

Welcome to the second week of this online retreat for *Tricycle* Magazine. My name is Jason Siff and I'll be talking some more about awareness of thinking and meditation. The place where I'd like to begin is by talking about how I see meditation. The way I define meditation, for the most part, is that whatever you experience when you sit down to meditate is meditation. Your intention to meditate or adopt a meditation posture, or start a meditation sitting is actually enough to call whatever follows after it meditation.

With that kind of definition, everything that you experience during the 20, 30, or 40 minutes is included within meditation. There's nothing actually non-meditative about it. All of what's going on is part of what occurs in a meditative process. This broader view of what meditation is, I believe, starts to help us become more tolerant and accepting of our experience and more capable of becoming interested and explore what's going on. It turns any type of sense of internal conflict or dialogue of being upset or arguing with somebody into a situation where you can actually sit with it and perhaps learn about how you get drawn into such dialogues, and how they are fueled and kept alive, rather than an activity where you're trying to always have certain experiences. This definition of meditation also is not about arriving at or generating certain states of mind; it's about staying with whatever comes up within your experience, to be honest with yourself around what is happening and not to try to change it so much. When it comes to changes being made within your sitting, you may find that these are done mostly by how you are aware of something. They're not done because you've always decided to make a change. You notice some things are going on and suddenly you are more focused in that area. You notice the breeze for example and you find that you are more aware of how it feels across your skin, of the sound and various things around it. It's not like you've decided, "I'm now going to become aware of the breeze." It's more like the breeze has come and your attention has gone to it and stayed for a while.

That will also happen with awareness of breathing. You may find that your breath comes into your meditation sitting and you start to notice that you're breathing; through your nostrils, through your abdomen or shoulders, or you are hearing yourself breathe. You find that at that moment you are aware of breathing. It's not because you decided to. It's because it has caught your attention and you've then let your attention stay with it.

This orientation to meditation is what I would call receptivity. You are not being passive in the sense of letting something go on. You are actually being receptive. You're letting something go on and listening, attending to or noticing things around it - sometimes you're passive and sometimes it's going on and you've lost your ability to listen or be aware of it, but that's okay. You may find that when you recollect your experience afterward, you pick up some things that you couldn't hear or notice during the sitting and that brings about greater awareness of that kind of experience so that when you meditate again, you might find that you're familiar with it. You find that because you've remembered certain things that have happened in your meditation sitting, your future meditation sittings when you have similar experiences seem a bit more familiar to you, without you trying to forcefully or intentionally become aware or mindful of it.

With that definition of meditation, what tends to happen with people is they find that including thoughts in meditation sometimes feels quite unnatural, that many of the instructions have been how to get rid of thoughts and now being told to include thoughts and it doesn't seem right. “I'm not only being told to include thoughts, but being advised to let them go on longer than I would normally in meditation. I'm getting suggestions to get caught up in them.”

I realize that there will be some hesitation and perhaps anxiety or fear for some people around doing that. If you get caught up into thoughts for too long, you fear that they'll go on for the whole sitting and you will be consumed by them. I suggest you treat that as a fear. You don't know. Many times I've heard that from people and they've let their thinking go on in these sittings and in a sense have been able to find that by being more allowing with their thinking they've produced less conflict and struggle with it. Sometimes thoughts die down more and become less obtrusive or distracting. You may actually find that in allowing your thinking, certain thoughts may not progress in the direction you think they will. If they do and you get overwhelmed in the thinking, I suggest that you let yourself come back to your body, breath or something and take a break for a while. If the thinking is going to come back, let it come back. You may find that if you are taking a little break from the thoughts and using your awareness of body or breath as a perch to sit there for a few seconds and go back into the thoughts or feelings, you'll be developing more tolerance for those thoughts and feelings over time. You may find that few of these periods of getting overwhelmed, going back to the body, then going back into those thoughts, being overwhelmed again and coming back, may start to lead to some way in which you feel that you can go a bit longer with those thoughts and feelings. They become more tolerable, and perhaps you become a bit more interested in looking into them a bit more.

