

## Thinking. II: Investigation, the Use of Reflective Thought

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Investigation, or reflective thought, can be a very helpful tool in spiritual practice. This is something that is not often talked about. Thought is generally looked upon as an intruder in the mind. But if you look at the Buddha's teachings you see that over and over again the Buddha described the use of reflective thought as a tool: "Wisely reflecting one considers thus..." On the night of the Buddha's enlightenment, he was reflecting on causality, on dependent origination. This kind of reflection involves the skillful use of thought, not the avoidance of it.

Investigation refers to the quality of mind, the natural intelligence, which recognizes patterns. It is the quality of mind which discerns order, which looks into things and determines what is going on, what is the nature of the experience. It is an innate function of the mind.

Investigation figures strongly in the Buddhist teachings. The term shows up in a number of places. *Dhamma-vijaya*, for example, means "investigation of reality," and it is one of the seven factors of enlightenment. *Yoniso-manasikāra* is another term which often appears. It means "going to the root of things" or "paying attention to the source." It is sometimes called wise consideration or wise reflection. Both of these are highly valued and encouraged in the Buddha's teachings and practices.

When you realize the importance of investigation in the Buddhist teachings, you can no longer see thought as an intrusion or a corruption. Thought is a natural occurrence in the mind, and investigation a natural aptitude. It is a

function of awareness. Investigation is a discerning of the relatedness of different elements in our experiential field.

There are two ways to use investigation — applied to a specific theme, for example, if there is something that mystifies you or is a big issue in your life, or applied as things come up on their own.

### Investigating a Specific Theme

We usually think, "Now that I am meditating I have to switch off the thinking process. But actually the best time to do our thinking is during meditation. If there is something that you want to investigate, sit down, relax the body, center the mind, and deliberately bring that into awareness.

One way to use this approach, for example, is to ask about a specific theme that you want to understand. "What is selflessness?" or "What does death mean to me?" or "How do I relate to the idea of my own death?" Ajahn Chah said that three times a day (morning, midday, and evening) we should ask ourselves the question, "Why was I born?" When the mind is steady and clear you can use this kind of inquiry. This is a fertile environment.

You might use investigation to understand an aspect or subject of the teachings. "How does desire lead to grasping? How does feeling turn into grasping?" Or you might ask, "When I use the word 'ignorance,' what is that? What is ignorance?" Then consult your own wisdom. Don't try to enter into a logical process but rather wait and see what arises in response to that question. Pursue the questioning in this fashion. Thus, while there is thinking going on, it is happening within a spacious medium.

Now, if the mind races off and starts chattering, then come back, relax, and realize that at the moment the issue is

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too charged. You will need to establish more tranquility, more concentration before going back into it.

There is no end to the usefulness of this manner of investigation. Sometimes if I have to take part in a conference, or someone has asked for a Dhamma talk with a particular theme, I'll sit myself down with a legal pad, write the title of the workshop on the top of the page, close my eyes, and repeat the topic to myself. It might be something like "The Dhamma and Nature," or "The Buddhist Attitude Towards Death and Dying," for example. I just repeat the topic and see what comes up. Then I take notes and jot it down.

You can also look at something more mundane, some aspect of your life. Perhaps you are madly in love with someone or you are trying to break up with someone. Perhaps you are having a conflict with your parents or your boss, or a friend. The idea is to consciously bring that up. Establish your focus and then state what is going on in your life, then witness what arises: What is going along with that? What is contributing to that? What effect does it have?

One of the most useful aspects of reflective thought is to understand the assumptions we have about identity, the feeling of self. We can start with a question such as, "Who am I?" Thus our habitual assumptions about who we are become challenged. They are punctured. There is a moment where the questioning itself changes things. It is like turning the camera onto the photographer. The sense of self is startled. It trips over its own feet. For a moment the self-creation mechanism is interrupted. In that moment there is a gap. The mind is awake. There is clarity, but no sense of self.

When using this method of investigation the thinking mind will wade in with verbal answers but we are explicitly *not* interested in these. We are doing this practice as we want to create an interruption in the flow of self-creation. So that, if the mind comes back with answers, we don't stop there. We keep the questioning open-ended. We keep reflecting. We keep challenging the conceptual answers that the rational mind gives. We have to use different angles to get out of making habitual responses. When a hesitation or gap occurs, just let yourself rest in that. Keep going back to that. Keep looking to see what it is.

This is using the mind when it is settled and in its most relaxed and intelligent state. More often than not you will find associations, ideas, images that wouldn't normally occur to you. This is because you are not driving the thought towards some kind of logical conclusion. You are not looking for answers. Rather you are simply open to receiving jewels.

