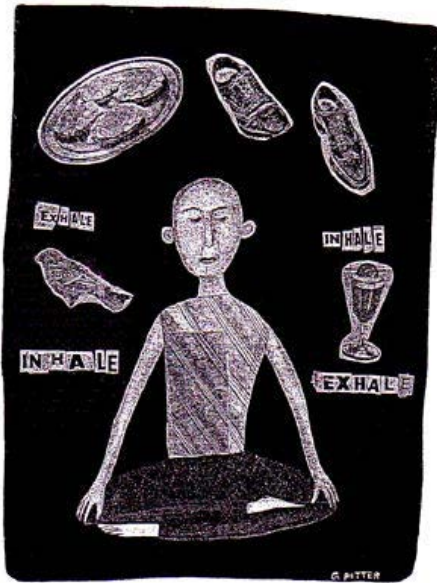


Thoughts on Thinking

by Edward Espe Brown



Knowing what to do with your wandering thoughts is perhaps the greatest challenge for meditators.

At my first formal interview with Suzuki Roshi, I didn't know what to say. Perhaps I really could not think of what to say, or nothing I was thinking was worth saying. I was young and sincere, and I wanted to make a good impression. After a couple of minutes of sitting quietly facing each other, I began to relax and Suzuki took the initiative.

"How's your meditation?"

"Not so good," I replied.

"What's not so good?"

"I'm thinking a lot."

"And what's the problem with thinking?" he asked.

That stumped me. When I looked directly for the problem with thinking, I couldn't find it. My fallback position was to tell him the do's and don'ts of meditation.

"You're not supposed to think in meditation," I said. "You're supposed to quiet your mind."

"Thinking is pretty normal, don't you think?"

I had to agree with the Roshi, who then explained that the problem with thinking was not thinking per se, but thinking that was stuck.

When people tell me meditation is "difficult," what they really mean is that quieting their minds or stopping their thinking is what's difficult. And just as I was as a new student, they are extremely reluctant to examine the issue

more carefully. It's not so simple. And when it is not simple, the simplest approach is to stick to the rules.

I've known people who have seriously devoted themselves to "not-thinking," and when I ask them if they called to let their friends know that they would be late, they say, "No, I didn't think of that." This is not a new phenomenon. An old Chinese Zen Master once said, "Some of you are taking me literally when I say, 'Don't think,' and you are making your minds like a rock. This is a cause of insentientcy and an obstruction to the Way. When I say not to think, I mean that if you have a thought, think nothing of it."

Mind Against Mind

The capacity to think is an essential element of our lives. We need to plan, make decisions, and communicate. The problem is not that we think but that we haven't had a truly new thought for most of our lifetime. In other words, our thinking is fixed.

For example, once I believe no one likes me, do you think I'm going to let anything change my mind? No way. I can explain any contradictory evidence: You don't know me well enough; if you really knew me, you wouldn't like me; you are just pretending to like me so you can get something out of me. Thinking tends to be for and against—and to be intolerant of thoughts that do not obviously concur. This is often referred to as "the disease of the mind is to set mind against mind."

Rather than eliminate thinking, you could say that one of the basic skills to develop in meditation is to be able to hold and sustain contradictory thoughts—calming the impulse to eliminate the opposition. One obvious example has to do with sitting still. You want to sit still, so can you have the thought to move and go on sitting still? Or do you have to do what the thought says?

If sitting still means eliminating the thought of moving, you may find meditation difficult—because the way to remove thoughts is to tighten muscles, and this makes sitting quite painful. Holding on to a thought, such as, "I am not going to move," also tightens muscles. This is what you are busy doing a good deal of the time, so if you are serious about releasing and calming the body and the mind, thoughts are going to be popping up one after the other. The trick is not to mind.

You could say that the point of meditation is to liberate thinking, and understanding this, you are ready to examine what to do with thinking during meditation. There are two basic strategies. One is to do something other than thinking and to use your thinking to help

accomplish that. The other is to give your thinking something to do other than what it usually does.

It's important to keep in mind that the goal is not to eliminate your thinking. I hear this all the time: "I'm so sick and tired of my thinking. I just want to get rid of it once and for all." Your thinking knows you want to get rid of it, so it is going to cling to you for all it's worth.

So what do you do with thinking during meditation? This first strategy, which is basic to Buddhism, especially Zen, emphasizes posture and breathing. With energy and commitment, give your attention fully to them rather than to your thinking.

This means emphasizing a straighter spine, including the small of the back curved slightly in and the neck long. But don't be shy about asking your thinking to lend a hand when needed. Is the neck shortening and the chin jutting forward? That's a red flag that thinking is in full bloom, and when your thinking notices that, lengthen your neck. You can also have your thinking count the breaths, say on the exhalation, or note the breath as it proceeds in and out.

Any Questions?

The second strategy involves giving your thinking a task. Good ways of doing this include koan study, the vipassana practice of noting, and any host of other creative endeavors. For instance, you could challenge your thinking with specific questions, such as, "What was your original face before your parents were born?" (Chew on that for a while.) Or you could practice taking mental notes, as appropriate: "thinking," "judging," "planning," "remembering," "anger," "joy," "seeing," or "hearing."

There is also the koan of daily life: Ask your thinking, "What is it you really want?" or "What is the most important point?" Any one of these activities can keep thinking occupied. In a sense, what you are doing is inviting your thinking to join you in meditation rather than trying to exclude it. This is similar to how you might work with a young child, explaining, "Here's what we are doing, meditating, and I would like you to help me by observing posture, sensing the breath, or whatever it is we are focusing on."

A third approach is to make a deal with your thinking: Leave me alone for now and I'll check back with you later. The secret here is that you are not trying to get rid of your thinking permanently, only temporarily. This is similar to the parent-child model: "Listen sweetheart, I am really busy right now, so please don't bother me. Could you play

by yourself for awhile? And later we will play together." You directly ask your thinking to leave you alone—to suspend judgment, gossip, and commenting so you can meditate—and agree to get together afterward to listen to what your thinking has to say.

But even with this approach, your thinking often can be very suspicious. I learned how to deal with this obstacle from a speech consultant when I had trouble expressing myself at meetings.

"Tell me what you wanted to say," she prompted.

"I can't." When she wondered why not, I explained: "My thinking won't let me. It says it won't be good enough."

She offered some instructions: "Ask your thinking to go into the room next door while you talk, and promise that you will check back with it when you are done."

"It won't go."

"There's a television there."

"It doesn't believe I'll check back."

"Promise."

"It still won't go," I lamented.

"Close the door! Force it shut!" she insisted.

Finally, I told her what I had wanted to say at the meeting. "Now, let's ask your thinking what it thought," she said. My thinking was pleased and relieved to be consulted: "That was rather good," it told me. But my speech consultant wasn't finished. "And now let's ask your thinking if it has any suggestions for improvement?"

My thinking was so pleased and politely responded, "You might have tried this or emphasized that a little more."

This was a fundamental shift from the more habitual approach of simply telling my thinking to go away and not "bother" me. Here, I asked my thinking to be quiet so as to closely observe what was happening—and then tell me about it.

Always be mindful that you and your thoughts are aiming to discover engaging, creative, enjoyable ways to meditate—as well as ways to live, awaken, and benefit each other. Think of your thinking not as an adversary but as a spiritual friend.

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