

The Analytical Mind

August 7, 2018

The analytical mind, all too often, gets a bad rap in Buddhist circles, especially Western Buddhist circles. But many times that's simply an excuse for laziness and mediocrity, not wanting to think, saying that thinking is bad. Actually, thinking has its place in the meditation, and your powers of analysis have their place, as well. It's just learning how to use them at the right time.

After all, think about the Buddha: He had to analyze his path. He was looking for what was skillful but he didn't have much guidance. So he had to look at his actions, to see what he was doing, and in particular what he was doing that was wrong. He then had to figure out how to do something that was right. That required that he analyze things. But notice, he was analyzing his actions.

Our educational system, all too often, teaches us to analyze anything but. We analyze other peoples' actions, other things, other ideas, other abstractions. When we learn, say, scholarly method or the scientific method, that's when you're focused on your actions, and those lessons can be useful. Whatever background you have in gaining a sense of what you're doing is useful to apply to your meditation.

We're trying to get the mind quiet, so that it learns the skill of how not to think. And sometimes the mind is willing to settle right down, like some of us tonight. It's been a rough day with the heat, a lot of us are braindead, and the mind is ready just to settle down and rest. But the problem there, of course, is that it just might go to sleep. So you have to make your mind active enough to figure out when the signs of sleepiness are coming on, and what you can do to prevent them.

But it's not the case that everybody's braindead. Some of us have a mind that just keeps thinking, thinking, thinking, and can't stop. The mind thinks that "As long as I can analyze things or worry about things enough, I can fend off problems." But that's the mind that has to be taught that there are many problems out there in the world you can't anticipate. And in cases like that, you'll need a lot

of mindfulness and alertness to figure out what the right thing to do would be. That realization gives you a good reason to meditate right now, to develop those powers of mindfulness and alertness.

There are other ways of thinking your way into stillness. If you're feeling lazy, you can remind yourself that death can come at any time. Wherever there's birth—and we've all been born—death is going to come and we don't know when. It could come tonight. Are you ready to go? What would you like to do on your last night? You'd like to meditate, to get your mind in shape.

Like that old woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang. She was sitting one night and a voice came to her and said, "You're going to die tonight." So she said to herself, "Well as long as I'm going to die, I may as well die meditating"—to see what was going to happen, how death happened. As she told me later, she felt like her body was going to fall apart. It was like a house on fire—that was the image she used. No matter which room you went into, it was all aflame. But then she thought of the space element, so she went there, keeping the perception of "space, space, space" in mind, without paying any attention to any sensation of the body. When she came out of that meditation, everything in the body had gone back to normal. She didn't die—that's why we know the story—but she learned an important lesson. When everything else gets bad in the body, you go to space. She also learned the lesson that when you get cornered like this, then if you've been meditating, you're more likely to be able to think up a solution.

So when you realize that death can come, you want to get your powers of mindfulness and alertness really strong so that you can face that event and not get knocked off balance. If you find your mind is going to lust, you can think thoughts about the different parts of the body and ask yourself: Which part are you lusting for? Then just think about just that part. If all you had was that one part, cut off from the rest of the body, would you go for it? No. How about the other parts? Are any of them really nice, in and of themselves? No. You look at your own body; you look at the other body. There's really not much there that's worth getting all worked up about. So why bother?

If you want something that's really pleasant, you can get to know the breath. In other words, you learn how to think your way into stillness. Use your powers of

analysis for the purpose of training the mind. And if you have trouble getting into the body, think about those questions that Dogen used to ask. Here's another one of the ironies: that all too often Zen is portrayed as saying you shouldn't think, you should get past your analytical mind, and that Dogen was the master of just sitting. But he wasn't sitting just making his mind empty. He was thinking about, "What does it mean to sit?" That was his riddle. "Is the body sitting in the mind? Is the mind sitting in the body?" And you can work on those questions yourself.

All too often when we're trying to get into the body, we're trying to push our head down into the body, because we're identifying with the head. You have to tell yourself, "Wait a minute, there's already some awareness in the body itself, you don't need to push the head into the body. Where's your awareness of the body right now? Where's the hand's awareness of the hand, the arm's awareness of the arm, your stomach's awareness of the stomach?" There's an awareness already there. Allow that to come to the fore.

Then you realize that it's not a question of getting into the body. The body's already in the body. It's just a question of allowing the parts of your awareness that are already there in the body to show themselves. Your awareness in the eyes is in the eyes, your awareness in the nose is in the nose. All the parts of the body are in their right place.

This is one of the lessons you learn when you start analyzing what the problem is, and you look at what you're doing. And if you can learn to see that what you're doing is strange, so much the better. Because then you're more likely to try other alternatives to see what's un-strange. When the mind really settles in the body, everything seems right, there's a very great sense of normalcy. When things finally do settle down, there's a sense that this is where everything belongs. Which means that the mind when it's worried and thinking about things is not quite normal, but it can use its abnormal things—in other words, use its powers of analysis—to get things back to normal. That's what they're useful for.

So the analytical mind is not always a bad thing. It's actually necessary for the practice. It's just that you have to learn how to analyze when it's good to use it, and when it's good to put it aside. Once things have settled down, all you have to do is try to maintain them. That's a point where too much analysis can get in the

way. So once the analytical mind understands the principle of time and place, and gets a sense of what's worth analyzing and what's not, then it's a real ally in the practice.