In the silence of the mind lies the answer to all questions. At that moment there is the recognition of the reality of all things. We see life in its essence. Thus, reflective thought is a very useful tool to recognize the nature of mind which is

so easily obscured by the patterns of our conditioning. It is ironic that it is actually the use of thought which can bring about this most clarifying of insights.

### When Things Come up on Their Own

The other method is to apply investigation when things pop into the mind during the natural course of events. Using this method we process things in that same reflective manner. Ajahn Chah worked in this way a lot. He had an inner analysis going on much of the time. When something came up he would think about it, contemplate it like this. He would have internal dialogues, very actively using thought to explore. He'd ask, "Why is this? What does it say about that?"

We can employ this method throughout the course of the day. When on retreat, for example, you might come into the hall and find that someone has moved your cushion and you may notice a strong emotional reaction — outrage or irritation. So you can reflect on that. "Isn't that interesting? I see this space as my patch and I am defending my territory. It's as if my territory has been invaded. A week ago this was not mine. Last week it belonged to the retreat center. Now I call it 'mine' and I want to kill the person who invaded my space! Here I am contemplating homicide. Isn't that interesting?"

Similarly, if you find that you are critical of yourself, you can look at it. If you notice that you are twitching like an ant on a hot plate, and you notice that the person next to you hasn't moved all week, that she or he is sitting there all noble and serene, never blinking, totally composed and restrained... and if this causes you to think of yourself as a vibrating intrusion on the universe... this can be contemplated. We judge ourselves against our neighbors, so, with investigation, we can see and understand this. If you want to help the investigation along, you can even take the issue to absurdity: "I am the most agitated person in the universe. Everyone else is in eighth *jhāna*. They are all arahants except for me. I am just an infection that has been sent along to try the patience of these noble and holy beings." Thus you begin to see how absurd it is.

The idea here is to take the habitual reactions and judgments and open them up. We look into what we want, what we fear, what we dislike. We look into the compulsive reactions and opinions, the way we judge people. This is all within the realm of meditation.

One might imagine that the sitting posture or the walking posture is some kind of sacred space that no thought should be allowed into. No visas will be issued. But the time when we are meditating is exactly the best time to use investigation and reflective thought. It is when the mind is

at its most sharp and clear. This is when you can get the deepest results.

When I first went into the monastery, I used to use this kind of reflection to shed light on my relationship with my mother. I have a wonderful mother, but we've had a somewhat fraught relationship — particularly when I went off to the Far East and became a Buddhist monk without any warning. I'd get tense letters from England on a regular basis. So I'd sit quietly in my cabin and I'd think the word 'mother.' I'd watch what followed, the volcano erupting like Mt. St. Helens. And I'd witness the patterns of reactivity. Then I'd establish a sense of calm again and, some time after, drop it in once more.

Now the issue, or question, at hand doesn't have to be emotionally charged. We can investigate anything. This kind of reflective thought has an entirely different quality than *papañca*. You can use it to watch *papañca*, but it is more usefully engaged in as a way of investigating the teachings, or our patterns or habits of thought. "What are the teachings about? Why do I react to things in the way I do? Why am I shy? Why do I get over-enthusiastic and excited? What is behind that?" We put a question forward and listen for a response.

So try this and see what comes up. Some thought or intuition will probably arise. "Well, I do that to fill up the space. I meet someone new and I am afraid that they are going to reject me so I swamp them with interesting things to say." You might ask, "What am I afraid of?" Maybe nothing, in particular, will arise. You may not know what it is. You may feel a sense of fear and not know what it is. Sometime later, you can pick it up and look at it. You may notice yourself doing that particular thing in daily life and then you'll notice, "Ah, I'm doing it again." Just setting the intention to look at it will make it more apparent, and gradually you'll begin to see into it. It might take years, but that's okay. Be patient.

### Stay Open to All Possibilities

In using thought in this way, we are not demanding a fixed or certain answer. We must remain open to any possibility. If something arises, fine. If nothing arises, fine. You are consulting the oracle of your own heart because that is what genuinely knows. In our hearts, there is a well of infinite wealth and wisdom. We are using that, turning to that. When the *papañca* gets running, we need to let go of whatever it might be that it is pursuing and then come back to this place of investigation instead.

