

WATCHING THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS

GUIDED MEDITATION

You can sit in a comfortable position, because the posture is not really important. What is important is to have your spine erect but relaxed. And you may have your eyes open or closed.

Now just allow the mind to do whatever it likes.

If thoughts are arising, let thoughts arise - thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future...

There is no need to repress thoughts, no need to control thoughts. See how far you can be aware of each thought that arises. You need to have moment-to-moment awareness.

Just know how you relate to each thought that arises. Are you judging them? Are you getting involved with them? Or can you allow them to just arise and pass away?

You have enough space in your mind for every thought to arise. See how far you relate to each thought that arises. Learning to make friends with your thoughts.

Make your own discoveries. Are the thoughts mostly about the past? Are they mostly about the future? Are the thoughts racing one after another? Are they slowing down? Is there space between two thoughts? Do you get involved in some thoughts? Do you judge your thoughts? Make your own discoveries about the different aspects, about the different dimensions, about the structure of your thoughts.

Have moment-to-moment awareness of the way you are relating to each thought that arises.

Now can you do the same in relation to emotions? Can you allow emotions to arise? Especially the emotions that you don't like, that you resist, deny, repress and control?

Emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety, guilt. Can you just allow such emotions to arise if they need to arise? Can you make friends with them? Can you make enough space for them? Can you just allow them to come? Letting them be without repressing them, without controlling them, without resisting them?

Thoughts and emotions: Learning to see them as they are, not as they should be or ought to be. Learning just to allow them to be. Just letting them be.

Can you make friends with the emotions that you don't like, that you resist, that you control? Can you create space for them?

Can you do the same in relation to sensations in your body? Tensions, pressure, unpleasant sensations. Can you allow any sensation to arise in your body and just let it be? Just allowing it to be?

Thoughts, emotions, sensations, sounds. Learning to see them as they are. Learning to have a mirror-like mind, just reflecting things as they are. Not resisting anything, not grasping anything. Not liking anything, not disliking anything. Not accepting anything, not rejecting anything. Just being, just allowing. Surrendering to *what is*.

Be alert and awake from moment to moment.

Thank you. You may open your eyes now.

DISCUSSION

GODWIN: We will begin our discussion with thoughts. Let me hear your experiences in relation to thoughts.

MEDITATOR: *I'm used to the practice of focusing on the breath in order to stop thoughts, rather than letting thoughts arise freely.*

GODWIN: This brings up a very important point. We need to learn to focus on an object such as breathing; but we also need to learn to allow the mind to do what it likes. That is, we need both focusing and scanning. Otherwise, if you are only used to focusing, then you can't do anything else. So ideally we should learn to do both, focusing and scanning.

MEDITATOR: *I find that when I allow the thoughts to arise, no thought arises.*

GODWIN: That is fascinating! So I'd like to discuss the implications of it. When we are focusing on the breathing and we don't want thoughts to arise, what happens? They arise. And when we are allowing thoughts to arise, they don't arise!

Now why should this be? Why is the mind always acting in opposition to us? How is it that when we allow things to happen in the mind or when we invite things to happen, they're not forthcoming; but when we don't want things to happen, they seem to arise? This happens not only with thoughts but also with emotions, especially emotions that we don't like. When you invite emotions to arise, they don't seem to arise. They seem to be rather shy. But when we fight them, when we fear them, when we don't want them to arise, they seem to arise. Now what is the reason for this?

This brings up an important point which I often repeat and emphasise. Meditation consists in making an effort to understand how our mind works by making friends with it, by being gentle with it, by telling the mind to do this or that as we would tell a child. If you tell a child not to do something, what does the child do? It's the same principle. And then, what do the parents say? "My child is stubborn." We use the same word in relation to our mind: "I can never meditate successfully. My mind is stubborn."

So it is extremely important in the first place to have this right relationship with our mind and body, to make friends with our mind and body, to create space for them; and then to make an effort to understand how our mind works. It is extremely unfortunate if we are so involved with techniques and achieving particular states of mind that we miss this wonderful opportunity to *understand* our mind. So this is why I say meditation is understanding, exploring, discovering. Then there's an element of fun in it. Then you find meditation interesting. All the time we can make discoveries about what is happening in our mind. But if we are concerned only about a particular state of mind, we miss this important point.

