

# Experiences Associated with Meditating on the Thought Process

## Introductory Remarks

- Some people experience all of these, others just a few.
- These experiences may come in sequence or you may jump back and forth.
- As a sequence they may unfold over various "scales" of time. You may pass through them in turn during the period of a single sit, over the duration of an entire retreat, or over a period of months or years.
- As practice deepens, you tend to mostly experience the later parts of the sequence (Experiences 7 - 9 below). But
- What you subjectively experience during meditation does not depend only on how much practice you've had. It depends also on the level of challenge coming from your external situation and on the natural rhythm of releasings from your deep mind. Therefore,
- There is something important to be learned (and re-learned) from each experience, and you are never wasting your time or going backwards as long as:
  - You understand how to work with each experience and
  - You make at least some effort to do so.

## The Experiences

### Experience 1

Total lack of awareness and specificity with regard to the thinking process.

What to do?

- 1. Vocal Labeling!**
2. Understand that the discomfort and frustration associated with this is an important (and perhaps necessary) part of the learning experience because:
  - a. The mind must poignantly experience the pain of its chaos before it becomes motivated to be different.
  - b. The discomfort and frustration experienced at this stage become the seeds of compassion and humility for later on when you eventually do become empowered with superior concentration.

### Experience 2

You are able to be mindful of thought to some extent but the "noting" lags behind the event, i.e. you become aware of a thought mostly in retrospect, several seconds (or thoughts) after it has occurred.

What to do?

Keep trying, but also accept the fact that your mindfulness is not yet "concurrent." Remember the "principle of relativity." On a relative scale you are still much more mindful than you would be otherwise. Remember, as far as the self-effort aspect of the path is concerned, relative results are good enough. Let Nature (Grace, Time) do the rest.

## Experience 3

"Thinking about thinking about thinking..."

When we learn a new skill, we usually have to think a lot about what we're doing. However, once that skill has become second nature, we are able to access it with little or no thought. Not surprisingly when we begin to meditate on thought, we may find ourselves doing a lot of thinking about the process of observing thinking; the mind may play many convoluted games with itself.

In general, "thoughts about observing thought" should be observed like any other thought. Eventually the mind will get tired of "tripping out" on itself, and you will settle into a matter-of-fact observing mode without all those convoluted and confusing games.

There are, however, two possible exceptions to the general rule "observe any and all thought regardless of its content." The first exception involves deep insights, which may occasionally arise during the observing process. You may find it useful to intentionally leave the "just observing mode" for a while to intentionally consider and clarify such insight.

The second exception involves mental labels. Labels are simple words that aid the observing process. There are many ways to categorize ones state of thought with labels. A very common one is to label thought in terms of its content (memory, plan, judgment, fantasy, etc.)

Personally, I find two sets of labeling categories particularly heuristic, a fancy word meaning "tending to facilitate insight."

1. Labeling thought by the type of mental event: (Image, Talk, Both, None)
2. Labeling thought by activation level
  - a. With respect to just image: (Clear, Subtle, None)
  - b. With respect to just talk: (Clear, Subtle, None)
  - c. With respect to both image and talk (in that order):  
 (Clear/Clear, Clear/Subtle, Clear/None, Subtle/Clear, Subtle/Subtle, Subtle/None,  
 None/Clear, None/Subtle, None/None)  
 ( $3^2 = 9$  possible pairs. It's not as complex as it seems...really!)

Mental labels are of course themselves thoughts (specifically, they are examples of "talk"), but they differ from general thought in the following significant ways:

1. Mental labeling is simple thought whereas general thought is often quite complex.
2. Mental labeling is highly ordered whereas general thought is often random if not chaotic.
3. Mental labeling is specifically designed to clarify the thought process itself.
4. Mental labeling generates the least amount of thought needed to achieve this clarification.

Although mental labels are thoughts, attempting to label them could lead to a confusing and frustrating infinite regression, especially when you first begin. So what should you do? Simple. **Don't label or**

**observe the mental labels themselves unless you really want to.** If you wish, consider them to be a special class of thought exempt from the labeling process.

