

Mindfulness of Thinking (3 of 5) Types of Thinking

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

skillful, helpful, wholesome, unskillful, unhelpful, unwholesome, freedom, agitation, alienation, discursive thinking, conversation, stories, fantasy, cognition, recognition, knowing, mental noting

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In this third talk on mindfulness of thinking, I will continue to lay out the territory of thinking. Some of the different aspects, components, and distinctions within the domain of thinking can be supportive for meditation practice, mindfulness practice. The more we can see distinctions, see the difference between the component parts of something, the more there are spaces for freedom, choice, and non-attachment. The more that everything is a swirl of just one big thing – abstraction – it is hard to find our freedom with it.

It may be useful to consider that there are different layers of thinking. Some of the layers are not so useful for meditation, and some are part of meditation. So

meditation is not meant to be coming to a mind that does not think at all. There can be a very quiet mind with seemingly no thoughts. But that is not necessarily the purpose of meditation.

It is useful for the purpose of meditation to shift how we think and to think in ways that are beneficial for meditation. The Buddha has a wonderful teaching where he does not categorically say something is right or wrong or is the thing to do or not do. He has a long list of things to make his point. He says:

If something is unskillful to do, unhelpful to do, unwholesome to do, then don't do it. But if it is skillful and wholesome to do, it's helpful, then do it.

So thinking that leads to greater freedom, calm, settledness, and peace, please do that thinking as long as it is useful. But thinking that leads to agitation, contraction, or alienation, even from ourselves, is not to be done. And so we find our way. We do not have a categorical idea about what thinking is. We begin by being curious: "What is this phenomenon of thinking, and what are the different aspects of it?"

I call the coarsest layer "discursive thinking." It is very common in meditation circles to call it that. Discursive thinking is conversations, telling stories, and playing out scenes. It is remembering in great detail what happened

in the past, imagining what will happen in the future, and being in fantasy, where the whole story is a fantasy.

To be absorbed in the world of discursive thought – the storytelling mind, the conversation mind – is often very compelling, so much so that we can get alienated from ourselves. We might not think or realize it because we are so identified with the thinking mind. We are so identified with the stories. This is where we find and establish who we are. We are creating and making up who we are. It feels very real.

Discursive thinking has its place in life. Is it skillful or unskillful? There is skillful and appropriate discursive thinking, but it is alienating when done too much.

Leaving that world behind is a bit challenging for some people because of their strong identification with it. We believe this is how we establish who we are, know who we are, get what we want, figure out who we are in relation to other people. Sometimes it tells us wonderful stories that prop us up and make us feel great.

Sometimes it tells us terrible stories and makes us debilitated and depressed.

The idea is to not give so much authority to discursive thinking, to bracket it, or to put it aside temporarily at least in meditation – to experience ourselves in a radically different way. But it can be disorienting to make

that shift if people have lived most of their lives in discursive thinking.

If you come down a layer or so in the mind, there is thinking that is not so discursive. It is still thinking about something, but it is thinking about what is happening in the present moment. This thinking is not in ways that are elaborate and take us away. Rather, the thinking almost connects us to what is happening here. It might be very simple sentences: “This is a dinner of salad. The salad has tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce. Oh, this is nicely made.” The thinking may be very simple statements about what is right here in front of us, in the direct experience.

Some of that can be questions. For instance: “My left knee hurts as I’m meditating. I wonder. Should I bring attention to it? Okay, let me do that.” It is a very simple kind of thinking. It might be so simple that some people do not recognize it as thinking. For them, discursive thinking seems like the only thinking there is. And this quieter recognition – wondering and turning towards the knee – might just feel intuitive. But it does involve cognition or ideas. There are ideas about pain, the knee, my practicing, the use of attention, and where I put my attention. All those things that come into play are a form of thinking I call “cognitions.”

This thinking may be subconscious for some people. As the mind gets quieter, even subconscious thinking floats into consciousness. We see the very subtle things that we usually miss in everyday life. So there are very quiet – maybe quiet – sentences, questions, wonderings, and probings of what is happening here in the present moment, which involve some layer of thinking.

Another layer of thinking is recognition. It is a fascinating place, closer to what I am talking about today – the knowing something. If you step out of the house on a rainy day, you do not have to analyze: “I wonder if it is raining? How would I know if it is raining? I wonder if there are a certain number of raindrops per cubic inch that qualifies as rain?” And, perhaps, you measure. But we do not do all that abstraction to decide whether it is raining. We just go outside and know it is raining. We do not have to think about whether it is raining. We know it is raining.

You go for a walk down the street, and you know that it is safer to walk on the sidewalk. You know what a sidewalk is, but you are not thinking “sidewalk.” You are not actively recognizing it, but something inside of you does recognize the sidewalk.

In fact, there is a lot of recognition going on subconsciously all the time, which arises effortlessly. This is like the example I gave earlier of sitting at a table

to eat. Knowing to use a spoon for the soup or a fork for the salad does not take any kind of algorithm of thinking, wondering, and analyzing. We are not sitting there for five minutes with mathematical formulas figuring out exactly which is the most efficient way of eating. We just know. There is a knowing that arises.

It is fascinating and helpful for meditation to start learning to recognize the very simple knowing that arises before we start thinking about something. In fact, there are some things we do that we actually start doing before we think about them. Something knows inside. For example, when I am cooking dinner, I know my way around the kitchen and cooking well enough that something inside knows when to go to the stove or the refrigerator, when to reach for something, and when to start cutting. I delight in how that works. There is almost a quiet knowing – a recognition – that wells up before I start thinking about it.

It is also possible for me to live in the “thinking about” world. It is fascinating to see in the kitchen or cooking that many times it is after the fact. I already know what I should be doing, and then I have simple thoughts about that, like telling myself I should go to the refrigerator and get vegetables. I know. I have already decided to do that. There is already that knowing there.

So the simple knowing of the experience in the present moment is a much deeper layer. It is more effortless and quiet. This is the layer that we are dropping into for mindfulness practice. Mindfulness uses the simple recognition of phenomena. To support that, people sometimes use mental noting, which can feel coarser and more energetic than this quiet knowing that I am talking about. But somehow, that simple noting, which is in the silent mind, is kind of like knowing out loud. Saying these notes in the mind – getting in the habit of it and staying in the flow of it – supports the rhythm of just knowing, knowing, knowing.

As we start being in mindful knowing more, it is fascinating to begin discerning, seeing, feeling, and experiencing the difference between what it is like living in the world of “thinking about” and living in the world of this deeper wellspring of knowing that can be here.

So that is the topic for today: the difference between thinking about something and knowing something. In meditation, we are not trying to get rid of thinking. We are trying to drop down a layer or two in how we think so that the thinking supports being present more and more – being here in a nonreactive, nonjudgmental way. Just here, without the abstractions that we often live in, often the abstractions of self – me, myself, and mine.

You might in the next twenty-four hours give some thought to the difference between thinking about and directly knowing. You might talk to friends. You might journal. You might do exercises, like cooking or doing simple things, and see what kind of deeper knowing might precede the world of thinking about what you are doing. Explore this territory and get to know it better.

Thank you so much, and I'll see you tomorrow.