

# **Dharmette and Q&A: Investigating Thinking**

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Kim Allen

So our theme today has been around the knowing of thought – knowing that as an experience. Thinking is a natural function of the mind. It's not automatically a hindrance to have thoughts coming through the mind – that's what it does. That's what it's supposed to do. And in the end, you know, waking up doesn't have a lot to do with thinking, thinking about things. But nonetheless, this natural function of the mind can be made part of the path. So instead of fighting with thinking, if that's our habitual way, getting to know it. And of course, if we're fighting with thinking, probably somewhere underneath, we're actually creating the thoughts, right? If they keep coming, there's actually something there we're buying into and going with. And then we think we have to fight it in order to stop that. But we can go down to the level of not buying into the thinking so much.

So I want to just talk about – this is a huge topic – the investigation of thought. But I wanted to just mention some dimensions of it that can come in in our practice. And you can maybe see which ones, one or ones, kind of catch your attention. Because I often think that when we hear things about practice, the ones that we think, "Ooh, that sounds interesting," that might be useful for us at this time in our practice." And similarly, the ones where we think, "Oh, forget it. That sounds horrible," that might be useful for us too." So, you can see.

So, one thing about thinking is that there are many different layers of thought. And sometimes we, thinking is presented as one thing. And we know it as just one experience – that voice in the head that talks, or all those images in our mind. Or maybe we realize that emotions and thoughts are very similar. And so it's all about emotions: that's what the thinking mind is.

But there's so much more to it than the top layer. There are very subtle little thoughts that, for example, direct our practice. We sit down and have the thought, "Okay, let's do breath meditation." That's a nice refined thought, actually. And even maybe we don't even have those words – we just sit down and we know what we're going to incline the mind toward – that's a subtle kind of thought in a certain way. Intentions are subtle thoughts. We are intending to be present during the conversation. We're intending to listen carefully. Or someone is starting to get irritated with us and our mind hones in and intends, "Oh, I'm not going to get sucked into this. I'm going to stay kind." Those intentions are thoughts, aren't they? A form of thought.

So there's a lot of different kinds of thought. Even in *jhāna* there is thought, not *vitakka* and *vicāra* after the first *jhāna*. But there are little ways in which the mind knows what it's doing. It inclines toward the next *jhāna* – kind of a thought. It's an intention, at least. Right intention is sometimes called “right thought,” second step of the path. So, starting to discern, "Oh, there's these activities of the cognitive mind." If we call them all “thought,” suddenly we have a very rich landscape. And it's interesting to see how that looks for us.

And so then we can start to also differentiate a little bit, a la *Majjhima Nikāya* 19: which kinds of thought are helpful? And which kinds of thought are not so helpful? Which kinds of thought are sticky? Which ones are not as sticky? So there are beneficial thoughts: thoughts of loving kindness. The whole loving kindness meditation where you sit there and say, "May I be happy and may I be peaceful. May you be." Aren't these thoughts? Yeah, these are directed thoughts that we're deliberately creating, and they're helpful. Or the impression of radiating – also an intention.

And some thoughts are not helpful. Like the ones that chatter at us all day, "Oh, you're so stupid. You shouldn't have done that. Why did you do it that way?" Blah blah blah. Or these revengeful thoughts, "I'm going to figure out how to make. I'm going to figure out that other person's mind and manipulate it." You know, not very helpful to spend our energy on that kind of thing.

So we start to see. And we can see that either through just understanding what the thought is about and then knowing these six categories from MN 19. But more useful, we can see what it does in our own mind. We may start to have the insight that comes, that's written in *Majjhima Nikāya* 19 of, “whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of their mind.” If you spend all day practicing angry thoughts, are you not unhappy in the evening? Yeah.