With allowing thinking into meditation practice, many people have thought that I'm talking about no longer being aware of the body—that the body, breath, body posture, aren't important—but that's not true. What I'm basically saying is that thinking is not being separated and divided within your experience. It's not a non-experience that some people might think it is.

Many times with body awareness practices people are taught experience with your body, breath, and senses is the real experience. What's happening with your thoughts is all deception and delusion.

By being kind and gentle with your thoughts, you'll find that there's a way in which your thinking is more tamed. It can be more a part of your experience and you don't have to feel that you must get rid of it. If you step back and take a broader view around our inner experience, you may find that it doesn't quite make sense to try to divide the mind and body in this way. What would happen if you tried to live a life where every thought got noted and discarded? I don't know how you would be able to function so well in certain situations and interactions with people.

I don't know how anyone would actually function if they didn't have thought. The Buddha after his awakening obviously had thoughts. He had many thoughts. He gave many teachings all on words, language, metaphors and even distracting thoughts that we have heard about from various discourses. The idea is not to have no thoughts, it's actually, “How do I free myself from certain unskillful thoughts? How do I actually not become so dominated by certain kinds of thinking?” In a sense, it's to know those thoughts so well that they don't trick you anymore. If you look at that, that's what the figure of Mara actually was about: certain thoughts that come to us that may sound enticing or can lead us to make certain changes or decisions in our life. The Buddha picked that up immediately and said, “No, I hear you Mara,” and did not go there or take those up. That's what we're trying to develop and look at; not to try to live with no thoughts.

In including your thoughts in your meditation sitting, you may find that there are certain ways that you've been accustomed to trying to detach from them. One way of detaching from thoughts is also very common in body-based practices with pain. Many times in meditation people may find that when they have a pain in the leg or some type of chronic pain that's coming up in the sitting, they can get into a state of mind where they separate themselves from it, where they feel more detached and start to notice the pain and not react to it so much. There's a kind of evenness or equanimity around the pain. That's often considered to be a rather optimal state in certain meditation practices.

Sometimes people will then say, “If I could develop that with my thoughts where I could actually be detached and separated from them and notice them from more of a distance, then they won't affect me so much. There will be a way in which I can have thoughts and look at them but they're not going to get me drawn in.” It's true. There are meditative states people go into where that is possible to have a detachment from one's thoughts and the noticing of them. My experience around that in working with meditators and having done that many times in my own sittings is that usually those states of mind are such that you're much more settled and concentrated. You are not drawn into thoughts because some of those thoughts can't hold you; they're wispy and present themselves. You notice them and they may not do much of anything. These kinds of thoughts are not necessarily the thoughts we're having problems with. They may actually be thoughts that are more mundane or contemplative. They are not intense rage or periods of real strong craving. They're not necessarily things like that because in many of those states of mind you can't have intense rage. You're not going to notice that.

You also are probably going to notice thoughts that are obsessive because you're not having those thoughts then. You're not being anxious and fearful. You might not even have thoughts that are sad or grief because in some of these states of mind, many of our emotions may be a bit more muted and not so strong. The thinking may actually be slowed down and be much easier to get a handle on. To say that those states of mind are states that you would be able to investigate, and understand thoughts, is not quite accurate. It's not going to lead to the understanding of the kinds of thoughts that we need

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to be more acquainted with. The ones that draw us in that start to lead us into certain actions that we may find are regrettable or not the direction we want to go in.

Awareness of thinking needs to be about being aware of thoughts as they naturally present themselves; to have a practice that enables you to be more aware of the angry thoughts, revenge, or of what you might say to somebody that would be harmful and hurtful, and for you to be able to have a capacity to notice some of the things that go into making up those thoughts. What are the compositions of some of the thoughts that are going on in our head, especially the verbal ones? The ones that pop up when we’re sitting in meditation and having an argument with somebody or when we’re lecturing or rehearsing a conversation or replaying a conversation we had—what are some of the features of that experience?

