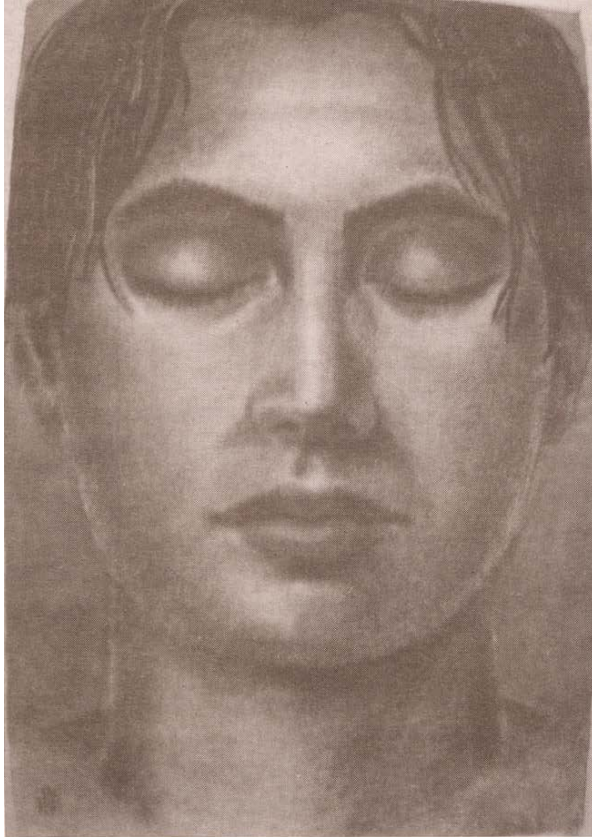


I Hadn't Thought of That

by Wes Nisker



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After years of meditation practice, one of the most significant changes in my life has been my relationship to my mind. We're still living together, of course, and we remain friends. But my mind and I are no longer codependent. I am taking back control of myself.

The change in our relationship started when I finally admitted that my mind had a thinking problem. I was a heavy thinker, often starting with two or three thoughts the minute I got up in the morning and then continuing to think throughout the day until bedtime. My mind produced thought after thought, about love and work, of course, along with existential thoughts and trashy ones, thoughts about clothing, food, music, politics. One subject after another, on and on, and all of it centered around me, which became embarrassing as well as oppressive. The thinking would not let me "be" – either at ease, without worry or in the moment. I

began to see my mind as an insecure, selfish, nagging inner bitch who was stealing my happiness and destroying my life. For our mutual survival, I decided to seek an intervention.

At first I tried analysis, with hopes of uncovering the psychological origin of my mind's need to think; later I got into some Gestalt screaming, flailing and crying, which only temporarily stopped the flow of thinking; and intermittently I used drugs, trying to "blow my mind" by short-circuiting the neural wiring. Finally, I tried meditation.

It turned out that the goal of meditation was not to stop thinking, as I had assumed, but rather to expose my mind to itself. Before meditation I was completely focused on the content of thoughts, how to manipulate them and extract meaning from them. That is what I was graded on in school and what our culture considers important. But nobody had taught me how to look at the process of thinking itself or at the intrinsic nature of thought. As the Tibetan sage Tulku Urgen said:

The stream of thoughts surges through the mind of an ordinary person, who will have no knowledge whatsoever about who is thinking, where the thought comes from, and where the thought disappears. The person will be totally and mindlessly carried away by one thought after another!

Let's be clear: thinking is not bad, or some kind of roadblock to enlightenment. In fact, thinking is an essential tool of our well-being and even our survival. (Perhaps a warning sign should be put up at meditation centers advising all who enter on the path: "Give up thinking at your own risk.")

Indeed, thinking is fabulous. Our genius as a species is the ability to create complex symbols, agree on their meaning, and use them to encode our knowledge and describe our plans. The thinking function allows us to compute, reason and imagine, and perhaps most important of all, to share our understanding with each other in the form of speech or writing. We can even record our

thinking and pass it on to future generations. (“Hold that thought!”)

Unfortunately, as a species we have grown to value thinking to the exclusion of other aspects of our being. The more we become identified with our thoughts, the more we are lost in our individual narrative, disconnected from what we have in common with other humans and other forms of life. We have turned our sense of self over to our thinking mind, leaving us lost in thought, disembodied. Especially in Western culture, heads are us.

Although we remain convinced that our ability to think somehow makes us “the chosen species,” existentially superior to the rest of creation, in the modern era this belief is being challenged. In his secret notebooks, Charles Darwin wondered, “Why is thought – which is a secretion of the brain – deemed to be so much more wonderful than, say, gravity, which is a property of matter? It is only our arrogance, our admiration of ourselves.” Making the same point, Stephen Jay Gould wondered if an intelligent octopus would go around being so proud of its eight arms.

Meanwhile, the new cognitive sciences are putting thought in its proper place in the scheme of things. Research into our brain and nervous system reveals that most of our interpretation of the world as well as our decision making takes place on what Daniel Dennett calls the “sub-personal” level, without a rational, conscious, thinking self directing or guiding the process. In fact, brain science reveals that thinking comes about quite late in the cognitive sequence, apparently in order to weave our experience into the ongoing story we tell about ourselves. As one neuroscientist put it, “We don’t have a rational mind so much as we have a rationalizing mind.” Our thinking is, for the most part, an afterthought.

Do we overvalue our thinking? The scientists seem to “think” so. Those who study cognition say

it is a way of organizing experience, while the evolutionary scientists see it as an adaptation, something that evolved like the eye or the opposable thumb. Great tool, folks, but not the be-all and end-all of creation.

The Buddha would appear to agree with Darwin and the scientists. He regarded the mind as a sixth sense, and did not seem to give thinking any more or less importance than sight or hearing. Like the other five senses, our thinking is simply another way of reading and interpreting the world. And as is true with other senses, the main job of the thinking mind is survival.

Just try to imagine what humans were thinking 20,000 years ago. I would guess it was something along the lines of “I wonder who is going on the hunt tomorrow” or “The gods want me to put red clay on my face to make the enemy run away” or “Honey, who is watching the fire tonight?” Now our thoughts are about our medical insurance, or the news from around the world, or our love like (aka, passing on our genes), and as the song says, “It’s still the same old story.” On most of our interior human screens, in any given era, is another episode of Survivor.

When I regard thinking as a survival tool, it helps to demystify and depersonalize the process. I see my thoughts as somewhat generic, as endemic to my species, not as “I,” “me” or “mine.”

So after years of meditation, and with the help of modern science, I now have some understanding of both the source and nature of thought – and have gained a degree of freedom. I no longer have to believe in or get carried away by every thought that comes along...

Wes Nisker is coeditor of *Inquiring Mind* and an author and meditation teacher. This piece first appeared in *Inquiring Mind*, but also appears as a chapter in his book, *Crazy Wisdom Saves the World Again*. His website is www.wesnisker.com.