

Mental Stirrings

February 27, 2004

Everything you really need to know about the mind keeps happening in the present moment.

Many times, when a thought comes into the mind, we want to trace it back, “Where did this come from?” And psychotherapy really encourages that: If you want to understand the thoughts, the urges, the neuroses in your mind, they say, you’ve got to remember back to when you were a child.

But the Buddha’s approach is different. He says to focus on the present moment. Watch what the thought is doing right now. And if you watch carefully enough, all the layers that get involved in creating a thought, maintaining the thought, will become clear.

You start out in that process by actually not paying attention to the thought and by paying attention instead to the breath, focusing on the breath as your object of concentration. The thoughts that come into the mind you leave aside. Just don’t pay them any attention. As soon as you’ve noticed that you’ve paid attention to them, come right back to the breath. Try to be quicker and quicker in sensing when you’ve lost your focus.

That in and of itself is the technique that’s going to give you insight into your thinking. As you get quicker in noticing the thinking, you get to watch the process of thought-formation earlier and earlier on in the process. You begin to see that there are stages. The quicker you get at eliminating the thought—whether it’s simply just dropping the thought and coming back to the breath or when the breath gets really refined and spreads throughout the whole body—you can actually zap the thought with the breath in its more incipient stages.

As you do this, you begin to see that the issue is not so much where the thought came from. It’s what you’re doing with that initial seed of a thought, how you encourage it: That’s the big problem.

And you gain this insight by not playing along with the thought. In this way, the insight that you can gain into thoughts is not really something separate from the practice of concentration, of maintaining your one focus. It’s a byproduct.

You’re more and more solidly based in the breath. As the breath gets more and more refined, you see more and more refined levels in the thought process. The level of noise that comes from your normal conscious activity dies down. Things get more and more quiet, so that as a thought sneaks into the mind you can catch it.

It’s like a thief sneaking into your house. If you’ve got the radio blaring and

the TV blaring and all sorts of lawnmowers and power tools going full blast, someone could sneak into your house with no problem at all. You'll never hear them. But if the house is absolutely quiet, then you have the opportunity to hear them as they sneak in. You can catch them more quickly. Sometimes you can hear them before they've come into the house, as they sneak into your yard.

It's the same with the thoughts. As your mind gets more and more quiet, more and more solid with the breath here, you begin to sense earlier and earlier stages of thought processes as these things begin to form in the mind. You chase them back to the point where it's hard to say that it's strictly a mental phenomenon. It seems to be right at the border between where the mind and the body meet at the breath. It's just a stirring, both physical and mental at the same time.

Normally, as you sense that stirring at the edge of the mind, you get curious, "What is this all about?" And part of it is *finding out* what the stirring's about, and part of it is *creating* what that stirring can be turned into. That's what you can drop. But you've got to watch out for that curiosity. The mind has such an old habit of wanting to see what that thought is, or what could be made out of it: "Here comes a new thought. What could this be? Maybe I can make it into something entertaining. Maybe it's going to be good."

This is why it's important that you try to develop a really jaded attitude toward your thinking—realizing that whatever the thought, it's most likely something you've been through before. And you have a pretty good idea where it's going to take you. It's not going to take you very far in the direction you want to go, so why get involved? Especially when you're right here and you're trying to get to know the present moment, and all the mind keeps churning out are thoughts of past, thoughts of future, which only get in the way of what you're trying to see right now.

So try to develop a slightly, I'd say, cynical attitude toward your thinking, that you don't let yourself get carried away by the glamor of the possibilities for entertainment: "What's this thought? What's that thought?"

Sometimes they seem like little gifts: "Here comes a package. Let's open it up and see what's inside." For the most part, we've opened up many, many of these packages in the past and they don't really have that much to offer. Just old bones that we've chewed on many times before. Or like that package we got a while back that was supposed to be books, but it was damaged in the post office, and when we opened it, it had nothing but a dirty stuffed rabbit.

So the first step in getting to separate yourself from the thoughts is to develop the right attitude toward them, an attitude that's less likely to get carried away. It helps, of course, when the breath feels comfortable, when the breath feels gratifying, when the sense of real refreshment coming from the

way you breathe: You're less inclined to jump at things.

This principle applies not only to your thoughts but also to any quick fix that you'd normally run after to give yourself a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of fun. When the breath is going well here and feels really, really good, why would you have to go running after those things? You feel less inclined.

Sometimes we hear that the mind goes after a little bit of pleasure thinking that the pleasure's going to be permanent. Well, we pretty much know it's not going to be permanent. We just feel that it's going to be worth it: a little bit of effort and some immediate pleasure: "Who cares whether it's going to be long-lasting or not?" That's the attitude. That's why we jump at things.

But if you can see that that little bit of pleasure's going to have long-lasting pain, it's going to cast a long shadow over your life, and at the very least it's going to get in the way of the training of your mind: Then it's not worth it.

So give the mind a place where it can really feel good right here and now so that it's less likely to jump for things. When it begins to see that the effort that's expended in trying to get those quick fixes is really not worth it, that you've got something better, something automatically right here, right now, then you don't have to go jumping.