MEDITATOR: *There seems to be a natural tendency to repel our negative thoughts, but you are encouraging us to be friendly with our negative thoughts. That goes against our conditioning.*

GODWIN: It's a very strong conditioning that we have to judge our thoughts: negative thoughts, positive thoughts, good thoughts, bad thoughts, beautiful thoughts, ugly thoughts, important thoughts, unimportant thoughts. After all, they are only thoughts. But with our past, with our past conditioning, we tend to judge them. And then, what happens when we start judging them? We repress them. "Negative thoughts should not arise", so we push them away. "Ugly thoughts should not arise," so we start repressing. This is how we start to repress, to control, to deny. So it is extremely important in this technique to learn to relate to thoughts just as thoughts, without these value judgements. Then you will not repressing them, denying them.

And when you start relating to thoughts without judging them, you just let them go. It is by judging them that we get involved in them.

Our thoughts really grip us, and that's how suffering is created. There is a beautiful metaphor that is used in Tibetan Buddhism, in the Mahamudra practise. Relate to your mind as a clear spacious sky and to the thoughts as clouds. The clouds do not affect the sky and the sky doesn't affect the clouds. Or take the metaphor of a mirror, which is used in many meditation traditions. It is there in the Zen tradition, in the Tibetan tradition, in the Theravada tradition, in Taoism. Whatever object comes before the mirror does not affect the mirror, and the mirror doesn't affect the object. So relate to thoughts that way; and you can do that only if you can learn not to judge them.

So please, avoid the confused idea that meditation is about trying to stop thoughts. If you can relate to thoughts in the way I am describing, then whether thoughts are there or not, the mind remains like a clear mirror or like a the clear spacious sky. And that is a mind that is free.

Another point is that when you learn to do this, you don't have to confine it to the sitting posture. As we all know, thoughts are arising and passing away all the time. From the time we wake up to the time we go off to sleep, it is continuous, relentless thoughts, the inner chatter. So if you can learn to work with thoughts in this way, then meditation becomes a way of life.

MEDITATOR: *How does this practice of watching thoughts differ from daydreaming?*

GODWIN: Interesting question! We know how thoughts generate stories and daydreams and fantasies. I would like to illustrate this with an example.

There was a meditator at the Centre in Sri Lanka, a Western woman, and a mosquito bit her. So she thought, "I'll get malaria" And then she thought, "If I get malaria, I'll have to go to hospital. And if I go to hospital, I won't be able to leave Sri Lanka on the day I'm planning to leave. In which case I'll have to inform Mother. And when Mother learns that I won't be arriving on the day she is expecting me, she's bound to get depressed..."

Now I see that you are amused. But isn't that what we all do - creating stories from what has happened in the past and from what we anticipate in the future? But we don't realise that *we* create these stories, we become victims of the stories that *we* create *ourselves*. And this is how suffering is created.

Sometimes I use the metaphor of films. We create our own films. We produce them, direct them, act in them. We do all that. And these films that we create ourselves again generate suffering and the emotions that arise in relation to it.

Some meditators' daydreams are terrible. One young meditator told me that in all her daydreams she becomes the victim. Fascinating! But then there was another meditator who said that in his daydreams he was always victorious, successful. So it seems there are differences. Now this is meditation: to understand the contents of all this, exploring whatever happens in our minds.

It's very significant that the term used is "day-*dream*". What is the difference between a day-dream and a night-dream?

MEDITATOR: *Not much. They're both involuntary.*

GODWIN: Very good. In other words, we hardly have any control. In both situations we hardly have any control; they become real. And this we call living! During the day, perhaps most of the time, we are lost in stories, daydreaming, fantasising. And that situation: that is how suffering is created, that is how emotions arise.

Hence the importance of our meditation. Hence the importance of being alert and awake.

It is very significant that in techniques like focusing on the breathing, there is no room for stories to arise. When thoughts do arise, ideally we learn to let go of them and come back to the present. Because, as I said, our stories are about what happened in the past and what is going to happen in the future. So in focusing on breathing we learn to be in the here-and-now, so that there is no room for daydreaming or fantasies to arise.

Anything else about thoughts? It's a very interesting area, a very important area. I'd like to raise a question for you to reflect on: can there be suffering without a thought? It's an important question to reflect on. Can there be suffering without a thought? Find out for yourself.

Now I'd like to hear your experiences in relation to emotions. When we practise letting emotions arise, especially emotions that we don't like, what happens?

It's extremely important this working with emotions, especially unpleasant emotions. In meditation one needs to realise in one's own experience that trying to repress emotions, trying to get rid of emotions, actually gives them more power, more energy. This is a very important realization. One has to see this in one's own experience.

