

MINDFULNESS HOMEWORK: SEEING THOUGHTS AS THOUGHTS

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In becoming more aware of our thoughts and our personal patterns of thinking, we catch increasing glimpses of the fluid, impermanent, and transitory nature of everything – and the potential freedom and flexibility that comes with this kind of awareness. As you simply sit with and acknowledge whatever arises in the mind, without evaluation, judgment, or striving for certain outcomes, you develop greater stability of mind, greater capacity to let things be, and greater insight and compassion in daily life. As you become more aware of the stories you spin and the mental traps you set for yourself, you begin to disengage from them with greater ease.

Thoughts are not Necessarily “Fact” or “Truth.”

- Our minds are constantly making meaning out of what comes to us through our senses.
- Those meanings are often based on fragments or pieces of information – and the meaning we make almost always go well beyond the bare facts that we have access to.
- It follows that the meanings we create often do not reflect what is actually happening – this is the reason we often need to update and refresh our views in light of the present moment and new information.
- We are not often aware of the ways we are making meaning of situations – we simply assume that we are seeing things as they really are.
- Moods and feelings are powerful influences shaping our frame of mind – the lens through which we see the world. This lens, in turn, shapes our patterns of thinking.
- When thoughts and mood mesh, thoughts can be very compelling and hard to see as thoughts. It is as if thinking patterns re-create the feelings that shaped the thoughts in the first place. The feelings then give birth to related thinking patterns, continuing the cycle and making the thoughts seem very real.
- Consider the following two scenarios and how your thoughts, interpretations, and feelings differ in each:
 1. You are feeling down because you just had a quarrel with a colleague at work. Shortly afterward, you see another colleague in the hall and she rushes off quickly, saying she cannot stop.
 2. You are in a good mood because you and a work colleague have just been praised for good work. Shortly afterward, you see another colleague in the hall and she rushes off quickly, saying she cannot stop.
- Notice that despite the same scenario of a colleague rushing off, the context of that scenario (the quarrel or the praise) correlated with very different interpretations and feelings. Again, this is the role of the “frame of mind” that influences our experience.

The Uses of the Thinking Mind (These are the common ways that people use everyday thinking, for better or worse)	The Limits of the Thinking Mind (These are the experiences in life in which the thinking mind tends to not be useful – and can even be an obstacle)
Judging and evaluating	Letting things be
Analyzing and reasoning	Insight and intuition
Planning, organizing, and predicting	Taking risks and being vulnerable
Remembering	Being present
Explaining or reason-giving	Paradox and contradiction
Holding remorse or regret	Forgiveness
Worrying	Faith and trust
Blaming and criticizing	Care, compassion, and love
Narrating and story-telling	Simply experiencing

What We Notice about Thoughts.

- Thoughts just seem to “show up”
- Thoughts can feel strong, powerful, and convincing
- Thoughts can often feel difficult to control
- Often the more we try to control or suppress a thought, the more the thought “shows up”
- Thoughts can be “sticky” (staying with us for a long time - sometimes years - coming up again and again)
- ➔ We can learn a new relationship to thoughts by relating to them “as thoughts” – mental reflexes that arise and pass away naturally

Exercise 1: Sitting Meditation – Viewing Thoughts as Mental Events

Every day, gradually practice sitting meditation for at least 40 to 45 minutes a day. You can choose from 10-minute Sitting Meditation, 20-Minute Sitting Meditation, Stretch and Breath Meditation, Sitting Meditation, Inviting and Working with Difficulty Meditation or simply Bells at 5, 10, 15, 20, and 30 Minutes (all from The Mindful Way Workbook). Feel free to experiment with various combinations day to day. Whichever meditation practice you choose, be consciously aware of thoughts *as thoughts* – not thoughts as “you” or as “truth.”