So, and, you know, in any given situation, we might say, "Well, I'm at work. I have to do certain things with my mind." There's often a choice there. You know, are we just getting through these emails because we have to get it to our boss and we're afraid of the consequences if we don't get it all done in the next hour? Or can we see it as, "I'm being useful on this project. You know, I have information that other people on my team need and I'm going to write these emails to tell them what they need to know and it's helping the flow of my work project"—a whole different attitude about the same action. And it can really help in terms of how exhausted we feel, how resentful we are about doing it, how egotistical we are about how great we are, how bad we are, you know, all that.

So there's different ways, and it's just a training. It's just noticing how we're applying the mind. And if we have to just surrender, and there's no way to do a certain activity or a job without our mind getting riled up, we've tried and tried, maybe we need a different job. So.

And then we can also include processes. We start to include things about the process of thinking. For example, maybe this is a transition about content and the process, but which thoughts do we believe? I mean, we have thoughts all day. Some of them we believe and some of them we don't believe quite so strongly. What does it feel like to believe a thought, and is there any choice about that? You know, the thought comes in about, "You didn't need to do it that way." Do we immediately say, "Oh, that's right. I'm going to make a list. I'm going to write this down so I don't ever do it that way again." Or do we say, "Oh, thanks for your opinion." That's a nice thought. “Now go on.” That's not such a nice thought. But

you know, we don't have to believe everything that comes into our mind. Goodness knows.

So there is actually a choice there some of the time. So starting to exercise that choice and feeling what it is to believe thoughts. Because there are also healthy thoughts that come in, like, "This is not really about you," for example. It's nice to believe that thought. Believe that one. But we might dismiss it: "Yes, it is. It is about me. You're wrong." So, you know, know which thoughts to believe, and which ones not to believe. Which are more Dharma-oriented? This is a lot of fun to look at this dimension.

And then there's the whole relation between emotions and thoughts. They're actually less different than we think. The Buddha didn't really differentiate them that much. I mean, he did sometimes. But to make a whole class of things called "emotions" that are, in and of themselves, a contained set – he didn't really do actually. He said, emotion and thought, it's all stuff in the mind, all these mental processes. And we can see that what we call anger or what we call fear is often related to a bunch of associated thoughts about "me," and about views, and about what's true, and the way the world is, and about what that other person is doing. There's all these thoughts that go with our emotions and all these emotions that go with our thoughts. And it's kind of the feedback loop. So, starting to see that as a process is really helpful, really liberating,. It can be, at least – to just know that those are related.

Sometimes we think we're a very logical and analytical and thoughtful person about this –" I've figured this out and this is how it is. These are the facts." But underneath, all of that careful logic was because we're terrified if this isn't true. You know, we're terrified if we don't have an understanding of this in a logical way. So there's a fear driving logic sometimes. Or thoughts about planning are often driven by anxiety. So noticing those relationships can be very helpful.

And then once we start getting more into the process, then it opens up the whole world of the body sensations that are associated with thought. Thought is not just

in the head (if you believe that's where thought happens), or in the heart, or whatever. Thought is of the whole body experience. And there's all these tensions that go down into the core area. There's a tightness in the head associated with thinking. There are whole ways that we hold our body associated with thought. Like if you're in a tense conversation with someone, you might kind of lean over the counter while you're talking with them. And if you stop and notice what your body is doing, it's like, "Why am I like on my tiptoes leaning across the counter while I'm talking?" That's all the emotion and thought going with it, right? But it's turned into the posture of your body. So noticing that, how relaxed are you? Are you in an open or a closed posture? Do you have your arms folded across your chest? These are all related things.

And then we can get more subtle. Like what is the internal body experience? Even if we look relatively relaxed on the outside, there might be a knot in our stomach, there might be friction in the body-mind system associated with certain kinds of thought. My teacher calls thoughts about the self "wind drag," which is kind of true. You know, when the mind would just normally be flowing along, but there's this wind drag associated with "me" being a weight on my thoughts.

