

## *Standing Outside Your Thoughts*

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If we were to measure our thoughts in terms of their quantity, we'd have to say that we're really good at thinking. In terms of their quality, it's another matter. Very rarely do we pay much attention to quality, it's more a matter of being interested in whatever the mind churns up. Some people are better at directing their thoughts for particular purposes, and other people just follow wherever the thoughts may lead them. But in either case, we're way too interested in our thinking. Any thought that comes up, we have to peer inside. It's as if it's a little present. What's inside this present? You open it up, and sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not so good. But then you find yourself falling into the present, this gift that you've given to yourself, and sometimes that can involve a lot of suffering because your thoughts can take you in all kinds of places.

As we meditate, we're trying to get some control over this process. There's the belief that meditation involves no thinking at all, which is not the case. You're basically learning how to think more skillfully and to be more discriminating in how you go into your thinking—which thoughts are worth thinking and which ones are not. The Buddha gives you skills not only in passing judgment on your thoughts, but also in learning how to stop the thoughts that are not worth thinking and to encourage the ones that are.

He talks about five skills all together. When a distracting thought comes up as you're meditating, the first approach is to simply note the fact that it's a distraction, and then replace it with the topic of your meditation. Or if you find that the meditation is not grabbing your interest today, replace it with some other skillful form of thinking. You can change the topic of your meditation. If you've been doing the breath, you can try analysis of the body into its parts, or you can think thoughts of goodwill. Something skillful.

If that doesn't work, the Buddha says to think about the drawbacks of that distracted thinking. Where is it going to take you? What kind of qualities is it developing in the mind as you pursue that line of thought? Which defilements? Greed? Aversion? Delusion? And what would it lead you to do if you were to think about it for a long period of time? Keep examining the thought in that way until you decide that you really don't want to go with it, and then you get back to your meditation.

The third approach is simply to ignore the thought. You know it's there, but you just don't pay it any attention. In other words, just because a thought is in your mind doesn't mean you have to follow it, doesn't mean you have to get into it. It's there, but you don't have to get into it at all.

The fourth approach is to relax around the thinking. When you realize that that distractive thinking takes energy and you can find where you're tensing up to keep that thought going, then you relax it.

The fifth approach is, as the Buddha says, to crush your mind with your mind. In other words, if the other approaches don't work, you just make up your mind, "I'm not going to think that thought," and then you bear down. Put the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and just tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." You can use a meditation word really rapid-fire like *BuddhoBuddhoBuddho*, really fast, to jam the circuits.

So those are the five methods. The Buddha says that when you master them, you'll be able to think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don't want to think. And as you get better and better at these methods, you get to be more discriminating in which thoughts you really do want to think.

But in explaining these methods, the Buddha doesn't just explain the method. He also gives you analogies, perceptions to hold in mind to remind you of the different ways you can relate to distractive thinking so that it doesn't have to take over. Instead of going into the thought, you stay out of the thought. And as you're staying out, you can stay out in various ways.

In terms of the first method, the image is of a carpenter removing a large peg with a small peg. In other words, think about the way you relate to your mind as a craftsman relates to, say, a piece of furniture he's making. You realize that something's been put together crudely, so you try to undo it and put it together better. In this image, you're the craftsman, and your thoughts are the things you're working on. That's one way of distancing yourself from them. After all, as a good craftsman, you don't want to produce shoddy work or crude work. For the sake of your own self esteem, you want it to be more refined.

For the second approach, thinking about the drawbacks of the thought, the image is of a young man or young woman who is fond of beauty looking into a mirror and seeing a dead snake or a dead dog around his or her neck. Think about the sense of disgust that that young person would feel. Okay, you should try to develop that same disgust for your thoughts. In this case, you look at yourself as being fastidious. You don't want to get involved in things that are dirty or beneath you. Think of your thoughts of anger or lust as dead snakes, dead dogs. In this case, the Buddha's appealing to your sense of pride and your sense of what's appropriate,

what's attractive. Think about the people who could read your mind and, if you're dealing in thoughts of anger or lust, what they would think. So there's a self-conscious attitude here: how you would look to others and also how you look in your own eyes. Thinking in that way can give you some distance from your unskillful thinking.

The image for the third method, simply not paying attention to the distracting thought, is of a person who sees something he doesn't want to see and so just turns his eyes away. In this particular case, you're not trying to exert any power over the thoughts. You let them be, but you don't have to pay them any attention. As the Buddha said, it's attention that feeds our thinking. So you know the thoughts are there, but you don't try to get into them. You leave them be. In this case, you're not trying to push them away, but you're not getting into them, because you look at them and can see they're not worth looking at.

