

# Introduction to Mindfulness (20 of 25) Knowing without Thinking

February 9, 2024

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** friendly, respect, free rein, hiking, identifying, thought-fulness, commentary, questioning, simple, quiet, boats, river, menu, showboat, war boat, raft, centered, present, discursive, storytelling, absence, reactivity, sensations

**Gil Fronsdal**

Hello. This is the fifth talk on mindfulness of thinking. One of the benefits I've received from my meditation practice, especially from mindfulness practice, is that I have a friendly relationship with my thinking. My thinking and I get along just fine. I often know what I'm thinking about. If it doesn't seem to be important, valuable, or beneficial, it's relatively easy for me to change how I think.

It's easier to be friends with my thinking because I'm not oppressed by my thoughts. They're not forcing themselves on me; I don't live under their weight. I respect them and give time for my thoughts.

Sometimes when I exercise or go for walks in the hills, I give my thoughts free reign and just completely let them think whatever they want to think. This is different from what I do in meditation. Then I'm just sitting and being present. That full presence to experience means I'm not traveling along with the thoughts and being the thoughts.

When I give freedom to thinking – when I exercise or when I go for hikes – it's fascinating because it shows me what's going on for me and what I'm really concerned about. Or it shows me a deeper place of unfolding that might be going on as I'm thinking about or reflecting on something. I take time to give unfettered freedom to my thinking to do as it wishes. Then I practice with that, whatever it might be, or I try to become wise about the topic if that's necessary.

At other times I don't give freedom to my thinking, not because I'm averse to thinking, but because there's a better game in town. There are more interesting things to do than to be thinking a lot. It's more interesting to be centered in the present moment and aware of what's happening as things unfold.

Some people consider thinking to be awareness. They confuse mindfulness with thought-fulness. They give attention to tracking and thinking about what's happening as it is happening. They might engage in verbal commentary and recognition, or in recognition using images.

This can certainly be valuable, but we might be limiting ourselves from a deeper satisfaction when we are centered in the head, in the usual place where discursive thoughts and reactivity to the world happen, or in the usual place where fear arises.

Instead, we can be centered in a deeper source of knowing which is quiet and peaceful. It can feel like it's knowing without thoughts. Or maybe it's knowing that is accompanied by very simple thoughts, such as thoughts of recognition or knowing, or thoughts that have questions.

For example, when I feel an ache in some place in my body, I can have a very simple thought, "What is this? Let's bring attention to it." What would it be like to be aware of it in a way that's close and intimate? Or what would it be like to observe it instead from a distance? This process can be a very simple kind of questioning or contemplating that comes from a place that's deep within us. It is a place that feels more at home within us than the place where reactivity comes from.

An advantage of looking within is that we learn not to identify with our thoughts or *be* our thinking. For many people, who they think they are is inseparable from their thoughts. If they weren't thinking, they would feel they didn't exist. But actually we can exist brilliantly without being centered in our thoughts and thinking.

Part of mindfulness of thinking is not only being mindful of thinking itself but also being mindful of the absence of thinking. That can happen when the thinking mind (the discursive or the storytelling mind) gets really quiet. When the mind that goes on and on – that loops and spins around – gets really quiet, you can feel the quiet, the silence in that part of the mind. There still might be some rudimentary thoughts of recognition or questioning such as "What is this? How should I be with this?" But those thoughts are very gentle. There's a quieting of mind.

What does that quiet mind feel like? What is it that's not thinking? What is the awareness which arises that is not centered on thinking? This is where mindfulness of the body and sensations is so helpful because the sensations in and of themselves are not a thought. They belong to a deeper process of feeling, sensing, and knowing that is not centered in thinking. Part of mindfulness of thinking is being aware of that which is not thinking.

When we come to the end of a thought, what is there before the next thought arises? I'll ask you a question. I wonder how you would answer this question if you didn't use words or thoughts to explain, describe, or answer it. The question is, "Who are you?" Who are you if you don't use thoughts to answer the question?

There might be many responses to this. But sometimes we realize that there is a different way of being alive if we don't use the usual concepts or ideas – such as "I'm this kind of person" – as the answer. If that drops away, how do we experience ourselves? How we experience life? We do so in a fuller, somatic, experiential way that is not always through the filter of thoughts.

I liken this to no longer studying the menu but actually eating the food. If we're always living in the menu, the instruction manual, or the screenplay, then we're not really living our lives. Spending too much time living in our thoughts is like reading the menu.

We can learn how to be mindful of thinking in such a way that we become free from being stuck in thoughts. We become free from identifying ourselves strongly with what thinking says to us. We learn to be very respectful of thoughts and become friends of our thinking. We don't have to be opposed to our thinking but we're not caught in its web.

I'll end with a comparison that I like to use when I teach mindfulness of thinking. Imagine that you've gone for a nice walk. It's a nice day and you're walking in a park. It is a safe and comfortable place. You stop by the river and sit leaning against a tree with beautiful shade. It's a very peaceful and pastoral place and you're very content. You have a nice little snack, maybe lunch, and you're sitting there enjoying the water flowing along. You are almost pulled into the endless streaming of water. It keeps you feeling very relaxed, just watching the water flow, with gentle little waves in the river coming and going. It's nice to be alive and present. The hike has been good. You feel content here.

Then lo and behold, coming down the river is a showboat with music, dancing, games, a casino, great food, and attractive people. The next thing you know, you've been on that boat for a few days, and you wake up and wonder, "Wait, how did I get here? I was having such a nice contented time on the riverbank, and how did this happen?"

Well, you get off the boat and finally make your way back up to where the tree is, and once again you're there very content and happy, watching the river. Nothing is needed – no one to be, no one to become, nothing to get, nothing to understand – just there. Then down comes another boat. This time it's a war boat fighting the battle, fighting the good war. And you see it, but the next thing you know, you're on the boat for hours, fighting the war. You don't even know what war you're fighting, but you're there manning the guns and directing the show. Then you come to and think, "Wait a minute, what am I doing? How did I get here? What's going on?"

You get off the war boat, come back up to your tree and sit there. Next thing you know there's a decrepit old raft that's barely alive, barely floating. It's just limping along, floating down the river half-drowned. It seems so poor

and pathetic, and you feel sorry for it. As soon as you feel sorry for it, you find yourself some hours later, somehow managing to sit on top of the raft and navigate down the river, and you wonder, "How did I get on this raft?"

Then you make your way back to the tree. When the next boat comes down the river, you lean against the tree, take a deep breath, relax, and just watch it pass by. Other boats come; you watch them go past. You don't have to get on.

This is an analogy for thinking. All kinds of thoughts can come along, all kinds of boats. Do you get on the boat and don't even know you're on it, waging the good war, having the great fantasy, maybe feeling very sorry for yourself in some way? All those things might be needed sometimes in life, but chances are they're not needed as much as all the boats we get on.

Mindfulness is teaching us to stay present on the solid, safe shore and just watch the stream, the flow of life, in a freeing way without getting on the boats.

Thank you. I hope this week on thinking has been useful. I look forward to coming back in a week.