

Thoughts



Nothing was ever so unfamiliar and startling to me
as my own thoughts.
(Henry David Thoreau)



Thoughts

(Joseph Goldstein)

What are thoughts? What is this phenomenon that so powerfully conditions our lives when we remain unaware of it, yet dissolves so completely as soon as we pay attention? What is our proper relationship to that endless display of thoughts parading through our mind?

The Buddha said that we are shaped, created, and led by our thoughts. If he was right, then it is important for us to watch our thought process closely to see where we get hooked, where we are seduced through identification into creating something that brings us unhappiness.

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They can drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and the impact they have on our destiny, depend on our understanding of things.

If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arising and passing, then it does not matter what species of thinking appears in the mind; they are all essentially empty of any substance at all, and we can see them for the passing show that they are.

These all-powerful movers and shakers of the world that create us and lead us become little energy blips in our mind, with hardly enough power to create even a ripple. They seem like transparent dewdrops evaporating in the sun.

But there are many times when we are not simply watching thoughts come and go, either because we are lost in them or because we choose to think something through, perhaps as a precursor to action.

In both these cases **it is crucial for us to discern wholesome from unwholesome thoughts in order to know which to give our energy to, because these thoughts do have a karmic impact; they lead us.**

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. Which thoughts will we invest in? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which to act on and which simply to let be.



You have to be careful not to criticize or fight the mind, since it is normal to think, hear sounds, and feel sensations. The trick is not to grasp or reject them.

Just leave them alone and let them come and go lightly.

(Martine Batchelor)

Thoughts are often one-sided and untrue.

Learn to be mindful of thought instead of being lost in it.

(Jack Kornfield)

Just as the salivary glands secrete saliva, the mind secretes thoughts.

The thoughts think themselves. This thought production is not bad; it's simply what minds do.

(Jack Kornfield)

Repetitive Thought Patterns (Adapted from Joseph Goldstein)

Probably you are plagued by recurring thoughts like everyone else. If so, you may find it helpful to remember that our emphasis in Dharma practice is less on changing the pattern than on changing our relationship to it.

Instead of fighting or struggling with repetitive thought patterns, instead of trying to make them stop coming, we can learn how not to react, how not to make them the cause of actions, how not to be bothered by them.

When we dispassionately observe our repetitive thoughts, we come to realize the thoughts are empty; they don't belong to anybody; they are not rooted in self. What feeds them is our relationship to them. We do not like them, and precisely because we do not like them, they keep coming back. At a certain point we stop not liking them. Then it is no problem.

We need not be judgmental or discouraged by a repetitive thought pattern when it occurs. Since this pattern will be around for a while in our mind, we might as well make friends with it. When a repetitive pattern arises, we can just see it – “Oh, here it is again” – without being surprised. We begin to work with it in an accepting way.

I have watched some of the most appalling scenarios in my mind. Okay, there they are, arising and passing. If we relate to them in a non-reactive, non-identified way, their content does not matter. Tremendous freedom comes when we realize that from the perspective of mindful awareness the content is irrelevant.

Without getting caught, without identifying with them, they simply become other empty, ephemeral thoughts, which we neither condemn nor believe as they pass through like leaves blowing in the wind. The mind stays free.



*Thoughts are just what
is. They appear. They're
innocent. They're not
personal.*

A Guiding Life's Purpose

One of the fundamental principles of the spiritual life is to know one's purpose. When we have a clear purpose in life, we can move directly toward accomplishing it. Our life's purpose provides a blueprint for discriminating between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts. Our life's purpose helps us choose which thoughts to act on and which to let pass.

Restraint

It is important to understand restraint.

With wisdom and awareness we can see that there are skillful activities that are conducive to greater happiness and understanding, and there are unskillful ones that lead to further suffering and conflict.

Restraint is the capacity we have to discriminate one from the other, and the strength and composure of mind to pursue the skillful course.

It is possible to develop restraint, the gentle discipline of settling back and allowing the desires to arise and pass without always feeling the need or compulsion to act on them.

True restraint is not cultivated through aversion and suppression. It comes from simply seeing what is harmonious and what isn't, and then acting accordingly, bringing our actions of speech and body into alignment with what we know to be true.

As we work with the quality of restraint, we find it to be a source of tremendous power and energy.