The fourth approach is basically built on your desire to relax as you're getting the mind into concentration. There is a certain amount of energy that goes into the concentration, but, once the mind settles down, there's also the ability to relax into the breath, relax into your sense of the body right here, so you want to extend that relaxed state even further. When you get sensitive to the breathing, you begin to notice that when a thought comes into the mind, there's a little knot of tension that appears someplace in the body. That's the marker that allows you to stay with that kind of thinking. If you can detect that knot of tension and breathe right through it, the thought has no place to stand. In this case you're using your desire to rest to get rid of the thought, because you realize that distractive thinking requires energy on your part. You're putting energy into doing something that's really not helpful at all. That's wasteful. So why do that?

Then, for the fifth approach, the image is of two strong men beating down a weaker man. This is the opposite of the image where you're relaxing or the image where you're not trying to exert any control over the thoughts at all. In this case, you're really actively trying to overpower the unskillful thinking. You put energy in. This, of all the five methods, is the one that takes the most energy and involves the least amount of discernment, but sometimes it's necessary. Just show through force of will that you're not going to go with the distraction. Show yourself that you're serious about this.

The other four methods involve a certain amount of discernment: the discernment of the craftsperson, the discernment of someone who's fastidious, the discernment of someone who says, "Okay I can't control this situation, but I certainly don't have to get involved," or the discernment of the person who realizes that the distractive thinking is not something that's coming in from nowhere or

coming in from outside. You're actively producing it. You're involved with it, and you want to end the involvement.

So, these are perceptions that help give you an idea of how you can relate to your distractive thinking. And you have choices. The Buddha never recommends that you follow just one method or approach. He says you want to master all five because the mind can be pretty obstreperous with its thinking, and there are times when you do have to use force. Other times, when you try to get involved in getting rid of the thinking, it just makes the situation worse. In that case, you try to use the method of just turning your attention away.

You can use other images to hold in mind as well. For instance, you're sitting in a very large room, other people are in one corner of the room talking; you're in another corner. You don't have to go over and get involved in their conversation. You don't have to go over and try to chase them away. If you chase them away, they might get really nasty, so you stay in your corner and do whatever work you have to do in your corner—i.e., stay with your breath or whatever object you've chosen as your meditation topic.

This way, you take on different roles with regard to your thinking instead of just jumping right into a thought and allowing it to turn into a state of becoming where you take on an identity in the world of that thought. These perceptions, these analogies, allow you to think of yourself standing outside. This may involve a sense of you, but it's a skillful sense of you. This is one of the cases where the Buddha would say that it's useful to imagine yourself as a carpenter or as someone who's walking and decides he'd rather stand to relax, or someone's who's standing and decides he'd rather sit down, someone who's sitting and decides he'd rather lie down. You can take on any of these roles with regard to your thoughts, and that way you've got them surrounded. If you take on only one role, your defilements will figure that role out pretty quickly and learn how to get around it. But if you're adept at taking on different roles, you can deal with whatever tricks they may have.

There's a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer comes to see the Buddha and mentions that when he's given an elephant to train, he rides the elephant just for a couple hours—takes him here, takes him there, makes him do this, do that—and within those couple of hours he can pretty much figure out all the tricks that that elephant has: in other words, the tricks it might use to get out of doing the job. But, he says, people are a lot more complex. In his words, the human being is a tangle, but these five methods help to untangle you from your unskillful thinking.

So, keep them in mind. You're not limited to just one method, say, of noting, or one method of just trying to push the thoughts out. There are times when you have

to cohabit. They can be there, but you're going to be there, too, in a separate space. Just like Ajaan Fuang's way of dealing with cases where people were possessed by spirits: He wouldn't try to chase the spirit out. He'd spread lots of goodwill, talk to the spirit, reason with it, until it could cohabit peacefully with the person it was inhabiting and not create a lot of trouble. That way, he was able to deal with a lot of spirits in cases where other people had tried to force the spirit out but couldn't succeed.

That's just one instance of how it's good to have a wide range of skills and be able to take on different roles. You may say, "Well I'm the kind of person who does it this way," but as the Buddha said, when you define yourself like that, you limit yourself. Think instead: "What does this particular kind of thinking require so that I can stop it or at the very least not get involved in it?" Be more flexible in how you approach the problem. That way, your skill as a meditator becomes an all-around skill, and you get more creative in learning how not to think. We like to think of our thoughts as creative, but it's important to see that learning how not to think can be creative as well.