



# Thinking and Thoughts

## The Role of Thinking in Meditation

Dennis Warren, Guiding Instructor, Sacramento Insight Meditation

### Thinking and Thoughts Disconnecting from the Drama

Thoughts and thinking are such an intrinsic and dominating aspect of our experience, we seldom stop to consider their influence in our lives. We're thinking nearly all the time – reliving or recasting what has happened in the past; planning or projecting out into the future; or churning and analyzing an issue or question. Life becomes characterized by a constant stream of thoughts, ideas, and chatter in the mind. Inner quietness, calmness, and stillness disappear. Many of us are restless or uneasy if we aren't thinking, or doing something, all the time.

Despite our belief that we control our thoughts and our minds, meditators quickly learn that most of our thoughts are involuntary and beyond our control. We find ourselves pushed in one direction, then pulled in another, by thoughts we would prefer not to think. By merely recalling a particular experience we can find ourselves flooded with a cascade of emotional reactions, caught up in reliving an unpleasant experience or overwhelmed with a fast-moving train of associations. A powerful cycle begins to set in—thoughts trigger emotions; emotions trigger responses in the body and breath; and these responses trigger more thoughts and emotions. Once this cycle gains momentum, it is difficult to break. If we don't develop a skillful relationship with the process, it can smother our lives.

But thoughts have no inherent value. Most thoughts appear in the mind with no conscious effort, then disappear, barely noticed. Others arrive in the mind like rolling thunder or a bolt of lightning in a dark night, galvanizing the attention of the mind, inflaming the emotions, and stressing the body. If the topic of thought has particular emotional or intellectual significance to us, the mind places a floodlight on it. *Our reactivity to thoughts comes from the level of attachment, identification, and personalization we have to the subject matter, the content of the thoughts.*

Once we hold onto or resist a thought, we empower it to become something more than merely the movement of energy in the mind. A thought takes on a reality of its own in our mind once we attach to or identify with it. A memory and associated anger becomes "my" anger, rather than just the appearance of a memory in the mind and an emotional

reaction. And the difference between "my" anger and the appearance of "anger" in the mind is enormous from an emotional and psychological viewpoint. *It is the difference between defining ourselves, on the one hand, and clearly seeing into the nature of how experience arises in the mind. It is the difference between personalizing events, and observing an objective event in the mind.*

### Seeing Into Thinking Reactions

There is a direct and immediate relationship between the process of thinking and reactions in the body and mind. Yoga teacher and author Donna Farhi provides an excellent description of this process:

When we find ourselves constantly worrying or stuck in an eddy of repeating fear, insecurities, doubts and intransigent beliefs about ourselves and others. These thoughts serve to build and maintain chronic body tensions. *We call it tension in the body, but in reality, much of it is the recapitulation of thoughts singing their message of mayhem throughout our cells.* Muscles tighten, joints stiffen, our organs don't work as well, and circulation slows as the body is flooded with the toxic chemicals that are delegates of the stress response. All of these changes create obstacles to the free movement of the breath in the body. [Italics added for emphasis.]

Once we begin to experientially observe this interrelated and interconnected relationship between thoughts, the breath, bodily sensations, and emotions, we begin to realize that each conditions the other. *Each is an ongoing and constantly changing process that is continually conditioning and affecting the others throughout the day, usually below our level of awareness. They are an interlocking, inseparable, and mutually dependent kinetic chain which leads to emotional reactivity and the personalization of events and experience.*

Perhaps most important, we begin to see that the process of thinking is only one aspect of who and what we are. We have become so dazzled by the conceptual and intellectual capacities of the mind, we allow thinking to dominate our

lives and mistake concepts and beliefs for direct experience. Concepts and beliefs are, at best, one step away from direct experience. *To the degree that we perceive the world only through concepts and beliefs, we cut ourselves off from direct experience and from Insight, which arises from direct experience.*

Wise thinking and reflection have an important role to play in our lives, but are different than the process of meditation. Ramakrishna was right when he said that "Thinking is a good servant, but a poor master." Learning how to meditatively work with the process of thinking is an important part of a balanced path of practice and living.

The process of thinking is an important object of meditation. Becoming involved in the content or subject matter of the thinking process, is not part of the meditation process. It is a distraction from and obstacle to the meditation process. If you're focusing on the content or subject matter of thinking while sitting in meditation, you're lost in thought rather than meditating. Meditation involves the moment-to-moment awareness of the process of experience, rather than the mental or intellectual content of thinking.

