

## Basic Principles

### Thought & Thinking From A Buddhist Perspective

Buddhist practice is based on the process of causes and conditions. Every experience arises from the conditions that precede it. These conditions can act as either a cause of the experience arising and/or influence its' qualities and characteristics. Experience is changing constantly because conditions are changing constantly.

Thought is one such condition. It influences perception, judgment and decision making. It's important to realize, however, that thought is only one of many conditions causing or influencing our experience in each moment, and not necessarily the most important one.

The historical Buddha was clear in stating that there are two forms of thought conditions: those which point the mind towards suffering and those which point the mind away from suffering. (1)

The Buddha discussed the potential impact of thought in our lives in this way: "If a person speaks or acts with a harmful thought, trouble follows that person as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. If a person speaks or acts with a harmonious, thought happiness follows that person as his or her own shadow, never leaving them." (2)

This statement frames the importance of our having a conscious approach to working with thought from a Buddhist perspective. Thought needs to be mindfully evaluated to determine whether it points the mind towards suffering (desire, aversion or ignorance / confusion) or away from suffering (towards balance, clarity and wisdom.)

This is an evaluation of both the process (how) and the content (what) of thinking

From a Buddhist perspective, the fact that we think something, or believe something, doesn't mean anything. Thought represents an unchecked potential cause of, or support for, suffering and harm without mindful evaluation. The objective is to think mindfully.

Unmindful thought is a particularly dangerous condition because it tends to be self-centered and self-referential. This includes thought in the form of strongly held views, assumptions, opinions, beliefs, values and memories which are forms of thought.

Thought is the primary tool the mind uses to avoid experience in the body. It does this by shifting the focus of attention from direct experience in the body to self-centered or self-based thoughts. We think about experience rather having the experience. This results in suffering from personalization and identification. (3) This process of disembodiment is one of the primary reasons we are largely disconnected from the rich experience and wisdom

available to us through the direct, body-based (energetic, sensory, somatic) experience the historical Buddha recommended as the foundation of our mindfulness practices.

It is difficult to grasp the implications of these basic principles because our lives tend to be so thought driven and dominated. Thought has an important role to play in life and practice. But its' important is out of balance in most of our lives. For most of us, it acts as a primary obstacle to clearly seeing our intentions, speech and actions as well as making sound evaluations and choices related to suffering. It is helpful to remember the words of the Indian Sage Ramakrishna that "Thinking is a good servant, but a poor master."

### **Making Thought The Object of Mindfulness**

The Buddha used the image of a cow herder tending his herd and mindfully directing them to walk in a direction that would insure their safety and health. The clear direction in this and other Suttas is that we can make thought a practice in the following ways.

#### **Step One. Make thought a regular Object of Mindfulness in daily life.**

We can start doing this in a way similar to how we work with the primary object of meditation in our sitting practice, whether it is the breath or the body. We suspend judgment, and mindfully watch & experience what is taking place in relationship to the thought that is present. What is happening energetically, with sensations in the body, the feeling tone of the experience, emotions and other mind states? How are these components of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness relating to and influencing each other? This is basically the same process of Investigation we use in sitting meditation.

At first, this may seem awkward since we are, literally, thinking and watching our experiencing thinking simultaneously. With time and patience this is a skill that slowly becomes reflexive and intuitive like many of the other skills we develop in practice.

#### **Step Two: Mindfully evaluate the direction the mind is being pointed.**

An essential part of mindfulness is knowing or understanding the implications of what is taking place in our bodies and minds while it is happening. This involves examining both how we are thinking (process) and what we are thinking (content.) There are a number of approaches we can do this inquiry:

We can examine whether the mind is being pointed towards suffering (desire, aversion or ignorance / confusion) or away from suffering (towards balance, clarity and wisdom.)

At the most basic experiential level we are asking if a thought is contributing to an unskillful mind state such as being unmindful, judgmental, reactive, defensive, aroused, attached and/or personalizing experience? Or is the thought contributing to a skillful mind states such as being mindful, non-judgmental, responsive, open, balanced, non-attached or seeing clearly?

Another approach would be to mindfully evaluate if the thought encourages speech, action or additional thoughts that is directed by desire, aversion, confusion? Ill-will or the urge to harm? Towards struggle and dissatisfaction? Or does the thought encourage speech, action or additional thought that is directed by generosity, kindness and clarity? Kindness and non-harming? Towards cooperation and satisfaction? We can use any one of these qualities as a focus of inquiry.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggests asking "Is this necessary?" or "Is this helpful?" to evaluate a thought (4)

The answers to these experiential questions arrive primarily through the direct body-based Evaluation /Investigation process discussed in Step One, supplemented by reflection and cognitive assessment in certain circumstances. As a general rule, you are heading in the wrong direction if you find you are trying to "figure out," "work through," "think through," or are ruminating about one of these experiential questions.

