

Session 6

Thoughts are Not Facts

*The human mind, in its desire to know, understand, and control, mistakes its opinions and viewpoints for the truth. It says: this is how it is. You have to be larger than thought to realize that however you interpret “your life” or someone else’s life or behaviour, however you judge any situation, it is no more than a viewpoint, one of many possible perspectives. It is no more than a bundle of thoughts.’*

Eckhart Tolle in Stillness Speaks

# Thoughts are not Facts

We are constantly interpreting information, looking for some meaning, almost unconsciously until something trips us up, as in the Story of John. The mind creates a commentary, trying to make sense of what is going on around us. Closely behind all of these interpretation follow emotional responses, which are dependent on the interpretation that we give the event.

With mindfulness we can develop the skill of separating the event from the interpretation of the event, and so become less easily trapped in one particular scenario and hence more open to other possible interpretations.

## Thoughts and Feelings

Cognitive approaches to address unhelpful thoughts tend to be to take the thought and challenge the truth of it in order to try to change the belief on which it is based. Mindfulness takes a different approach. Rather than taking a confrontational approach to our thoughts we change our relationship with them. We can start to accept thoughts as mental events, not necessarily absolute truth. At the start of the course we learned to notice thoughts as they happen and learned to return our attention to our breath. Then we learned to be able to observe the thoughts as they come and go, as mental events. We are learning that we have thought, rather than thought having us.

## Standing Behind the Waterfall

When we are facing difficulties it can feel as though we are in a cascade of thoughts, feelings and sensations. The practice of taking just one of these and sitting with it can help us to find somewhere else to stand, to find a place we can have a clearer view of an event itself.

For instance, we may have thoughts such as ‘I don’t know how I’m going to deal with…(insert any difficulty here)…, it’s just impossible.’ Rather than focussing on the thoughts and continuing to feel overwhelmed, we can sit with our feelings and see just what it is that is causing us distress. You may find for example, confusion, anger, sadness, desperation. Being able accept and allow these feelings (Whatever it is, it’s ok, let me feel it) rather than pushing them away seems to take the power our of them so that we can get on with what needs to be got on with and not be hijacked by what we can’t get on with.

Similarly, when we experience a strong physical sensation our thoughts are affected. A thought stream may go – I have a headache, it’s bound to turn into a migraine, I’ll have to cancel everything I’ve planned if it doesn’t clear up soon. If we sit with the feelings these thoughts evoke we can see that we may feel anger and fear and vulnerability. In acknowledging how we feel we may be able to approach the problem with greater understanding and compassion, with acceptance rather than resignation.

## Stepping out of the Story

When we watch the same film over and over again, it loses its ability to capture or enchant us. Similarly with our thoughts, as we practice we will see the same old stuff coming up again and again, and it loses its ability to hijack us. We can start to see and name the ‘mind films’ that come up, ‘oh this is the I hate my boss theme’, or the ‘no-one appreciates me story’.

We can start to separate fact from thought, the event from the add-ons. We observe thoughts, noting their content and emotional charge, ‘ah there’s that thought, I’m feeling this,’ and then bring our attention back to the object of our focus, without getting caught up in the flow of thought or emotion. In defusing the mental track we have been creating, we have given ourselves access to the wisdom to see if we can change the situation or whether we need to accept it as it is.

‘When we lose ourselves in thought, thought sweeps up our mind and carries it away, and in a very short time we can be carried far indeed. We hop a train of association not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line we may wake up and realise that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train it may be in a very different state of mind from where we jumped aboard.’ (Joseph Goldstein in Segal, Williams and Teasdale 2002)

We saw in the moods and thoughts exercise that our interpretation of events can be affected by our mood, our state of mind. We can use the Breathing Space at any point to help acknowledge what is actually happening, rather than what we think is happening. The Breathing Space is like opening a door, we find that there may be more corridors and doors beyond, more choices in how we respond to a situation.

## Home Practice

* Further Being with Feelings Meditation
* Sitting meditation for 20 minutes or 2 x 10 minutes daily if poss
* Think about the future mindfulness group