



# Sacramento Insight Meditation

## Intention, Meditative Awareness and Problematic Thinking

Meditative awareness, or mindfulness, is the cornerstone of practice. This form of non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness allows us to see through confusion, attachment, and reactivity. The resulting clarity allows us to accept and experientially investigate whatever is present in our lives and initiate decisions and actions based on wisdom and compassion. This process embodies A Middle or Balanced Path of practice and living.

Meditative awareness is based on the foundation of a flexible balance and steadiness towards experience. If the mind has been pushed or pulled out of this balance, we tend to become lost in the Process of Reactivity and unconsciously react from habit and conditioning. As a result, the ability of maintaining this balance in the mind, and restoring it when the mind has become unbalanced, is an essential meditative skill.

The skill of seeing that meditative awareness has dissipated, then *intervening* to restore it is significantly different than the skill of meditative awareness itself. In meditative awareness, the mind is present with and accepts whatever is present. It is a state of mind that is not driven by judgment. No effort is made to resist, change, or fix what is present.

Intervening to maintain, strengthen, or restore meditative awareness, on the other hand, involves an experiential evaluation of the quality of meditative awareness that is present, an assessment of what needs to be done to restore or stabilize it, and the initiation of skillful action. The starting place in developing these skills is establishing a clear intention to protect and maintain one's meditative awareness.

What roles do thought and thinking play in this process? The historical Buddha placed enormous emphasis on the power and influence of thought in our lives. He said "Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind."

Skillful thought and thinking – those that point or incline the mind towards clarity, balance, and peace – are considered principal components of a skillful practice. They support meditative awareness as well as wise action and speech.

Our objective in practice is to cultivate – develop, maintain, and strengthen – skillful thought.

Thoughts and thinking that are not skillful – those that point or incline the mind towards confusion, struggle, and dissatisfaction – can compromise meditative awareness. They can trigger emotional reactions that throw the mind out of balance. They reinforce, perpetuate, and deepen aversive mind states, such as confusion, anxiety, frustration, anger, doubt, and depression, through repetition and fixation on certain themes.

The historical Buddha warned that this type of thinking can "obstruct wisdom, cause difficulties and lead away from liberation." Our goal in practice is to avoid or abandon unskillful thought. So how can we do this?

The first response is always to make thought an object of meditation and to experientially investigate. We focus on the process of thinking, not its content or story line. We note or label the thinking – remember, thinking, planning, imagining. We deconstruct the experience by exploring how the thought manifests itself or affects the breath, body, feeling tone (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral/indifferent) emotions, thoughts, and patterns of these. As our practice matures, this process of inquiry becomes a habit and then an intuitive response to experience.

This helps us distinguish an emotional reaction from the thought that triggers or is related to it. We begin to see how merely thinking a thought starts a kinetic cycle of Reactivity that makes us go unconscious. The process of investigation will frequently disarm problematic thinking by dissipating its intensity or breaking the reactive cycle that it triggered.

But what does one do if meditative investigation fails to break a pattern of unskillful thinking or reduce its intensity to a workable level?

*Meditative psychology recognizes that action must be taken to stop counterproductive or harmful thoughts from compromising meditative awareness.* Meditative investigation helps us see and understand the nature of problematic thinking that has arisen and why it is continuing, even if it

has not disrupted the reactive thought cycle or measurably reduced its intensity. This experiential knowledge helps us make a skillful choice on how to work with the particular type of problematic thinking that is present.

*Five different strategies are recommended as an antidote to unskillful thinking, as a way of balancing the energy in the mind, and to redirect the mind towards skillful thoughts. These strategies are not intended to replace meditative investigation. They are to be employed when unskillful thoughts overwhelm meditative awareness and disable the investigative process. Likewise, their purpose is not to engage in a cognitive analysis of the thoughts themselves or to dive into the content of the thinking and work with it. The historical Buddha said that by following these strategies the mind will become “steadied internally, quieted, and brought to singleness and concentrated.”*

The five strategies are:

1. ***Replacing Unskillful Thinking With Its Opposite.*** This involves examining unskillful thinking and the mind state or emotion that accompanies it, then substituting thinking which rebalances the mind. Thoughts of self-judgment and criticism, promoting a sense of inadequacy and doubt, are replaced with thoughts about situations in which you have performed competently which promote a sense of well-being and confidence. Thoughts supporting anger are replaced with thoughts that will tend to support empathy and compassion. Thoughts encouraging resentment are substituted with thoughts that promote appreciation.

