

## *Skillful Thinking*

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We often think of meditation is being a process of not thinking, but to get the mind to settle down, you have to think. A lot of the Buddha's meditation instructions involve teaching us how to think in a way that's useful, in a way that's helpful. We may think, well, we know how to think perfectly well, thank you, but if your thinking causes suffering, if it causes harm, then no matter how clever it is, you still don't know how to think.

The Buddha points out the ways to think, the questions to ask, that will make your thinking useful, helpful, skillful, a part of the path to the end of suffering, rather than a cause of suffering.

You notice his instructions on right concentration: The first jhana has directed thought and evaluation. In other words, he teaches you where to focus your thoughts and he gives you instructions on how to evaluate what's going on. Here you direct your thoughts to the breath, the sensation of breathing in the body. Try to broaden your concept of the breathing, so that it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it's the whole energy flow in the body. It's part of what's called the wind element, which includes the in-and-out breath, but also other energies in the body, such as the up-flowing winds and the down-flowing winds. In other words, there's an energy that seems to flow up through the body sometimes as you breathe in, and then there's an energy that flows down as you breathe in, from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet. If the energy flows up too much, you start getting headaches. If it flows down too much, the body slumps down, you get sleepy. So you have to find a way of balancing these two energies.

There's also the energy in the stomach, the energy in the intestines, and then the energy that flows throughout the entire body. This is probably one of the most interesting parts of the wind element in the body: the energy that keeps your nerves working, the energy that keeps the blood flowing through the different parts the body.

You might want to make a survey as you settle down to focus on your breath. How is the energy flowing in your body right now? Go through the different parts and check things out: Is there a blockage anywhere? Any place where you're tensing up your muscles, blocking the blood flow? If you find it, think of breathing through it, or breathing into it, or breathing around it: any way that

helps to dissolve the blockage. You may think of relaxing your hands, starting with your fingers and going up through the palms, the wrists, the arms. Then start with your toes and go up through your feet, your ankles, your legs—relax all the extremities and see what that does.

That's when the evaluation comes in. Does it feel good? If it feels good, if it provides an area where you can settle down and feel at home, then you've done it skillfully. If not, try it in other ways.

The basic evaluation here is based on the four noble truths. This is the Buddha's guideline for discernment. Actually his guidelines go back even more simply than that, pointing out that there are actions that you may like to do that give good results, actions that you may like to do that give bad results, actions you don't like to do that give good results, and actions you don't like to do that give bad results. The things you like to do that give good results are no problem. The things that you don't like to do and give bad results, they're not a problem, either. You don't want to touch them.

It's ones that you like to do that give bad results, and don't like to do but give good results: Those are the ones you've got to watch out for. Those are the ones that test your wisdom, your practical intelligence. Can you talk yourself into doing the things you don't like to do but give good results? Can you talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but give bad results? In other words, wisdom is strategic.

The Buddha recommends that, to get started on that, you go ask someone you respect: What sort of actions will give bad results over the long term? What sort of actions will give good results over the long term? It's from this framework that the four noble truths come. Craving, ignorance, clinging: These are things that give bad results. Yet we like to crave, we like to cling. Virtue, concentration, discernment give good results. Sometimes we like doing these things, sometimes we don't, but we've got to learn how to talk ourselves into pursuing the path continually.

Part of that comes from understanding what these four noble truths are. There is suffering, and it's something to be comprehended. In other words, you want to be able to watch it, so that you can understand what's happening. What is suffering? Is it physical or is it mental? Look at it. Is it possible for there to be pain in the body and yet no suffering in the mind? That's an important question. And exactly how do you experience suffering? What is the experience of suffering? That's something you need to comprehend.

As for the cause of suffering, once you've begun to comprehend suffering, you begin to see the other mental factors that occur around it. When you detect those

factors—things like craving and ignorance—you let them go. Now, to be able to do this, you've got to develop good strong qualities in the mind—virtue, concentration, discernment—which are things you want to develop. Then when you see the craving passing away, that's something you want to notice. You want to watch that and realize what's happening.

