

# Mindfulness of Thinking (1 of 5)

## Recognizing Thinking

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As we start this five-day series, the theme for this week is mindfulness of thinking. I think of it as building on last week's theme – mindfulness of breathing.

Thinking is a hugely important part of human life, and should be respected, and hopefully also appreciated. The products of thinking are all around us. Civilization is a product of people's thoughts, ideas, designs, and inventions. Much of what we see in the so-called civilized world came through the vehicle of someone thinking about something. Sometimes this had great benefits, and sometimes not such great benefits. Without thinking, we would not be able to navigate the

world, take care of ourselves, be safe, make a life for ourselves, and be in rich relationships with people.

So thinking is an important part of life. But it's also a place of tremendous suffering. Thinking can be quite deleterious. Some of the stories and judgments we tell ourselves are quite debilitating and undermine our vitality, our joy, and our happiness. Some of them create great fear, and some of them create depression or discouragement – all kinds of things.

Learn about how to be mindful of thinking, so you can begin to not be caught in the grip of thinking and can see with greater clarity. Also, learning to think more clearly and wisely in a beneficial way is one of the byproducts of mindfulness practice.

So this week I'll focus on mindfulness of thinking. The first step is to clearly recognize that you're thinking. This provides an orientation so we can see clearly what it is we're working with when we're doing mindfulness of thinking.

There's something tricky about thinking. Sometimes it doesn't really want to be recognized. It's almost as if thinking is sometimes so concerned with its own thoughts and ideas that it just wants to be left alone so it can just gallop off and do the thinking fully. To say this differently, sometimes thinking is so alluring, so

captivating, so commanding, that it seems like it's easier to just wander off in thought and think away, than it is to step back and recognize, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

There can even be a protest in the mind that thinking is really important – "I have to think this. I can't just step back and recognize that I'm thinking. Everything needs to be there in the thinking. I have to be fully involved. I have to think this" – and, gallop – off we go.

So it can sometimes be quite disconcerting and disorienting to learn the art of stepping back in the mind and getting an overview of the mind enough to be able to see, "Oh, I'm thinking, and I'm thinking about planning; I'm thinking about remembering; I'm thinking fantasy, or thinking about my resentments," whatever it might be. Or, "I'm having a conversation in my mind with people. I'm repeating the same conversation I had with my friend last week over and over again, to understand what happened, and to come back with a better answer. I'm having a conversation."

Step back. I like the language of stepping back. It's kind of like being in a crowd of people, and stepping out of the crowd a little bit – three, four, ten feet away. When you look back, there's a whole different relationship to the people who are involved in a heated conversation.

You were part of the heat just a moment ago. By stepping back, you're no longer in it, and you can watch it and see that it's there.

Mindfulness of thinking, this clear recognition, is not meant to be a dismissal of thinking or a denial of thinking. We are meant to wake up clearly to the fact that we are thinking – thinking is happening now, instead of getting pulled into the stickiness and compulsion of thinking over and over again. For many people, that's what they spend their life doing. Before we do any kind of mindfulness practice, I think that thinking is given free rein, and we just think whatever we think. We wander off, and the mind just does what it does. Sometimes we just follow along. We're kind of pulled by the nose by our thoughts. The mind thinks, and we follow along without any thought about it.

I've met people for whom mindfulness of thinking – recognizing that they're thinking – is a completely foreign idea. They have no clue how to do that. Whether it's that challenging, or whether you can get some handle on the fact that you're thinking, I think that to begin to develop the skill, a little bit of strength in recognizing what you're thinking when you're thinking it is foundational to all the other aspects of mindfulness of thinking. This helps us develop and go deeper in the practice.

One very simple exercise is to tell yourself what you're thinking. You can do this with the inner voice, or if you're alone you can say it out loud to yourself. "I'm thinking about lunch. I'm thinking about the news that I just read. I'm thinking about what my plans are. I'm thinking about my fantasies. I'm thinking about my complaints. I'm thinking." You can do this just as if someone is asking you, "What were you thinking just now?"

