

2013-10-20 Stopping The Stream of Ruminations

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SPEAKERS

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So good morning. Good morning, everyone. This morning, I read a news article about a study. It was an article in the BBC Online news website. And it was an article about a large study done in England from 38,000 people. And the conclusion of the study is that the leading predictor for stress, depression and anxiety is rumination. And rumination is a great word in English boy. If you if you look it up in the dictionary, it has two meanings. It means for to keep thinking about something repeatedly. And it means has a second meaning is a cow that chooses cut and that it really means to chew. The word comes from the Latin word to chew or chew again. It's, you know, it's quite nice with a cow, you know, you know this, but cows will eat grass and they'll swallow it. And then in their leisure when they have time off, they they'll sit there peacefully and, and they regurgitate that grass into their mouth, so they could chew it, and they chew it more thoroughly, and then they swallow it again. So, I suppose we have like this, you know, extra pockets someplace in our brain, and our belly and our brains and we, we take these life events, and we take them in, and then we store them back there. And when we have a chance, we regurgitate them and then we chew them and chew them and chew them again and again. And many years ago, I did the famous raising exercise this one probably the most famous mind exercise in America where apparently, Jon Kabat Zinn I think a baby came up with it was on a television program to introduce mindfulness and he was going to reduce it to the television host and so the exercise involves taking a reason and slowly chewing mindfully holding it looking at little bit quietly and takes quite a while before you put in your mouth and then you chew it slowly. And when the television that the guy and the host realized what was going on he immediately curtailed it because you cannot television have the audience sit there watch with someone is slowly eating they're raising and silent.

So anyway, so just taking a raise and chewing it so should I say chewed and chewed The reason and you chew it long enough the sweetness and the flavor goes out. And there's no sweetness It tastes like cardboard. So we take in our life experience And since we store them in our second stomach, and then we regurgitate them, and we chew them and chew them and chew them. And after a while, if there was any sweetness there to begin with, it goes away, but it starts becoming, after a while he thinks can be deadly, produce tremendous amount of stress. And what the article said is that, that they're thinking and now that the most important issue around anxiety and depression and things like that is not the life events people have, but rather how it's how they ruminate about it. rumination and self blame were talked about together, but they said rumination is actually as a more important role than self blame. And, and so the analogy I like to do for this is is that I could be fixated on the striker I can hold the striker I can hold on to this I can think that it's really important for me to have a good striker when I'm a Dharma teacher to strike the bell and, and so I'm not going to let go of the striker and so because I'm so attached to it I hold it I grip it really really tight and encrypting is really tight after a wild My hand hurts

and it goes numb then it freezes up and then the ligaments kind of glue together and whatever and so it's really becomes a you know problem from my life how I hold it and I continually blaming the striker the strikers that problem where they are the people want to take my striker away is that problem and but the stress that my hand is under is not the strike or the people want to have it, but has to do with how I'm gripping it and how I never let go of it.

