

Jason Siff
Week 3, *Awareness of Thinking*
“Wholesome Qualities and Skillful Choices”
September 15rd, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Hello, I’m Jason Siff and I’ll be continuing this online retreat on the awareness of thinking. This is the third week.

I’d like to begin with the notion that when you’re thinking you’re not in the present moment. People often say thoughts are either about the future or the past, but they are not about being in the present. In fact, many teachings around meditation give the student the idea that when they start to think they are no longer being mindful or present. That mindset turns thinking into a real enemy in your meditation practice. As you’ve been meditating using the approach that I taught these past couple of weeks, you may have noticed that you’ve softened with your thoughts and your thoughts may have been less of a problem or issue within your sittings. Some of you might have also felt that your thinking has been more dominant and haven’t felt like this is a way to go for you. My point here is not to actually try to convince you to allow your thinking, but to understand something about what would happen in a meditation practice where someone does allow his thinking.

When it comes to thoughts about the future, you may find that if you label those thoughts as planning or going into the future you actually don’t worry much about them. There are so many different things that you are including under the label of planning which first seem like planning, but may not be related as far as actual activities. In a sense they may actually be quite different. Say you’re meditating and you’re planning a vacation. In that planning you are purchasing air tickets, looking at brochures, considering where you’re going to stay, imagining some of the meals or how many days you’re going to stay—while doing that you may find that you’re excited about what’s going on, and at other moments you are a bit anxious or hesitant around something. You might find something you think you’re missing that you’d like to do. While you’re going through that, you’re experiencing feeling excited, apprehensive, or that you’re missing out. Those feelings are happening right now. They are part of your experience. Notice that even though your thoughts are going into the future, they are actually creating a present moment experience of thinking about this vacation that you’re going to take. I would look at that kind of thinking process as something that may not necessarily be planning, but some form of trying to get yourself oriented or feel enthusiastic or excited about something. To start to look at that experience from that angle of exploring it in more depth, you might find that it is telling you something about yourself that’s very important to know. It is giving you a certain kind of present moment awareness whenever you have thoughts about taking a vacation.

In another situation, you’re thinking about an interaction you had with somebody before the meditation sitting and the kind of email that you’re going to send that person afterward. You find yourself drafting this particular email; saying things to this person you felt you didn’t say during the conversation, but would like to say right now. You may

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even be doing some editing around it. You may be picturing that email on your computer screen and seeing yourself writing it. Is it actually happening in the future or is this something that you are engaged in right now? This is about how you are affected by a conversation with somebody and the kinds of feelings that come up around that conversation and what you feel you need to do about it. When you start to get clued into the fact that it's something that's happening right now and how can you be a bit more in touch with what it is you're actually feeling, thinking and going through. You may find that your experience may start to open up for you more. It may be something that you are actually able to sit with, be with and work with during your meditation sitting.

When it comes to memories in meditation, many people feel when they go back into the past and remember their childhood or certain period of their lives, they aren't being in the present moment and should perhaps be beyond that or it's not important now because it's done and gone. Maybe it's not done and gone because you're actually feeling it right now. The memory is coming up and it's doing something within your experience right now. Consider that memories that are arising may need to be attended to in a certain way in the present moment. If you keep trying to forget or say you don't want to think about that memory or period during meditation practice, you might find that it comes back again. It's telling you, “Look at me!” Consider something about this experience in the past that may be relevant now. Look at that as something that is more helpful rather than a hindrance.

As part of this approach to meditation you start to become a bit more flexible to the kinds of thoughts and feelings that are coming into your sitting. You are able to see that if a memory keeps arising again and again, maybe it needs attention, and you can give it attention. If your thoughts about what you're going to do after meditation sitting keep coming up, maybe you need to let yourself go into that a bit more and give it some attention. If something keeps recurring; perhaps there is a reason for it. Perhaps there is some way in which you haven't been able to hold it, stay with it or know something about it and it keeps going. There may be some way you're treating it that you're dismissing it all the time instead of listening to it.

This basic approach to meditation is when your thoughts go into the future, to the past and into the present, it's all happening now. It's all happening together. You can find a present moment experience within memories that you're having and within future thoughts—to be able to bring your attention to that rather than disregarding it because they don't fit into the notion of being in the present moment.

