

Jason Siff
Week 1, *Awareness of Thinking*
“Mindfulness of Thinking”
September 3rd, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Hello. My name’s Jason Siff and I’ll be leading this online retreat for Tricycle Magazine. The topic of this retreat will be *Awareness of Thinking*—how to develop a more refined awareness of your thoughts in meditation. Much of the material I’ll be presenting is from my upcoming book, *Thoughts Are Not the Enemy*, an innovative approach to meditation, which will be published by Shambala Publications in the fall of 2014.

To begin with, many of the meditation practices that we’re taught tend to focus on the body. The initial instructions are often to bring your attention to the breath, or to your body’s posture, or to physical sensations, or some experience that is connected with your body—to disengage from your thoughts. In that kind of meditation practice, thinking may be something viewed as a distraction that gets in the way; something that is not to be encouraged or caught up in. In fact, it’s to be discarded and abandoned. The way I teach meditation, however, is the complete opposite of that approach. Instead of looking at thoughts as something to get rid of in meditation sitting, I look at thought as an essential part of your experience of meditating.

This approach and the instructions that I’ll be giving around it may be completely opposite to many of the practices you’ve heard about or that you’ve been taught. This is something that you may want to consider trying out and seeing “does this actually work in my experience? Are the various things that I’ve heard about sitting with thinking actually true? Are thoughts actually a distraction all the time? Are thoughts in a sense a real problem for a meditation? Do we always need to get beyond them or is there a way in which we can in a sense make peace with our thoughts in meditation and actually sit with them and benefit from that process of being with our thoughts in meditation?”

Before I introduce the practice, I want to relate a bit about my own story to meditating with thoughts. Many years ago, in the 1980s, I was a monk in Sri Lanka. After doing Boinka Meditation, Mahasi Meditation, and developing a very strong awareness of my breath and my body, I would still have periods of thinking and periods where there was in a sense no way to really look at that thinking. I had developed a very strong detachment from my thoughts and an ability to know a particular strategy or pathway to quiet my mind and get past thinking. Even though that produced some tranquil states and provided a certain kind of insight into my experience, it was lacking something. What I found it was lacking was a real discernment and understanding of my mind. I didn’t learn how to be aware of my thoughts as they were. I didn’t have a sense of knowing the various ways in which my mind would latch onto something and take it for quite a while, or why that would happen.

Many of you who have meditated perhaps have wondered this too. You sat and your mind has settled down; you’ve been very quiet and still. Then you have another sitting and you’re thinking about all sorts of things again. When that happens, you feel you are failing, or you are not doing it right, or for some reason your mind is just out of control.

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It’s just not working. Part of my way of looking at this was to take another angle on it. Maybe the whole area of awareness of thinking is to notice how your thinking is natural, without trying to subdue it or trying to quiet your mind first. This practice will give you a sense of what it is like to meditate with your thoughts and to look at them a bit more critically. At first, I was so trained to let thoughts go by that I could not hold them long enough to take a closer look. I think that will happen to many of you who have been meditating for a while. You might find you’ve put your attention on your thoughts and “poof” they are gone. That’s been a fruit of your meditation practice. I started to work in the direction of what it would be like if I just let myself continue to think productively on meditation. What if I let myself think about all sorts of things? What if I just stop this whole idea that thinking was an issue and kept thinking? When I started to do that, I couldn’t actually notice my thoughts in the present moment.

There was a real difficulty in being able to watch a flow of thoughts go by. Often, when I would bring my attention to my thoughts and note it, I would just get that bit of thought; a piece of something I was thinking about. Then it would stop. I had to let it go on much more than I was used to, assuming that I was not going to be aware in the moment as much as perhaps pick it up after the fact. What started to happen is I would just let myself think about all sorts of things in my meditation sitting, and only afterward would I start to reflect on what I was thinking about. Where did my thoughts lead? What were some of the transitions from one topic to another? How did the thoughts actually develop?

Sometimes you have this idea that if you start to get upset about a situation, or you think negative thoughts about somebody, you’re going to end up hating the person afterward. But I found I didn’t end up hating the person afterward. As I sat, other things would start to emerge and I would begin to question my perceptions of that person. I would question my intentions to say certain things that probably weren’t all that pleasant. Usually, I’d end up feeling better about the conflict, and have a better idea of how to approach that person in the future. Something started to happen where a certain kind of negative thinking got redirected into something much more positive. I started to actually value it that much more.