- When you become aware of your attention drifting from the meditation focus, pause to recognize what thoughts, ideas, or memories are arising. Then quietly or silently say to yourself “thinking” as a gentle reminder to notice thoughts *as thoughts*. Then softly return your attending to your intended focus.
- Or, you can also choose to make the thoughts themselves the focus of your attention. As with any other focus of attention, the practice is simply one of noticing thoughts arise, develop, and pass away. Starting out in this practice, try it for simply 3 or 4 minutes at a time – it can be challenging for most people. Some imagery can be helpful in considering your thoughts:
 - **Thoughts as images projected on a movie screen.** You notice how you buy into the images of a movie as real and you notice as well how the images arise and pass away.
 - **Thoughts as a performance on a stage.** You notice how the performers come on stage to act, and sing and dance. Again, you notice how you get lost in the drama of thoughts and you notice as well how thoughts arise temporarily and pass away naturally.
 - **Thoughts as passing clouds or weather moving through the spacious sky of the mind.** You neither try to push away or hold onto the weather. You simply allow the weather to pass naturally, recognizing that some weather moves through quickly like fluffy clouds while other weather overshadows everything for a period, like a thunderstorm.
 - **Thoughts as leaves moving along a stream.** You allow the thoughts to be carried by the current naturally, not trying to control or fight the current.
- Or, when you notice that your thoughts have a strong emotional charge and are especially persistent or intrusive, practice with recognizing how these emotions are packages of physical sensations, feelings, and related thoughts. See if you can “drop the story” of your thoughts or “drop down” into the experience of the body – the felt sense of emotional and physical feelings. Bring awareness to the region of the body where the intensity resides and engage the practice of “Inviting and Working with Difficulties.”
- Take some time to reflect and journal about this practice of noticing thoughts as thoughts. What did you notice about your experience?

PLEASE NOTE: It's almost as if some thoughts are in disguise so you don't even recognize them as thoughts when they come into your consciousness – especially thoughts like “I'll never be able to do this,” “This is not doing me any good,” “This is actually making things worse.” Thoughts can be so well camouflaged against the background of intense feelings that they get caught up in the reactions of not wanting to have those feelings. But with time and with the slowing down process of meditation, you will start to notice these more subtle thoughts more and more, and naturally they will begin to unravel on their own as you give them less and less energy.

Again, it can be a helpful reminder in this practice: when emotionally intense thoughts are around, acknowledge the thoughts as thoughts and drop down into the body to bring awareness to physical sensations and feelings that surround these thoughts. Again, this is the act of synchronizing mind and body which allows for more presence and perspective, less concept, and increased space and flexibility.

“What are the thoughts I am having? What am I feeling at this moment?”

Mindfulness gives us another place to stand where we can look *at* thoughts rather than just looking *from* thoughts, allowing us to be interested and inquisitive of our thoughts in a less intense and reactive way. When thoughts and feelings feel like a huge torrent or deluge, we employ mindfulness as a way to move to stand beside or behind the waterfall, watching the thoughts and feelings cascade past. They remain close and you can feel the force of them near you, but you are not them.

Always, always the foundation of this skillful practice is kindness and compassion toward oneself – gently reminding yourself that this is what happens in life, that your thoughts are not your enemies, that you and your experience are workable as you are. Without kindness and compassion, the practice only leads to cycles of frustration, disappointment, and self-punishment.

Exercise 2: Your Top 10 Unhelpful Thoughts

Similar to the exercise “Seeing Your Negative Thoughts,” in this exercise you will name the top most familiar thought patterns. This is the kind of activity that helps you to recognize when this pattern is arising for you – such as “This is my ‘I can’t stand my boss’ pattern” or “This is my ‘no one recognizes how hard I work’ pattern.” This in turn allows more space between you and your thought patterns, and with time this can have a significant effect on how these patterns influence your experience.

Your list can be thought patterns about yourself, about other people, about life in general, about the past, about the future, about work or relationships or health, or about hopes or fears or expectations or regrets. Your thought patterns can be mainly words while others can be images or picture in your mind. Sometimes it can just be a sense of meaning or attitude. Thoughts have so much potential to influence in different ways.

- **Example:** “I am awkward in social situations and people don’t really like me.”
- **Pattern 1**

- **Pattern 2**

- **Pattern 3**

- **Pattern 4**

- **Pattern 5**

- **Pattern 6**

- **Pattern 7**

- **Pattern 8**

- **Pattern 9**

- **Pattern 10**

I take my thoughts so seriously. What can I do about this?

Mindfulness teaches that thoughts and emotions are not as static and solid as we might experience them to be. Just as physical sensations are constantly changing, the mind also is in continual flux. Begin to observe the changing physical sensations of sounds, tastes, smells, sights, and touch and come to see them as waves that rise and then fall away naturally. The same is true of thoughts and emotions. Those who practice mindfulness come to consider the mind as another sense organ. Just as the nose smells, the tongue tastes, and the body feels, so the mind thinks. This is what it does. As you start to perceive the impermanence of life, you'll come to more easily see each moment as an opportunity for new perspectives, new approaches, new beginnings. This is a position of freedom. Sit or lie outside and look up at the clouds floating by. Imagine yourself as the vast, open sky and imagine thoughts as the passing clouds of various kinds, letting them come and letting them go.

