

INTRODUCTION

Lost in Thought

THE HUMAN MIND is a wonderful asset, capable of composing poetry, mapping DNA sequences, contemplating causality, developing the theory of relativity, and putting a human on the moon.

While we might not all have the intellectual aptitude of an Einstein, we each possess a resilient mind that can observe, communicate, investigate, problem-solve, and plan. Our minds can quickly process complicated information that we can consciously use to shape how we experience our lives.

Thinking is certainly useful, but the untrained mind may tend toward repeating distressing patterns. Many people suffer from chronic comparing, endless worrying, seductive fantasizing, or relentless planning. People can even develop anxiety through countless hours obsessing about the past or imaginative rehearsals of how they might respond to encounters in the future.

The Buddha declared, “I do not see even one other thing that, when untamed, unguarded, unprotected, and unrestrained, leads to such great harm as the mind. The mind, when untamed, unguarded, unprotected, and unrestrained, leads to great harm.”

The good news is that we can purposely choose to train our minds to let go of unskillful thought habits. As the Buddha concluded, “I

do not see even one other thing that, when tamed, guarded, protected, and restrained, leads to such great good as the mind. The mind, when tamed, guarded, protected, and restrained, leads to great good.”¹

In meditation retreats, classes, and study groups, I have taught the sequence outlined in this book as a methodical process for removing distracting thoughts. This practice is designed to dispel thoughts that divert meditators from maintaining focus on their meditation objects or present experiences. These strategies can augment a wide range of meditation practices and can be combined with practices of mindfulness, loving-kindness and compassion, concentration, and insight.

The training begins by recognizing that a thought is just that—a thought, a creation of our own minds. From this recognition, we distinguish what is skillful and unskillful, and then progress through a traditional training sequence in which we learn (1) to replace unwanted thoughts, (2) to examine the risks of fueling habitual patterns, (3) to withdraw attention from toxic conditions, (4) to investigate causes, and (5) to exert dedicated resolve.

When applied in meditation, these strategies can strengthen our mental skills, lighten our psychological load, enhance our joy, increase stability of the mind, and lead us to life-changing insights. These ancient techniques are also relevant to everyday life. By understanding how the mind works, you can strengthen focused attention, clear away trivial distractions, organize your priorities, and reduce the destructive forces of craving, aversion, and delusion.

This book will help you unlock the incredible capacities of your mind to think clearly, reflect deeply, discern what is real, and pay attention to what is actually happening in your life. Real-life examples from meditation students who have worked with this training sequence demonstrate the relevance and value of each step. A range of pragmatic exercises will help you apply the lessons both on the cushion and in daily activities. By working with this training, you

can develop skills to recognize the nature of your own mind and abandon unwholesome thought patterns.

These time-tested methods for overcoming distractions are needed now more than ever. The great twentieth-century Thai forest master, Ajahn Buddhadasa, was once asked how he would describe the state of the world today. He replied, “Lost in thought!” People spend an enormous portion of their lives dwelling in the stories they fabricate and exist largely disconnected from what is actually occurring in the present moment.

USEFUL BOTH IN MEDITATION AND DAILY ACTIVITIES

This is a book for meditators—both beginners who struggle to tame a restless mind and advanced meditators who strive to deepen their concentration and insight. The techniques presented here can be employed both on and off the meditation cushion and can support both spiritual and worldly success.

It is a sequential training system. I recommend that you develop your skills systematically, chapter by chapter. Get comfortable applying one strategy before moving on to the next. Once you have gained some experience in working with this system for removing distracting thoughts, you can bypass the sequential order and apply whichever tool will be most effective in the given situation.

Whether you are an experienced meditator or a beginner trying to develop mindfulness, you probably know the pain of wrestling with an unruly, distracted mind. Before you can experience the extraordinary joy of a settled and concentrated mind, you must learn how to dispel distractions and overcome restlessness. Many kinds of disruptive thoughts can obstruct your concentration in meditation. In ordinary life these same distractions can lead to anxiety, insomnia, arrogance, procrastination, apathy, worry, and depression, while negatively impacting relationships, productivity, and your ease of mind.

As you learn to neutralize distraction and settle the mind, be assured that Buddhism does not reject rational or reflective mental activities—we need the ability to think clearly and function intelligently in this world. Critical thinking is an asset on a spiritual path. But too often restlessness prevents us from effectively using our minds, and pervasive thoughts reinforce habits we might be happier without.

WHAT IS YOUR MIND DOING?

You use your mind in a wide variety of ways every day. You might wake up feeling a bit worried about getting things done today, let your mind wander aimlessly during a morning shower, entertain fantasies through breakfast, apply the mind to solve problems at work, judge the performance of colleagues, contemplate philosophical questions, compose emails and letters, design playful games for your children, send a friend an encouraging message, accumulate knowledge through reading, and then relax into dreams at night.

You might notice that as you sit in meditation, your mind may habitually wander away from your meditation practice and become caught up in worries or plans. Thoughts can take many entertaining forms. They can conjure up vivid stories and create a sense of self-orientation that organizes our perspectives on the world. Thoughts stimulate emotions, lead to actions, attribute meaning to events.

If you find that you are stuck in a mental rut, you can use your mind to investigate your thinking—in other words, become mindful of your mental activities.

Thoughts can be challenging objects for meditation because they occur in such rapid succession. The Buddha said, “I do not see even one other thing that changes so quickly as the mind. It is not easy to give a simile for how quickly the mind changes.”²

Countless thoughts float through our minds every day.