So as you can pull yourself away more and more quickly from the distraction, whatever the distraction may be, you see that the mind is actually a collaborator. It's been playing along with these things, for a long time. It's the one that dresses up a little bit of pleasure to make it seem like more than it really is.

Psychologists have studied how people are very poor judges of what would really give them happiness. A lot of it comes from this habit of the mind to dress things up to look like more than they are. This is why advertising is so seductive. It worms itself way into this habit that the mind already has. So just as you have to train yourself to become jaded toward advertisements, you have to become jaded toward the way the mind dresses up its thoughts, dresses up its distractions as things that look really interesting, really intriguing, entertaining, or important.

If you look at them simply for what they are, you see that they're just stirrings in the mind that the mind dresses up. A little bit of stirring, which is a *sankhara*, and then you place a label on it, "This is a thought about that. That's a thought about this." And the question is, "Did the stirring really spark that label or was the label slapped onto it totally arbitrarily?" It's really hard to tell. But there is an element of arbitrariness in it.

And that label: Look at what it is. Many times the original stirring dies away but then we've created that label that carries things along. We make a little symbol in the mind and then we agree, okay, this symbol is going to equal that.

It's interesting to note with this *sañña* here that the Thai word *sañña* also means an agreement. That's how it functions in the mind. You have a little symbol in your mind for whatever that thought might be and you agree, okay, this is going to mean that, that's going to mean this. It's a game of make-believe right there.

And then, from that point on, you're actively involved in the further construction of the thought: Where is that narrative going to go? You explore the potential of the thought: more *sankhara*, more *sañña* working together. But that's all they are: these aggregates, these little events in the mind, these choices that are made. We think that we're being disturbed by the thought, yet we're the one creating the thought to begin with.

Maybe that initial stirring was something unintentional but as soon as you latch onto it and begin to draw out its potentials, that's intentional. That's the kamma, and that's the problem. The stirring is not the problem. The problem is what you do with it. You end up creating suffering for yourself, weighing yourself down. And when you weigh yourself down, you weigh down other people around you as well.

The question is, how do you see these things? Simply by trying to stay with the breath as much as possible, being as quick as possible to drop a thought as soon as you see that you've been distracted. Drop it; come right back.

And in the process of doing that, you begin to see: You push the barrier closer and closer to that initial stirring, to where you got involved, to how you got involved. And this allows you to see more and more clearly how arbitrary the whole process is—and again, how much you've been a collaborator. You've played along with these things.

So this insight into the distractions of the mind is not something where you can say, "I'll work at that later, I'll focus on the concentration and then I'll turn my attention to insight later." It's more a process where everything develops together. Your ability to stick more and more consistently with the breath helps you nip your distractions in the bud more and more quickly. And as you nip them in the bud more quickly, that allows you to see earlier and earlier into the process of how these things formed.

If the thought comes to you and seems already full-blown, it's already a narrative telling you this, telling you that: You're way too late. Dropping it at that point is better than not dropping it at all, but still you haven't got anywhere near the beginning of the process.

You want to be able to see it before it becomes a narrative, before you can even recognize what it is—seeing that the act of recognizing is, in and of itself, an arbitrary thing.

And again, that's an insight that comes from concentration practice. It's why the Buddha never had a separate concentration technique or a separate

insight technique. The way of getting an insight is simply learning how to pose the right question in the mind. And then you look for the answer by making the mind very, very still, trying to catch it as it moves off away from its stillness.

So the processes of stilling the mind and gaining insight have to go together. Without the stillness, as I said, the thieves can sneak into your house, they can steal all your valuables and run away, and you wouldn't even know it. All the radios and TVs and power tools are just blaring away in your ears. But as you make things more and more quiet, you can sense the thieves as they're sneaking up. When you're really good, you can even sense their thoughts before they even think of coming in your house. You want to be that quick. But the stillness is what allows you to be that quick.

So your concentration is not a snuffing-out kind of stillness. It's more a quick-and-alert kind of stillness. You get everything still in the mind so that you can see wherever in the mind there's going to be distraction, a least little bit of disturbance: You want to be there and on top of it—on top in such a way that you can extricate yourself from it as quickly as possible.

This is something that can be done only within the context of this very strong foundation you've got with the breath, that you've got with the subtle breath filling the whole body. That provides the context. And when you've got that context really solid and your alertness is really sharp, insights can't help but come. You don't have to anticipate them, they'll come clearly. And the element of their being something of a surprise, something unexpected: That's what guarantees that they're not something you've simply created for yourself and you're trying to impose on the mind.

You actually see these things moving, you see how it's done. And you surprise yourself. You've been able to catch yourself in the act, this act of make-believe, of taking this little stirring and turning it into all kinds of narratives, all kinds of ideas. You actually catch sight of the process as it's happening. That's startling.

So although the insight can't be willed, you can will the causes that can give rise to it. And that's what we're doing as we maintain our alertness with the breath: this 360-degree awareness that we're trying to develop as we stay with the breath and let the breath penetrate the whole body, let everything grow still in the body.

That way, the really subtle things can begin to appear, and you see what they're doing right here, right now.