Independent of trying to meditate, using a very general form of thinking and just simply naming what's there to yourself develops the skill of seeing, "Oh, that's what I'm thinking about. That's what I'm thinking about."

I know a Buddhist teacher who, when people tell him they have a lot of repetitive thinking and they can't stop, asks them to count every time they do it throughout the day. Some people have come back to him and said, "Wow, I got to some high number like 325 times where I kept thinking the same thing. After the 326th time, I said, 'This is ridiculous.'" Somehow it broke the trance or the stickiness, the compulsion around the thought. "Wow, this is phenomenal – this many times."

That's another way of recognizing. Just count, "Okay, here I am. Thinking about sex again. One, two, three." Maybe that's enough and after that, you stop. Or maybe it's a lot more. Or maybe it's some other thing – the resentments you have, over and over and over again.

See how many times in a day these kinds of thoughts go on.

This is also a way of taking an inventory of what we're thinking. Because it is very instructive when you start recognizing and seeing how repetitive thoughts are and how often there are certain top themes. What are the top three things you think about throughout the day? Many times people just go sailing along in their thoughts without any reflection about it. They have no idea that they're thinking the same thing over and over again, or that three major themes keep visiting over and over again.

One of the advantages of being on a meditation retreat is that, because of the heightened attention to the present moment and the attempt to try to be focused on the breath, for example, people tend to notice their thinking a lot more. It's a shock to some people to discover some of the common themes of their thoughts. They had no idea how many of the thoughts were fear-based until they started getting an inventory, a sense of the frequency in which they had those thoughts. "Wow, it's happening again. It's happening again."

It's not bad news to learn this about oneself. It's actually a part of growing. It's happening anyway. Rather than not knowing it, which is kind of dangerous, it's healthy,

healing, and beneficial to start recognizing what is happening with your thoughts.

One of the things we can learn when we start doing this kind of exercise is the attitudes we have about our thinking. Some people have adversarial relationships with thoughts. Some people are afraid of their thoughts. Some people feel that thoughts are one of the most important things going. Some people's relationship to thinking is that thoughts are a form of entertainment. They're very happy to think because they can get entertained. For some people, it's an antidote to boredom or stress to go into the entertainment center of the thinking mind. Some people's attitude is that we shouldn't be thinking.

I once was on retreat with another Buddhist teacher. Both of us were practicing, and he was a senior teacher to me. I wasn't a teacher myself yet. There was an occasion for a little conversation, and I started to ask for some advice about something. I forget what it was. It might have been about being at the meditation center. I started my sentence, "What do you think about...?" And he didn't let me go any further. He just looked at me and said, "I try not to think." I thought, "Well, maybe on retreat that's okay, but that was a strange answer. We don't have to be adversarial with thoughts."

It's wonderful to have thoughts quiet and get still. It's wonderful to discover the deeper layers of how the mind works, which is obscured by a lot of discursive thinking. But the point is, as we start getting a handle on our thinking and see what it is about, then we also start noticing our attitudes and beliefs about our thinking as well.

So as you go about your day for the next 24 hours, I would encourage you to start recognizing what you're thinking about. Recognize your thoughts, and recognize that you're thinking. You might put a stopwatch on that beeps every minute and just say, "Oh, okay, that's what I was thinking." Or you can write down what you are thinking about every few minutes in a journal. Or just say to yourself, "Oh, okay, I'm thinking about that. I'm thinking about that." You might also spend some quality time thinking about your relationship with thinking. Talk to friends about what they've discovered about thinking or what you're discovering about your thinking.

This high-end overview of thinking will be good preparation for the next four days as we go deeper and deeper into this topic. The background for all this is the idea that I offered in the meditation session: if we can have a clear, calmer recognition of our self's thinking, sometimes the thinking begins to settle itself. We develop the skill of recognizing thinking partly so that we can use a calm, still awareness and recognition of



thinking to help quiet and settle the thinking mind – partly so that we can see more clearly and partly so we can think more clearly.

I hope you enjoy this. I hope one of the results of this week on thinking is that you become friends with your thinking and your thinking becomes your friend.

Thank you.