What I found was that when I started to reflect back on my thinking, there were ways in which I could look into other aspects of my thoughts. I could look into certain emotions, underlying moods, the tone of voice in my thoughts, the attitude within them, and the history around those thoughts. I found that it was actually very rich. There was something about myself—or many things about myself rather—which I could actually now learn. I could have this exploration into how my mind works in interactions with people and in situations where I just couldn’t say, “stop and disengage” and go back to my body and figure out what it is I’m feeling. That’s very awkward in a conversation with somebody. What I found was successful is to follow what I was thinking, what the other person was saying and start to pick up ways in which I could actually skillfully navigate what I was

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doing in those situations. I believe that’s a skill that all of us can benefit from within meditation practice and for our lives.

I met a lot of resistance early on when I left the Monastic Order in 1990, came to Los Angeles, and started teaching meditation to lay people. First of all I owed a certain respect to the practices I had been taught; I still taught a bit of awareness of the body and feelings, and then noticing the thoughts from that angle. Over time though, I became more courageous and tried to articulate what I was doing in my own meditation practice, what I believe the Buddha was trying to get at in some of his discourses on becoming aware of thinking. The concept was to create an inner environment in meditation where thoughts are allowed; where thinking is less of a problem and more of an area that you are going to develop a certain kind of kindness towards.

Having taught this way for over twenty years, I now see that the kindest way to be with yourself in meditation is to allow your thoughts. I just cannot see a way around it. You can practice *metta*, you can practice acceptance, but if there isn’t an allowing of your thoughts, I don’t know how actually kindness could develop toward yourself and others within your meditation sittings.

In this approach to meditation, there are three main conditions to really consider within practice. The first is kindness and gentleness. If you go into your meditation sitting with a sense that you’re going to try to develop greater kindness and gentleness toward your inner experience—that you belong in the meditation, your thoughts, feelings, history, intentions and you’re actually starting to be kind to yourself around that. That it’s okay. There is nothing wrong. There is no failure in that. It is actually a success and a benefit when you are kind to yourself while you’re sitting. If you’re harsh, aggressive, or pressured around what’s going on in your meditation sitting then instead of trying to say, “I’m not going to be pressured, I’m not going to be aggressive,” see if you can be kinder to your aggression and to the pressure. That is a way in which you’re not trying to say, “Well my experience has to be this blanket kind of kindness to everything at the beginning.” That’s not possible. That’s an ideal. You may find it’s actually about responding to situations as they come up. If I’m aggressive, pushy, and pressured then I’ll allow that and be kind to it to see what that does to my aggressive, harsh, or pressured feelings.

The second condition is critical in an open meditation practice; that is permission. You actually have permission to let your mind wander, to go into different areas. Permission to practice a meditation practice you’ve been doing. Permission to experiment with other practices. If you meditate with a sense of permission you might find that you end up with many more choices. Instead of having only one choice—such as whenever your mind wanders bring your attention back to the breath or “I should allow everything to go on for as long as it goes on”—you might find that your meditation sitting may be peppered with

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many different choices. At certain points within the sitting you can make a choice to let a thought go on longer. You can make a choice to direct your attention to the breath. You can find that a certain feeling has arisen and you want to follow that, or a memory has occurred that you want to consider more, or any variety of things. You need to approach meditation with the mindset there isn't really a wrong choice. There are choices that are ignorant and automatic, choices that in a sense you may do habitually and repetitively without ever understanding anything about why you might be doing those. To consider then that in this kind of approach where you might be more allowing of thoughts and feelings in your meditation, you may make certain choices that are different than what you've done in other practices. Do not consider them as mistakes. When you reflect back on them at the end of the sitting, you might find that what may for a little while seem like a mistake, might actually have turned out quite differently. This may give you a different perspective on what goes on when you meditate.

The third condition is one that I see as important as one continues to meditate, and that is to have an interest in your experience. I believe that many of the meditation instructions we receive may actually create a sense of apathy, especially apathy toward thoughts. If you are doing a practice where you've just let thoughts kind of go by, or you've noted your thoughts and come back to the breath, you might find that you've become apathetic or indifferent toward your thoughts. I wouldn't consider that indifference to be a positive indifference. It's not equanimity. It's actually worthless. Interest is being able to see that what is going on in your mind may actually matter. It may be something you can look at much more. Interest counteracts aversion. You might find you are sitting and you have some irritation around a sound in the room or even by some of the thoughts that are coming up. You might find that if you actually become interested in your experience of hearing that sound, it starts to become less about getting rid of it and more about what is going on. What are some of my reactions to this? What happens when I focus my attention on this sound? The nature of interest comes and goes within your meditation sittings, but when it's there you can explore more deeply what is going on. You can actually question things and find that there may be less aversion and less craving. It's not that you would want something to stay longer because you want to enjoy, but you might want it to stay longer because you want to know more about it.