And so we can start to see how exhausting the *papañca* kind of thinking is. *Papañca* is the discursive thought that goes on and on, just feeding on itself, not really related to the present moment. And that tends to be related to craving and conceit and views, according to the suttas. So we can start to see that and feel the exhaustion in the body and the mind that were alluded to in the quote I read, right? "Even with excessive thinking, the body becomes tired." Isn't it interesting that that's the first thing he says? He says, "With excessive thinking, my body might become tired. And when my body is tired, the mind is strained." I like that sequence. So looking in the body can be a great way to relate to thought.

But we can also look in the mind. This is something I talked about several of these half days ago. I talked about whether we could see the shape of our thoughts in meditation. And this is very subtle. You may or may not. You might say, "What? That doesn't make any sense." And that's fine. But there can be a sort

of a shape or a structure to thoughts, especially when we're in the kind of sky awareness and we just have a thought come in. It can look like a little ripple in the fabric of the mind somehow.( I'm mixing my metaphors now.) So maybe the mind is then like a fabric that pervades everywhere, and there are little lumps in, or twists, or pleats that are associated with certain kinds of thought. I find this a very interesting way to rest with thought.

And then in the realm of like deep Dharma, we have conditions for the arising and cessation of thought. How does thought arise? I mean sometimes it's just random. I don't know if random is – maybe that's too strong. It's always conditioned in some way. But if you're just sitting there peacefully in meditation and the thought of the birthday party that you went to when you were 13 comes into your mind, I don't know where that comes from. It's just liberated from the stuff of the mind and heart.

But still, there's a fascinating exploration as to how certain things are conditioned, like certain body sensations. Pain, in particular, conditions particular thoughts. Emotions condition particular thoughts. But also, the awareness that we have of thought can sometimes make it disappear. You know, people say, “I'm trying to look at my thoughts, but whenever I'm aware of them they vanish.” It's like, yeah, that's right. There's a whole layer of thought that actually can't stand up to awareness. This is very powerful to imagine. It's not the whole of thought, but there is a whole category of thought that vanishes instantly upon being seen with right mindfulness. This is really nice to know. So if you're looking at thought and they're vanishing, great. Awareness is one of the conditions for the cessation of thought, actually. Right mindfulness is, at least.

But there are other conditions for the cessation of thought. And it's interesting to discover those. So knowing how thought comes and goes is very empowering and useful. And at some point – that was a lot, right? I think I gave you 10 or 12 things you can look at around thought. You can spend your whole life figuring all that out.

So there's also just letting go. There's also just letting go of thought. Thinking is not really where it's at in meditation, although it is good to know something about the thinking mind. Otherwise you're just subject to it. And when you know enough you can just turn away from it. You don't have to be that loyal to thinking. Loyalty to thought is not really necessary.

So then we can start to realize what I pointed to in the second meditation which is, “Oh, there's something that knows thought that is not thought.” Thought is a kind of knowing. That's relevant, and it's useful that we know certain things through thought. But there are other dimensions of knowing or awareness that are not really cognitive. This is a very important discovery. The body itself knows things in a way. And then there's this kind of broad awareness that knows even the arising and passing of thought. And yet it's so clear that there's a knowing there. But what is it? Some part of the mind can know another part of the mind. You can even know the knowing of the mind. So this is very interesting to see. And allow yourself to go into new kinds of cognition or knowing that we don't normally use in our regular email, talking, driving kind of day.

So all of this helps us expand our understanding of what the mind is, which leads to greater, greater modes of freedom. I think today I just want you to experience the distinction between knowing the thoughts and knowing what knows the thoughts. Experiencing the knowing of the thoughts. So that, in itself, is an important distinction and a subtle one.

I think I'll stop there because that was kind of a lot. But I'd love to hear any thoughts you have about thoughts, or about the practice today, or any questions. Raise your hand. Yeah, Beverly..

**Q1.**”So since it was our kind of assignment for today, I was noticing thoughts that came up. And they were wholesome except there was a certain point where – I guess it's restlessness – where I become impatient and decide the meditation should be over.”

“Okay.”