So in the same way with our our thinking mind, that life events, how we hold how we relate how we interact engage, in telling the story and repeating the memories. It's how we relate to what our mind does in psychology. That might be more important sometimes the event itself. People can go through major life difficulties major crisis shouldn't things that shouldn't happen. And that's unfortunate for sure. And there can be all kinds of lasting effects. But one of the one of the things that has a huge impact on how well people do or how difficult these things are for people has to do with do they ruminate too. They tell the story over and over again, do they blame themselves as a self blame as part of it? And it could be that the ruminations the thinking about it might seem true to thinking might be true, but that doesn't require us to keep thinking about it. Having a Dharma teacher has for a Dharma teacher to have a bell striker is a good thing. You know, you bring the belt into the sitting and you know, it's a nice thing, but as a Dharma teacher, always Need to hold it? You know, you can pick it up when it's needed. So this rumination, figuring out our life, trying to solve things over and over over again, through our thoughts. And it's, you know, kind of astounding if you if you kept a log of how many times you had the same general thoughts. It's kind of an amazing number. And they're not amount of reruns, the mind goes through, you know, season's over and they just doing the reruns. And the, but I don't think we tend to look, we don't keep a log. And so we don't tend to kind of notice how often we're having the same theme going through same consideration over and over again. Partly because we're trying to deal with something trying to resolve something, fix something. And sometimes the rumination, that repetitive thinking we have is, is the problem itself. It's what adds to the stress adds to the difficulty but Because the rumination is about something we were blinded by the something we're thinking about to not notice how we're thinking. So if I'm fixated on the striker and so that's all I'm concerned with. I don't notice the cost of gripping it. So but at some point if someone turns points their attention my attention to my grip, say, Oh yeah, I guess I am holding it harder than I need to. So I can let go. So how do we hold on to our thoughts? What are the role of thoughts in our lives is a really useful thing to investigate and begin taking responsibility for our thinking mind, rather than letting our thinking mind, do whatever it pleases? Let have free rein of the playground. But to say that you can't, you know, to begin directing the mind a certain way. Thinking in wiser ways, let go of certain thoughts. To learn to be wise about the thinking mind is a really crucial part of any kind of, I think spiritual practice any kind of certainly Buddhist practice. And in Buddhism, we have two primary, very broad kind of practices to support and help us with overcoming the rumination of the mind to interrupt the repetitive quality of that. And one is mindfulness and the other is concentration. Mindfulness helps us see more clearly what's going on. And in seeing more clearly, it gives us the option gives us the option to choose different ways of relating to the thinking. Concentration is one of those alternative ways that concentration sometimes can cut through the thinking mind. weaken the force that keeps us connected to it. If we get concentrated in the breath, for example, and don't give much attention to the thoughts or keep Pulling back from the thoughts and letting go of them. Slowly, the energy for thinking begins to lessen. And they don't have such a grip on us. It's a quite a powerful thing for the mind, to let go of what it's thinking. And even if you can only let go for a moment, and then you're back into whatever you're thinking about that movement of letting go, is, I think it's a very, very meaningful thing for the mind terms of trading the mind freeing the mind loosening the mind. The and if you keep doing it, you have to do it over and over again, slowly, that muscle of letting go that muscle of beginning to choose where your mind goes, becomes stronger and stronger.

So in this study, that I read, they talked about, they refer to the kind of rumination that is stressful causes anxiety. depression as negative thinking. And I think this is a kind of common enough in English to talk about, you know, negative emotions and negative thinking to just refer to it that way. It's a little bit of abstract perhaps to, to consider what is negative what isn't what's a negative thought, in, in the Buddhist tradition and the differentiation is between those thoughts which are skillful, and those which are unskillful. Or to put it in a more common language, those words are the thoughts which are useful, and the thoughts which are totally not useful, that may be even damaging to have and to be able to distinguish between those is very important. So it'd be able to see the consequences of what we're thinking about how we're not only what we're thinking, but, but how we're thinking. You can think about things which have in a sense positive thoughts. But how we think about it is damaging. So maybe some something, for example, as a positive thing might be thoughts about generosity. But someone can be neurotically fixated in wanting to be a generous person. And so they're constantly kind of rethinking about how to be generous, and what should I do and how should I do it. And the mind is so claustrophobic around those thoughts, that the how we are, sometimes this needs to be addressed, not what we're thinking about. So, both of these things, so skillful and unskillful. So, in the suttas, there is a discourse called removing distracting thoughts in the middle length discourses. And here is an interesting list of progressive strategies that the text recommends for overcoming these unskillful ways of thinking. So it begins without necessarily saying so the text by assuming that you I can recognize when your thoughts are unskillful. So require some modicum of self awareness to notice, you know, I've been thinking the same thing over and over again, what I'm thinking about now is draining me. This was stressing me out. It's causing anxiety. It's, it's causing me to be depressed. You know, and it's possible to see that it's been said, I study I read, read about a study once about, they studied, I don't know if it was women or teenage girls and how they felt after they read fashion magazines. And, and the results of the study was that as a generalization as a whole as a statistic. women feel worse about themselves after reading these fashion magazines than they were before. So I don't know if it's, you know, resonates with some of you women here. For some of the men who are living with women but I suppose there's men magazines that does the same thing for men, the so to recognize the content, what did the toll it has on us our energy drains, our feelings, drains, we were kind of feeling good before and now we feel bad, heavier. Now, there's thoughts of self blame or self criticism, I'm not good enough that come on. And so recognize that these are not helpful for us and not be swayed or convinced by the voice that says, well, it's accurate. That it's true. And even if it's true, even if it's true that you're a lousy person for your ever. You're like a really lousy person. Let's just say for the moment, let's just say it's true. Who says that your DD keep having those. Keep thinking that He was told you have to keep repeating those thoughts and reminding yourself all the time that you know, yes, I almost forgot I'm lousy. And then, you know, tell your friends you know, you know, I tend to forget this. So if I forget Can you remind me You know, there's no need to keep having those thoughts over and over again and the consequences that your mental for that for our mental health. The article said that's it guess the UN or someone has done a study UNESCO I don't know who that claim that a quarter of people you know, in the world have some kind of mental challenge, psychological challenge.

