

# Introduction to Mindfulness (19 of 25) Knowing Thoughts Simply

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We'll continue with the fourth talk on mindfulness of thinking.

Thinking is an important part of being a human being, and it's best not to be in an antagonistic relationship with it. However, I know that for many people, their thinking is often a challenge. They can get pulled into thoughts they would rather not have.

What keeps thoughts going is the interest that something in our system has in them – attachments to certain things, resistance, or being bothered by things. We're in a relationship with our thoughts that is feeding them and keeping them going.

In meditation, one thing we can learn is that if we are aware of thoughts directly and fully without feeding them, sometimes they go away really quickly. When they do mindfulness, sometimes people get confused by how quickly their thoughts disappear if they just note them, see them, and recognize them. This is because when the attention itself is not reactive, then we're not in a relationship that's actively giving the food of attention to the thoughts.

If we really dislike our thoughts and are really troubled by them, and we don't want to be involved in them, all that attention of not wanting and being aversive to them is actually fueling the thoughts more. It is a kind of attention that reinforces thoughts to continue. Maybe the particular content of the thoughts is not being reinforced, but the tendency of thinking is getting reinforced.

So sooner or later it's very valuable to learn the art of not being bothered by or troubled by our thoughts. Even with the most ugly thoughts a person can have, just step back and know them from a place that's not entangled or caught in them. For some people, that equanimity and disengagement from thoughts while we see them is supported by simple mental noting and labeling.

Some people only use this technique of labeling for their thinking because it helps them to acknowledge, step away, and not be entangled in thinking. But to do that we have to have some sense of what it's like to know without being attached – without leaning into, pulling away, or being reactive to thinking.

If you're using a word in the mind – like your voice says, “thinking,” “remembering,” or “planning” – one thing that supports that is to listen to how that is being said in the mind. You might see that you're not so equanimous about it after all, through the tone of voice or the strength with which you're saying it. If you don't like it, maybe you're aversive to it, the inner voice might say, “Planning!” with a little bit of aversion in the voice. Or if you're having some wonderful fantasy and you really enjoy it, maybe the way you say the mental note has a sense of indulging or enjoying. You might say, “Oh, fantasy! Oh, that's so good!”

We can find out what relationship we have with thinking, and how to know without being in an active relationship with it. We just let it be, just see it for what it is. Of course, this is not always easy, but you can always be mindful of this even when you're not doing it this way. If you're being mindful of it, you simply recognize how it actually is.

One label or phrase that can be helpful for some of us sometimes is to say, "This is how it is now." Whatever is happening, recognize, "Oh, this is how it is now. It's just this – how it is now." Whatever it might be – if you're distracted, if you're caught up in your thoughts, if you're spinning, if you're reactive – "Oh, so this is how it is now."

The movement of "This is how it is now" is meant to be a way of relaxing, stepping back, opening up, and acknowledging, "Oh, this is how it is," without being for or against it. It is just honest recognition. We can always do it: "Oh, this is how it is now." Hopefully, the very moment we recognize how it actually is for us, that understanding protects us a little bit from the idea that meditation is not going well and we're failing.

One of the great labels that I've used for myself when everything was very complicated is, "Oh, this is chaos, chaos right now." That creates a great big space for the whole catastrophe, but in a mindful way – chaos. Then as I stay present for that, I get closer and I see, "Oh, there's a lot of churning in the chest, there's a lot of fast thoughts." Then I get closer to knowing something a little more particular.

As we do this with thinking, "Oh, this is planning, this is fantasy. Okay." Then there's space to see it better. One of the things we can see is the glue between us and the thinking – the gravitational pull and the stickiness that's there. That is valuable to know too. "Oh, look, those thoughts are sticky," or, "I'm sticky with it, I'm attached to it, I'm leaning into them, there seems to be a very strong bond between the thoughts of me, the thoughts in the mind. No wonder I can't let go because I can feel that."

