

# Thinking: I. Understanding and Relating to Thought

Ajahn Amaro

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2010

## Introduction

In Buddhist meditation circles, conceptual thought tends to get the same rap as the ego. It is perceived as something bad, something that we don't want or that needs to be eliminated. And it's no wonder. Thinking can feel like a great burden. In our efforts to meditate, we see how unruly the mind can be. It charges off here, there, and everywhere chattering away insanely—all day and night. And because the mind can be so hyperactive, we tend to make thoughts the enemy. Meditation practice can become a battleground between me, the meditator, and the invading thoughts.

We tend to forget that in our schooling—particularly, in the West—we spend 12, 16, 18 or more years in education systems learning to think and think and think, to create concepts, to juggle many ideas at once, to compare them and critique them. In addition, we get praised for our ability to do that well. So it is hardly surprising that when we come to meditation, all of this is still going on. When we sit down to meditate, we see the results of the actions of a lifetime. That's to be expected. We can't decide to stop thinking any more than we can decide to grow a couple of inches, keep our hair from graying, determine to be a bit more charming, or never get angry again. We can do all the deciding, we like but it doesn't have much effect.

Like many of us, I got interested in meditation in order to learn how to stop thinking. I wanted some peace of mind! I had spent many years endlessly stimulating the mind with all sorts of fascinating, useful, wonderful, and

interesting things, but I felt immensely burdened by the resulting mental activity. I wanted at least to slow it down a bit if not stop it altogether.

Well, one day, after I had been living in the monastery for a little more than a year, I finally got my wish. It had been our custom at the monastery to do all-night meditation vigils. As you might imagine, the body can get very stiff and achy from these long hours of sitting, and it was customary to fire up the sauna the day after to soothe the stiffness and aching. (This may sound like a luxury, but it is actually a tradition from the time of the Buddha. Most monasteries had a fire house, a *chantagara*. This was seen as medicine to be used to benefit people's health, to soothe aching muscles and bones.) Well, I was a novice at the time and part of my job was to get the sauna ready—to stack the firewood and set up the water jars. Once I got it fired up, it was my habit to sit in the sauna before everyone else arrived. Then, after everyone left, I'd putter around a bit and sit in it again before I cleaned up.

On this particular occasion, I stayed on to sit a little longer after everyone else had left. It was around 9:00 p.m. and I had been awake for 36 h. The sauna was completely dark except for a little lamp in the window, which was giving off a dim light. I had been sitting there for a couple of hours when suddenly, without any warning, the thinking stopped. I couldn't believe it! The thinking stopped completely. This was the first time in my life that my mind had ever ceased thinking! "Wow," I said to myself. "This is what the mind feels like when it stops thinking. It is possible."

I was very excited! Granted that, at first, I had to be driven to a state of complete exhaustion in order to experience that effect, but that was okay. The thinking had finally stopped.

As time went by, however, I noticed that the mind began to slow down quite naturally. I didn't need 180° heat and

---

A. Amaro (✉)  
Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery,  
16201 Tomki Road,  
Redwood Valley, CA 95470, USA  
e-mail: ajahnamaro@abhayagiri.org

fatigue for the thinking to subside. And as my fascination with stopping the mind began to wear off, I noticed something even more interesting: Even though the mind was slowing down, even though I would have periods when the mind was not thinking at all, I noticed that it never actually stopped suffering because of this! Even though the mind slows down and stops thinking, it is not necessarily free of dukkha. Whether there was dukkha or not was independent of the presence or absence of that thinking. It was just a mind with no thinking in it. This was a big disappointment!

I had to conclude that the act of thinking itself was not the problem. Rather the suffering lay in the uncontrolled quality of thinking, where the mind is running and racing and just chattering away, and the basic imbalances that caused that. And so I became very interested in how this random chatter occurred.

### Papañca, the Thinking Mind Run Amok

First, it isn't the case that the mind is inherently thinking all the time. Rather, thinking is a highly conditioned activity. In the teachings, the process is described in this way: We come into contact with things—objects in the world or our own thoughts. Each moment of such contact is accompanied by feeling which is pleasant, painful, or neither. Whatever is being cognized is then named. The Pali word for this is *sañña*. Most often, it is translated as perception but the English word “sign” comes from the same root as *sañña*. *Sañña* is a kind of designation. There is a raw sensing of a stimulus and then our memory moves in and names it. “That is the sound of a dog barking.”

Conceptual thought begins to cluster around that naming. That is, that which we name, we then think about. This is called *vitakka*. We may think, “I wonder who owns that dog.” “Is that the same dog I saw yesterday?” Then *vitakka* takes off. It blossoms into what is known as *papañca*. This is conceptual proliferation. It is the mass of thoughts and conceptions, which burden the heart and mind.