We guess it's a wide range of what those challenges can be. That's a big number. And it was in the context of this article that rumination has a really big key role for this. You know, for the statistic so so the Buddha then gives in this discourse strategies of how to deal with when you recognize you have unskillful thoughts, what to do. So the first thing that's recommended is substitute those unskillful thoughts with skillful thoughts with useful things to think about. So it could be that you reframe a situation from what is an interpretation or perspective which is draining to one that's encouraging, that's more meaningful and uplifting. It doesn't mean kind of making being Pollyannaish about it meaning and is putting, you know, pretending it's better than it is. But you know, one simple reframe of a challenge would be there's a challenge they have to do and then and unskillful thought would be this is a really a

drag, and this is going to be hard for me and I'm not up for the task, but I have to do it anyway. Isn't this too bad? The other way is, I have to do it. Let me try to do that in such a way that I can be mindful while I do it. Since we're mindfulness tradition, or let me do it and see if in the doing of it, I can become a better person and doing it. Let's see what what how can I do this thing I have to do in such a way that it makes someone else feels better while I do it. Even if I'm going to feel bad, those are not you know, it's not necessarily creating some false impression on it. It's just kind of approaching it for a different purpose that maybe makes you feel better about what you're about to do. So reframing the situation and offering a different perspective on it, sometimes can break the trance of the negative thinking of the unskillful thinking. Sometimes what's helpful is to think about something entirely different. If you go to Best Buy and electronic store, and boy do they have a lot of things went yesterday with a friend and never been to BestBuy. And I said, Are you sure you got enough sleep last night? Did you eat? Well, I think it was this is gonna be stressful to go in there. And so I go in there and you know, you know, this is really depressing. I would like to I would like to have that big television but it's bigger than my living room you know? You know, I think the problem is I need a bigger house in order honor goes you know, and so the mind can go off down these tracks so I think I better think something different maybe I should not go to Best Buy, you know. And so sometimes changing when we think about it totally not reframing it, but thinking about something which is uplifting or meaningful or more useful. I like the word useful. If what you're thinking is not useful, why don't think about something more useful? So I do this regularly in my life. I think I tend to do it more often when I'm driving. But it's sometimes when I walk down here Sunday morning, I will start thinking about something. And I recognize this is not this is fine when I'm thinking about, but it's not really so useful to go down these lines. And I think what I can do instead is I can think about the talk I'm going to give. I'm coming down here anyway, so let's you know, and that's what I'm going to do. And so let me direct my mind into something that's more useful. And, and I don't feel like I'm covering over anything when I do that. I just am using my time better.

Now then it's the discourse goes goes on and says if that doesn't work, which had my thoughts, then consider directly the kind of thinking you're having. And consider the texts calls it the danger, or the disadvantage of these kinds of thinking. So this here is really understanding the consequences that having these kinds of thoughts is damaging to me it's maybe can be damaging to others. This is not healthy to have these kinds of thoughts. They're not beautiful. The example it gives the text gives an example. They're not beautiful. It gives an example of someone who's well adorned, they've addressed they've adorn themselves, dress themselves done their hair, nicely. ornaments, they're wearing the ring, nice clothes. And then the example of a dangerous thing to do is to get a dead snake and wrap it around your shoulders. putrid, dead snake, you know, you know, it's like Not a nice thing to do. And so are the thoughts that you're having? Or the thoughts that you would like to have? Would you someone who really, you really respect a lot. We want them to know you're thinking this. Maybe that contrast, you know, it's just really what you feel good about you feel good about having these thoughts, is this something you would feel good about if someone saw this is not to increase yourself blame? The purpose of this is to kind of loosen up that preoccupation with these kinds of thoughts. So Oh, no, this I don't think I want to be involved with this is painful, it's negative consequences. It's dangerous. And I didn't realize how dangerous it is and building up a habit of having these kinds of thoughts over and over again, is not useful. So the assumption here is that if you can do that, then maybe that would kind of loosen up with a grip. You have On your thoughts on this holding the striker whatever you're doing, then this compassionate text goes on and says, Well, if that doesn't work, then we have something else for you. The next thing it says, in that case, try to ignore them. Just try to kind of get a little bit like thinking about something else. But here it says just ignore them. Don't give them any attention. So when I did wrote my dissertation, probably like, I guess most people who write a dissertation, there are regularly thoughts. This is too difficult. I can't do this. It's too much. You know, what have I gotten myself into? It's and I had these thoughts, and lots of them frequently. This is impossible. I can't do it. And I

