



Mindfulness for Later Life Programme

Week 4 Handout

Recognising Thoughts and Emotions as Mental Events

We know the world only through the window of our mind.

When our mind is noisy, the world is as well.

And when our mind is peaceful, the world is, too.

Knowing our minds is just as important as trying to change the world.

Haemin Sunim, The things you can see only when you slow down.

Our aim in this course is to be more aware more often. A powerful influence taking us away from being 'fully present' in each moment is our automatic tendency to become 'hooked in' by our thoughts. Often, these thoughts will take us, quite automatically, down some fairly well worn paths in our minds. In this way we may lose awareness of the moment, and also lose the freedom to *choose* what, if any, action needs to be taken.

Our thoughts can have powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often thoughts are triggered and then run quite automatically. By becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind and, as best we can, letting go of them and returning our attention to the breath and the present moment, we can begin to get some distance and perspective on them.

That allows us to see that thoughts are just mental events, not truth, reality, or 'me', and that there may be other ways to think about situations. This can free us from the tyranny of some of the old, familiar, unhelpful thought patterns that can automatically pop into mind.

Eventually, we may crucially come to realise, deep in our bones, *that all thoughts are only mental events* – including the thoughts that say they are not. *Thoughts are not facts; and we are not our thoughts.*

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind. It is also possible to get hold of them, and look them over from a number of different perspectives. By becoming more familiar with our habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns we can become aware of, and change, the processes that lead us into unhelpful downward mood spirals.



Relating to Thoughts

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 a thought that you must get a certain number of things done today and you don't recognise 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 course participant, Peter, who'd had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realisation of this one night when he found himself washing his car at 10 o'clock at night with the floodlights on 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 it needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself he also saw that he was 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 into 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 prioritise 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 recognising your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for clearer sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

The 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 be calm, and if each time we recognise 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 its content, then 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.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Full Catastrophe Living p.69-70.

Examples of Unhelpful Thinking Patterns

The types of thinking patterns below are more likely to occur when we are stressed or anxious, experiencing low mood, or in pain.

In becoming aware of your own patterns, and by recognising them, you have more freedom not to identify with them or to take them at face value.

What are some of your own examples or 'favourites'?

- **Mind-reading:** 'He thinks I'm stupid / boring / unattractive'
- **Crystal-ball gazing:** 'I'm not going to enjoy this'
- **Over-estimating the negative:** 'This is going to be a total disaster'
- **Eternalising:** 'I'll never manage this. 'I'll always feel like this'
- **Expecting perfection:** 'I / people shouldn't ever make mistakes'
- **Over-generalising:** 'This is difficult – everything's such an effort'
- **Judgementalism:** 'I wasn't able to do that – I'm just not good enough'
- **Taking the blame:** 'When things go wrong, it's my fault'

Personal 'favourites'?

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Hearing our Thoughts

A thought arises, lingers in consciousness for a relatively short while, then fades. It's just a mental event, an 'object' that we can pay attention to but that is neither 'me' nor reality. But sometimes we may need a more concrete way to shift our perspective so as to perceive it in that way. Our sense of hearing may provide such a way.

Sounds are around us all the time. We don't need to go out and hunt them down. We can just give ourselves over to hearing what is already here to be heard in this very moment. Sounds are just part of the input the mind receives from the world.

These facts determine how we normally relate to sounds. When we hear the sound of a truck in the street, we don't automatically think of it as part of ourselves; we know it is in the street outside.

If we think of the mind as the 'ear' for our thoughts, then perhaps we can learn to relate to thoughts that arise in the mind in the same way that we relate to sounds arriving at the ears. Normally we may not even be aware of the extent to which the mind is 'receiving' thoughts until we refine our ability to be aware of them, until we practice intentionally giving them the space to simply be here as they are and to be seen and known for what they are: discrete events in the field of awareness. By analogy, mindfulness of hearing can help us develop a similar sense of openness toward our thoughts, allowing them simply to come and go, without enticing us into the drama they are creating.

In this week's home practice, we practise attending to sounds for a time and then move to seeing if we are able to relate to thoughts and thinking in the same way. In this way, we are creating optimal conditions to 'freeze the frame' on that way of attending to experience while we shift the focus of our attention from sounds to thoughts.

The Guesthouse by Jelaluddin Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture, still, treat each
guest honourably. He may be
clearing you out for some new
delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the
malice.

Meet them at the door laughing and
invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.

because each has been sent as a
guide from beyond.

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Informal Practice Log – Week 4

Each day this week, see if you can bring mindful awareness to a pleasant activity. It is best if you can put your reflections on the practice log soon after you have completed the activity. **What was the situation? Where were you, who were you with, what were you doing?**

Activity	What feelings, thoughts, sensations did you notice before you decided to experience this mindfully?	What feelings, thoughts and sensations did you notice WHILE doing this mindfully?	What did you learn from doing this?	What feelings, thoughts and sensations are you noticing NOW as you write this?