So there are four potential duties you've got here in the present moment, which means you've got to think, you've got to evaluate the situation to figure out which duty you should perform. When there's an experience that comes from the breath, from the way you breathe, is it stressful or is it not? If it's stressful, what's the problem here? Is this stress actually part of the path? After all, sometimes there's some stress in developing virtue, concentration, and discernment, in which case it's going to give good results down the line, so it's something you want to pursue for the time being. But if it's not associated with any of those things, if it's associated with craving and clinging, you'd better let go of the craving and clinging. But try to comprehend the stress first.

So there is a process of thinking and evaluating that goes along with the meditation. You can reduce this to pretty simple terms. As you're sitting here breathing, does it feel good? Does it not feel good? If it's not feeling good, can you figure out why? Can you change the way you breathe? Can you change the way you relate to the breath to make it more satisfying, more gratifying to be right here, just breathing in and breathing out? You can ask yourself: What kind of breathing would feel good right now?

Just pose that question in the mind and see how the body responds. When it's got the green light to go for comfortable breathing, it'll usually go in that direction. What stops it from breathing comfortably is your ignorance. In other words, you're not looking at things in these terms. You're looking in other terms, which may seem very clever, very intelligent, but they're ignorant of the real issue at hand, which is: What are you doing that's causing suffering? Why are you doing it? Can you learn how to stop?

That's basic wisdom, basic discernment: learning how to ask those questions and putting other questions aside.

So even though there are states of concentration where thinking is minimal, to get there you've got to learn how to think. This is why we don't just sit here focusing on the breath without thinking at all. We have to understand the Buddha's teachings and see how they actually relate to what we're doing right here, right now. That requires some humility. No matter how smart we are, we've been causing suffering, so we're not all that smart. We've got to learn how to look at our thinking in a new way, learn how to use our thinking in a new way, so that

instead of being a cause of suffering, it helps bring suffering to an end. We've got to understand these different duties that go along with the four noble truths.

There's a story about Chao Khun Nor, who was a famous monk in Bangkok, a meditator who, even though he lived in one of the most lavishly endowed monasteries in Bangkok, lived very simply. He had a little hut off in the corner. During the middle of the century they brought electricity into the monastery, but he asked that his hut not have electricity. He lived very simply.

Late one night he was doing walking meditation in front of his hut, and a young monk came running up to him, and said, "I can't control my thoughts. I've just been worried about—whatever. What can I do?" Chao Khun Nor looked at him and said, "Well, you've got your duties all mixed up." Then he turned around and walked into his hut.

Now, fortunately, the monk had studied some of the Buddha's teachings and he knew what Chao Khun Nor meant by duties. They were the duties with regard to the four noble truths. He was developing something he should have been letting go of. In other words, he was feeding all these unskillful thoughts, while he should have been trying to comprehend what's going on here, why there's suffering, and then seeing what he was doing that was causing that suffering, and letting that go. The instructions worked.

For most of us, those instructions would have gone right past us. But if you understand the Buddha's teachings on what it means to think wisely, then when you find your thinking running off like, as they say, the man who jumped on a horse and rode off in all directions, you've got to stop and ask yourself: What's going on? What exactly is your duty here? Start dividing things up in terms of the four noble truths, and then you know what to do.

Now, you may not be able to do it skillfully at the beginning, but you can't let your impatience get in the way. I don't know many people who've got problems with an addiction, some activity or craving that they just seem can't get control of, and they want an immediate end of the problem. Well, their impatience is what got them into the problem to begin with, and impatience is not going to get them out. You have to work patiently at getting more and more skillful, figuring out when to observe, when to analyze, when to rest and just watch, when to let go, when to develop.

Beware of meditation techniques that tell you just to let go, or just to note, or just—any "just" whatever. If concentration comes, they say, just notice it passing and then you learn something about inconstancy. Well, yeah, but you haven't got much use out of the concentration. Concentration is something to develop. Make sure you've got your duties straight. When you do, then your thinking can be

helpful. You know when to turn it on, when to turn it off, which direction to apply it. That's when your thinking gets wise—and becomes part of the path.