As a starting place, we can take any one of the above approaches to hold as an open question in mindfully watching, experiencing and evaluating the implications of thoughts?

I have also found that investigating the relationship between listening & thought can be a very helpful way of revealing unhelpful thought and thinking habits. An exercise you might try follows below.

### **Step Three: Make adjustments as, and if, necessary to maintain or restore balance in the thought process.**

The Buddha discussed three fundamental ways of working with thought. Each involves making a choice of what action to take in a particular moment of thought based on mindful evaluation. The choices are: (1) refraining from thought that points the mind into suffering (desire, aversion, ignorance / confusion); (2) cultivating thought that points the mind away from suffering (balance, clarity and wisdom); and engaging in thought that purifies the mind of desire, aversion and ignorance and other unskillful mind states. The three choices translate into a number of specific strategies for maintaining or restoring balance to the thought process that will be the subject of the next talk and a second paper.

Notes

- 1 The Dvedhavitakka Sutta: Two Kinds of Thinking, Majjhima Nikaya 19.
- 2 The Dhammapada, Chapter One, Twin Verses – The Choice, Second Text, Khuddaka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka
- 3 The Madhupindika Sutta: The Honey Ball Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 18.
- 4 Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening, Joseph Goldstein, Chapter 38, Right Thought, p. 351

## Listening & Thought

### Which Way Is The Mind Being Pointed?

Here is a practical, interesting exercise in looking at the relationship between listening and thinking. You can try it anywhere -- at work, at home, with co-workers, friends or family.

It is designed to alert us to habits and patterns of listening & thinking that are operating below our normal level of awareness. As a result these habits and patterns influence what we hear, how much we hear, and our understanding of what we hear without our knowing it.

Studies consistently show that we commonly do a number of things unconsciously in addition to listening while we are listening. Each of these unconscious activities involves some form of thought or internal dialogue that supports them. By definition, they are unmindful.

If we can spot the activity, bring it up to the level of awareness, we have the opportunity to mindfully watch, experience and evaluate its' impact: Is the mind being pointed into suffering or away from suffering?

### Unconscious Activities While We Are Listening

Here are a few of these activities to watch for:

1. **Selective Listening.** This occurs when we are listening only for certain points, facts or topics and ignoring most of what else is being said.
2. **Liking and Disliking.** Sometimes we have a reaction of liking or disliking a topic, the person or the way something is presented, then listening to what is said thru this form of reactivity.
3. **Bias.** Bias involves paying attention through a prism of pre-existing and fixed views, assumptions, opinions, beliefs, and preferences – all forms of thought. When bias is present, our listening can be an exercise in looking for parts of the communication which confirm, or are consistent with, our pre-existing viewpoint; and doubting, rejecting or resisting those that do not.
4. **Waiting To Talk.** Sometimes we're so eager to react to what we have heard that listening completely stops. Instead, we're merely waiting for our turn to talk. This can take the form of planning, strategizing or rehearsing what we are going to say. Sometime we can't even wait and feel compelled to interrupt.
5. **Personalizing.** We all know this one. It happens when our listening is based primarily on self-interest.

6. **Speculating.** Speculating involves making assumptions, conclusions, projections or guesses about where a communication is going, what the speaker is "really" trying to say and about the speaker's motives.
7. **Judging.** Judging, in this context, involves unmindfully making an evaluation and assessment of what is being said or the way it is being said. One version of judging is placing an individual or idea in a category which carries a set of definitions, values or assumptions and then listening from that perspective.
8. **Debating.** Sometimes we carry on a silent debate with the other person, internally arguing and matching points with what is being said.
9. **Problem-solving.** Problem-solving involves actively working through, strategizing about, or attempting to resolve some issue or problem that is being spoken about.

### Try This Exercise

During the next week, pay mindful attention to how you listen to others.

In particular, notice what is happening in addition to listening. See if you can discern one of the unconscious activities and the thought that support it. Do this in a relaxed and curious way. Treat this exercise as an investigation.

What habits or patterns, if any, do you observe? Do you listen to different people in different ways?

When you spot an unconscious activity and the thought that support it, either make it An Object of Mindfulness and Mindfully Evaluate it or simply ask "Is this activity and thought helpful?" or "Which way does it point my mind?" (1)

Reflect on any habits or patterns you see. Do these help or hinder your ability to listening fully and engage in an open, non-judgmental discussion?

You may find it helpful to write out what you have experienced and what you have learned. Doing this usually helps clarify these issues.

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