This is not just an idea or knowing you're attached. It means we *feel* the sensations of stickiness, or the strong magnetic pull, or even the sense of, "Oh, we're really stuck together here now." Rather than being upset with that, we say, "Oh, look at that, this is stickiness, this is the glue that keeps the thoughts going." Now you're seeing a different part of the experience – "Oh, this is how it is, this is how it is."

I want to repeat what I said at the beginning of the guided meditation, for those of you who might not have heard it. All the instructions we give in mindfulness meditation might seem like a lot to remember, a lot to do, and very complicated. But it's meant to be simple. What I'm trying to do in this series of instructions is to describe the territory of your inner experience so you will know that it's there, it is happening, how to recognize it, and how to be mindful of what you're recognizing.

When you can recognize what's happening, it's no longer just one big buzzing, confused sense of suffering or challenge. You will be able to start seeing, "Oh, in fact, there are different parts of it." I'd like to propose the simile of a park. Maybe you can approach your inner life as a nature park, a natural preserve, which in some ways, we are. You've never been in this park before. A nature guide brings you in for the first time. They take you around and show you all the parts of the park – the paths, the groves of trees, and the ponds. You can't exactly remember everything at that moment, but when you go in by yourself later, you can remember, "Oh, yeah, this is where I am now. I'm by the pond." Or, "This is by the grove; this is by the meadow; this is where the path goes." You feel confident that you know the way out because you've been shown all the places in it.

That's what I'm trying to do here: to show you the territory of your inner park as you end up in it. Then when you come to the different places, you will recognize, "Oh, this is how it is now. This is how it is here." With that recognition, opening, and centering on the experience, maybe something inside of you can relax. Something is seen, something is known, something is not struggled with. It's just recognized instead of struggling. "Ah, this is fear. Ah, this is my irritation. Ah, this is how it is now." Naming it and seeing it, "I see you."

It is the same way with thinking. Thinking is made up of many parts. There is a whole part of the park that has different paths, and different pieces that come together to make the whole. At different times you might notice "These are thoughts. I am thinking in words." Or, "These are images. I am thinking in images. These are fast thoughts. These are slow thoughts. These are active thoughts. Now my thoughts seem angry. Now they're quiet and calm. Now they're harsh. Now they're this way. Now they're connected to grief. Now they're connected to enthusiasm and wonderful anticipation. This is what the emotion is like. This is the source of what I am thinking."

This is not analysis, thinking, or searching to understand. Over time, as you get more and more familiar with the inner park, you can acknowledge, "Oh, this is what's happening now. Now I see the parts. This is what's

happening." Finally, as a way of not making it complicated – as a protection from that – I suggest that people use breathing as a default. Just come back to the breathing.

If you spend some time recognizing thinking and the parts of thinking, you might use the standard of the three-breath journey with everything. For about three breaths, recognize your thinking. Maybe note, "Thinking." Then open to it, be present, and breathe with the experience of thinking for three breaths. Then return to the breathing. If the breath feels like there's a lot of tension in the body, notice, "Oh, tension." just be with that for three breaths. Then go back to the breathing for however long it works so that you don't get pulled into or entangled with what you know. It's very easy to get caught in that entanglement with things without knowing you are. So just be with thinking for a short time, three breaths, and then come back to the breathing.

Everything is respected carefully and well, but you don't have to spend a lot of time with it. You might come back to your breathing for a while for three breaths. Your thinking might still be prominent, so you might know it again. And then back to breathing. Calmly go back to the breathing, centering. Then maybe go back to your thoughts, "Thinking. This is how it is."

As you go through your day today and you notice that you're thinking (which I hope you do now – you're a little more familiar with the territory and the way), experiment again with how simply you can know your thinking. As you know it, what is your relationship to it? Is it simple or are you leaning into it or bothered by it? If you are, just say, "Oh, this is how it is now." So thank you very much.