would, I would spend, you know, I don't know hours composing a footnote. You know, and the dissertation is supposed to be okay book, right? So, you know, so if that takes that long to do the footnote and the way I treated those thoughts, I treated them like pesky flies in the background. I basically I didn't stop them, but I ignored them, I just didn't give them any attention and let them be in the background. And they didn't get in the way. So I just kind of kept working on the next foot you know, on the next sentence, and it was actually off and that was the way I was working. Let me just get through the next sentence. Because the whole dissertation was too big of a project. And so leaving these things in the background, ignoring them, if you can, can be very wise. This idea of ignoring them, I also relate to doing concentration practice. So, you know, this, I think, I think a lot of these directions very useful for meditation medic is a very useful place to recondition the mind, to, to refurbish the mind to upgrade the mind, to change the conditioning of the mind, so that when you come out of meditation, you have a different kind of mind to work with. And so in meditation, to have an object of focus, like the breath, or have loving kindness as an option, focus of the practice, and you kind of hold the course. And you don't let the mind veer off into the thoughts that it might want to have. And just hold Of course, and learning how to develop a concentrated mind, do concentration practice in an effective way. That is stilling deepening, relaxing, is one of the great functions of meditation practice. And so to learn to just stay there, ignore the thoughts Don't get involved in them, and hold the course. So that so that can be a stilling of the mind.

If that doesn't work, if ignoring that doesn't work, then the text suggests that you turn your attention to something it's called the thought formations. And the thought formations I understand to be not the content of the thoughts not the thoughts themselves, but directly into the activity that your inner process of having those thoughts what is that inner activity like for you to be thinking? So if there if there's a lot of intensity around the thinking that you're having, you can feel that the energetic of energetic so that intensity, if you're tense around your thoughts, you can feel the tension. If there you're sticking very fast, you can be fierce feel or see the speeds of the thoughts. If there's a lot of emotions connected to the thoughts, you can feel the emotionality that's connected to the thoughts we're having. So rather than focusing on the content, we're focusing on the process. Thinking itself. And, and then it says, then relax those, relax the thought formations, relax, relax the activity that's associated with thinking. One thing that I do is I will focus on what I call the thinking muscle. And my thinking muscle for me, is often in the middle of my skull. And I feel it as a kind of pressure and tension that I associated with being very involved in thinking. And I'll bring my attention to that place in my skull. feel the tension and the pressure that's connected to thinking. And then as I exhale, I'll relax it as if I'm relaxing and Muslim. And sometimes I'll kind of visualize that, whatever that knot is or pressure that it flattens out. Like you have a ball of dough. And you take the roller and you're like you're having a roller. It's kind of like it kind of flattens out like you're rolling out a, you know, pizza dough gets all kind of broad and flat and somehow that kind of sense of it. broadening out and flattening out is part of this feeling where it supports me that stilling in the quieting of the mind. An image of this broad quiet still flat surface that is using meditation sometimes is the image of a lake is still quiet pure Lake, the surface scoop of the quietness still. So the mind kind of the waves quiet down, and that way and the surface becomes common still.

For people who don't have any access to the what is feels like beholden to thinking activity. indirect way of getting there is, again, not focusing on the thoughts but relaxing the body. Just seeing where is tension in the body. Trying to use lead to the body relaxed and relaxed. Because chances are that some of the physical tension we hold in our body is connected to how we're thinking.

Chances are, I think that most of it is and the analogy for this stilling and quieting the mind. So there's less active thinking going on, is the analogy is given is that if a person is walking fast, to relax, walk slower. If the person is walking slow, or wants to relax, stand still. If the person is standing, still the way