“And I think that happens at the half hour mark because I've been meditating for half hour in half hour increments for weeks now. So something in my body or mind at the half hour mark. And then I can – when I get impatient and there'd be a proliferation of thoughts and kind of bodily sensations and restlessness associated with that. I assume it's common. I wouldn't. And it's pretty common in me if I get impatient. So I'm wondering if there's maybe a way to soften that at least in the meditation context.”

“Well, that first thought of, ‘the meditation should be over.’ Do you have a choice about whether you believe that part or not?”

“Well, maybe that's what's happening. Maybe in some level I'm believing it, right? And I'm not saying I actually hear those words. I just think that's what's happening. You know, that's sort of the process.”

“So there must be some thought.”

“Yeah.”

“Like, ‘Oh really? But the bell hasn't rung yet’.

“Well, this is obvious.”

“So we can just say, ‘Thanks for your opinion. But it isn't actually over yet’. I mean, this is all just one approach, right? But. So, not giving quite so much weight to that thought. And you know, you can start to name what's happening. It doesn't mean it's going to prevent the restlessness or the impatience. But those can be noted as, ‘Oh, wow, look at that impatience. Feel that restlessness, its energy in the body.’ And meditation is just different at that moment. Instead of being sitting the way you think meditation should be, now you're sitting with a restless body, and it's still meditation.”

“That's what I was trying to do when I noticed it come up. Because oh well, this is interesting. This is something you can work with.”

“Just be with them.”

“Yeah. I'm sure it is common, as you said. Thank you.”

“That's *the* most common thing. Thank you.”

“Yeah. Rinal.”

**Q2.** “Hi, Kim. Thanks for that. I missed the first half, but I caught the second half and I really enjoyed your summary just now. Thank you. I have a question about



how to work with... So this is quite timely because I've recently started working with thoughts and getting awareness on thoughts. And I've noticed that I see... Like I've noticed that under certain environments I can see life through a certain lens. And it depends on what environment I'm in. I can be in a lovely environment and all my thoughts are lovely, and I can be in a challenging environment and I'll have all these thoughts that go on about – you know, just in the background – maybe not great stuff. And so when a circumstance happens, say we call that circumstance X and I react in a Y, in a way that is... Which I'll call Z. And that way... And that reaction is unhelpful. And I notice I do that a lot.

And I've also noticed that the reason why I think that happens is because all day long there are thoughts going on in the background that are priming me to react in this way when a circumstance arises. But when I try to do meditation, when I try to sit and watch my thoughts, watch the cloud... (Sorry, I'm just going to close a window.) When I sit down to get present to the cloud of stuff that happened when I reacted with Z or when I try to do it in the moment or even retrospectively, that thing you mentioned, the thoughts disappear. There's no thought, there's space. So I struggle to be able to shine light on the thoughts and become very aware of them. And once... And I find that once I become aware of something over and over again, it tends to lose its effect and power. But with certain things, that thing happens where they disappear. And I find that to be a bit of a challenge, a problem for me, because if they disappear, then they'll pop up again under the right circumstances, do their little work. And I'll do it again and again, but I'm just not getting... They disappear when I try to get close to them.”

“Yeah. Yeah. So first of all, this is a really great observation, that there's conditional or situational kinds of thoughts that are associated if you're in a lovely place, then you start saying, ‘Oh, it's so beautiful. I feel grateful today,’ etc. And then if, you know, if you're in a more challenging, stressful situation, then it's all ill-will toward the people and the things and everything. This is very common and great.

And one of the ways to be able to get to that layer of experience in a direct way is to switch from trying to look at the thoughts themselves to being aware of the

feeling tone of the situation. So when we're having nice thoughts about a nice situation, it's because it's pleasant. It's a pleasant situation where we're feeling pleasant experiences in our body or mind or visual field, whatever it is. And then when things are challenging or difficult and the mind is going toward grumbling, it's because it's unpleasant. And so unpleasant experience brings up negative type thoughts. So instead of trying to look at the thoughts, if they're disappearing, try to look at the feeling tone instead, and just rest with the sense of pleasant or unpleasant. And that will take away the fuel. Being aware of that layer, that feeling tone layer, tends to take away the fuel for those kinds of thoughts. So even though you're not seeing them, you are defuelling them. Does that help?"

