

Review

## Keeping Your Head: Remembering to Think in Mindfulness Practice

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### Abstract

It is an axiom in secular mindfulness that to become present is to direct attention away from thinking to physical sensation. While this can be a useful strategy to manage depressive rumination, as an automatic default position, it risks demonising our fundamental human capacity to purposefully think about the causes of suffering and how to reduce it. Many approaches within Mahayana Buddhism in particular explicitly use reflection on key ideas as necessary pre-requisites to meditation, and in these traditions, thinking is fundamental to our ability to move beyond limiting notions of ourselves and others into a more liberating vision.

### Keywords

Mindfulness; Mahayana; Buddhism

## 1. Review

“I’ve been talking to you for quite a while in this teaching session; how many of you have gone into your heads?”, said the trainer to the group of mindfulness teacher trainees. As a mindfulness



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teacher trainer and clinician in the UK's National Health Service (NHS), how many times have I heard something like this, often from people with extensive postgraduate qualifications - as if the way to lose your way in mindfulness is to think. And the solution is to usually to administer some emergency mindfulness first aid by bringing people out of their "heads", often by standing up and moving around, and "back into the body". Once the thinking process appears to have been interrupted, we return to an appreciative allowing of what is present, although less so to thoughts than to the rest of our experience. We never seem to worry about being too much in our bodies or our emotions, but if we "get into our heads", it seems to be a problem.

Certainly, there are pitfalls with certain kinds of thinking. Thoughts can be rationalisations of habitual patterns of identity formation that we use all the time to reinforce that this is the kind of person we are, this is what we think and like and don't like. The more we allow it to just ramble on, the more we ossify into a structure that is limiting. And in the context of depression, the cycle of ruminative thinking in which we try to think our way out of our self-recriminatory narratives tends to just deepen them. So, in secular mindfulness, we might remind ourselves that "thoughts are not facts" and "come back into the body", which is certainly one way we can step out of rumination. However, just as we can get caught by automatic patterns of ruminative thinking, so can we also make automatic assumptions that conceptually based experiences are less worthy of our attention, or less inherently useful. This might form part of a strategy of avoidance [1]. Perhaps more concerningly, it might contribute to an anti-intellectualism that can characterise various varieties of fundamentalism and populism prevalent today in which 'experts' are denigrated and thinking is limited to allowable, polarised positions.

I don't think we need to be squeamish about thinking. Mindfulness is about being with things as they are. If we're thinking a lot, then stopping thinking to focus elsewhere as a default strategy is not being with things as they are; it is trying to replace one experience with another. Instead of moving away from "the head", I have found it helpful to practice being with thinking a lot. Thinking a lot is not in itself a problem, and I don't feel any need to stop thinking by moving attention into the "the body" or anywhere else. It's quite possible to bring an awareness to how thinking is, be present with the thinking, feel its energy (e.g. frantic, critical, reflective, etc.), notice the agenda behind the thinking (e.g. I want to get stuff done, or I want to work out how to get on better with someone), and toggle between thinking content and the bigger space of awareness from which the content arises and disappears. Within mindfulness practice itself, these different kinds of thinking are also not always well distinguished and it is easy to get lost – for example, open awareness practice can just become mind wandering, not dissimilar from rumination [2].

Not all thinking is equal. Secular mindfulness practice rarely distinguishes between ruminative thinking and conceptual reflection. This distinction is essential if we are not going to lump all thinking together into one demonised bundle. Ruminative thinking (see [3, 4]) is something that happens to us, that has us in its grip. It is like being bobbed up and down on a strong current in a choppy sea, dragged along here and there. It is an aspect of our default mode network to which we revert when not otherwise actively directing our attention, and it is self-focused and vigilant. It tends to be automatic, repetitive, rigid and often doesn't progress us any further in our understanding or emotional state from where we started. Indeed, if we are prone to being depressed or anxious, that is the current it will take us down [5].

However, this is entirely different from conceptual reflective thinking [6] which is purposeful, active and effortful. This thinking is like getting in the boat on that choppy sea and rowing

somewhere we have decided we want to focus on. This type of thinking is a powerful way to deepen and embed a particular experience, or to help us understand why we are doing something. For example, in order to practice compassion, we might want to consider what causes suffering, how it is maintained in our lives and the lives of others, what blocks and aids our access to compassion, and how we can respond. Crucially, this type of thinking enables us to reconsider our values and priorities, to examine ourselves, and to use insights about ourselves to change how we perceive situations and act in the world. Although this type of thinking is not much taught in the secular mindfulness world, it is indispensable to a purposeful practice.