to relax, sit down. And if you're sitting down, the way to relax is to lie down. So the same thing with the mind, you kind of step it down, you do less and less activity in the mind. You start thinking about the future start thinking about the past. Stop judging what's happening. Present, you know, start, you know, letting them be more or less and less involved with thinking what's going on. And as some of you know, with the development of mindfulness, there are some there can become a point a shift, which is quite a remarkable shift for some people, where the mind is no longer fixated or involved in the world of thinking, but is shifted to be involved in the world of feeling and sensing. And the deeper wellsprings of joy of happiness or well being of meditation belongs more to the world of sensing and feeling that does the world of thinking. In fact, if you think too much, it gets in the way of dipping deep down into kind of the wonderful well, real springs or pools. That can happen within us. So this quieting our mental mental thinking no longer being involved in is very helpful. And then the text so Now this texts offer like four different strategies. I think they're all good strategies. And but that they don't work, none of it work. And you've recognized that what you're thinking about is unskillful unhelpful and may be really dangerous for you. Maybe you're thinking about all you can think about is how you're going to punch that guy out. Just get close to that guy, you know, you're just you're working yourself up in a lather, anchoring, or you can't stop thinking about how there's a liquor store just a block away from your house. And, you know, you've been in recovery for 32 years. And, and you know, it's a big deal. Your 35th anniversary is coming up and you know, it's a big deal to give it up right and you feel the drive and intensity of wanting to go get some alcohol, and you can't stop thinking of it that you know, and, and you know, if you're if you lower your guard, probably you'll find yourself at the stores. So you've done all these things, and none of it works. So what do you do that in that kind of circumstance? So this is kind of setup here is that when nothing else works, it's gonna be really dangerous for you. What do you do? Then the tech says, You clench your teeth, and press your tongue up against your mouth, just like a strong man would grab a weak man and hold the person down. So it's not a very spiritually uplifting image. You know, and, and, you know, and, you know, we prefer our spirituality to be about freedom and inspiration and non limitation. But, realistically, occasionally, this is what the mind needs the mind has no it says people say mind has no shame and will you know do all kinds of things even when you think better with the mind thinks and what the mind does sometimes what you think and what the mind does sometimes can be different. And so sometimes for some people some really something really strong medicine is needed. And I've sat in meditation and had overwhelming urges, physical urges to do something new. No, it wasn't appropriate to do. And it was like, sitting in the rodeo, you know, in a horse, wild horse you sit they just sit still, I mean, the outside it looked like Oak Hill sitting pretty still. But you know, it was a lot of work. Just you know, it kind of it was it wasn't clenching my teeth, but it's, you know, something equivalent. So, sometimes to protect ourselves from problems. This really strong medicine is needed. So, to the text gives these five approaches.

So to replace unskillful thoughts with skillful thoughts, to give time and consideration to the dangers and downsides of what you're thinking about and how you're thinking, to ignore it. And then if none of those work, and this, I think is one of the most important things for mindfulness practitioners to do, and that is to turn your attention directly to it, and look at right in the face the thinking of the activity of thinking. And then in particular, look not at the thoughts themselves, the content you did that when you looked at the danger. But if you rather than looking at the content of the thoughts, do this very radical and remarkable thing, which is a stair step out of the field, or orbit of the content that what you're thinking about, to look at the process of thinking the activity of thinking. The analogy I like to give is kind of like listening to people speak a foreign language you don't you don't know. You have no idea what they're saying. But perhaps you can pick up a little bit about you know the emotional tenor of the conversation and so you know what this is an intense they're really in it fighting it out, you know do you have them because there just seems like it's really heated the conversation you can kind of see that if you don't know the words, or they're really quite those people are really relaxed and pleasant, easygoing conversation and even

though you don't know the words, so you can do the same thing with yourself, you can step back, as if you don't know the language that you're thinking in. What's that interactivity like a process like and by doing that, it might be possible to notice what can relax. You can relax some physically relaxed or mentally relaxed, quiet, what's going on? And then when you're really going to be in danger then You know, and you're about to say something. Like, right, uh, you know, I mean, I sometimes still I find myself wanting to say things that I shouldn't be saying things mostly around my kids, you know, giving advice when you know, when advice is not, you know, it's obvious what you should do. Let me just tell you. And so sometimes I can feel the urge to say something. And then I've clenched my teeth exactly, but it's kind of like a holding back and holding in. That goes on. So all this points to the possibility of taking some responsibility for our thinking, to track what goes on and not allow our thinking to have free rein to think whatever it wants to not identify so strongly with our thinking. To not assume that who we are, is in our thinking, not assume that our thinking is accurate. And not to assume that our thinking is necessary to not assume that our thinking has authority. But to begin questioning the whole process of thinking and to learn to step out of the and the currents, the stream of Roman bounnam reminder. No, I can't say it any more rumination, stream of rumination and strewed. Their stream of being caught up in thinking about the same thing over and over and over again. Remember, if you keep chewing it over and over again, the racing gets like cardboard. It's not useful to keep thinking over and over and over again. So there was a My thoughts for today and I hope that this helps you have a more peaceful mind.