But when we allow emotions to arise, when we invite them, then either they don't arise or when they do arise they are not so powerful, they don't overwhelm us.

There's a word one meditator used to describe unpleasant emotions and I have been continuing to use it though I'm not very happy with it. The word is "monsters". So you invite all the monsters you dislike to your party, and guess what happens? They don't come! But if we are afraid of them, if they come when we are trying to get rid of them, then the small monsters become bigger. We don't realise how we make our monsters bigger. This is again a very important experience in meditation, to realise how we create our own suffering by making our monsters bigger.

So I have my own definition of meditation. Meditation is an attempt to create space in our minds so that our monsters can become our friends. And when they have become our friends it makes no difference whether they are there or not.

And that is a very important breakthrough: the pleasant/unpleasant dichotomy disappears. Now what happens in meditation if we identify only with pleasant experiences and dislike unpleasant experiences? We like only angels but not monsters. So there is a split in us, a dichotomy, a duality.

So what has happened is, that in the name of meditation we have become divided; our meditation has become a battle, of resisting the monsters and going for the angels. One has to transcend this dichotomy; one has to go beyond this pleasant/unpleasant division. And this technique of watching emotions enables one to do that. It is an important breakthrough. You learn to have a mirror-like mind that reflects things as they are. And that is a mind that is free.

MEDITATOR: *When I invite unpleasant emotions to arise, they don't arise.*

GODWIN: So is there a problem? In fact some people tell me they want monsters to arise, and when they don't arise, it's a problem! See what a lot of energy we have given to them. What is presented in the Dhamma is very simple: when they are there, just know that they are there; when they are not there, just know that they are not there. In both situations just have a mirror-like mind. That is freedom.

MEDITATOR: *When I invite them in meditation they don't come, but in certain situations in everyday life they come up and are a problem.*

GODWIN: A very important practical question, because in everyday life there are situations where these emotions may arise - anger, fear, depression, guilt, tension, jealousy and so on.

I think we are all familiar with these.

And we also know from practical experience how they just come up in unexpected situations. Now how does a meditator work with such situations? We have a very strong conditioning, maybe from childhood, to dislike them, to repress them, to control them, especially the unpleasant experiences. Take anger. When we were small our parents didn't like us when we got angry. A girl once told me that when she was small her mother would say, "Don't get angry. Your beautiful face becomes ugly." And you will have heard similar things. So what happens? As children we learn to repress anger. We learn to pretend, to repress, to control. This is a very strong conditioning we have.

And then what happens when you take to the spiritual life, when you take up meditation? We are told the same thing: "**MEDITATORS** don't get angry. They have only positive experiences."

It is extremely important to change this perspective. And how does one change it? By realising that we should first *learn* about these emotions. We have already taken up a position about them - that they are bad, undesirable - without even learning about them, without even experiencing them. This is why it is so clearly said in the Dhamma: when they are there, just be aware that they are there. We don't really experience these emotions fully and completely because of the positions we have taken. So if we have these emotions in

everyday life – fear, anger, whatever – we can learn to be completely aware of them, completely with those emotions. This is the first point.

The second point is to learn to experiment with them, to explore them. Experimenting with them means not taking up a position. Consider anger: suppose that in everyday life you get angry. How does the meditator work with the anger? Why do we get angry? Because we have an expectation, a model or an ideal, of how the other person should behave, or how we should behave, or how life should be.

When we realise this, that the problem is with ourselves in having such an idea, having such a concept, then we learn to look at ourselves. And we learn to take responsibility for that anger. Otherwise we take up the position that the other person has provoked us, so we don't have to do anything about it, we can continue to get angry and not realise the reason for it by experimenting and exploring. Such a person will never get an opportunity to work with such states of mind. So one should look at *oneself*. This is the second point.

So rather than focus your attention on the subject that is provoking you, you look at yourself and try to explore, to understand the nature of anger. And then at that moment you will realise: it's my problem for having this idea, this model or image.

Then there is another aspect to anger. Some very interesting physiological changes take place in anger. And here again one has to make an effort to experience it, to understand it. This is what I mean by experimenting. Now what happens in our body when we get angry? What happens to our face, our heartbeat, our stomach? One has to be aware of these changes that are taking place in the body.

Different people may have different signals physically, but there is one that happens to everyone when they get angry, the breath speeds up. What happens with the breath when we meditate and the mind becomes calm? It slows down. So this shows that the breath is a very important indicator, a very useful monitor of what is happening in our mind.

Maybe that's why focusing on breathing is a meditation technique. Doing this with anger, you will be relating to it in an entirely different way.