"Yeah, I'll give that a go. Thank you."

"That's at least one one approach."

"Yeah. Thank you."

"Was there more?"

"No, it just seemed a bit easy. But possibly it's very effective. So I'm sure it is. I'll try it out and give it a go. Thank you very much."

"Try it out. And also one more thing comes to mind now that you're speaking again, as I remember you said that when the thoughts disappear, there's space. That's also a great observation – to be able to see the absence of them. And I know that they do come back because they're strongly conditioned, that kind of thinking. But if you can notice that space, which is pleasant, by the way, you can rest in that space. And that in that also de-nourishes those thoughts from coming back. They probably still will, because it's a strong habit. And so you'll have to maybe have some faith about that. But if you can notice the space when the thoughts vanish when you look at them, that, too, is a good meditation."

"I just asked. So when I'm trying to get to the thought and there's that space, and you talked about it being pleasant, I don't experience that space as pleasant. But that could be because, yes. I wonder if you have any thoughts on that because..."

"So how do you experience it?"

"It just feels blank."

"Okay, maybe neutral then, something like that. Generally, the release of thinking, because thinking always has a little bit of strain associated with it, the release of thought does have a relaxation, at least, with it, always. Like the way, if

the fist is tight and we release it, there's a little bit of relaxation. It doesn't mean it was unpleasant to have our fist gripped. I mean, here I have a little bit of tension holding this mug. And when I put it down and I release the handle, there's a little relaxation in my muscles. I guess that's pleasant. It doesn't mean it was wrong to be gripping the handle. So in the same way, we have these thoughts and then they release, there is a slight – let's call it 'release' associated with that. We don't have to put a feeling tone on it. But noticing that letting go experience, that slight opening, that slight relaxation, that in itself is onward leading. Is that a little bit more refined than saying 'pleasant?'

“Yeah, I'll take that away with me and overlay it to what I'm feeling and see how it slots in. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“Great. Alba had her hand up. Now she has vanished. Okay. Let's see. Anybody else? Julie.”

**Q3.** “Yes, thank you. I heard somebody talking about the disappearing of thinking, the disappearing of thoughts. It was a question posed when somebody had just like a memory lapse and then was trying to pull those thoughts back and was feeling stressed about it, you know – can't remember. And then, the pointing out was that in a way it points to the impermanence, right, one of the three recollections. So, the impermanence of things and that ephemeral nature of thinking. And so for me, it was really helpful to hear that, because I've often glommed on to thoughts and ideas as being very significant and holding a lot of weight. And so to hear that ephemeral nature of thinking and to be okay with that just moving through. And as someone who is in a hereditary line for dementia and Alzheimers, it's also kind of a really good thing to realize I can let it go and not get freaked out about it.”

“Thank you. Yeah, there's nothing less substantial than a thought. It has no weight, no shape. Well, we give them great significance at times, and of course they can have a big impact on others. But just drifting through our mind, yeah, they can be quite lightweight. So that's one thing to notice: which ones are heavy to feel, heavy to us, and which ones feel light, which ones feel sticky, and which ones feel like we could just let them go by. That tells us something about our

habits in relation to our thoughts, and can give us also a sense of empowerment in this realm. Thank you for bringing that up.

Well, I think we're at the end of our time. So, thank you for coming. Why don't we just dedicate the merit. This has been a wonderful period of practice and it's wonderful to share the Dharma with each other and meditate together, even on this screen in our little squares. And so we can wish that what we've done today will flow outward and benefit others, even in ways that we don't see. Maybe ways we do see, but maybe ways we don't. So, may all beings be happy and may all beings be peaceful and may all beings find freedom. May your practice contribute to that. Thank you.