What I'd like to do is give you the basic instructions that I give to a newcomer to meditation, sometimes it's someone who's never meditated before although that's kind of rare these days. Usually it's somebody who already has a meditation practice. As I give these instructions if you already have a meditation practice, keep in mind that what I'm saying here is not for you to stop doing your meditation practice completely, but to enter into the meditation sitting from a different angle. If you go back to your previous meditation practice at any time that's fine. You may find you go back to your familiar practice and try a bit of what I'm saying. That's all good. That's not a problem with this.

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The basic instruction I give is to find a comfortable posture to sit in; one that you may not need to move for the duration of the sitting, however long that is – 20, 30, 40 minutes. If you’re completely new to meditation 20 minutes may be a good place to start. You can also lie down if that’s a preferable posture for you. The basic instruction then is to bring your attention to the touch of your hands; touching each other on your lap or resting on your knees or your feet touching the ground or against a cushion. Have your awareness on that but also not hold it there. Instead, just use it as a place to come back to at times as a place that is grounding within the sitting. In this way, you may find that you can allow thoughts to go on in your sitting and have this kind of external contact of the touch as a place to come back to. If you feel that you get overwhelmed with the thoughts, you can gently bring your attention back to it. The idea here is not to stay with this external contact but to let your mind go where it will and you follow.

Instead of thinking that you’re directing this meditation sitting, you are going to be passive and allowing to what might happen during this period of time. In doing that you might find that there could be periods where you’re getting drowsy. Instead of trying to wake yourself up, let yourself go toward sleep. Many times when people allow themselves to go towards sleep and meditation, they may not actually fall asleep. That could happen. But if you do fall asleep, don’t worry about it. It’s not a problem. Also, there are times for this kind of approach that you might feel a bit agitated. You are thinking a lot or certain feelings are coming up and you feel like you want to end the sitting early. You can do that. You can just decide, “I’m upset enough. I’m going to end it now. I’m going to go take a walk or write.” What I suggest that you do though is you sit again maybe later that day or the next day. Don’t treat it as a failure or something that’s going to make it hard for you to sit. You just come back to the cushion and try it again. Usually people in this approach will meditate with their eyes closed. If you have a practice of eyes open meditation you can do that, but you can always decide at some point to close your eyes. If you open your eyes during a sitting of course, there’s no problem in that.

During this online retreat one of the main features of this approach to meditation—which by the way is called recollective awareness meditation—is that after meditation sittings people write down their experiences. The kind of journal that people keep is one where they describe what they remember from the meditation sitting. What I suggest is that you start with remembering what was easiest to recall. Write down the easiest recollection you have and then from that recollection you might find that you remember another thing and then another. You might write down a description of those events. After a while you might find that you have remembered certain pieces or sections of the meditation sitting, but there are other parts that you have no memory of that are completely forgotten. That’s fine. The idea here is not to try to probe into areas that are hard to remember, creating some strain or pressure around this. Come back from the sitting and write down what you remember; what’s easy to write about.

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When you write in your journal, what I suggest is that you try to use your own words; similes, metaphors. If you have a tendency towards Buddhist terminology or psychological terminology you can use those words, but maybe try to explain and describe a bit more of what it is you mean when you use those terms—describe an experience more fully. For example someone may describe an experience that they’ve said is spacious. Say a few more words about it. Say something about how your body felt or if you felt your body or if it seemed like there was no light or if there was some kind of color in this spacious feeling or a particular sensation you might have had or a feeling. Embellish it a bit, but try to be as honest as you can. It doesn’t have to be 100% accurate. I don’t think we can do that with our language around meditation. We can be honest to ourselves that “I am trying to say and write down what it is I experienced to the best of my ability.” With this journal, what I would like you to do is actually consider meditating as an assignment twice during this week and journal two meditation sittings. Give yourself about 10 to 15 minutes after your meditation sitting to write in your journal. Sometimes what will happen is when people are meditating they start rehearsing what they are going to write in their journal. If that starts to happen to you, you can let it go on. Don’t be concerned about it at this point. It’s an artifact of the whole instruction around journaling. It will probably go away. You can also journal about how you were rehearsing and thinking about journaling. That’s perfectly fine.

With the journaling during this retreat, you can send it to me. You can email me a copy of your journal at Jason@skillfulmeditation.org and I will respond to your journal in some way. Also there will be an ongoing chat that’s going along with this retreat. Whether or not you decide to continue with this retreat, you are always welcome to visit my website www.skillfulmeditation.org and contact me, or any of the teachers I’ve trained, to learn more about this approach to meditation. Thank you very much and see you next week!