



SESSION 6: THOUGHTS ARE NOT ALWAYS FACTS

SUMMARY OF SESSION 6

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: "Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge." They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do! —JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN⁸⁹

As we have discovered, our thoughts can have very powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often those thoughts are triggered and run off quite automatically. By becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind, and letting go of them as we return our attention to the breath and the moment, it is possible to get some distance and perspective on them. This can allow us to see that there may be other ways to think about situations, freeing us from the tyranny of the old thought patterns that automatically "pop into the mind".

Most importantly, we may eventually come to realize, deep 'in our bones', that:

- All thoughts are only mental events (including the thoughts that say they are not)
- Thoughts are not facts
- We are not our thoughts
- Habitual thoughts often lead to habitual actions

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind. We can "get hold of them" and look them over from a number of different perspectives. And by becoming very familiar with our own "Top Ten" habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns, we can more easily become aware of (and change) the processes that may lead us into downward mood spirals.

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that might block or undermine practice, such as "There's no point in doing this," or "It's not going to work, so why bother?" Such pessimistic, hopeless thought patterns are one of the most characteristic features of lowering and depressed mood states, and one of the main factors that stop us taking actions that would help us to get out of those states.

As we learned in Sessions 4 and 5, it is particularly important to recognize such thoughts as "negative thinking", and not automatically to give up on efforts to apply skilful means to change the way we feel.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be. —JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN⁸⁹

WAYS YOU CAN SEE YOUR THOUGHTS DIFFERENTLY

Experiment with taking a Breathing Space when you notice your thoughts becoming repetitive, circular or negative in tone. The Breathing Space allows us to explore relating to our thoughts in new ways, for example:

1. Just watching

Just watch each thought come in and leave without feeling that you have to follow it. If you leave thoughts alone, rather than trying to avoid or suppress them, you may find that they 'move on' in their own time.

2. Thoughts are not necessarily facts

View each thought as a passing mental event, rather than necessarily a reflection of fact. As we practise meditation, we begin to see that thoughts are constantly coming and going in our minds - just as sensations come and go in our bodies. Seeing this clearly can help us to take them less seriously. We discover that, although they feel like 'truth', thoughts are simply a representation of our perspective at a particular moment. They often feel very powerful because they are accompanied by feelings. This is particularly true in areas of self-judgement. Yet, even when feelings are strong, this is simply how we are thinking and feeling in this moment. Change is possible.

3. Writing things down

Write your thoughts down on paper or do some drawings that reflect how you feel. This has the effect of letting you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down can give you some time to reflect on its meaning and give you the option of responding to it differently.

4. Reflection

It can be helpful to reflect on upsetting thoughts, to allow space for the possible emergence of a bigger picture, or alternative perspectives, that we are not at first aware of. Approaching difficulties in a gentle, friendly and curious way can result in profound shifts of perspective. Be aware of any sign of any sign that you are criticising yourself. Let your "wise mind" give its perspective, perhaps labelling the feeling out of which it arises, and holding a sense of curiosity, as best you can: "Here is the familiar harsh and critical voice"; "Here is the voice of depression"; "Ah, here is sadness."

The keynote attitude to take with your thoughts is gentle interest and curiosity.

For particularly difficult thoughts, it may be helpful to intentionally take another look at them in a balanced, open state of mind, as part of your sitting practice: If you notice yourself going around in circles or getting caught up in self-judgment, pause and bring your attention back to sensations in the body, and then the original thoughts and feelings.

YOUR MIND'S TOP 10 UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

When you've watched your mind a great deal and seen the same old thoughts come up again and again, you will eventually find you don't rise to the bait anymore.

Naming your familiar thought patterns can help you recognize them when they start up. It allows you to say, "Ah, I know this program. This is my 'I can't stand my boss' program or my 'No one recognizes how hard I work' program." The recognition of thought patterns for what they are creates space between you and them. Eventually, you may see these familiar patterns so clearly that they will no longer press your buttons.

See if you can identify your own Top 10 unhelpful thought patterns or programs.

Keep a record of these "usual suspects" here:

Program 1 _____

Program 2 _____

Program 3 _____

Program 4 _____

Program 5 _____

Program 6 _____

Program 7 _____

Program 8 _____

Program 9 _____

Program 10 _____

It's fine to make this a continuing project extending over the next few weeks—and you don't have to find 10!

WHEN YOU BECOME AWARE OF DIFFICULT THOUGHTS

When you become aware of difficult, upsetting thoughts and images in your mind, hold them in awareness, with an attitude of gentle interest and curiosity, perhaps expanding awareness to include one or more of the following (go back to the breath after each one):

Perhaps there are other ways of seeing this situation?

Perhaps this is the 'voice of depression or anxiety or stress' speaking'?

Perhaps this is confusing a thought with a fact?

Perhaps this is jumping to conclusions?

Perhaps this is thinking in black-and-white terms?

Perhaps this is condemning myself totally because of one thing?

Perhaps this is concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?

Perhaps this is blaming myself for something that isn't my fault?

Perhaps this is judging myself?