In this process there is a simple raw feeling, sensation or thought. There is no particular feeling of self or other with that. But as the process takes off, as the naming takes place, we begin to get a sense of me in here experiencing the sound of that dog out there. As the thinking (*vitakka*) kicks in, the sense of self and other becomes more concrete and the sense of me not only experiencing this but also being burdened by it becomes more and more solid.

As meditators I am sure you have seen this pattern. With practice, we start to recognize this pattern. We see how it works.

Usually we are caught up in the activity of mental proliferation—half way through our great novel or fully

through the saga of how our first marriage could have been “if only...”—before we wake up and remember that we're actually still in the meditation hall, and that it all started with the sound of the dog barking. “That sound reminded me of Binker, our dog. We got the dog when we first got married. Maybe if we hadn't had the dog, the marriage would have worked out.” Then we track it back and see where it began.

As meditators we see how this pattern occurs over and over again. The mind's propensity is to think habitually. It takes almost nothing to trigger it. For example, I spent most of my youth listening to rock music at every opportunity. So when I entered the monastery in Thailand, I spent the first few years singing inside my head. My mind was so used to listening to music that for the first few years everything that happened at the monastery was a cue for a song. It could be a leaf falling off a tree or a car going by. It could be the clanking of a kerosene tin or comments that people made. It could even be just the random thoughts in my mind. Any one event, word or thought could translate into a lyric. It was like a Bing Crosby and Bob Hope movie: “That sounds like a cue for a song...”. Before you know it you are playing the entire soundtrack. I was staggered by the amount that the mind remembered and conjured up!

That is the mind's habitual mode. It picks things up, chews on them and keeps creating—all from a moment's stimulation.

### What's a Meditator to Do?

We can approach thought by trying to dissolve it. If there's enough wisdom in our response to thinking, we can simply say, “This is just a thought. It's not me or mine,” and we can cut thinking off as if with the sword of Mañjushri. But if there's not enough wisdom this can easily turn into an aggressive process. We may believe that thought is an infection, a kind of nasty fungal growth that is occupying the space between our ears. We can think that we need to wipe it out. Or it can become suppressive. As Westerners, along with our great capacity to think, we have tremendous willpower and we can use this to push thought down, to hold it back. And this can be effective for a certain amount of time. But when the will wobbles, and it will, the dam breaks and we are overwhelmed with conceptual thought again.

So for myself, I have learned that the best way to deal with excessive thinking is to just listen to it, to listen to the mind. Listening is much more effective than trying to stop thought or cut it off. When we listen there is a different mode employed in the heart. Instead of trying to cut it off, we receive thought without making anything out of it.

During one of the monastic retreats at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, Ajahn Sumedho said emphatically, “All your thoughts are garbage. You may think that some of them are good but you should consider the possibility that *all* your thoughts are garbage.” Some people may have felt that this was an insulting thing to say, but I found it brought a tremendous sense of relief.

One of the biggest problems with thoughts is that we tend to believe everything they say: “If I am thinking it, it must be true.” But actually our thoughts are just a collection of habitual judgments, perceptions, memories and ideas that are fed through consciousness. They may have some relationship with truth but they may not! If we take as a base line the notion that most of our thoughts are like the random barking of the dog, we make less out of them. And therein lies the sense of relief. We then find that we can relate to thought in a much more open way. We are not looking on every element of it as being meaningful or true or realistic at all; and we’re not giving it a value beyond what it really has.

Most of our thoughts are like dreams. Occasionally, perhaps once or twice a year we may have a dream that is significant and we know it. We may not know exactly what it is about but it is pretty clear that there’s a message in it. But the other 364 days a year it’s just the leftovers of the day. There is nothing particularly significant or important about any of our dream content at all. It’s just the residue, the echoes of the day’s events and activities, the things that we have rehashed a couple of times already.

When we look at thought in this way, we find we aren’t being pulled into it in the usual fashion. We can just look at it. We don’t reject it or suppress it, but we don’t buy into it either. We don’t make more out of it than what is there. That attitude of listening, of opening to and receiving thought, has a liberating quality in-and-of itself.

### Listening to the Sounds of the World

In the Mahāyana Buddhist tradition, along with Mañjushri, one of the principle bodhisattvas is Avalokiteshvara, “the one who listens to the sounds of the world.” Just as Mañjushri is the embodiment of wisdom, with the cutting off of greed, hatred and delusion by his blazing sword, so Avalokiteshvara is the embodiment of compassion. Just as Mañjushri is related to seeing, the seeing of light, enlightenment, so Avalokiteshvara is related to hearing. Wisdom has a masculine, assertive quality; compassion, listening, has a feminine receptive quality. (Interestingly enough, even though Avalokiteshvara started out as a masculine figure, the symbolism has been transmuted over the years, into the grace feminine for of Kuan Yin. Most people see it as feminine precisely because of this receptive, undiscriminating, open-hearted quality.)

