

## *Think*

*July 16, 2021*

Try to breathe comfortably. Notice where the breathing is most prominent in the body and focus your attention there. Try to make that spot comfortable, then see how far the sense of comfort can spread. You're going to need this as your foundation because it's inevitable that when you're sitting and meditating, especially for a long time, pains will come up. If you're going to deal with them properly, you need a foundation of well-being that gives you a sense of confidence that the pain is not going to take over. It's not going to overwhelm you, because you've found some allies inside—the parts of the body you can make comfortable. At the very least, you can always go there.

But that's just hiding out. Sometimes hiding out is all you can do, but it doesn't solve the problem, because the mind can create a lot of suffering around physical pain, and you want to understand why. It's not simply because we think about it and talk to ourselves about it. It's because we think about it and talk to ourselves in the wrong way.

If the problem of pain could be ended simply by not thinking, we could all go into a state of non-perception. That would take care of it. But there's a state of non-perception that's actually wrong concentration. No discernment gets developed there. Remember, the path requires not only right concentration but also discernment, right view, which means you have to learn how to talk to yourself in new ways, develop new types of perceptions.

First you want to see what perceptions you have around the pain. How do you talk to yourself about it? If you find yourself talking about how long it's been there, how much longer it's going to be to the end of the hour, remind yourself that all you need is to be in the present moment. If you add the past and the future, that's weighing the present moment down. But even being in the present moment, there can still be perceptions that make the pain hard to bear. So you want to question them.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a lot of really good questions. Say there's a pain in your knee or a pain in your hip. Is the pain the same thing as the knee? Is it the same thing as the hip? They're in the same place, but are they the same thing? Look into it. It is possible for them to be in the same place but not be the same thing. After all, the hip is part of the physical body made out of the four elements. The pain is not any of those four elements. It's something else. You might say that it's like a light shining on a piece of ground. The light hitting the ground is one thing. The

ground is something else. If something in the mind that insists that the pain and the body are the same thing, question it.

You could also ask yourself, “What shape does the pain have?” It may seem like a strange question, but there may be part of the mind that has a perception that the pain does have a shape, and it’s trying to control it, trying to keep it within certain boundaries so that it doesn’t spread, building up a little wall of tension around it, which actually doesn’t help the problem.

You can ask if the pain has an intention to hurt you. Part of the mind will say, “Oh, of course not.” But there may be a part of the mind that says, “Well, it seems like it.” The only way you’re going to find that second part of the mind is to ask questions.

You can ask if the pain is coming at you. Actually the pain doesn’t have a direction, but if you’re going to give it a direction, think of it going away. In other words, as soon as it arises, remind yourself, “As soon as it appears, it’s going away,” because the pain comes in little moments. You can think of yourself at the back end of a train. The train’s going through the countryside. You’re facing backwards, and anything that appears in your range of vision is already going away from you. Have that same relationship to the pain. See what that does.

The perception that it’s one long, continuous pain—that’s a perception you should question as well. You question it by trying alternative perceptions. You don’t stop thinking. You think in new ways. It’s not simply a matter of stopping your thinking.

There’s a great passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa’s Dhamma conversations, where he’s talking to someone about issues of self and not-self. The literal meaning of one of his statements is to “consider,” but with a tone of voice and in the context, he’s basically saying, “Use your brains. Think about these things.”

If the problem of suffering could be solved by not thinking, then why do we have so many books and books and books in the Pali Canon? All that Dhamma that the Buddha uses to explain the problem of suffering is because suffering has so many implications, so many ramifications, so many ins and outs. You’ve got to learn how to think around all the different ways that the mind can very unskillfully create a lot of suffering for itself. You do that by reversing the thoughts, changing the thoughts around, turning them inside out, trying new ways of thinking.

So we get the mind still not because stillness is going to solve the problem in and of itself. We get it still so that it can do the work, see things clearly.

If you want to see what the mind is doing in the present moment, you’ve got to get it still. If you’re trying to analyze the mind while it’s running around, all you

get are blurs. Everything is in the dark. And all the tools of the mind—your perceptions, your thought constructs—are being used in the dark, too. Imagine if you were using power tools in the dark. You couldn't see what you were doing. You could do a lot of damage.

What you're trying to do is to bring some light to what you're doing, to see precisely what perceptions you have around the pain. Ask yourself, "Are you using the tools of perceptions skillfully, or are you using them sloppily?" Because you've got to look at the details.

When you read Dhamma books, you get the basic principles. You listen to Dhamma talks, you get the basic principles. But you've got to look at the details of your own ways of creating suffering if you want to understand things. Then you have to come up with precise alternatives, different ways of thinking about suffering, different ways of thinking about the pain or whatever the issue that has the mind worked up.

So it's not a question of not thinking. It's a question of thinking in new ways, thinking with the lights on so that you can see the details of what you're doing. You can use your tools well. Now, there *will* come a point that you see things so clearly that you can put the tools down, when you've thoroughly understood how your perceptions were causing suffering, and you've developed a path of perceptions and thought constructs to counteract them. Because that basically is what right view and discernment are all about. After all, what is your discernment going to use if not your perceptions and your thought constructs? What else does it have? You use aggregates to solve the problem of the aggregates, of clinging to the aggregates.

When the work is done, then you can put the tools down. But you've got to use the tools because there's a lot of ignorance that has to be counteracted. The best way to dig it out is to try thinking in new ways. Like that issue of the shape of the pain: There may be a subconscious attitude that it does have a shape. As long as you don't question it, it's going to stay subconscious. But when you start questioning it, you run into it. What are questions made out of? Directed thought and evaluation, perceptions, thought constructs, active thinking.

So you use thinking to cure thinking. That's the role of discernment on the path. If you let go simply because you've heard that if you don't create narratives around the pain, then it's going to be better, and so you stop the narrative, that's just mindfulness. But if you look more deeply into exactly what are the perceptions that still make suffering, even when you're just in the present moment, that's when you're beginning get into the area of discernment.

As the Buddha said, mindfulness holds things in check. Discernment is what cuts through them. You can hold things in check only for so long. But when something is cut, it's cut for good. It's like cutting off your arm and trying to sew it back on. It's not going to be the same as it was before. If you just hold the arm in check—say you wrap something around it—you can very easily unwrap it and still use the arm as you used it before. But if you want to totally let go of it, you cut through it. It's not a pretty image. But it does give you a sense that mindfulness is there just to hold things in check for a while, whereas the activity of discernment is required if you really want to comprehend the suffering. Only then can you cut through the cause because you're coming from understanding, from seeing clearly what you're doing, having counteracted all the unskillful thoughts in the mind so that you can bring them up into the conscious level of your awareness. Then you can let them go in an entirely different way.

So think. As the Buddha said, commit yourself to the practice and then reflect on what you're doing. The reflection is going to require using perceptions and using thought constructs. And it's in learning to use them well that you can finally understand them and can put them down.

The letting go that comes from mindfulness—when you simply do as you're told and let go—and the letting go that comes from seeing clearly that an attachment is not really worth it: Those are two very different things. The second requires your active thinking abilities. So keep them sharp. Thinking may be part of the problem, but you can train it to be part of the solution.