One of the main features of any verbal thought is that there is a tone of voice. There’s a way you are speaking. If you pick up that tone of voice, you may find that it opens up to things around emotions within the thoughts. You might hear that the tone is a little irritated. Then you might notice there is some irritation in the thoughts. This is important because many times meditators feel as though everything has to be revealed in the body, that if they’re going to be aware of irritation, it has to be a particular sensation they notice in their chest or arms, etc. rather than something that actually exists within the mind. By mind, I mean that it’s not necessarily connected with a physical sensation, but it may be related to some mood or something else that’s going on, connected to some awareness of the body. It is operating as something that you may be able to detect in the tone, rhythm, and speed of the voice. There’s a way that if you reflect on those characteristics of your verbal thoughts, you may start to get a much better sense of something that’s keeping them going, an important feature of them. This is one reason why I don’t believe looking at thinking as something that is a disembodied voice that is passing by. It’s actually a voice that’s connected with how you are feeling at that time.

Within any internal monologue or dialogue, there is an audience. There’s somebody you’re talking to. Sometimes we don’t pick that up when we’re sitting and having a dialogue with somebody. We think, “I’m thinking about what I’m going to say to this person.” We don’t think about how we’re changing our words for that person. We don’t think about how we might actually perceive that person and adjust some of what we’re thinking so that we can communicate with that person. We also may not find it so odd that sometimes we have that person replying to us and telling us certain things. Here we are in a sense putting words into that person’s mouth. That reveals something about how we see that person. There’s a good deal to learn from reflecting back and noticing some of the things that are going on in these interactions.

This kind of noticing can’t be done in a present moment. What will tend to happen is that you’ll probably have a very heavy hand and stop the thoughts. You’ll stop the dialogues and then you’ll think, “What was I talking about here?” You might intentionally try to reflect on it. Instead, what I suggest is that you let the dialogues go on as you are a third party listener. You’re letting it happen and finding that as it goes on certain things about

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what you would say, how you think this person would respond, a variety of different choices that you’re making certain adjustments in the way you speak. All of that is starting to happen and you may be picking up bits and pieces of that. When it’s all over or after the sitting, you might be able to write down some of it to recollect a bit more of what was going on. Then you might actually find that you get a much clearer picture of how that thinking works.

There is an important thing around thoughts and meditation: if there’s a particular theme, topic or issue that you’re pursuing, it usually has a certain momentum. You get a sense that it won’t stop. If you try to stop one of these dialogues you want to have with somebody, you may find that it pops up again and again. To consider if something has momentum and has this juice in it, let it spend itself to go on and reach some place where it needs to get to. Sometimes that might be a few minutes, a half-an-hour or longer.

Part of this approach of being with thoughts is a development of patience. I don’t think anyone could do this practice without some sense of patience around his or her experience. I’ve known many people over the years that have felt frustrated, or they felt they were struggling with it. Much of the frustration was either negative self-criticism around having too many thoughts and not having their minds be able to settle down, or it was frustration around being impatient with themselves, finding they wanted things to progress much faster.

For this week I want to give you an assignment around looking at thoughts in meditation which involves looking at your journal. Once you’ve journaled your meditation sitting, I suggest you take a few minutes afterward and re-read the meditation sitting to see if you can point out two kinds of thinking. One kind is more coherent thoughts that tend to follow a particular issue or theme. The other would be more random thought or thought fragments. These may be incomplete sentences or ideas or things that come to mind that come and go. They don’t land or lead to many further kinds of thought. Some of those may actually come in the form of images, types of movie scenes or scenarios. Make note of those; either highlight it or put it down on a separate piece of paper. We’ll be able to discuss that a bit more in the next session.