

Hi, everyone. My name is Zac, and I use he and him pronouns. I'm a white thirty-nine-year-old male with long and thinning medium brown hair. Today, I'm wearing a dark gray T-shirt and gray rectangular glasses. Although it's not visible on my camera, I like to share that I'm seated on a gray and black manual wheelchair.

Tonight, I want to talk about mindfulness and thinking. I'd like to preface this talk by acknowledging that thought can work differently for disabled people than it does for non-disabled people. Conditions like neurodivergence, chronic pain, anxiety, and more mean that our brains are wired differently, and our relationship to our thoughts can be different. So I offer this teaching as something for you to consider, but please don't feel badly if it doesn't resonate or work for you. The Buddha said to always try things out for yourself and see if they are supportive and not just to take him at his word.

The inner workings of our mind and our relationship to our thoughts are a complex aspect of our lives. There are two similar quotes from the Buddha on how thoughts affect our being. The first is, "Whatever one thinks and ponders upon will be the inclination of their mind." And the second is, "We are what we think. With our minds we make up the world."

There is a common misconception that the point of meditation involves turning off our thoughts, that true tranquility is found in thoughtlessness. You likely have heard the meditation instruction to let go of your thoughts, perhaps even from me. While you want to avoid getting lost in thinking during meditation, having thoughts arise is a completely natural part of the process. Our goal is to notice the thought and bring ourselves back to our anchor until the next thought inevitably arises. Formal meditation practice helps us to establish a rhythm between thinking and refocusing our attention.

While daily living differs from meditation- We still want to bring awareness to what our mind is doing, how it's affected by our circumstances, and how our mind state affects our mood and feeling tone. Thoughts are not our enemy, even when practicing mindfulness. There is no way that we can remain alive and not have thoughts. We might experience stillness for a moment or two, but thoughts are continually arising within our minds. And this is not a bad thing. It's tied to our survival.

The Buddha himself was a great thinker. All his practices and ideas around how to reduce suffering and live a more wholesome life were not magically manifested, but developed through insight and contemplation.

At the same time, thoughts are major contributors to our suffering. Greed, hatred, and delusion are all cognitive processes. Thoughts can be both our greatest support and our worst detractor. The problem is not so much the thoughts themselves. We can have all kinds of thoughts. Sometimes we can even have quite ugly ones. When we're able to disidentify with our thoughts and not take them personally, it reduces the suffering they can cause. Simply having a thought of greed, hatred, and delusion isn't really the problem. The difficulty is when we get entangled in those thoughts and believe them to be true. Realizing we are not our thoughts is very liberating in itself. When we have disturbing thoughts, we can simply say to ourselves, "Wow, that was an odd one," and move on. One of my teachers likes to say, "This mind has a mind of its own."

Just because a thought arises in our mind doesn't mean that we have to act on it. We can simply just let that thought be. We have veto power over our thoughts. Of course, realizing this will only help some of the time. Other times, we get caught in these thoughts, even when we're aware they aren't true.

Bringing mindfulness to our thoughts can help us to be aware of when and how they are affecting us. Physical pain is often very apparent. When we touch a hot stove, we instinctively withdraw our hand before pain signals even register in our brain. But mental and emotional pain can have a different quality. Sometimes we can be sticking our fingers in a wound for a very long time before we understand how much suffering we are causing ourselves with a thought. Slowing down and paying attention to how a thought feels can help us intentionally stop the harm that they are causing us.

It's very normal to get lost in our thoughts. We often believe that we can think our way out of problems we are facing. This is one of the reasons for repetitive thoughts. We feel if we could consider a problem from every angle, we'll find a solution. Even wholesome thoughts can be unsupportive places to get lost in when we are repeating the thought over and over in our mind. So not only do we want to be mindful of the nature of our thoughts, but we wanna be aware of when we're getting lost in our thoughts.

Gil Fronsdale defines a difference between what he calls *thoughting* and *thinking*. He says *thoughting* is simply when a thought arises in our mind, and this is totally unavoidable. In meditation, teachers often give an instruction to let your thoughts float by like clouds in the sky. When we can do this, the impact of an individual thought is very minor. More often, however, we are drawn into Gil's definition of *thinking*, which is what happens when we seize onto a thought and begin to ruminate on it. An adjacent concept in Buddhism is called *papañca*, when a thought leads to a cascade of free association where one thought jumps into another and another. *Papañca* is often defined as proliferation of thought.

In one of the most well-known texts containing teachings of the Buddha called The Middle Length Discourses or Majjhima Nikaya, he describes two kinds of thoughts that he noticed within himself.

The first category he describes as ones which obstruct wisdom, cause difficulty- and lead away from Nibbana. In this category, he put thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty. When he noticed this category of thoughts within himself and considered the qualities they brought up, they subsided within him.