Perhaps this is setting unrealistically high standards for myself, so that I will fail?

Perhaps this is mind reading/crystal ball gazing?

Perhaps this is expecting perfection?

Perhaps this is overestimating disaster?

Perhaps this is treating myself more harshly than I would treat someone I cared about who was troubled by this thought, and came to me for advice?

STEPPING BACK FROM THOUGHT

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and that they are not “you” or “reality”. For instance, if you have the thought that you have to get a certain number of things done today and you don’t recognize it as a thought but act as if it’s “the truth”, then you have created a reality in that moment in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

One patient, Peter, who had had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realization of this one night when he found himself washing his car at ten o’clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn’t have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today, because he was already so completely caught up in believing it.

If you find yourself behaving in similar ways, it is likely that you will also feel driven, tense, and anxious without even known why, just as Peter did. So if the thought of how much you have to get done today comes up while you are meditating, you will have to be very attentive to it as a thought or you may be up and doing things before you know it, without any awareness that you decided to stop sitting simply because a thought came through your mind.

On the other hand, when such a thought comes up, if you are able to step back from it and see it clearly, then you will be able to prioritize things and make sensible decisions about what really does need doing. You will know when to call it quits during the day. So the simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

This liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself. When we spend some time each day in a state of non-doing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand. As the mind develops stability and is less caught up in the content of thinking, we strengthen the mind’s ability to concentrate and to be calm. And each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises, and we register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and consider its accuracy, each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and to a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We are coming to know ourselves better and becoming more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be but as we actually are.

Adapted from:

Full Catastrophe Living (pp. 69-70)

By Jon Kabat-Zinn

THE TRAIN OF ASSOCIATIONS

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we all spend much or most of our lives there. But meditation is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Because meditation is not thought, through the continuous process of silent observation, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen.

When we lose ourselves in thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps our mind and carries it away, and in a very short time we can be carried far indeed. We hop on a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line we may wake up and realise that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them, but then vanish upon inspection.

But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, and then all of a sudden - whoosh! - gone, we are lost in that one. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, so that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: "Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge." They can drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and the impact they have on our lives, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arising and passing, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind; we can see them for the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. Which thoughts will we invest in? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which to act on and which simply to let be.

Adapted from:
Insight Meditation
by Joseph Goldstein

HOME PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK FOLLOWING SESSION 6

- **Choose your own formal mindfulness practices** from the selection of audio recordings you have been provided with to make up a minimum of 40 minutes every day. You might like to select practices that you have found particularly helpful during the course, as well as revisiting others that you may have struggled with initially. It is fine to choose two shorter practices for your 40-minute practice time (e.g. 20 mins + 20 mins) and to split these across the day (e.g. a practice in the morning and a practice in the evening)
- **Three-Minute Breathing Space:** Practice the regular Three-Minute Breathing Space 3 times a day.
- **Responding** - In addition, you might like to experiment with responding to difficult/strong emotions, unpleasant or stressful events in your day-to-day life by taking a 3-minute responsive breathing space (with extra guidance) whenever you become aware that difficulties are present. If negative thoughts are still around after the breathing space, you might like to use some of the ideas in this session's handouts "Ways You Can See Your Thoughts Differently" and "When you Become Aware of Difficult Thoughts".
- **Complete the 'Being Prepared'** - Recognising the Early Signs of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Questionnaire.

Complete the 'Practice Record Form' each time you do any of the practices. Make a note of anything that you notice.

THE BREATHING SPACE: WAYS TO SEE THOUGHTS DIFFERENTLY

If negative thoughts are still around after you take a breathing space, you have a number of options for what to do next.

Option 1. You might just re-enter the flow of everyday life, with your perspective on thinking shifted, even if only slightly, by taking a breathing space.

Option 2. You might continue to be mindful of the emotion fueling the thoughts, focusing on how it is experienced in the body. You may find it useful to follow the extended instructions for Step 3 introduced in Week 5.

Option 3. You might focus on the negative thoughts themselves, exploring one or more of the strategies described below. Simply watch the thoughts come and go in the field of awareness, without feeling you have to follow them.

1. Simply watch the thoughts come and go in the field of awareness, without feeling you have to follow them.
2. Remind yourself to view the negative thoughts as mental events, rather than facts.
3. Write your thoughts down on paper. This helps you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. The pause between having the thought and writing it down provides an opportunity to take a wider perspective.
4. See if you recognize the thinking pattern as one of your “top ten” unhelpful thoughts.
5. Focus, with kindness and compassion, on the feelings that may be giving birth to the thoughts, asking yourself “What feelings are here now?” “How am I experiencing these feelings in the body?”

HOME PRACTICE RECORD FORM

You can record each time you practice on this form or use your own diary/journal. Make a note of anything that comes up in the home practice so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.

Day/date	Practice (Yes/No)	Comments: Discoveries, Delights, Difficulties?
Saturday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS:	
Sunday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS:	
Monday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS:	
Tuesday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS:	
Wednesday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS:	
Thursday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS::	
Friday	Chosen Practice(s): BS BS BS Responsive BS:	