

Practice Note: Where Does Thinking Occur?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 14, 2010

Something you might want to explore today is how letting your discursive thinking become quiet can help your practice. It's pretty obvious that spending time thinking about anything but your meditation gets in the way of the meditation. To be thinking about the future, the past, anything at all – especially if it's discursive thinking – pulls you away from the involvement with your breathing, or your walking, or your present moment mindfulness.

Some people find it helpful to locate where their discursive thinking occurs. So for people who think verbally, with words, where's the loudspeaker in the head that's projecting those thoughts? Where does that verbal activity occur? Maybe you won't find a place, but where are you hearing the inner voice, or where is that inner voice being spoken?

And some people might find that some place in their brain, that's where it seems to happen. Sometimes you can feel the blood flow is into certain parts of the brain. When you're in a lot of discursive thinking, you can feel that a certain part of the brain is activated, a certain part of the brain that has some pressure or tension.

Or it could be that, if you're listening to the voice of someone else speaking, where's that voice coming from? Where's that place?

Sometimes, if you're able to locate and then bring your attention right there, and perhaps if you're breathing with an awareness of that, see if you can quiet that voice. And as it becomes quieter, see if you can appreciate or enjoy the absence or the quieting down of discursive thinking. So rather than just letting go of it, and coming back to your breath, see if you can actually appreciate and enjoy the changing texture, the changing sensations or feeling tone, in the thinking mind that comes with the mind becoming quieter.

Some people think more with images. And it can be helpful to see where the images are projected. Are they projected a little bit in the front of the mind? Are they projected in the back of the mind? Is there a screen some place in your mind? And can you locate that screen where the images actually occur?

In locating where the voice is speaking, or where the loudspeaker is for thinking verbal thoughts, or where you're seeing the screen or the projector for images, you're shifting the focus from the content of your thoughts or the images themselves, to something about the process and the experience itself, and to the mechanism of how that is happening. You begin to distance or disentangle yourself from the actual content of the images or the words. And without some distancing, it's very difficult to meditate because the thoughts can seem so captivating.

With the quieting or dimming of the images, hopefully that's nice for you. But see if you can find something to appreciate, something that's satisfying or pleasant with the stilling of that activity of thinking or imaging. Because if you can feel the the pleasantness of it, then it can feel more attractive to go to that place of stilling.

And actually it's possible – I don't know whether it's true for everyone, but certainly I can feel it – that you can actually feel that not having discursive thinking is so much more satisfying and pleasant than having discursive thinking. And without sensing and feeling that difference, it's very easy to want to go back into the thinking because thinking is so compelling.

You might want to explore that, and as you do so, you might explore it with some attention to your breath, in the background or in the foreground – as if you're floating on the ocean. You're aware of yourself on the ocean when the waves are coming through; you're aware of the waves lifting you up and down, up and down, and the breathing is there, supporting this whole exploration.

In any case, if that doesn't make any sense, you can just forget it, and enjoy yourself. Thank you.