2. ***Reflecting on the Negative Consequences of Unskillful Thought.*** This approach involves reflecting on the consequences or implications of continuing to be caught in the current pattern of unskillful thinking. This means experientially and meditatively reflecting on the issue. Holding an open question and allowing the answers to arise from reflection – what will happen if this thinking pattern continues? How will it affect the mind? And the body? Behavior? This form of reflective inquiry can generate wisdom and Insight that diminishes or dissipates the unskillful thinking.

As you begin your morning, you find your mind racing, thinking about the amount of work facing you during the day, producing a steadily increasing level of anxiety. You stop, reflect on the consequences of allowing this process to continue. You recognize it will soon lead to a sense of being overwhelmed, and negatively influence the rest of the day. The mind opens to this possibility, the attention is

returned back to the breath, and the mind begins to settle back into the direct experience of the moment rather than continuing to project out into the future.

3. ***Redirecting Attention Away From Unskillful Thinking.*** With this strategy, awareness is intentionally moved to some form of wholesome thinking or images that allow the mind to stabilize and become calm. This might involve thinking about, or imaging, work you’re doing on a business, organization, family, or social project in which you have a great sense of commitment and passion and which gives you a sense of accomplishment or pleasure. Or it might be simply redirecting the mind to something else that can be solidly focused on to divert the mind from, and break the cycle of, repetitive and compulsive thought.

4. ***Reflecting on The Causes of Unskillful Thought and Alternatives.*** This process, like Reflection or Negative Consequences, involves reflective inquiry. This time the inquiry is directed towards the causes and conditions that are driving the unskillful thought and possible alternatives. An examination of a particularly troubling bout of compulsive thinking may be driven by a fear of performance, or rejection, or a need for acceptance, or a refusal of the mind to accept the realities of a particular situation. If the cause or condition that is fueling the problematic thinking can be clearly seen, attention can shift to meditatively working with the underlying cause rather than thinking.

5. ***Subduing or Overpowering Unskillful Thought Through Effort.*** The traditional image used for this strategy is of a large man overpowering and holding a smaller man on the ground. This approach, literally, is about power and effort – refusing to go into or continue certain types of thoughts. It is captured by the popular phrase – “I won’t go there.” Sometimes the act of taking a stand, of refusing to engage in certain thoughts, by itself will cut off difficult thought patterns at their base. Other times, you may need to use this strategy in combination with others discussed above.

There are two approaches to working with these five strategies: one is to see these as progressive alternatives. The first option is tried, and if that doesn’t work, move to the second, then the third. Another is to see the selection of the appropriate strategy as arising from listening deeply to the unique circumstances of each situation and choosing the response that seems best suited to deal with the type of troublesome thinking that is present.

It may be helpful to think of these strategies as a first aid kit that can be used when the usual practice of meditative awareness and investigation is not effective. Like a first aid kit, each of these strategies has to be ready to be used when you find yourself caught in a cycle of reactive thinking. Take the time now to reflect on these different approaches and how you might employ them. Image yourself caught in some recurring pattern of thought that is difficult and see yourself using these strategies. With respect to Replacement and Redirection, develop a clear vision of what thinking or image you would use for the types of thoughts you already know tend to cause problems.

Also be alert to the fact that working with meditative awareness and investigation, and these five strategies for dealing with difficult thoughts, may alert you to work that needs to be done outside of the meditative arena. These processes may make it clear that it would be helpful to work with a counselor or therapist around issues involving relationships, anger, conflict avoidance, past trauma, or other considerations.

### **Daily Life Homework**

#### **Working With Difficult Thoughts**

The homework during the next two weeks is designed to build on, and expand, our scope of inquiry relating to the lawful unfolding of experience and Intention in daily life. The practices recommended below, however, will act as a valuable investigation of Intention even if you have not participated in the last several weeks of our meetings. Here are the suggested practices:

*Practice One:* Select one type of thought or thinking that you know causes you trouble and tends to move into a reactive spiral of unskillful thought and emotion. Reflect on how you could use the process of *Replacement With Opposite* to work with situations where this type of thinking arises. Develop a specific line of thinking or imagery that you will use when it does arise. When the problematic thinking does appear, employ the Replacement strategies; experience what happens to the problematic thinking and the feeling tone that is present; how the process manifests in the breath, body, other thoughts, and emotions.

*Practice Two:* Select one type of thought or thinking that you know causes you trouble and tends to move into a reactive spiral of unskillful thought and emotion. Reflect on how you could use the process of *Redirection of Attention* to work with situations where this type of thinking arises.

Develop a specific line of thinking or imagery that you will use when it does arise. When the problematic thinking does appear, employ the Replacement strategies; experience what happens to the problematic thinking and the feeling tone that is present; how the process manifests in the breath, body, other thoughts, and emotions.

As best you can, engage in both of these practices without judgment, without an agenda other than investigation and discovery, and without trying to change, fix, or solve whatever is seen and experienced.

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