

Mindfulness of Breathing (28) Feeling Thinking

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I'm going to discuss the seventh step of *ānāpānasati*, the Buddha's teachings on breath meditation:

One trains oneself: Breathing in, one experiences the activity of mind.

One trains oneself: Breathing out, one experiences the activity of the mind.

The activity of the mind is the mental formations, the constructing activity of the mind. The mind – *citta* in Pali – is a rich and wonderful topic. I'll touch on some of it here. In English we might, in simple terms, call it “the mind.”

One of the main activities of the mind, for many of us, is thinking. I emphasize two ways to become aware of thinking. One is to observe it – to *know* what's happening. The other is to experience it – to *feel* the experience of what it's like to be thinking. Both are important. To learn to recognize, know, and observe thinking can be a stepping stone to feeling and experiencing it more fully.

As always, with mindfulness of breathing, there's the rhythm of breathing – the background or the foreground beat – that we're getting centered on, focused on, and settling in on. The breathing protects us from getting caught up in the world of thinking.

To be resting, focusing, or stable on the breathing. Then, as we get more stable, the awareness can begin to open up and be expansive, inclusive, and able to take in more of what's going on. With a stable presence and attention to breathing, it's possible to be aware of thinking without being bothered by it. Not to make thinking a problem, or that it's wrong to think in meditation. Not to be upset about it. Or even to call it a distraction.

It's easier not to be bothered by thinking when there's not a strong pull into that world. We don't get lost in it very much. But, if we do get lost in it, we're better off not being bothered by it. Being upset or agitated because we are thinking is a recipe for perpetuating the thinking. The more agitated we are, the more the mind tends to produce thoughts, ideas, and stories.

The art of not being bothered, upset, or attached to thinking – but also not being aversive to thinking. To not make thinking your best friend or your enemy. It's just that thinking is happening.

To be aware of thinking going by – the classic image in Buddhism is having thoughts drift by like clouds in an endless sky. They are just clouds. I love the metaphor of clouds for thinking. If you put your hand into a cloud, you don't get anything. You may get a little moist, but there's no solidity. You can put your hand right through it. It turns out thinking is actually less solid than a cloud.

Thoughts are kind of a virtual reality. What we invest in our thinking – the attachments, engagement, and energy we put into it – makes thinking sometimes more solid, real, and important than almost anything else in our lives. We can get so wrapped up in our stories, ideas, and thoughts.

The paradox here is that the more energy we put into thinking, the harder we try to anxiously think, or be attached to thinking – the less we actually think effectively. The most creative, innovative, wise, loving, and beneficial ways of thinking tend to be without a lot of extra energy. It is a choice to think about things in daily life. But do it with an easy, relaxed mind. The ability to stay focused and very relaxed allows the thinking mind to be more productive and creative. But for many people, it is rare to approach daily life with a creative, relaxed mind – with relaxed thinking.

A useful skill to learn in meditation is to not be bothered by your thinking. To have the wisdom not to be caught up in it, or to be for or against it. To have a certain equanimity. To be patient when the mind wanders off in thought. To keep coming back, and starting over again, starting over again.

With the seventh step of *ānāpānasati*, there is some stability, some centering on the breath, and the ability to stay with the breathing more continuously. Of course, that ability comes and goes. Many of us will regularly start at step one of *ānāpānasati* – "I'm just beginning." That's completely fine. But, at some point, as we settle in enough – by the end of a long sit, or when there's enough stability as conditions come together – we can become aware of thinking. It's like clouds in an endless sky. We don't get too caught in it. We don't get focused on it, but rather we are aware of thinking.

There are a few interesting things to notice when we can do this. One is to notice whether we think more in words or in images. For some people, it's one way or the other. For others, it's a combination of both words and images, but one may predominate.

Once you recognize what your primary quality of thinking is, you can investigate it. Where does it operate? Where is the inner voice that is speaking? Where is the loudspeaker? Where is the inner mouth or vocal cord that's speaking?

Sometimes people feel it's behind their forehead. For modern people, it's somewhere in the brain. In the ancient world – and in some places in modern Buddhist Asia – people associate the heart center with where they are thinking. Some of you may do as well. But the tendency in the modern West is to point to the head, partly because the brain has such a big role in thinking. However, the words might be spoken somewhere else inside.

If you're thinking in images, it might be like a scene in front of you with your eyes closed. It might be like a projection screen in front of you. There's some kind of directionality – it's there – the sense of watching it. That sense of a location for the inner voice, if you can find it – or the directionality of seeing an image – is a means by which to start noticing the extra energy that goes into thinking.

If there is an inner voice, or if there's a lot of extra energy going into thinking, there is often contraction, tightness, or pressure. If there is a lot of imagery, there might also be contraction or tightness, but it might be in a different location. For some people, it might be around their physical eyes, even with the eyes closed. They're seeing an image. They may have a habit of engaging the eyes to focus on an image. And so there might be tension in the eye area.

By noticing the location where thinking seems to be occurring, it's also possible to notice how much energy is being expended for this – and the emotions that might be connected to the energy. You start seeing that there is more to thinking than just the thoughts or the images. There's the energy, tension, or pressure involved. There is the interest that's involved with thinking – curiosity, or being glued to or locked onto it. There can be some emotionality connected to thinking. Sometimes emotions are the fuel for thinking, or the source for what we're thinking about.

It's possible to settle back and just observe thinking – without necessarily observing the content of the thoughts. The content is often not as important for the purpose of meditation as are the associated aspects of thinking – the energy, tension, directionality, location, emotionality, and interest we have. Not to study them and get too active, but rather to step back and observe these aspects. This gives you access to the instructions to experience mental activity.

In this case, to experience what it's like to be thinking. Or to say it differently, to really *feel* thinking – feel it somatically, physically almost – even though it's mental. There might be some sensations of thinking. Seeing this allows us to disinvest ourselves from the story and the ideas, without dismissing the thinking. We are experiencing different parts of thinking – and that by itself tends to allow the thinking to become quieter and more still.

As thinking becomes quieter, we may be able to stay more fully with the inbreath and the outbreath, focusing on the body breathing. Perhaps we can do so with more ease and well-being – with the simplicity of just being content and present with the breath.

More often than not, the discontent about life and impatience belong to the realm of thinking, or are fueled by thinking. This is not an instruction to get busy to notice and focus on thinking – but rather to stay with your breathing. And don't be bothered by your thinking. Don't be troubled by it.

But, as it becomes relevant, touch into it – and begin experiencing feeling what's happening as you breathe. Perhaps with the idea that you're breathing *through* your thinking, or breathing *with* your thinking. Being with the breathing supports you to not get caught in whatever you're thinking about – you can just observe it and feel it.

May you develop a new relationship with your thinking. Don't assume the way that you think is the way it has to be. There might be wonderful, delightful, relaxing, creative, and wise ways of thinking that can take a very different form than the ways you are usually thinking.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.