Exercise 3: Three-Minute Breathing Space – Ways to See Thoughts Differently

(Audio: Track 8 from The Mindful Way Workbook)

Each day this week, take time for a Three-Minute Breathing Space several times per day. If unpleasant feelings or negative thoughts are overwhelming, you may find the following suggestions helpful as you move forward with your day:

- Simply watch the thoughts come and go in the field of awareness, without feeling you have to follow them.
- Remind yourself to view the negative thoughts as mental events, rather than facts.
- 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.
- See if you recognize the thoughts as one of your “top ten” unhelpful thinking patterns.
- Focus on the feelings that may be connected to and giving birth to the thoughts, asking yourself, “What feelings are here now?” and “How am I experiencing these feelings in the body?” Be gentle with yourself.

“DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING. SIT THERE.”

Stop right now and listen to whatever sounds are in your environment – perhaps the wind blowing, cars driving by, the leaves rustling in the trees, the crickets chirping, the people talking nearby, or the sounds of music or the television. Notice how the mind is quick to make meaning and categorize or create an image for each sound. Then simply come back to noticing the sounds as just sounds, the rise and fall of waves of sound. Notice their impermanent nature as they come and go, come and go. What is it like for you to listen to sounds without judgment, evaluation, labeling? Try to bring this practice with you into your daily routine, setting up some kind of reminder so that you'll take a few moments throughout the day to listen, to come into your bodily senses, and to experience the moment directly and nakedly.

Exercise 4: An Early Warning System

Many people find it helpful to recognize the earliest signs that tell them they are getting burned out, overstressed, or generally overwhelmed. Your actions tend to be most effective if you can respond as early as possible to signs that your mood is shifting. We may also call this your **Relapse Signature** – the pattern of signs that indicates your mood is spiraling down in ways that get you stuck. The following are some common examples for many people. Check off the ones that apply to you during emotionally challenging times:

- ☐ Sleeping more or sleeping less, waking at different times, difficulty getting to sleep or getting out of bed.
- ☐ Getting easily tired or exhausted.
- ☐ Not wanting to deal with responsibilities (mail, paying bills, running errands).
- ☐ Seeing negative thoughts and feelings taking hold more (ie, difficult to shake or dismiss).
- ☐ Giving up on exercise.
- ☐ Not wanting to see people.
- ☐ Eating more or eating less, not interested in food or obsessing about food.
- ☐ Becoming irritable with yourself or with others.
- ☐ Putting things off, procrastinating, or postponing deadlines.

- ☐ Other: _____

What are your triggers for the signs listed above?

Now reflect on the situations in your life that tend to lead to the patterns you checked off above. Review the list below and check the ones that apply for you:

- ☐ Relationship problems
- ☐ Work or school demands
- ☐ Disorganized routine
- ☐ Lack of direction or purpose
- ☐ Feeling overworked and stressed out
- ☐ Family issues
- ☐ Financial stress
- ☐ Lack of social support or loneliness
- ☐ Lack of meaning or lack of spiritual/religious connection

- ☐ Other: _____

What are the thoughts and emotions you tend to notice when your mood is shifting and falling into a downward spiral? What do you notice happens in your body? What do you typically do or feel like doing about it? How might you get the help and support you need when you notice your patterns taking hold?

Daily Practice: Practice each of these exercises for 6 out of the next 7 days.

1. **Sitting Meditation – Viewing Thoughts as Mental Events**
2. **Your Top 10 Unhelpful Thoughts**
3. **Three-Minute Breathing Space – Ways to See Thoughts Differently**
4. **An Early Warning System**
5. **“STOP”**
6. **Mindful Walking**

“Stepping Back from Thought” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine, Meditation Teacher & Author)

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not “you” or “reality.” For instance, if you have the thought that you must 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 in that moment a reality in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

One patient, Peter, who’d 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 10 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 knowing 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, 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 nondoing, 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 be calm. And if each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of the content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are.

“The ‘secret’ of life that we are looking for is just this:
To develop through sitting and daily life-practice the power and courage
to return to that which we have spent a lifetime hiding from,
to rest in the bodily experience of the present moment –
even if it is a feeling of being humiliated, of failing, of abandonment, of unfairness.”
(Charlotte Joko Beck)