This type of reflection is intrinsic to Buddhist (mindfulness) practice. The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path ([7], p. 327-370) presents a way out of suffering and its the first two points are 'Right View' or 'Understanding' and then 'Right Thought'. In Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the starting point is the 'View', ([8], p. 9) the map, the conceptual understanding of how things are and why we practise. Only then comes Meditation and then Action. If we haven't first thought through a conceptual map of where might be going, and what the obstacles might be and why we are even practising, then we are likely to get lost or give up.

The Four Noble Truths ([9], p. 243-249) describe the problem from the Buddhist perspective, and the way out of it. The problem is that we suffer and we our suffering is caused by ego identification, by grasping onto something that is not solid or fixed or able to deliver lasting satisfaction. So, knowing that, I can explore this sense of "me", enquiring where or what it is. I can drop in the thought, "how do I suffer?" and "What does a moment's freedom from suffering taste like?" Although this is not primarily an intellectual exercise, this enquiry starts with a thought and then proceeds in a holistic and intuitive way to soften the ground from which clarity might emerge.

Using the thought of impermanence ([10], p. 99-126; [11], p.39-59) can be very helpful in loosening attachment to that which cannot last. Is there anything in my experience that is not subject to change? I can explore the impermanence of everything I do. At work, everything I am trying to build up and establish in our mindfulness centre will, at least in its current form, be gone soon. I and most of the colleagues who are building it up right now will have retired in 10 to 15 years. This is such a helpful thought because it invites me to both apply myself wholeheartedly and fully to what I passionately believe in at work whilst at the same time, using the awareness that it will not last to keep perspective, to use my thinking function to see that it is not what defines me and that other things will replace it. For me, this is more effective stress management than sitting watching my breath over lunch.

When I over-invest in what I do and become upset that it is not better valued or funded or recognised, I can remind myself of the thought I will soon not be here, and nor will you, dear reader. If you are a middle-aged person like me, chances are you are looking at not more than another 10,000 days, but it could be tomorrow, or later today. Where do you want to put your energy? Do I want to stay furious with that colleague who keeps blanking me, or can I let it go? Cells in our stomach take about 5 days to regenerate; cells in the liver last around a year; and bone cells take about 10 years to die off and be replaced [12]. So what's the same about me now as when that colleague first blanked me 20 years ago? What would my little work dramas look like from the moon? I find these thoughts helpful to heighten the vibrancy and preciousness of each moment and to let go of what I invest energy in but do not value. As Mary Oliver [13] asks: "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" However, as mindfulness teacher trainers, we rarely invite trainees to ponder this.

Thoughts that are manifestos of personal identity, like “I must be happy” or thoughts that tell us that we are a particular kind of person: clever/stupid, lovable/unlovable, good/bad can deeply shape our experience and perpetuate suffering. On whichever side of the dualistic see-saw we position ourselves, it can never lead to peace because we will either keep trying to get ourselves from “bad” to “good” in our own perception and in the perception of others, or we will try to keep ourselves “good”, or perhaps try and become even “better” so that we or others don’t start to perceive us as “bad”. This is endless and exhausting. However, to really see that, we need to bring attention to thinking. I do not fundamentally challenge the validity or power of distress-producing and limiting thoughts by moving my attention from my head to my body. I also don’t fundamentally change the feeling-thought that I am bad or unlovable or inadequate by trying to generate another experience that makes me feel better. It won’t last. We can, though, more fundamentally uproot the power of such states by using other thoughts that undermine the substantiality of the thought itself, such as “What is this?” or “Who is thinking this thought?” [14].

This is what the Heart Sutra [15, 16] points to – that although phenomena appear, they are not substantially, solidly unchangingly existent. This does apply to thoughts: thoughts are indeed not facts; but then equally, emotions are not facts, and neither are body sensations. The Heart Sutra specifically states that “Form” - i.e., physicality/materiality – “is emptiness”, along with all the other constituents of experience. Nothing we can think feel or sense is solid, independently existent, stable or secure. None of it represents the dry land we long for. So, when thinking is singled out, or dismissed as “distraction”, we should wonder what else is being valued instead, and whether that can deliver lasting satisfaction either.

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the thought par excellence is “bodhicitta”, ([17], p. 19-38), the aspiration to become free from suffering in order to free all sentient beings from suffering. This isn’t just a wish that leads us to becoming more compassionate; the compassion for others is that which frees us from the suffering-inducing belief in the validity, and overriding importance, of “me”. This is why the Dalai Lama [18] talks of “wise selfishness” because the striving to benefit others is the only way to truly benefit ourselves. This is central to the map, the View, that is our starting point. A recent study [19] suggested 3 random acts of kindness a day were more effective for mood than behaviour activation or cognitively challenging interventions.