## Experience 4

### Uncomfortable Reactions

Until one gets the "hang" of it, observing your thoughts is a little like trying to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. Your initial attempts to "turn the mind back on itself" may produce uncomfortable reactions. These include: frustration, confusion, disorientation, fear, tension and even occasionally headaches. On top of these, you may experience exhaustion from the effort required to focus. So what to do?

1. Don't let that discourage you. Once your skill matures, these reactions go away and usually do not return.
2. Apply the "prime directive of mindfulness practice": recycle the reactions (i.e. apply the practice to the reactions themselves).
3. Remember, as you gain experience, it will require less and less intention and effort... eventually it becomes automatic. (Really!)

Like all subjective states, these reactions can only arise as thoughts, body sensations or a mixture of thoughts and body sensations. Therefore,

1. Consistently observe any thoughts associated with the reaction; they are by definition included in your domain of focus. (i.e., label "I hate labeling talk" as matter-of-factly as "talk")
2. Have equanimity with any body sensations associated with the reaction (whether you pay attention to them or not).
3. If it seems necessary or productive:
  - a. Broaden your domain of focus to include both the body sensations and the thoughts associated with reaction, or
  - b. Restrict your domain of focus to those body sensations only, dropping focus on thought for a while in order to more deeply penetrate the reactive feelings.

## Experience 5

Surface thoughts (i.e. conscious self-talk and images) tend to disappear as soon as you note them. This may lead to the following concerns:

1. Am I suppressing or interfering with thought?
2. What should I do if the thoughts "truncate" as soon as I notice them? Where should I focus so as not to become distracted between thoughts?

Answer:

When we do pure mindfulness practice, our job is to pay attention to things as they are: Sometimes the act of observing changes the phenomenon we are observing. That change in the phenomenon is what is at that moment. Pay attention to it. Specifically,

1. If you note a mental image and it immediately disappears, keep your attention at the mental screen where the image had been. After the disappearance of an image, that screen can only be in one of two states:
  - a. Pleasant blankness
  - b. Subtle activity

Clearly detect which it is and continue to observe that state. There are only two possibilities. Either blankness/subtle activity will continue or more clear images will arise. The blankness or the subtle activity is the reality of your visual mental processing in that moment. Suffuse it with awareness for as long as it lasts.

2. Similarly, if you note mental talk and it immediately disappears, keep your attention at the internal "loudspeaker," the place where you "hear" your mental thoughts. Between eruptions of self-talk, that place can only be in one of two states:
  - a. Pleasant silence
  - b. Subtle activity

Clearly detect which it is and continue to observe that state. Once again there are only two possibilities. Either the silence/subtle activity will continue or more clear self-talk will arise. The silence or the subtle activity is the reality of your verbal mental processing at that moment. Suffuse it with awareness for as long as it lasts.

It is in the nature of thought to disappear as soon as we observe it. This is a part of its "break up" sequence. It does not necessarily mean that we are suppressing. Eventually whatever needs to come up will, but it is also important to be very clear about the difference between pure mindfulness practice and other forms of practice and to be clear which you are doing at a given time. In other forms of practice (samatha, metta) we are trying to direct and control the thoughts. In pure mindfulness, we take a hands-off attitude, allowing thoughts to last as long (or as short) and to come as frequently (or as seldom) as they wish. Often when we observe just what is there without wanting the mind to be any particular way, we discover that thinking is shorter and less frequent than we had assumed.

The point here is that blankness of the internal screen or silence of the internal voice or the presence of subtle preconscious processing are just as much aspects of thought as conscious self-talk and pictures. There is always something to observe at the thinking gate, so you never need to worry about being distracted "in between."

## Experience 6

Thoughts become dissociated, weird juxtapositions of words and images occur with no apparent connection between them.

This is a sign that one is dropping into deeper levels of the mind. It is similar to what happens during the hypnogogic (twilight) state as one falls into sleep. Take it as a good sign, but be on guard for possible sleepiness. Keep your back very straight and if necessary open your eyes partially or fully. **Don't hesitate to use vocal noting.** Two related experiences need to be discussed:

### Gross Sleepiness

You become so sleepy that you actually begin to dream while meditating. This can be a powerful learning experience, but you need to be very disciplined to make use of it. Over and over again, straighten your spine and open your eyes. Focus intently on your mental screen, monitoring the subtle and gross changes that occur there as each wave of sleepiness wells up and passes.