The Power of No

What is the attitude of no in practice? What is the wisdom of no? No means letting go of all conditioning, all phenomena, letting go of the thought of selfhood. No also means restraint.

There is great wisdom and power in saying no to unskillful impulses and desires. Following habitual desires and impulses that lead to suffering is not freedom. It is simply being carried away on a wave of conditioning.

Practicing the no of skillful restraint is the expression of a free mind. (Joseph Goldstein)



You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage - pleasantly, smilingly, non-apologetically - to say "no" to other things. And the way to do that is by having a bigger "yes" burning inside.

(Stephen Covey)

Self-respect is the fruit of discipline;
the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to one's self.

(Abraham Joshua Heschel)

Self- Discipline

(Henepola Gunaratana - Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist monk)

Discipline is a difficult word for most of us. It conjures up images of somebody standing over you with a stick, telling you that you are wrong. But self-discipline is different. It's the skill of seeing through the hollow shouting of your own impulses and piercing their secret.

They have no power over you. It's all a show, a deception. Your urges scream and bluster at you; they cajole; they coax; they threaten; but they really carry no stick at all. You give in out of habit. You give in because you never really bother to look beyond the threat. It is all empty back there. There is only one way to learn this lesson though. The words on this page won't do it.

But look within and watch the stuff coming up - restlessness, anxiety, impatience, pain - just watch it come up and don't get involved. Much to your surprise, it will simply go away. It rises, it passes away. As simple as that.

There is another word for self-discipline. It is patience.

*Life is a lot like chess.
If you can think ahead, you
can save yourself a lot of trouble*



With mindfulness we can witness the arising and passing of desire. We can allow the body sensations, the feeling states, and the stories of desire to be graciously received without judgment. When desire is met mindfully, the energy of desire will often intensify for a time and try to overcome us. If we don't rush to fulfill the desire, but simply stay present, the discomfort will eventually pass. Then we can notice what follows: usually a sense of ease, a peacefulness in body and mind...

(Jack Kornfield)

The Sacred Pause

Because experience happens so quickly, habitual responses can come out of our mouth or from our hands before we know it. It helps to practice skillful responses when things are easy. That way when things are tough, our pattern is already set.

It also helps to train ourselves to pause before our response. This is called the Sacred Pause, a moment where we stop and release our identification with problems and reactions.

Without a pause our actions are automatic. In a moment of stopping, we break the spell between past result and automatic reaction.

When we pause, we can notice the actual experience, the pain or pleasure, fear or excitement.

In the stillness before our habits arise, we become free. (Jack Kornfield)



If at every moment you are consciously watching your behavior,
a calm consideration will replace a blind instinctive reaction to certain situations in life
where the choice lies between committing a lapse in behavior or avoiding it.

(The Teachings of Kirpal Singh, v. 2, 19)



There are two distinct classes of what are called thoughts: those that we produce in ourselves by reflection and the act of thinking, and those that bolt into the mind of their own accord.
(Thomas Paine)

Every thought that crops up in the mind is in itself a test to see what one's reaction will be.
(Swami Nityananda)

Thoughts make a good servant, but a poor master.

Thoughts are suggestions not demands.

“
*Don't chase after
thoughts, and don't push
them away. Just let them
come in and go out like a
swinging door.*
”

- Jakusho Kwong Roshi -

”
OkDay.com

Don't believe everything you think.

As soon as you have made a thought, laugh at it.
(Lao-tzu)

You must never trust your thoughts when you are in sorrow
or when your level of consciousness is low.

We believe we own our thoughts and have to do something about them,
especially if they are negative. This is bound to create suffering.
(Ayya Khema)

Realizing for ourselves that the power to achieve contentment comes from within requires an understanding of how our thinking process controls our behaviors and, thereby, our results.
(Matthew Flickstein)

Don't forget to bring the good experiences of meditation into your daily activities. Instead of acting and reacting impulsively and following your thoughts and feelings here and there, watch your mind carefully, be aware, and try to deal skillfully with problems as they arise. If you can do this each day, your meditation will have been successful.
(Kathleen McDonald)