This can be done in relation to every emotion in everyday life. One can change one's attitude towards them rather than repressing them, controlling them, denying them. Rather than pretend that we're not angry and so on, we make friends with them by creating space for them and learning about them.

And there's yet another aspect to it. When we have these emotions, we tend to own them. We tend to think of it as *my* anger, *my* depression, *my* anxiety. Now, is it possible to relate to them without this sense of ownership? Can we see just anger, just guilt, just fear? With this change of attitude towards emotions they become learning experiences, valuable experiences for us. We can be learning about these emotions all the time, waiting for opportunities to arise to learn about them. Then your spiritual practice takes on an entirely different dimension. So rather than being afraid of them, rather than chastising yourself for having them, you relate to them in an entirely different way.

And then you realise when they are *not* there. When they are there you learn to work with them, to explore them, understand them; and when they are not there you realise that they are not there. So what is the difference? What is the result?

MEDITATOR: *You are living just in the present.*

GODWIN: Well, living in the present is just an ideal. But here again, this phrase “living in the present” has various aspects. Of course you are right, if one can be completely in the present, in the here-and-now, one can be free to a great extent of what is happening. But there’s another way of understanding what one means by being in the present. It means that in actual fact, although we assume that there is a past and a future, in a sense there is only the present. There is only the here-and-now.

Even when we recall things, and when we anticipate things, we do it *now*. So when we realise that the only reality is the present, then we’ll be relating to the past and the future in an entirely different way.

So again, to put it in practical terms, when you realise that a story you are constructing is dependent on something that has happened or something you are anticipating, then the story loses its power.

MEDITATOR: *But expressing our emotions can bring problems.*

GODWIN: Generally there are two ways we relate to emotions. Either we repress and control them or we express and indulge them. As we have found out, repressing and controlling them has its problems; and expressing and indulging them has its problems too, as we know. But what is attempted in meditation is, ideally, neither to repress nor to express, but just to be aware of it, just to create space for it, to make friends with it, to experiment.

MEDITATOR: *Does this practice eventually bring about a transformation in the mind – enlightenment?*

GODWIN: This again brings up an interesting point, that we should not be so concerned about results. In meditation, the spiritual life, we can become so involved in goals. Is there a difference between being ambitious materially and having ambitions spiritually? Is there really a difference? The ambition is the same. The more you try to get rid of an emotion, the more power you give it. So we should find the work we do with emotions more interesting than the state of being rid of the emotions.

In some cultures there is such an emphasis on achieving, on results. You want results, immediate results; but then you miss the fun. What is important is not the end result, but the doing of it.

What is important is not what will happen when you reach the top of the hill, but rather the process of climbing it, the adventures involved in it. So in some traditions they say that the ordinary mind *is* the enlightened mind. The practice *is* enlightenment.

Often we are doing something in order to overcome things, to see a result from it. But if we can change our perspective and learn to see what we are doing as something interesting in itself, something enjoyable, then that is enough. That is enlightenment, that is freedom. So I’d like to emphasise this point: see importance in your practice itself, not in what will come out of the practice.

I don’t see any difference between material ambition and spiritual ambition. Both can generate suffering, both create tension and repression. But if you can relate to the practice

itself in this different way, then your mind is free at the time you are practising, not when your practice is over.

Finally, I'd like to touch on some other aspects of this technique. It can have subtler levels. One is that you may have a glimpse, while you are doing this, that there is only thinking, that there is no thinker apart from thought. Normally when we have thoughts, we assume that *I* am thinking, that these are *my* thoughts. But working with this technique of observing the thoughts, you may have a glimpse or insight that there is only thinking and that the thinker apart from the thoughts is something that we construct.

You may have a similar experience in relation to sensations and emotions: that there is no feeler, apart from feeling.

The idea of *my* thought, *my* pain, *my* anger, *my* fear, drops away and that is a very important realization.

Another aspect of this technique is that when we learn to observe whatever happens without judging, when we learn not to repress things, not to control things, then, in psychological terms, this will help make our unconscious conscious. In techniques like focusing on an object, what happens is that there is an element of suppression. When thoughts come, you learn to let go of them and come back to the object, so there is an element of control, of exclusion.

But in this technique of watching there is no control, no exclusion, no denial.

So in this process when you learn to allow things to happen, then whatever you have repressed can surface. And when your unconscious is made conscious in this way, your behaviour becomes integrated and harmonious.

Another way of looking at this technique is that we are learning to surrender – to surrender to whatever is happening.