The thought that all beings have been my mother in a previous life ([20], p.98-106) reminds us how connected we are and can actually make us happier. This kind of thought can totally transform how we relate to everyone and everything and does so even if I sometimes struggle with its literal truth; even then I find that acting as if it were true still has an effect. I wonder how my life would be if that thought really infused my thinking process and the orientation of my life.

In secular mindfulness, when we “set our intention” for practice ([21], p.13-19), we tend mean that we decide that we will, to the best of our ability, be present with our experience, or perhaps infuse attitudinal qualities such as patience, compassion and non-striving into the practice [22, 23]. But why? If we’re if not thinking about why, then being mindful becomes a self-evident Good to which we aspire, probably reinforced by the repeated experience that it often makes us feel better – less depressed or anxious, less stressed, more appreciative and connected. That then effectively becomes our View, post-hoc: we do it because it makes us feel better and we want more experiences of feeling better.

There is nothing wrong with feeling better per se except that feeling better cannot be the ultimate Good and fulfilment of our lives because it is not stable; it can only be a transient state.

Without thinking, we cannot even tell whether this transient state is actually serving us or anyone else, or indeed harming. What if making me feel better causes someone else to feel worse? For example, what if my self-care, including intensive mindfulness practice, causes my partner to feel overloaded with our shared domestic and childcare responsibilities? What if our compassion practice makes us feel better but contributes to entrenching power inequalities and gives us a rationale to ignore social justice aspirations (see [24])? Or what if mindfulness makes me feel better but by buying into the model of stress as an individualised problem, removes the need for critical inquiry into its systemic and institutional causes [25]? One thing that seems more important than feeling good is thinking with a ruthless honesty about what we are doing and why, otherwise it's so easy to deceive ourselves. It's easy to imagine we're being fiercely compassionate when we're just being fierce; or to imagine we're paying attention when we're going through the motions with an upright posture; or to imagine we're driven by altruism when we're entrenching our self-righteous sense of knowing the truth.

In secular mindfulness we tend to emphasise the acceptance aspect of being with ourselves just as we are; but without thinking about how we really are, as well as being with how we are, we can easily become self-satisfied and lack the very curiosity about ourselves that we profess to embody. Rigorous self-examination is a key part of checking our intentionality in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Are we actually up to what we appear to be up to? This is expressed in Gyelse Togme's verse: "if you do not examine your own errors, you may look like a practitioner, but not act as one. Therefore, always examine your own errors, rid yourself of them – this is the practice of a Bodhisattva" ([19], p. 175-178).

The Lo Jong or Mind Training tradition in Tibetan, Mahayana practice specifically offers thoughts, "slogans" or verses to work with to change the way we orient ourselves and inhabit our experience. For example, Gyelse Togme's ([19], p.106-116) extraordinarily radical and counter-cultural thought: "All suffering without exception arises from desiring happiness for oneself; Perfect Buddhahood is born from the thought of benefiting others" is so useful to challenge the usual thoughts that what matters is my own happiness. In this way, I do not need my practice to make me feel happier or better because this more over-arching purpose for practice – to reduce, or remove, suffering for myself and all beings – makes sense of whatever I might be doing on or off the cushion, and, unlike positive experience, that purpose is always accessible to me if I can remember it, be mindful of it.

Whilst Buddhist frameworks offer a comprehensive philosophical and soteriological framework that makes sense of why we might sit on the cushion, this will not be a realistic or palatable proposition for most, nor one that is necessarily felt by everyone to directly address the most contemporary challenges of our times. This leaves an imperative for individuals practising mindfulness to find an overarching rationale for their practice that provides an orienting framework that is not reliant on us personally feeling better. This is indeed emerging through various writers (e.g. [26-28]) who present rationales for mindfulness practice that serve society beyond ourselves, responding to our crises of social inequality, of polarisation of various kinds, and of the climate. To do this work requires us to use our heads.

## **2. Conclusion**

If thinking about why we're doing what we're doing is not an intrinsic component of our practice, and of how we train mindfulness teachers, then it becomes a technique that can be applied in any

context for any purpose and it loses its meaning, its grounding in a holistic endeavour that is about something more than self-improvement or self-development, or self-anything. That is the point, that the bigger View offers a taste of freedom, a way beyond self-ing, beyond the project of putting energy into that which cannot last or satisfy.

The kinds of thinking described here are not ruminative or purely intellectual; they involve all of who we are: the body, the emotions, intuition and cognition. These kinds of thinking are ways of enquiring that use thought but do not make us enslaved by it. They can involve patiently waiting for a response, rather than being driven by an act of will. The responses can arise without us necessarily deciding to have them. They may arrive at our door, surprising us in the early hours as we wake, or they may ripen after much soul-searching over many years into a clarity that rises from a fog.

### **Author Contributions**

The author did all the research work for this study.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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