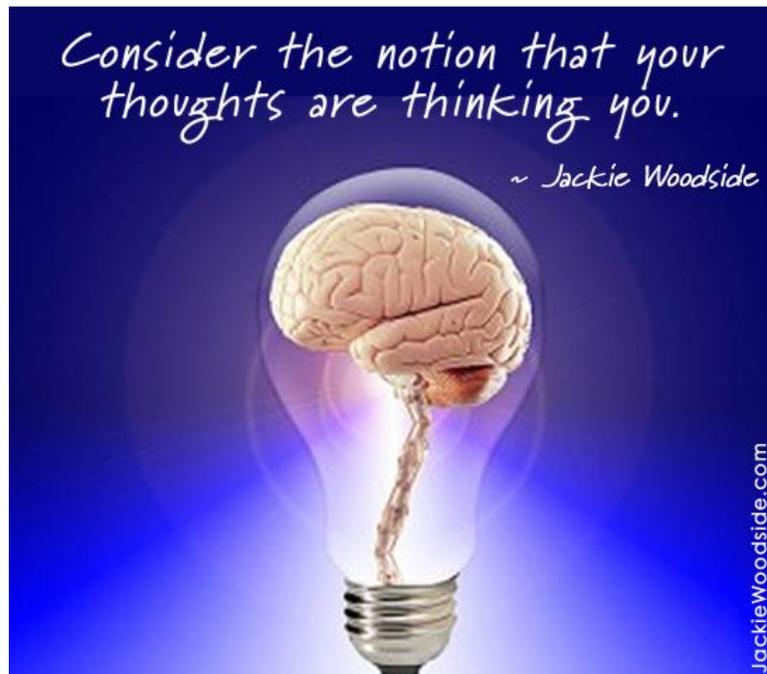
The solution is not to suppress our thoughts and desires, for this would be impossible, it would be like trying to keep a pot of water from boiling by pressing down tightly on the lid.

The only sensible approach is to train ourselves to observe our thoughts without following them. This deprives them of their compulsive energy and is therefore like removing the pot of boiling water from the fire.

(Lama Thubten Yeshe)

It is easier to behave your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of behaving.

(Kegley's principle of change)



The most important things in life are the thoughts you choose to frame.

(Marcus Aurelius)

Thoughts of themselves have no substance; let them arise and pass away unheeded. Thoughts will not take form of themselves, unless they are grasped by the attention.

(Ashvaghosha)

Like a skilled carpenter who removes a coarse peg by knocking it out with a fine one, so a person removes a pain-producing thought by substituting a beautiful one.

(Buddha)

Perennial joy or passing pleasure? This is the choice man is to make always. The wise man recognizes this, but not the ignorant. The first welcomes what leads to abiding joy, though painful at the time. The latter runs, goaded by their senses, after what seems immediate pleasure.

(Katha Upanishad)

Our Fragmented Mental State

(Steve Hagen, *Buddhism Plain and Simple*)

Most of the time our mental state is fragmented, filled with countless desires and cravings for this or that experience. To drive off such thoughts is useless. The more we try to push them away, the more we feed them, and the more they grow in strength and staying power.

If we simply observe our fragmented mental state, seeing it for what it is rather than feeding it – whether by judging it, indulging in it, or trying to shoo it away – then it collects into full awareness of its own accord.

The effort involved in gathering your scattered mind isn't an effort directly applied to a particular situation through your force of will. It doesn't follow from thinking, "I see my unwholesome state of mind. Now I have to cut it off." That isn't going to work.

Simply by seeing your state of mind, by seeing your inclinations toward this and away from that, you are awake. All you have to do is continue bringing yourself back to seeing. To see is to heal an otherwise fragmented mind and to prevent further scattering of mind from occurring.



Nature has its checks and balances. We tend to override them with our thought. We can, however, make a conscious effort to see, and let the balance restore itself. With seeing, restoring balance is no more problematic and sacrificial than not putting our hand in a flame. When we see what the act entails, we just don't have the urge to do it anymore.



Over time we may notice that each thought we experience is transitory and impermanent. Eventually, through simple observation, our thoughts, while no less vivid, will become less urgent, and will cease to have such a firm hold on our emotions and actions. We will be able to see each thought as it arises without feeling compelled to act on it.



