

Awareness of Thoughts and Emotions

From the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program originally developed by Jon Kabat Zinn, with additional development by Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal

“A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison, by widening our circle of compassion, to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” – Albert Einstein

As we continue to practice mindfulness we learn that our thoughts and emotions can become useful objects of our awareness, and are not simply something that we need to regard as a problem. Through paying attention to our thoughts and the whole process of how we become engaged with them, we are able to learn a great deal about our mental habits and state of mind, and how our engagement with thoughts creates suffering. We are able to start to change our relationship with our thoughts and through this become less trapped by them.

As humans, we tend to spend a great deal of our time engaged in thinking. We could even say, as Eckhart Tolle describes it, that to be human means to be “lost in thought”! We may regard our thinking ability to be something very special, highly evolved and something which marks us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. But in fact our thinking and our relationship to our thinking can create a lot of problems for us. In fact, our relationship with our thoughts could be seen as the cause of the majority of the suffering we experience as human beings. Our thoughts can tend to have a powerful effect on us; in fact we could say that we are slaves to our thinking. Why is this? It seems that it is a lot to do with how we relate to our thoughts and the beliefs or attitudes we hold about them.

What are our beliefs or attitudes to our thoughts? Firstly, we tend to regard our thoughts as very important, and they are therefore usually very successful in sabotaging our attention and distracting us from meaningful activities or company we are engaged in, resulting in us blanking out mentally from whatever we are doing or saying in the present moment. Secondly, we tend to regard our thoughts as important because we believe that they define who we are – there is a strong identification with thought – this is who I am! And then, thirdly, we tend to get hooked into the content of our thoughts, the stories that they tell us and the meaning that they weave out of our experiences. In fact, we can get totally obsessed with this content as the latest soap opera of our lives! So much of this will be mere speculation, interpretation, evaluation, judging, predicting and so on. We come to believe our thoughts as facts even when we don’t tend to believe all that others say to us or all that we read in the newspapers!

It may seem to us that we have little control over our thinking. We have a sense of thoughts automatically popping into our heads, often bound up with emotions, and they are frequently unpleasant and strong. We may find ourselves getting caught up in particular unhelpful thoughts patterns as personal habits. These often fall into three main areas of preoccupation: the past, the future and the present.

We get preoccupied with thoughts about the past: going over old arguments or disagreements, regrets, resentments, opening old hurts, reveries, mulling over or trying to rewrite memories and so on.

We get preoccupied with thoughts about the future: patterns of worrying, planning, fantasizing, dreaming, etc.

We get preoccupied with thoughts about the present: making a running commentary of whatever is in our experience, or what we think should be, judging, evaluating, analyzing and so on.

And we seem to love getting preoccupied in these ways – our thoughts seem to provide us with constant entertainment and stimulation – they become our latest “gossip”! We seem to find our thoughts very interesting and often assume that others will find them interesting too! Sometimes we meet people who do not edit this internalized stream of commentary, and their speech shows us how this stream of thinking can be interminable, alienated and out of touch with the present moment, including the person they are talking to. It

seems that we can be fearful of the mind quietening down, fearful of inner silence prevailing without our constant thoughts for company! Perhaps fearful of what we would get in touch with if we let go of this engagement with thought – if we are off our guard!

We will have noticed how hard it is for our attention to rest on something for very long and how the mind has a tendency to leap from one thing to the next, perhaps following associations, perhaps moving randomly and seemingly without reason. For this reason, we often talk about a butterfly-mind, or the mind is compared to a wild monkey leaping from one tree to the next, taking a bite from one fruit and without finishing it, moving on to the next one. This is the mind addicted to distraction! This is the mind that is easily bored. In fact, we have probably spent most of our lives training the mind in this way: it can multi-task, react quickly and scan the inner or outer environment for experiences it perceives to be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral and selecting according to its preferences. Our societies move at such a quick pace these days with the attention span of its people getting shorter and shorter. When we train the mind in mindfulness, we are attempting to turn around these tendencies and habits: we are training the mind to settle and stabilize and to calm the reactivity of the mind. Through this, we can find peace.