A variation on this theme is to redefine your object of meditation to include both the internal screen of thinking and the external screen of ordinary vision. Keeping your eyes open, note how you are pulled back and forth between these two screens (possible labels: "inner," "outer," "both"). When you get good at it, you will actually be able to detect ordinary visual reality contracting as dream image reality expands, and conversely. This leads to a softening and integrating of the inner and outer worlds...a *literally* earth-shaking experience!

### Intense Visions and Hallucinations

There is a lot to be said about this phenomenon. Here (in rather terse form) are just a few of the most important points.

1. Some meditators have these, others never do.
2. The causes are various, including physical, physiological and psychological factors.
3. From the perspective of the ultimate goal of meditation, they are neither desirable nor undesirable, neither necessary nor impediments.
4. The upwelling of such visionary material is a natural function of human consciousness and should not be cause for the slightest concern:
  - You are not going crazy.
  - You are not going to get weird.
  - You are not going to be possessed by devils, assailed by Satanists, or devoured by monsters.
  - You are not going to be sucked into another world.
  - However, if you have a history of prior mental illness, you should discuss these phenomena both with your meditation teacher and a therapist.
  - This material may be related to personal life experiences, either things you consciously remember or an upwelling of repressed material. In this case you have three options:
    - Work with it psychotherapeutically (under the guidance of a skilled professional).
    - Work with it meditatively (i.e. just observe with detachment).
    - Do both of the above.
5. From the viewpoint of the *ultimate* goals of meditation, such phenomena are best interpreted as part of a natural process of release from the deep archetypal levels of the mind. Basically there are two convenient doors to the deep mind: body sensation and mental imagery. Conversely, the deep

mind may release pressure through two channels: sensations (often uncomfortable) in the body and images (often archetypal) in the mind. This fact expresses itself historically as contrasting approaches in psychotherapy (Wilhelm Reich vs. Carl Jung) and spiritually (body-sensation-based forms of Vipassana vs. visualization-based Vajrayana).

6. Sometimes the content of this material may be pleasant and informative, but more often it is disconcerting, full of weirdness, destruction, sex and violence. (In other words, what the subconscious projects onto the internal screen of the mind is the same stuff the culture projects onto the external screen of TV and cinema.)
7. What to do?
  - a. Facilitate this natural psycho-spiritual detoxification by continuing to apply your technique and
  - b. Be happy (I'm serious!)

Be happy that the deep mind is unburdening itself. Better it come up now under these benign circumstances. Otherwise, there is every likelihood that it will come up under other circumstances, difficult ones such as illness or the dying process. Under such negative circumstances, it will cross-multiply with the other challenges present, vastly potentiating your sense of suffering.

Remember that purification is proportional to intensity of experience multiplied by depth of equanimity.

$$P = I \times E$$

- c. So, attend to the images with equanimity. Try to look around them or through them without getting caught in their content. This will be easier if the images are static, like photographs. However, often the images are dynamic, moving in lifelike ways. In that case, focus on the movements of expansion, contraction and vibration that churn them into existence and animate them. Focus on the flow that underlies them and away from their form. Meditate on the movement rather than the meaning, the shifting contour rather than the specific content. You are directly encountering the manifesting power of impermanence!
  - d. Treat "voices" analogously.
8. What not to do?

Insofar as you intend to make this phenomenon an object of mindfulness meditation, try not to:

- a. Have expectations that it go away.
- b. Interpret it or try to figure it out.
- c. Play games with it.
- d. Get tripped out about it.
- e. Try to use it to get power, personal insights or spiritual instructions (there are some exceptions to this; talk to your teacher).
- f. Be surprised if the images get (temporarily) more animated and realistic as the result of observing them with mindfulness and equanimity.