Thinking, as I mentioned in the last session, there are many varieties of this. I don't want to go into that in a lot of detail, but you can't treat all thoughts the same. You can't say these kinds of random thoughts that you're getting and these thoughts that are charged with more negativity are exactly the same kinds of things. Nor can you say that useful

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contemplation—where you’re reflecting on your experience and trying to understand it—is the same as a strong thought of craving to buy something. No! They are different kinds of thinking. To start to see that when you make discernments around different types of thinking, it’s not about justifying your thoughts about certain things in meditation. It’s actually about trying to understand that your mind doesn’t just operate with one mode of thought. There are different kinds that are working. When you’re journaling and recollecting your sitting, you may find that some kinds of thoughts, like fragmented random ones, feel as if they are not you. A strange idea comes into your head and you feel that’s not an idea you usually have. Certain thoughts go on that are complaints or unhappy and dissatisfied ones; you feel that’s a certain part of you and understand. You may get a sense that these thoughts around complaining and wonder how often you look at them. Most of the time you are in them and doing it. Meditation may be an opportunity to reflect back on those kinds of thoughts.

Part of this approach is starting to see there are some kinds of thinking that may have a bit more sense of self, habitually the way you are. There may be kinds of thinking that are less so—that are not so much identified with particular attributes, attitudes, behaviors or views. When it comes to looking at thoughts, I also suggest that you don’t try to classify them. Instead, write about them as they appear. Part of the journaling of what goes on in your meditation sitting around thinking is perhaps writing down a dialogue as you remember it or a particular thought fragment even if it’s half a sentence or a strange idea. Put it down and start to see a bit more that there are different kinds of thinking going on. Your mind isn’t always locked into one way or mode of thinking, perceiving and understanding things.

In Buddhist teachings around thoughts, what we are striving to do is help cultivate that which is skillful and wear away or diminish that which is not. The question is how does that happen? How does that work? In this kind of approach, what starts to happen is you need to recognize more closely what is skillful in your thinking. You need to have a sense that these are skillful thoughts or this is a skillful attitude; being patient or kind. You have to get a sense of some of the things that are not so skillful. If you have these thoughts around revenge and you come up with a revenge scenario, a lot of ugly things can happen to you and others on account of it. That wouldn’t be considered skillful. The idea is not to stop unskillful thoughts but to rather use something that is skillful to understand unskillful. Use how you’re developing your awareness of thoughts, how you’re investigating and exploring them in ways that you’re understand in what makes them work and keeps them going. That is a skillful activity.

We’re not trying to let negative unskillful thoughts go on and on until they exhaust themselves. We’re trying to have those negative unskillful thoughts go on and reveal themselves more and more; how we get caught up in them, how we believe in them, how we may form intentions to act on them. In looking into those thoughts, we’re developing

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something skillful. We're not being unskillful. We are using our minds and abilities to reflect, analyze and think more clearly around those thoughts; asking questions about them as a way to know more and not get caught up in them.

The full position is to get caught up in thinking we're ignorant of that we haven't examined and don't know much about. We can do a practice where we note those thoughts and have them banished, or we go into certain states of mind where we don't have these negative unskillful thoughts. We come out of these states and enter interactions with people and find the unskillful thoughts come back again. There's a way in which they weren't completely gone and inevitably come back.

How do we learn from our thinking as it is; as it actually appears to ourselves? As I said earlier, it is discernment. We need to be able to make discernments around certain kinds of thoughts and become familiar with them; not to judge them or say this thought is negative so you are going to stop it, but discerning what is negative in this thought. What is problematic about this kind of thinking? What is blameworthy? What is regrettable about some of these thoughts if you act on those thoughts? What are the consequences that could happen if you go through and say these things to the person that I am thinking about? In order to do that, we need to allow that into our meditation sitting.

Another side of meditation is in interactions with people in the real world, in our outside life. We're going to be more aware of what's going on around us, our habits, impulses and conditions. In a sense we're more in the wild even though it's quite civilized at times. In your meditation sitting, you might find that it's a kind of laboratory where you can look at the conversations and interactions that you're intending to have. You can sit with them, get to know them and look around them to find what is appropriate and what isn't.

To consider that you had a meditation sitting where you let yourself go through a difficult confrontation with somebody or something other major issue in your life that you need to work with, give yourself over to it and let it go on. I would hope that in the course of meditating with that, you might find something else emerged that your ordinary limitations break down. You might be open and find your mind go to something else that you hadn't been able to consider, to a feeling that you haven't been able to access. That may be more skillful than what you started with. That's a very important part of this approach.