These are a few points in summary to explain our relationship with the activities of the mind:

- We are addicted to thought and the distraction it offers us from whatever we may be experiencing in the present moment.
- We believe thinking to be very important.
- We believe the content of our thoughts to be facts.
- We are preoccupied with the content of our thoughts.
- We find our thoughts entertaining, even when we are “thinking about our problems”.
- We fear we would be bored or lonely without our thoughts.
- We identify with our thoughts and believe that they define who we are. They shape our sense of self.
- We may be wary of and unfamiliar with a mind where thoughts have quietened down.
- We may be wary of getting in touch with certain emotional states underlying our thoughts.
- When our mind starts to settle, we tend to stir it up by engaging again in thought.

Difference between Thoughts and Thinking

You may have noticed that we are not able to stop our thoughts. Thoughts arise by themselves without us doing anything to create them. We could say that the mind “secretes” thoughts, just as the stomach secretes stomach acid. It is what the mind does and what it is best at.

When we are practicing mindfulness, we will learn that it is possible simply to allow thoughts to arise by themselves and to fade away by themselves, without getting involved with them in any way. When the mind is relatively calm and our mindfulness fairly steady, we will find that it is possible to observe this arising and fading away of thoughts, just as if we were sitting on the banks of a river, allowing the activities of our mind to flow by in front of us. Or, to use another metaphor, it is like we were sitting on the top of a hill and our thoughts and emotions are like the weather passing over head, with its rain clouds and storms and winds and clear skies. Whatever the activities of the mind, we remain seated, just observing, and not getting lost in the flow. In this way, our mindfulness remains strong.

The problem only starts to arise when we become engaged in thought or engaged in the content of our thoughts and get sucked into the vortex of thinking. This is when thought becomes thinking. Instead of sitting quietly on the bank of the river of thought - just observing the activities of the mind flowing by, we jump into the river and get carried along by its current. It really is like jumping on to the “thought train” and after a while, once we realize that we have been thinking, we find that we have already been carried some distance away from where we started.

Observer and Undercurrent

Meditation teachers have developed models for us to understand the components of the mind and to clarify our experience when we are training in mindfulness. Rob Nairn, author of “Diamond Mind”, uses the terminology of the observer and the undercurrent.

The observer is not detached from experience, but immersed in it, and is the part of the mind which is self-aware and which can comment and reflect upon our experience. The observer is bound up in our sense of self and is self-knowing: it knows that we are having this experience, it knows that is “my experience”, and it knows if it likes it or not. It is the observer which tries to manipulate our experience according to its preferences, as it seeks to grasp at what is pleasant, push away what is unpleasant, and turn away from what is seen as uninteresting or unimportant. It is the observer which gets distracted and pulled into thinking. It is the observer that gets caught up in reactive mind states such as preferences, judgment and non-acceptance. It is the observer that we train when we train in mindfulness: the training to sit quietly on the bank of the river without jumping in.

The undercurrent is the constantly changing content of the mind, which flows on regardless of whether or not we engage with it. If the observer is the figure that sits quietly on the banks of the river, the undercurrent is the river. If we can observe it without jumping in, we will notice that it is made up of a stream of thoughts, feelings, images, sensory impressions, emotions, mind states and memories, which eddy and flow, like the currents of the water and the bubbles appearing on its surface. The undercurrent is autonomous and continues to flow whether or not we get involved with it. Also, much of it flows just outside of our normal conscious awareness. You may have noticed the flowing of the undercurrent when you are in states of drowsiness: perhaps when falling asleep, on awakening or when drifting into a day-dream.

The content of the undercurrent will probably seem familiar to us, and is filled with all of our past experiences, sensory impressions and mind states: fragments of a memory; an image of the face of an old friend; the poignant smell of floor polish from our old school; words spoken in the heat of a past argument; a lingering emotional essence of a dream we had last night; an old feeling of insecurity or vulnerability. It is the undercurrent which feeds in to our dreams and becomes part of our memory stream. It is not organized chronologically or systematically, although the observer attempts to organize, analyze, interpret and manipulate it – channeling it into the current stories of our lives.

When we are training in mindfulness, we have an opportunity to investigate the relationship between the observer and the undercurrent, and to recognize how it is the responses and reactions of the observer to the undercurrent that creates our suffering.

Metaphors for Working with Thinking and Emotions

When we practice mindfulness with our thoughts and emotions, we are entering into a different relationship with our inner experience, maintaining the stance of an impartial observer, and distinguishing between “thoughts” and “thinking”. This stance can be illustrated with the use of some metaphors, which we may find helpful in our mindfulness practice. Here are some commonly used ones:

We are sitting on the banks of a river and the water is flowing in front of us. The activities of our mind are represented by the flow and eddy of the river, or by the leaves which float past in the current. We remain sitting on the bank, just allowing the river to flow. When we get drawn into the thoughts, it is as if we have jumped into the river.