Impressions are woven into an intricate and seemingly inscrutable network of associations that shape how we view the world. While most thoughts zip past unnoticed, others reinforce perspectives that define our sense of self. If we think about a situation long enough, it is likely that—even without direct personal knowledge—we will develop beliefs based solely on the content of our repetitive thoughts. When meditators look closely at their minds, we are often aghast to discover how frequently thoughts reflect an obviously distorted perception of reality.

NO PLACE TO STAND

To see beyond habitual thoughts and experience their emptiness, we must be familiar with the workings of the mind. Then, when the mind is not besieged by the compulsive fabrication of self-stories, we enjoy both calm serenity and profound freedom in life. The skillful removal of distracting thoughts will not only strengthen concentration, but it also is profoundly liberating. Freed from identification with thoughts, the mind may open to a quality of knowing beyond the realm of discursive, restless habits. As the fetter of restlessness weakens, profoundly freeing insights become available.

We learn to meet life intimately, experience feelings fully, and think clearly—all without taking experiences to be *I* and *mine*. There is an interesting term found in the Pāli discourses—*atammayatā*. It means “non-identification, non-fashioning, not constructing, not made of that.” *Atammayatā* is the experience of not identifying with anything. It describes a rather advanced state of clarity in which we are not constructing self out of sensory experiences.

Not only has attachment to sensory experiences and personal identities ceased, but even attachment to subtle meditative attainments such as tranquility, equanimity, and insight knowledge has also ended. Delusions are not fabricated; personal opinions are not imposed upon perceptions. *Atammayatā* is a powerful state in

which habitual defilements are at rest, and the trajectory of one's path is inclined toward liberation.

This experience of non-identification provides a clear lens through which we can more clearly comprehend the world of experience. From the perspective of *atammayatā*, whatever happens in the sensory field will be recognized as conditioned processes, without concocting a place for the self to stand.

Most meditators struggle just to let thoughts go, only to find themselves drawn right back into their stories. When we believe thoughts to be true, we may become entangled in the stories they tell, and assume we *are* those distorted internal narratives.

The danger of allowing our thoughts to control us is illustrated in a line from the Pāli Canon in which a lazy meditator is warned, “You are eaten by your thoughts.”³ When consumed by our thoughts, we are unable to open to the liberating potential of the Buddhist path and the transformative insights into non-identification and emptiness.

While non-identification may sound like an appealing, fascinating, and far-off spiritual experience, it is achievable! To free ourselves from overwhelming thoughts, we can examine the conditioned patterns of mind that obscure the recognition that a thought is nothing more than a mental object being known by the mind.

TRAINING YOUR MIND

In this book you will learn to experience thoughts not as distracting impressions or incessant mental conversations that narrate your life story, but as discrete mental events (or states) that arise and pass away. At first it might seem impossible, especially for novice meditators, to distinguish a mental state from the content of a thought. As mindfulness gains momentum, however, the content of thoughts will naturally seem less enthralling.

You will notice the interplay between thoughts and physical

sensations and watch as mental states and emotions affect perception. Both in your daily life and in your meditation practice, you will gradually recognize the patterns that influence your reactions. You will not only become mindful of your thoughts, but you will also discover how you relate to them, develop the skills to loosen the grip of unskillful thought patterns, and free your mind.

If you have a sincere interest in exploring your mind, and follow along with the training sequence outlined in this book, you will learn a great deal about how your mind can either obstruct or support your spiritual path. The skills you learn will improve the clarity of daily decisions and ordinary activities, but the deeper purpose for training the mind is to see the emptiness of the thinking process, and to cultivate the stability that supports liberating insight.

Neuroscientists have confirmed that the structure and function of the brain changes in response to experience. It's encouraging to know that modern science agrees that our minds are pliable and can be transformed through training. Meditation not only calms the mind, but with diligent practice, it develops mental flexibility, malleability, and clarity. As the Buddha described, one's "mind becomes malleable, wieldy, and luminous, pliant and properly concentrated for the destruction of the taints."⁴



Join an Online Course to Support Your Practice

Readers may wish to supplement this book with Shaila Catherine's online course: *Beyond Distraction: Practical Strategies to Free the Mind*.

For information about her online Dhamma classroom, visit:

Bodhi Courses

www.bodhicourses.org

By gradually freeing your mind from deluded thinking patterns and the fetter of restlessness, you may experience the deep rest of tranquil states and open the door to the liberating insight of emptiness that is at the heart of the Buddhist path of awakening.

THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS BOOK

This book is inspired by two ancient teachings found in the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*: the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta: Two Kinds of Thought, and the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta: The Removal of Distracting Thoughts.⁵ These teachings present a sequence of practical strategies for removing obstructive mental patterns that can be applied in both meditation and daily life situations.

The Buddha tells us that before his enlightenment, he sometimes found his mind preoccupied by thoughts connected with sensual desire, ill will, and harming. He was not, however, daunted by distracting thoughts. He figured out how to deal with thoughts skillfully and developed a step-by-step approach to calm the restless mind. The Buddha's pragmatic instructions inform this little book. They have guided generations of meditators and have the potential to radically transform how you use your own mind.

You do not need to live enslaved by habitual thought patterns. I encourage you to take up the challenge and free yourself from distracting thoughts. Work with the many exercises offered in this book. Learn about your own mind and develop the capacity to think what you want to think. In the moment you recognize that a thought is just a thought, you will find yourself on the path to a life of remarkable freedom.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

The mind can be a potent tool, used to guide extraordinary achievements, inspire good works, and incline you toward spiritual

realization. But it can also produce thoughts that lead to suffering. For many people, thoughts run rampant and seem to oppress or control their lives. You can learn to overcome habitual modes of thinking to support worldly success, deeper concentration, and insights into emptiness that characterize a liberating spiritual path.