9. If you have emotional reactions to the images, never forget emotion is made up of both thoughts and body sensations.

Emo = Th + BS

So you may want to broaden your object of meditation to include both thought and body sensation. In that case, possible noting categories and labeling schemes include (but are not limited to) the following:

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Labels</u>
Thought & Feeling	"talk," "image," "feeling"
Thought & Feeling by location	"talk," "image," "face," "chest," "whole body"
Thought & Feeling by local or global impact	"talk," "image," "local," "global," "both"

10. Cultural Note: À propos of images of decay, destruction, personal mortality and being assailed or devoured: Two traditions describe these in great detail as stages associated with spiritual growth, Shamanism and Buddhism. In Shamanism, they are a common feature of the ordeal that the shaman must pass through as part of his/her "vocation" to the shaman role. In Buddhist practice, they may be associated with *bhanga* (lit. dissolution), one of the seven stages of purification (*sattavisuddhi*) in the traditional Theravada Buddhist formulation of Vipassana.

## Experience 7

You may become aware that "subtle processing" is continuously present. This makes sense because subtle processing is pre-verbal, pre-image mental activity. It is the continuous background hum of the subconscious mind which churns the internal words and images into existence. One might compare it to a subterranean root bed from which flowers (words and images) shoot up above the ground and back into which they decay. When you become aware of this subtle current of activity, you can choose to selectively focus on it. You may find that it seems to be located at your "internal screen", or the "internal loudspeaker" or both or neither. The latter case means you can contact it, but it is not in the same place where the words and images occur. Any of these are fine. The important points are:

1. Because the subtle processing tends to be smooth and continuous like a stream, it can be "observed" continuously, unlike the surface talk and images which tend to come and go abruptly. Observing that continuous stream can become quite relaxing.
2. In terms of its general level of activity, at any given moment, that stream may a) speed up, b) slow down, or c) remain the same. Associated with speeding up or slowing down may be a sense of expanding or contracting in terms of the three-dimensional volume of "thought space."
3. As you yield to these movements (including "remains at same level"), you may begin to feel massaged, nurtured, softened and cleansed by them. Further,
4. A kind of positive feedback loop may develop as follows:
  - a. Allowing the subconscious mind to flow without interference means that each thought completes itself at that deep level without needing to pop up on the surface as words and images.
  - b. This leads to fewer conscious thoughts and hence a sense of peace and focus which

- c. Makes it even easier to keep continuous contact with the subtle processing and, because it feels good, encourages you to yield even more to its movement qualities.
  - d. This causes the subtle processing to become even more fluid and efficient, leading to even deeper concentration, etc.
5. With sustained practice, the following effects may be noticed:
- a. The energy in the flow of the unblocked subtle activity breaks up hard spots, holdings, kinks and self-conflicts within the subconscious mind, leading to a greater sense of self-integration.
  - b. This reduces stiffness, viscosity and friction within the substance of the subconscious, causing it to function more efficiently (as a "well-oiled machine")
  - c. This allows for new kinds of associations and insights to arise, leading to enhanced spiritual intelligence and wisdom mind.
  - d. In essence, the mind becomes tranquil and pliant, yet energized.  
 "To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning." — *Henry David Thoreau, Walden II*

## Experience 8

The entire "space" of thought, conscious, subconscious and unconscious, dissolves and reunites with the effortless flow of nature. The movement of thought becomes its *meaning*. Because that movement is part of the "world wave," every thought has the same meaning which is the ALL-meaning. Put in more tangible terms, the massage of the thought becomes its message.

Obviously, one will abide in such a state only for certain durations, at certain times, for certain purposes (such as experiencing oneness, purification, deep rest). That is because in this state, thought has become vibrating contour without content. But as human beings, we also need to be able to respond to content, i.e. to think clearly about specific issues, effectively solve problems, skillfully consider situations. The ability to think empty thought and the ability to think clearly about issues mutually potentiate each other. Appreciating this fact is one of the marks of spiritual maturity.

The dissolving of thought back into the effortless flow of nature could be described as the beginning of a complete experience of ordinary mind.

## Experience 9

That effortless flow spontaneously ceases, and all the angels in heaven are silent for a while.