There is a Chinese sutra in which the Buddha asked all the bodhisattvas their method for realizing enlightenment. Each one described a specific meditation practice. Avalokiteshvara described a meditation on hearing. She said she starts her meditation by listening to the sound of the roar of the sea. Then she takes that sound and turns it inward. She returns the hearing to listen to the ear organ. By doing this she realizes the true way.

Some years ago Ajahn Sumedho was teaching a retreat at a Chinese monastery in California. For years the people at this monastery were puzzling over this phrase, “returning the hearing to listen to the ear organ.” They couldn’t figure out what that meant. Now, Ajahn Sumedho had been teaching a meditation on the sound of silence, the *nada* sound. Suddenly the people at the monastery realized this must be what he was teaching, this active inner listening. Listening to the inner sound brings the heart into a position of acute inner awareness. It is not that the inner sound has some magical property. Rather, it is that bringing of the alert mind, bringing openness and receptivity to sound, is symbolic of attuning one’s attention to the presence of ultimate truth. The sound is always there. We don’t have to create it. It is featureless. It is ever present. So it is a good symbol for Ultimate Reality itself.

In the sutra the Buddha praised this method, the meditation on listening, as the best method for enlightenment. Ajahn Sumedho had been teaching the meditation on the *nada* sound for some years so he was tickled by this connection to another Buddhist tradition. He hadn’t realized that there had been so much emphasis on this in traditional Buddhist meditation practices.

I tend to prefer this meditation object over mindfulness of breathing because I have found that the quality of listening translates very well from being a meditation object to being a mental attitude of listening—listening to thought, listening to the world around me. There is a quality of acceptance, nondiscrimination, compassion. Thought can be there, but we treat it in the same way as we treat a feeling in the body or a sound that we hear or a smell or a taste. Thought is just a sense object perceived by the mind. Just as a sound is perceived by the ear or as light is perceived by the eye, so thought is perceived by the mind. Just as we can be completely lost in something that we hear or feel or see or taste or touch, so we can be lost in thought. But just as we can be mindful of these, so too it is with thinking. Just as the mind can be absorbed in thought and carried away by it, so too, it can be clearly aware of thought and unconfused by it. Then thoughts serve to decorate the silence of the mind rather than overwhelm it.

When it is seen in its proper perspective, thought is seen as just another sense object. Just as we can be totally at peace with seeing or hearing or feeling, so too we can be at peace with thought. If we understand it in

the right way it is possible to have thought in the mind and have no obstruction whatsoever to our natural peace and happiness.

### Thinking is Not a Problem

So, in essence, it doesn't matter if there is thought in the mind or not. This is not the issue. What matters is the way we relate to it. This makes the difference. When we have the right attitude, right view, we are able to establish a quality of knowing, of awareness. As feelings appear, as sights and sounds and memories and thoughts and ideas come and go, we see that we don't have to do anything about them. We don't have to push them away. We don't have to hang on to them. We needn't be intimidated by them. We don't have to get drunk on them. They just are what they are.

Even though it is pleasant for the mind to get calm and not think, we shouldn't praise that condition as the be all and end all. The mind can be in a state of not thinking, but this may not necessarily be a liberated state. You could take thiorazine or have a lobotomy, and you wouldn't be

thinking. If that was the way to *Nirvana*, then the Buddha would have recommended it. We could just mix a few herbs together, make a potion, take a few cupsful, and everything would be fine. But it's not simply a matter of not thinking. Not thinking is not synonymous with liberation. We can close our eyes and block our ears and not sense anything, but that does not mean we are liberated. It just means that the screen is blank. It is not an exalted state at all. It's more like watching TV with a blank screen. We may criticize American TV, but it's better than watching a blank screen!

To be able to control thought, to be able to think when you want to think and refrain from thinking when you want to refrain is an extremely handy skill to possess. I'll certainly grant that. But it is crucial that we don't judge our meditation on the basis of whether or not we can stop thinking. It is important to look at thought in a new way. I've been describing the quality of listening to the mind, of looking at what is going on in the mind with an openhearted awareness, and inviting you to not be too particular about the object of awareness. It is important that you put as much emphasis—more emphasis!—on the nature of the subject, the one who is knowing. This is what will ultimately get you free.