

Wise Thinking (4 of 5) Thoughts That Calm Thinking

December 21, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *vipassanā*, worries, judgments, biases, spin out, automatic pilot, victim, identified, deliberateness, beneficial, influence, mental noting, emphatic, knowing, simple, distracted, recognition, non-judgmental, peaceful, surface mind, deep mind, creativity, intimacy, wisdom, holistic, underriding, relaxed, gym, refuge, unglue, stickiness

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Welcome to our fourth talk on wise thinking. When thinking is on automatic pilot, it's way too easy for it to be stressful or even harmful to us. It's very easy to spin out in all kinds of thoughts, worries, judgments, and biases.

But we don't have to be the victim of our thoughts. Some people are major victims of their thoughts. They don't realize it because they think they are their thoughts – they are their thinking. They believe that if they're thinking

something, it must be true because it's who they are. But thoughts are not who we are. Thoughts are a product of the mind, but that doesn't mean that they define who we are, any more than our growing fingernails define who we are.

Thinking is just what the mind does. It's a product of the mind, a consequence of many causes and conditions in the inner landscape. But we don't have to be identified with thinking. We especially don't have to be lost in it and live at its whims, going along with it or just coping with how it is.

It is possible to think deliberately, and in doing so, to have a beneficial influence on the mind, the heart, the body, and the world. We don't want to think deliberately all the time. There's a time to give the mind the freedom to think whatever it wants to think. I do that when I exercise. I find it very helpful to give that kind of freedom to my mind.

But I don't give that kind of freedom to my mind when I'm thinking. I don't get swept along with my distracted thoughts. I marshal a deliberate attention, a deliberateness of thinking – to see and know that I'm thinking, to step away and disidentify with thinking. I do this so I can call upon a way of being, a way of thinking, a way of thoughting, that has a more beneficial

influence on me than my automatic pilot thoughts might have.

In *vipassanā*, we have a technique called “mental noting.” It is just an emphatic way of recognizing what's happening while it's happening. Sometimes being more emphatic about the knowing is what frees us from being caught up in it. Mental noting is a form of thought. It's meant to be simple, rudimentary, non-judgmental thoughts, just recognizing what's happening. We don't think of it as work. We want the mental note, the recognition, to come from a place that's very peaceful, calm, and settled within.

If the distinction between the surface mind and the deep mind is relevant for you, allow the thought to well up from the deep mind. From this deep, calm vantage point, if there are distracted thoughts, recognize: now there are distracted thoughts. These are distracted thoughts. If we recognize distracted thoughts with the same kind of thinking that's distracted, we can stir ourselves up even more. But if we recognize them from this deep, quiet place that has all the time in the world, is not in a hurry for anything and just calmly recognizes, this can be settling and calming for the surface mind.

So we use thinking to calm thinking by using this deep thinking that we're capable of. It is the source of

creativity, intimacy, and wisdom. We can drop into this deeper place that is wiser than the surface mind because it's holistic. It takes in the information from all the different faculties that we have, so it is much wiser than the distracted mind, which is very limited in how it's integrated into the rest of us.

This takes a certain kind of relaxed deliberateness, not forcing it, not overriding your thinking, but in a sense underriding it, coming from underneath thinking and just recognizing it – “Come, sit down, relax, it's okay, sit down.” The idea is to deliberately think in a beneficial, calm way, not exactly controlling the situation, but taking charge of yourself a little by choosing how you're going to know and see and be present for your experience.

This mental noting can be done verbally. It can be done in images for people who use images and visualize when they think. It can also be done non-verbally because we often know things before we have the words for them. There is a non-verbal kind of precursor to the words that we say. There can be a sense of knowing that doesn't seem to come along with words but it's still a knowing, a kind of thinking process.

It is possible to adjust that nonverbal thinking so that it's calm and peaceful. Doing this in meditation is kind of like going to a gym and working out. We're working out,

strengthening, developing, and bringing forth a different way of relating to our experience. We're not just calming ourselves in meditation. If we just calm ourselves and let that be all we do, that sets us up to just get agitated again.

But we're calming ourselves by calling upon a way of relating, a way of being, a way of thinking that is an alternative to thinking as usually happens for us. Over time this can become more of a resource for us, like second nature, and more of a refuge for us. There are ways of thinking that become a refuge.

It's important not to overemphasize thinking, even thinking from this deep place within. The task of thinking is to unglue us, to unstick us, to let go of desires, aversions, doubts, regrets, and agitation, to experience ourselves more and more free, more deeply, and quieter. This is so that we can enter the world and relate it from the deep mind, the deep heart. The deep heart does have desires, but without stickiness in them. It wants to engage in the world and speak with friends but there is no stickiness with that. The desire comes from the place of freedom, calmness, and peace.

If what I'm talking about today makes sense to you, experiment with this throughout the day. You can even put a timer on your device that reminds you sometimes

when you're alone to take a time out to assess how your thinking is going. Assess what kind of thinking you are doing and whether it is possible to change gears and think from deep down inside in a calm, peaceful way.

The deepest and simplest way of thinking that is calming is to think thoughts of recognition. All we do is recognize what's happening. There's a time and place for other forms of thinking and creativity, even from this deep mind. But the way mindfulness practice supports us to do house-cleaning and connects us to something deeper is to have the simplest, most peaceful, calm thoughts of recognition. Usually, this is just one word, maybe two. Let it be that simple, so that simplicity is part of the message, and part of the influence on your whole system.

Doing this simple recognition is like stepping into a calm room after being in a very noisy place – “Ah.” The simple recognition is that calm room. “Ah, this is what's happening.” I hope this will teach you that there are different ways of thinking. You don't have to merely go along with the way you habitually think as if that's the way it has to be. Somehow the causes and conditions of your life have led you to think a particular way. There are other ways.

If your thinking is not good for you, by all means experiment with this alternative I'm offering today. Find whatever place you can that's calmer than your surface mind. Know and recognize what's happening calmly, in order to bring a calm, reassuring presence to all that is agitated and unsettled within you. May you be your own best friend. May you be your own refuge in how you think about yourself. Thank you very much.

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