When we handle things with this ease, we are changing the way we relate. The mind wants to know everything. Even if it doesn't understand, it will have some belief. It will form an opinion or view and hang on to that just to fill

up the space of not knowing. It wants to be on top of things. But this method of investigation and inquiry depends upon *not* knowing. It depends upon us being open and ready to not know. It depends upon us, allowing mystery and letting the knowing arise out of that. It depends on our not being threatened. From the ego's point of view, the unknown is frightening. It is threatening and it responds to that threat by clinging to a belief as a way of dispelling it. But from the point of view of the heart, the unconditioned mind, the unknown is mysterious... but it is beautiful. You don't have to fill up the unknown with a belief or a concept or a plan. You can leave it as mysterious, because 99% of it will be mysterious anyway. There is no way that we can understand it all. So the heart's response to that mystery is faith — a trust in the fundamental orderliness of the universe.

### Investigate All the Time

Using these methods, we learn that even though thinking might be going on, it is not necessarily irritating, not an intrusion or an invasion. Thinking is happening within the context of pure awareness.

When we are outside of retreat time and having to deal with more complexities of perception, when we have bigger decisions to make than how many bowls of cereal to eat, when we have to look after our family, when we have to deal with intense emotions and projections and perform as personalities, then developing this quality of reflection/investigation is incredibly useful. It becomes a way of sustaining mindfulness.

If you think mindfulness involves labeling what comes up and doing everything in a very deliberate fashion, you will suffer enormously because the world is not under your control. If you feel that in order to be mindful you have to have a sterilized environment, like on retreat, you put yourself in a very weakened position — and you are misunderstanding mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a mind that is full. It is not a particular attention to detail. When the mind is full of the present moment, this is the mindfulness that we are aiming for. When it is full, it is full of wisdom.

Developing the quality of investigation is a way of keeping track and of being tuned in to what is going on inside of us — the mood, the flow of feeling. Some people leave the retreat and then go into Safeway, for example, and become paralyzed by all the stimulation. But this can be investigated. You can realize that this is the experience of being hit by the not-so-safe way. "It's like *this* when the mind is hit by color and choices. This is the feeling of being overwhelmed." Thus, you are picking up and processing, digesting, using the thinking faculty to notice what is going

on. “This is agitation. This is the frenzy of over-stimulation. I’m in Safeway and this is what that feels like.” It’s ordinary. It is not necessarily an intrusion.

When you sit, you sit with the resonance of the day. If you keep ringing the bell all day, there will be resonance. We sit to meditate and expect that there will be stillness. But, big surprise, instead we see the aftereffects of the day. A few well-placed reflections can save you weeks of grief. You think, “Oh this is terrible. I can’t meditate. I’ve got to go into the forest, off to the mountains.” We keep holding that experience as indicating that something is wrong with our practice. But there is nothing wrong with our practice. If you experience a lot of agitation and noise during the day, when you sit, there it is. You don’t have to argue with it or fight against it. Just by reflecting, we see that it is the natural effect of certain causes and we can find peace in relation to it. We are not looking for peace in the absence of perceptions, emotions, or moods. Peace is found in the attitude that we have towards it all. Then we find that there can be an immense buzz or noise going on and there is peace in the heart. That is freedom. It’s not found in wiping out all experiences.

That said, when we want to hold a retreat, we don’t hold it in the freeway. We find a quiet place. But if we think this is the only way we can be peaceful — to do a 10-day retreat and that the rest is just being a wage slave to save up enough money to go, do the next retreat — then we have really wasted an opportunity. We haven’t learned anything

useful. We have turned the quietude of the retreat into a very dependent refuge. Certainly, it is better to have that kind of refuge than none at all. But if we set that up in our minds, then we are not making full use of what Buddha-Dhamma can provide.

Retreat is like five-finger exercises. You run the scales over and over again so that when the time comes to improvise, to get out there and play, your fingers know where to go. You don’t have to think about it. The point of the exercises is not to perfect the running of scales. You may become very good at scales, but the point of the scales is to be able to produce music. That’s how to relate to retreat time properly. The point is to learn skills that can help us along in the flow of the experience of living, in the rest of our lives. The retreat is not the real thing. Try not to set that up in your mind — it won’t help you at all.

No matter whether we are in retreat or outside, whether we have to be in charge or in a passive role, if we have to take responsibility or get out of the way, the heart knows *this* is the way to respond. The usefulness of this practice is in discovering that quality of response and trusting it. We are learning responsiveness to each situation. Then we use the props — like keeping the precepts, investigation, mindfulness of the body — we support that basic process of attending, opening the heart to the present moment, and letting ourselves respond from a place of naturalness, simplicity, and an unbiased heart.