Our unobserved mind is the source of a great deal of confusion and suffering for us. We habitually act out of our thoughts and assumptions – most of which we're only vaguely aware of – rather than out of full engagement with the moment. To make matters worse, we often identify with our thoughts, as if substantiality could somehow be found in what we think or believe. When we carefully observe our minds we cannot help but note that our thoughts and mental states are just as fleeting as the sensations of our bodies.

Just watch your mind. When you learn to see what is painful and not conducive to awakening you'll stop doing unwholesome behaviors very naturally.

Don't Always Believe What You Think

(Brad Klontz, *Psychology Today*)

Imagine yourself at a business meeting. You are introduced to a business associate named Mark. When you shake Mark's hand, you notice him look away. What you say to yourself about Mark's behavior will be automatic, and will determine how you feel about the encounter. If you say to yourself, "Mark is rude. He insulted me by not looking at me," you may feel angry. If you say to yourself, "Mark could tell I am uninteresting," you will feel dejected. If you say to yourself, "Mark must be nervous because it is his first day," you may feel compassion. How you act toward Mark will directly follow your thoughts and feelings. If you thought he was rude or he labeled you as boring, you might avoid him. If you thought he was feeling nervous, you might try to make him feel welcome.

Many Opportunities to Create Meaning

Life provides us with an endless supply of opportunities to create meaning. Things happen around us, to us and within us. Some things seem unique to us, such as an injury, job loss, promotion, retirement or divorce. Others are a universal condition of life, such as aging, health concerns and death. It is not what happens or doesn't happen to us that determine our mood and life satisfaction. Rather it is how we interpret those events, and what we decide they mean about ourselves and the world. These internal decisions determine whether we are "rich" or "poor," happy or sad, angry or joyful, appreciative or resentful. Then we act on how we feel.

Unfortunately, we give our automatic thoughts too much power. We rarely notice, evaluate or challenge them, yet we let them create our experience in the world. Often, they are inaccurate, only part of the story, unhelpful or just one of many possible interpretations. Anyone who has been in a relationship knows there are often at least two different interpretations of the same event. Have you ever had a conversation that went something like this?

"But that is not what happened."

"Yes it was."

"But I didn't say that!"

"Yes you did."

The Gift of an Alternative Perspective

In these circumstances, we are convinced that our way of seeing things is the correct way and that the other person must be crazy for not recognizing the "truth." Even though we participated in the same experience, two entirely different interpretations resulted, often with equal merit to an outside observer. Thus, actually, in this moment we are being given the "gift" of an alternative perspective. With the running dialogue between our ears and the misplaced trust we give to our own thoughts we do not realize the benefit of someone challenging our thinking. This can lead us to automatically believing what we think, without examining sometimes more accurate or helpful alternatives. When we naively accept our thoughts as "reality," we can become vulnerable to developing a way of looking at the world

that is limiting or downright unhealthy. We can miss opportunities, become overly pessimistic, excessively fearful, rigid or unreasonably angry.

What we say to ourselves about ourselves, about what has happened to us, about others and about the world will determine our experience of the world. Research has shown consistent and predictable patterns of thinking in people suffering from anxiety and depression. For example, when our thoughts are chronically focused on self-criticism, negativity about the world and hopelessness about the future, we will become depressed and we will be more vulnerable to relationship problems, sickness and premature death.