The other category, he said, were thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty. He said this category of thoughts do not lead to my own affliction or to others' affliction, they aid in wisdom, do not cause difficulty, and lead to Nibbana. He did warn that even when thoughts are wholesome or supportive, that when we spend so much time on that thought that we lose sleep, that that can lead us away from wholesome qualities.

I'd argue that there is also a third kind of thought, which is neither of the two. Thinking about what we want to eat for dinner isn't a thought that adds to or obstructs from wisdom, and yet it's necessary. Similar to wholesome thoughts, we can get caught in this category of thought. For example, if we spend lots of time every day contemplating what we want to eat, that can be a huge waste of energy.

While I do think this teaching oversimplifies how to deal with difficult thoughts, there is value in separating your thoughts into categories of supportive and harmful.

One important quality of mindfulness is to be non-judgmental. This may sound like evaluating all things as equal, but there's a bit more nuance to it than that. Judgment is the near enemy of a wholesome quality called discernment. Discernment guides us in differentiating between what is wholesome and unwholesome without adding judgment that something being unwholesome means that it's bad and that we shouldn't be experiencing it. Non-judgment means we can notice judgment and not label it as wrong, because judgment is natural.

Simply noticing a thought isn't supportive is not judgment. Discernment involves a quality of wise attention. When we go from, "This thought hurts," to, "Why am I like this?" We've struck ourselves with a second arrow. Discernment asks, "For what purpose am I thinking this? For what purpose am I believing this? Is this

thought conducive to joy or suffering?" Judging mind is painful and adverse, while discernment has a quality of compassion.

In the next Middle Length Discourse, Number 20, the Buddha lays out five different ways to deal with distracting thoughts when they arise. These techniques are progressive, meaning you are intended to start with the first one and work your way up to later ones if necessary. However, if you find the later techniques more effective, with the exception of the fifth one, I think it's fine to start with those.

It's also worth noting that it's not always ideal to turn to these techniques. If we're always tamping down on unpleasant thoughts the second they arrive, we're not giving ourselves the ability to examine the thought and why we are thinking it. For example, we don't want to avoid the second that grief appears. These five techniques have been broken down by a modern teacher into the acronym SHIFT.

The S in SHIFT stands for Substitute. In this method, we are substituting our negative thought for something that is more wholesome. The Buddha describes this method by saying, "Just as a skilled carpenter might knock out, remove, and extract a coarse peg by means of a finer one, when a bhikkhu gives attention to what is wholesome, his mind becomes steadied internally." Examples of effective thoughts are gratitude, compassion, and loving kindness. I really like using loving kindness because its repetitive nature helps break out the cycle of cyclical thoughts.

Just like during meditation, substituting our thoughts isn't a one-and-done process. Left unchecked- Our mind will almost definitely return to the difficult thought. After all, difficult thoughts are very appealing. It's a bit like an addiction. Even when we know that they are unhealthy, we cannot stay away from them. That said, any positive thoughts that will help you break out of difficult ones apply here.

If you find yourself still lost in thought after trying to substitute with a more wholesome thought, the next technique is called Harm. In this step, you become aware of the harm that the thought is causing you. It's important to do this with compassion because we don't want to add a second arrow of self-blame for these thoughts. So having some compassion and thinking, "Wow, those thoughts are really painful," is more what we're going for.

If neither of those work, the Buddha suggests finding a way to Ignore the thought. An example of this is finding something else we can do that will break us out of the thought pattern. For example, going on a walk or reading a book

are good options. Ideally, it's a wise distraction. However, I believe that everything in moderation can be useful, so if you're low on spoons and want to ignore a thought, turning on the TV can also be very effective. Although I'd advise against gravitating to the news or other upsetting content.

The fourth level of escalation is something called Fade Out. In this step, we focus on where the thought causes tension or discomfort within our body. After briefly bringing our awareness here, we slowly try and let go of the thought and the hurt that it's causing.

I think of this as being a psychological version of Gate Control Theory. Gate Control Theory is the instinctive response to grab ahold of a part of the body that has been injured and has been scientifically proven to disrupt pain signals.

The Buddha's final suggestion is meant to be a last resort and used sparingly, only if none of the above techniques are working. For the purpose of the SHIFT acronym, this is referred to as Throttle, but I think that somewhat mischaracterizes the nature of it. While there is a firm and strong "no" energy to this, it's not out of anger. Think more like a mother protecting their child who is about to do something that could cause themselves harm.

In the text, this practice is described as "crushing" the thought "with teeth clenched and your tongue pressed against the roof of your mouth". This works for some, but this can be done in a much less violent way using Fierce Self-compassion. Again, we do not want to promote aversion. That not only creates suffering, but it's been shown to be ineffective in dealing with unwanted thoughts. This method is especially helpful when we're having thoughts that could lead us to take unwise action or bring us out of integrity.

Thanks everyone. That's my talk on mindfulness and thinking. I hope you got some tools and insight from it that will help you manage your own thinking.