



Thinking + Breath

Thinking

-Thanissaro Bhikhu

The Buddha once said that he got started on the right path of practice when he learned to observe his thinking, noticing which kinds of thoughts were skillful, which kinds were unskillful. In other words which kinds of thinking lead to harm, which kinds of thinking didn't lead to harm. Notice that: He didn't say he got on the path when he learned to stop thinking. He got on the path when he learned to observe his thinking and to see it as part of a causal process. This is important, because a lot of meditation has to do with thinking. There's a popular misconception that meditation means not thinking at all. But if you look at all the descriptions of the noble eightfold path, you see that they all start with right view. Then they continue with right resolve. In other words they start with thinking: learning how to think in the right way.

In psychotherapy they have *talking* cures. And they note how amazing it is: Sometimes simply talking over a neurosis—getting it out in the open, learning to be very clear about the presuppositions behind it—can disband it. It loses its power. In a similar vein, meditation is learning how to watch our thoughts, to be very clear about how the mind thinks. Learn how to bring up its assumptions—the unexpressed assumptions or the ones just barely expressed—so that you can see them in the light of day. Then you can see what kinds of thinking you really do live with, what kinds of thinking are absent. Often you'll find that things that have been having the most power over the mind are the ones that, if you really look at them, don't really make any sense at all.

So it's important as you meditate that you have a sense of the role and power of thinking in the meditation. As the Buddha said, every state of concentration depends on a perception, a mental label you create, a little message you can carry

from one moment to the next, one that you can remember, that you can be mindful of. For example the object of mindfulness is: "breath."

As a meditator you've got to realize there are different ways of relating to the breath energy in the body. In fact, the only way you can really get in touch with the breath is to reconceive the way you relate to the body. The best way to deal with the breath is simply to think "allow". You don't push it. You allow it. What you can do is just think: open up, open up. Keep your wrists relaxed, keep your ankles relaxed. All your joints: Keep them relaxed. Think of allowing the opening up of the passages by which the breath can flow. You can't make the breath flow. It's something it's going to do on its own once you've opened the channels.

So you maintain the allowing thought of just "breath." This is part of getting a new view of the breath—and you need a new view of yourself as well, of what can be done. You can relate to the breath and body in a different way from the way you've been doing it. You can relate to the thinking in a different way as well.

As the Buddha once said, if it weren't possible for people to change their ways from unskillful to skillful, he wouldn't have taught the practice of developing skill. It wouldn't have served any purpose. But it is possible. When you've been doing something unskillful, you can change. You realize that there is another way of doing things and that you're capable of doing it.

This requires a certain amount of imagination. That's the beginning of any change in your behavior: allowing yourself to imagine that you can change the way you behave. This applies to all aspects of the practice. You start with generosity. When you make up your mind to give a gift, you're imagining yourself as someone with something to spare. Up to that point, you may have been thinking that you're hungry and lacking, and all you could think about was gaining, gaining, gaining, getting,

getting, getting. But when you allow yourself to think that you have more than enough, you can give. And you begin to realize that this has very little to do with how much you may have materially. Poor people can often be more generous than rich people because they have a different idea of “enough.” When you make this simple change in your thinking, you put yourself in a new place: a place with more dignity, a place of more inner worth.

The gift of forgiveness is the same sort of thing. Someone else has harmed you. If all you can think about is how much you’re a victim, you make yourself a smaller person. But if you think of yourself as large-hearted enough to forgive, you suddenly become a larger person. That gives the mind more space to move around.

And so on down the line. You learn that you can observe the precepts. You learn that you can meditate, simply by changing the way you think about yourself and your capabilities.

So remember that this is the observing and focusing the “thinking” part of practice. There do come parts of the practice where you will not think, but you have your skillful reasons for not thinking. You’re doing it with specific aims in mind, so be clear about your aims and where your aims come from. What are the values that lie behind them? What’s your understanding of suffering and the end of suffering that lies behind how you do things? Make sure to straighten out your thoughts. Once you straighten out your thoughts, realizing how suffering comes about and how you can put an end to it, you’ve got everything you need to put an end to it. It’s simply a matter of allowing yourself to think in those ways.

Notice that the emphasis is on allowing. You don’t have to force yourself. You allow something better than what has been happening... to happen.

Ajaan Fuang once said that if we could force

our way into nirvana, everybody would have arrived there a long time ago. But it’s not something you can do by force. You ultimately get there only through discernment. And discernment starts with learning how to think in the right way. It doesn’t cost anything, doesn’t require a lot of energy: just allowing yourself to think in skillful ways. That can turn you around right there, and head you in the right direction. So before you stop thinking, learn how to think in ways that are really helpful, allow yourself to think in ways that are really helpful, and it will make all the difference in your practice.

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Breath

- Ajaan Lee

Jhana means to be absorbed or focused in a single object, as when we deal with the breath.

The first jhana has five factors: (1) **Directed thought**: Think of the breath until you can recognize it clearly without getting distracted. (2) **Singleness of object**: Keep the mind with the breath. Don’t let it stray after other objects. Watch over your thoughts so that they deal only with the breath until the breath becomes comfortable. (The mind becomes one, at rest with the breath.) (3) **Evaluation**: Let this comfortable breath sensation spread and coordinate with the other breath sensations in the body. Let these breath sensations spread until they all flow together. Once the body has been soothed by the breath, feelings of pain will grow calm. The body will be filled with good breath energy. These three qualities must be brought to bear on the same stream of breathing for the first jhana to arise. This stream of breathing can then take you all the way to the fourth jhana. Directed thought, singleness of object, and evaluation act as the causes. When the causes are ripe, results will appear. (4) **Rapture**: a compelling sense of fullness and refreshment for body and mind, going straight to the heart, independent of all else. (5) **Pleasure**: physical ease arising from the body’s being still and unperturbed; mental contentment arising from the mind’s being at ease on its own, unperturbed, serene, and exultant. Rapture and pleasure are the results.