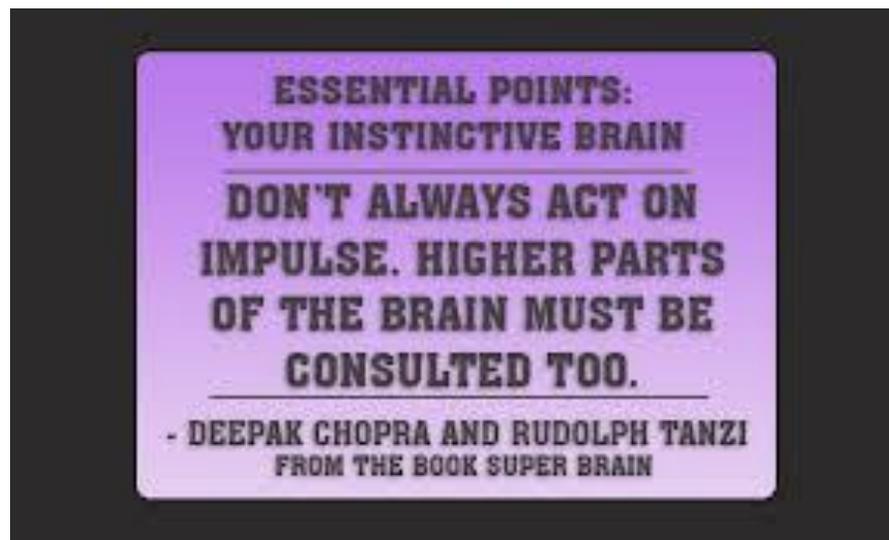
Thinking About Your Thinking

Are your thoughts serving you well? If you suspect that your automatic thinking may be having a negative impact on your mood, relationships, financial health or quality of life, consider spending some time thinking about your thinking. The next time you notice you are feeling anxious or down, ask yourself, “What is going through my mind right now?” Identify your self-talk and ask yourself:

- 1) What evidence is there to support this thought?
- 2) What evidence is there to refute it?
- 3) Is this way of thinking helping me get what I want?
- 4) Is there a more helpful way to look at this?
- 5) What is the worst thing that could happen?
- 6) What is most likely to happen?
- 7) If my friend had this thought, what would I tell him or her?

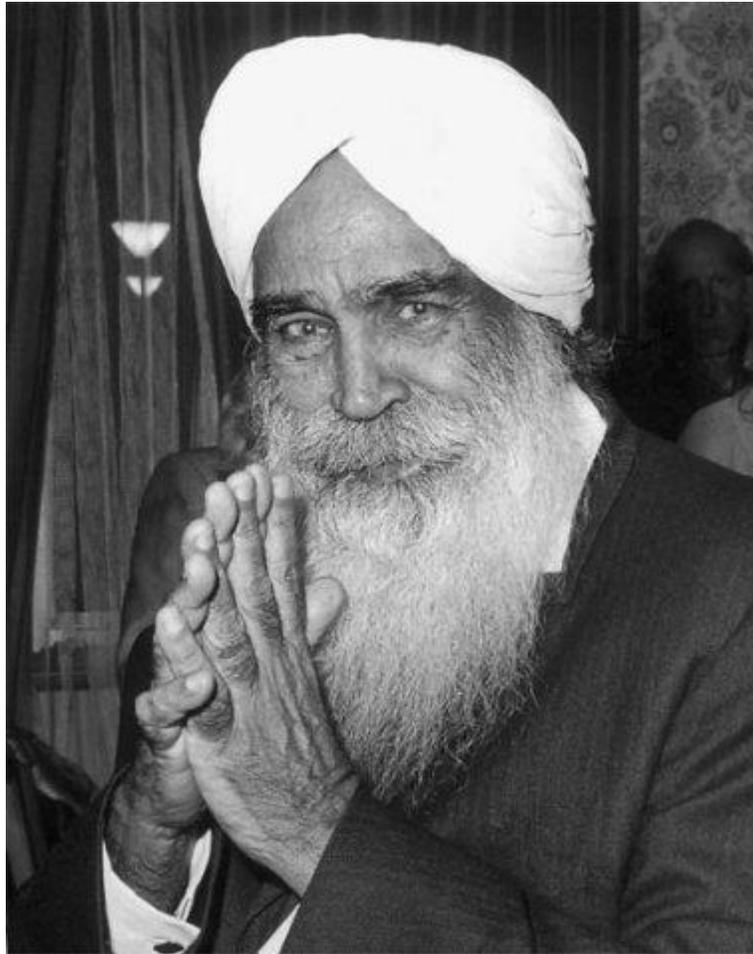
To a large degree, our thoughts determine our feelings, behaviors and outcomes. By becoming aware of our thoughts, evaluating them, and changing those thoughts that are inaccurate or unhelpful, we can improve the quality of our lives.

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mind-over-money/201307/don-t-always-believe-what-you-think>)



Enlightenment – that magnificent escape from anguish and ignorance – never happens by accident. It results from the brave and sometimes lonely battle of one person against his own weaknesses.
(Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano)

Changing over from material to spiritual man is the most difficult part of spirituality and when you learn to perfect yourself in that field, then God-realization is not difficult.
(Sant Kirpal, Spiritual Elixir, 103)



Let this be my last word, that I trust in Your love.
(Rabindranath Tagore)

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