

“Thoughts are just thoughts”

Segal Z., Williams M., and Teasdale J., (2002) point out that our thoughts have very powerful influence on the way we experience both our world and our feelings. As our thoughts vary and fluctuate so too does our perspective on life. Our mind can be like a television set up with many channels; whatever channel we are absorbed in determines our perspective for that particular period of time. The capacity of the mind to change its perspective is a very important one, but all too often this happens in a very mindless way. By paying attention to our breath we can have a greater insight into this process. The breath acts like an anchor for a mind that is constantly in motion. By bringing our awareness back to the breath rather than identifying with the various thought patterns that are constantly arising, we will gradually learn to get more distance and perspective in our thought process.

When we are both anchored in the breath and have created a sense of distance from our tendency to react to thoughts as they arise in the mind, we will be able to free ourselves from the tyranny of old thought patterns that automatically “pop into our mind”. Over time and with this practice, we will realise that our thoughts are merely mental events whose very nature it is to come and go, and not a phenomena that has to be slavishly obeyed.

By observing our thought processes on a moment-to-moment basis, we are neither suppressing, repressing, nor acting on them. This place of non-reactive observation gives us the opportunity to get to know our minds in a deeper way than is usually possible. It also gives us the opportunity to get to know our more frequent habitual, automatic and unhelpful thinking patterns which can lead us into downward mood spirals. While engaging with this material, for example, it is important to become aware of the thought process that will inevitable arise that suggest, “There is no point in doing this” or “it is not going to work, so why bother”. If such thinking is slavishly followed it will sabotage and undermine your efforts, and deny you the opportunity to open up to new awareness about the nature of your own mental and thinking

process.

You do not need to fight such thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather you can simply choose not to follow them.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise you might like to 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 often change upon inspection. But what about the strong thoughts that strongly affect you? You are watching and then all of a sudden you are gone lost in thought. What happened? What are the particular kind of thoughts that catch you again and again, so that you forget that they are phenomena passing through?

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

The kind 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 the 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 they are.

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

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 it, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness. As the mind develops stability, we strengthen the mind's ability to concentrate and to be calm.

Ways to see your thoughts differently

1. Just watch your thoughts come in and leave, without thinking that you have to follow them.
2. View your thoughts as a mental event rather than a fact. It may be true that this event often occurs with other feelings; and when it does, 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 has the effect of letting you see them in a way which 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 the facts of the situation?
 - Is there something about this thought/thinking which I can question?
 - How would I have thought about it at another time, in another situation?
 - Are there any alternative ways of thinking about this situation?
5. Gently ask yourself:
 - Am I overtired?
 - Am I jumping to a conclusion?
 - Am I thinking in black and white terms?
 - Am I expecting perfection?
 - Am I making assumptions?
 - Am I over-generalising?
6. For particular difficult thoughts, it may be helpful intentionally to take another look at them in an open state of mind and let your “Wise Mind” give its own perspective.

Noticing self-critical commentary

Williams et al 2007 highlights the more we engage in meditation the more we may notice ourselves having reactions to what we are experiencing, judging how well things are going, and how frequently we criticize ourselves. Such occasions are opportunities to remember that judging and criticizing are just more thinking, and prompts us to try as best we can to relate to these patterns of thinking as simply mental events.

So how can we help ourselves?

Williams and his colleagues suggest one possibility is to give a name to the patterns of thinking that habitually occur, and to use labels such as “Judging Mind” or “Hopeless Mind” or identify them as sub personalities. “My Worst Critic,” “Doubting Thomas” and so on. Ideally, the labels that we choose should help us to drop into wider and wiser perspective to see these thought patterns. To view them as frequent visitors to the mind rather than identifying with them as part of ourselves or hearing them as a voice of true reality.

We could label the whole critical judgmental package as “Critical Mind”. Once we have done this we are all able to identify the critical mind when it arises and acknowledge it. This can help to enable us to let the critical mind come and go, without giving it the power to trigger a cascade of negative thoughts. It enables us to discern what is useful and helpful.