### **The Critical Role of "Noting"**

The technique of "noting" or "labeling" thoughts as they appear in the mind is an important part of the meditation process because it helps break the constantly recurring cycle of attachment and identification with the content of the thought. It assists us in not getting sucked in the dramas contained in thinking. When we're "lost" or caught up in thought, it helps us get out. It supports an understanding that the nature of thinking is an ongoing and constantly changing process.

*Noting is a tool that enables us to experience thinking as it really is: Just another form of energy manifesting in our breath, body, and mind. We notice and experience the appearance of thinking, note or label its presence, see into its nature, then return the focus of attention to the breath and the body. The breath is always the anchor that stabilizes and calms the mind. The breath and the body are always the places to which we return to re-ground ourselves in direct experience.*

The noting process is both simple and powerful. As a thought appears in the mind, attention is placed on it, and a gentle, silent descriptive note is made to designate its character. *Noting redirects and refocuses the mind on the process of thinking appearing and disappearing, and away*

*from the mind's normal habit of identifying with and attaching to the content or drama of thinking.*

The simplest form of this meditative technique is to note, or label, "thinking" each time you realize that awareness has shifted to, or been lost in, thinking. After becoming accustomed to using this noting process, a more detailed noting system can be used which divides thinking and thoughts into four types, each with their own label or note as follows:

<b>Time Period / Type of Thought</b>	<b>Note</b>
Past (Memory)	→ "Remembering"
Present Moment	→ "Thinking"
Future (Projection)	→ "Planning"
Images	→ "Imaging"

*This form of noting is a doorway to experientially observing the workings of the mind. As we begin to separate ourselves from the content of thinking, we can observe what patterns emerge. Does the mind tend to focus on the past, the present, or the future? Do particular types of thoughts and mind states, such as judgment or self-criticism, tend to repeat themselves? We begin to see, perhaps for the first time, the cyclical nature, and the interconnected relationships of, energy manifesting itself in the breath and body and in the mind as thoughts, emotions, other mind states, and feelings of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.*

*Our goal is to meditatively investigate thinking by standing back and watching thoughts move through the mind rather than diving into and becoming involved in their content. We act as if thoughts were a river stream deep in the forest. We sit on the side of the stream and just watch the thoughts go by with interest, but without any effort to control, manipulate, or change them in any way.*

This moment-to-moment awareness allows us to directly experience the nature of thinking without the filter of intellectual or conceptual process. It allows the mind to detach from the topic of the thought. Rather than experiencing "thinking," or "pain," or "the breath," we bring our focus of attention to the experience that is occurring and its qualities: expansion, contraction, movement, temperature, softness, hardness, the process of constantly changing bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, feelings. *The experiential question during meditation is always the*

same: “What is happening right now, in the breath, the body, the mind, and the emotions?”

We can observe a thought arise and recognize that it is about something in the past. We can see that an emotion is attached to the thought or memory which, in turn, triggers a reaction in the body and the breath. We experience that this is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We begin to *see through* the initial appearance of our experience and *into* its very nature. We engage in this experiential investigation *without* stepping back into the memory, thought, or emotion, *without* reliving it, and *without* getting caught back in it.

We see and note whatever is happening, over and over again. We slowly begin to awaken to one of the most important Insights: *From the standpoint of our inner balance, peace, and happiness, what's important is not what's happening, or what we are experiencing, but how we respond to it.* To the degree we can depersonalize our experiences and not identify with them, we suddenly have breathing room and perspective around whatever is happening. The potential for consciously responding to what is occurring, rather than unconsciously reacting, emerges.