We are sitting on the top of the mountain and the weather is blowing over our head. The clear blue sky is our mind free of thoughts. The clouds and the wind are like our thoughts. We can remain sitting and just let them flow past without getting involved with them.

We are sitting under the lanes of a motorway. The lanes above with their flow of traffic are like our thoughts, traveling in all directions. We do not need to be distracted by them, we can let them take care of themselves and remain in the still place of the observer.

Thoughts are Not Facts

Our thoughts can have very powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often those thoughts are triggered and run off quite automatically. By becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind and letting go of them as we return our attention to the breath and the moment, it is

possible to get some distance and perspective on them. This can allow us to see that there may be other ways to think about situations, freeing us from the tyranny of the old thought patterns that automatically “pop into mind”. Most importantly, we may eventually come to realize deep “in our bones” that all thoughts are only mental events (including the thoughts that say they are not), that thoughts are not facts, and that we are not our thoughts.

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind; we can “get hold of them”, so that we can look them over from a number of different perspectives, and by becoming very familiar with our “top ten” habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns, we can more easily become aware of (and change) the processes that may lead us into downward mood spirals.

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that may block or undermine practice, such as “There is no point in doing this” or “It’s not going to work, so why bother?” Such pessimistic, hopeless thought patterns are one of the most characteristic features of depressed mood states and one of the main factors that stop us taking actions that would help us get out of those states. It follows that it is particularly important to recognize such thoughts as “negative thinking” and not automatically give up on efforts to apply skillful means to change the way we feel.

From Segal, Williams, Teasdale (2002)

Ways You Can See Your Thoughts Differently

1. Just watch them come in and leave, without feeling that you have to follow them.
2. View your thought as a mental event rather than a fact. It may be true that this event often occurs with other feelings. It is tempting to think of it as being true. But it is still up to you to decide whether it is true and how you want to deal with it.
3. Write your thoughts down on paper. This lets you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down can give you a moment to reflect on its meaning.
4. Ask yourself the following questions: Did this thought just pop into my head automatically? Does it fit with the facts of the situation? Is there something about it that I can question? How would I have thought about it at another time, in another mood? Are there alternatives?
5. For particularly difficult thoughts, it may help to take another look at them intentionally, in a balanced, open state of mind, as part of your sitting practice: Let your “wise mind” give its perspective.

From Segal, Williams, Teasdale (2002) based in part on Fennell, in Hawton et al. 1989.

Relating to Thoughts - I

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not “you” or “reality”. For instance, if you have the thought that you must get a certain number of things done today and you don’t recognize it as a thought, but act as if it’s “the truth”, then you have created in that moment a reality in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

One patient, Peter, who’d had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realization of this one night, when he found himself washing his car at 10 o’clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn’t have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today, because he was already so completely caught up in believing it.

If you find yourself behaving in similar ways, it is likely that you will also feel driven, tense, and anxious without even knowing why, just as Peter did. So if the thought of how much you have to get done today comes up while you are meditating, you will have to be very attentive to it as a thought or you may be up and doing

things before you know it, without any awareness that you decided to stop sitting simply because a thought came through your mind.

On the other hand, when such a thought comes up, if you are able to step back from it and see it clearly, then you will be able to prioritize things and make sensible decisions about what really does need doing. You will know when to call it quits during the day. So the simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

This liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself. When we spend some time each day in a state of non-doing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body, without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand. As the mind develops stability and is less caught up in the content of the thinking, we strengthen the mind's ability to concentrate and to be calm. And if each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of its content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are.

From Segal et al. "Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression", adapted from Kabat-Zinn

Relating to Thoughts – II

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we all spend much or most of our lives there. But meditation is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Because meditation is not thought, through the continuous process of silent observation, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen.

When we lose ourselves in a thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps our mind and carries it away, and, in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere along the line, we may wake up and realize that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few minutes right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them but then vanish upon inspection.

But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, and then, all of a sudden – whoosh! – We are gone, lost in thought. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, so that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: "Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge". They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and their impact on our lives, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arise and pass, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind; we can see our thoughts as the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.

From Segal et al. "Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression", adapted from Joseph Goldstein.