*Our goal is to be present, and experience a sense of well being, with whatever arises during meditation. We begin to see that we don't need to push anything way, or hold on to anything, to feel balanced and healthy. If it's cold, it's ok. If it's hot, it's ok. If the mind is engaged in lots of thinking, that's ok. If sadness appears, that's ok. If happiness appears, that's ok. We can just let go into the experience of whatever is present from a place of non identification and non attachment. Through nonjudgmental awareness, we can experience what is happening without fighting or struggling with it. Once we begin to develop this way of being with experience during meditation, it will slowly begin to extend out into other aspects of our lives.*

### An Illustration of Noting Thinking

During sitting meditation, you wake up to find yourself lost in thought, thinking about an unpleasant encounter with someone at work earlier in the day. In each case, rather than continuing to dive into the content, the subject matter of the thought or inner dialogue, awareness pulls back, sees the type of thought, and makes a gentle note. This helps pull out of and break the cycle of reactivity associated with the content of the thinking. Here is how part of the process might look and be noted:

Thought/Inner Dialogue	Time Period/ Type of Thought	Note
“She said that I shouldn't have taken the action I took. She said that it represented poor judgment on my part.”	Past	Remembering
“Next time I won't let her get away with talking to me like that. I'll set her straight.”	Future	Planning
“I'm really spending a lot of time remembering and planning.”	Present	Thinking
“This is unbelievable that my mind is so out of control.”	Present	Judgment

### Judgment, Self-Criticism, and “Mistakes”

One of the most powerful, and potentially destructive, types of thought is judgment. The source of this form of thinking is the tendency of the mind to compare, and then make an evaluation based on the comparison. (“The way I cook this dish is much tastier than how she makes it.”) It frequently comes in the form of punishing self-criticism (“You can't ever do anything right”); and involves avoidance (“I'm not going to deal with anyone who treats me like that”) or denial or fantasy (“If I could just get this issue resolved, my problems would be over.”)

But judgments, like thoughts, have no inherent value. Their value comes from the level of attachment, identification, and personalization we have developed to the subject matter, the topic, the content of the judgment. The problem with judgment, isn't judgment itself. If we can enjoy a meal for what it is, despite the fact that our preference would be to have the seasoning done in a different way, our judgment about the seasoning doesn't interfere with our life. If we can't enjoy the meal because of the comparison the mind is making, the judgment becomes a source of continuing dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Another problem with judgments is that our minds tend to treat them as true. Rather than questioning the validity of the judgment, the mind tends to accept it blindly. Once this form of identification sets in, it is self-perpetuating. Where

self-criticism is involved, a lifetime of repetition frequently turns a judgment into a self belief.

Noting or labeling can be helpful in enabling the mind to see judgments and to slowly detach from them. As a judgment appears in the mind, attention is placed on it, and a gentle, silent descriptive note of “judgment” can be made. If the presence of judgment is particularly strong, you might try noting *and* counting the judgments such as “Judgment One,” “Judgment Two,” “Judgment Three.” If you try this latter approach during any regular day—just watch, note, and count judgments as they appear—you’ll likely be shocked by the number, frequency, and strength of judgments that are present in the mind and the pivotal role they play in daily life.

*Be careful not to use the noting process as a method to try to eliminate, stop, or fix the thinking and thoughts.* This is just another way of attempting to control what is happening in the service of judgment. “I don’t like this, so I’ll try to change it.” Efforts to control thoughts involve resistance to what is present in our life, and lead directly to struggle, discomfort, and pain. Our objective is to simply settle back into the moment, allow thinking and thoughts to appear, then experience them directly, without judgment.

### **Liberating The Mind From Unskillful Thinking**

Deconstructing the process of thinking helps us pierce through attachment, identification, and the personalization of experience. Focusing on the direct experience of the process of what is happening in our bodies and minds clarifies and simplifies the surface appearance of complexity that arises from thinking. Investigating and labeling the nature of thinking reintroduces the possibility of choice in each moment, and liberates the mind from being controlled and dominated by deeply conditioned and habitual states of mind.

In order to skillfully work with thinking and thoughts we first need to reframe our objective. The objective is not to work with thinking and thoughts, but to work with the *process* of thinking and thoughts. If we frame the issue from the perspective that certain thinking and thoughts are problematic, the focus of our effort mistakenly appears to be changing the content or subject matter involved. If we frame the issue from the perspective of process – how thinking and thoughts arise, are sustained, and dissipate – the focus of our effort becomes working with the dynamic, interactive, and fluid based on what is appearing in the mind in the present moment.

Deconstructing what is happening in our bodies and minds on a moment-to-moment basis clarifies and simplifies the

surface appearance of complexity that can appear with thinking. Labeling or noting the nature of thinking and related mind states allows us to step back from the content of thought and reintroduces the possibility of choice in each moment. Deeply investigating the nature of thinking and thoughts can liberate the mind from being controlled and dominated by deeply conditioned and habitual states of mind.

