

The nature of thoughts

We all have busy minds. Sometimes it feels as though we are out of control of our thoughts, or hold a whole conversation with ourselves. Sometimes troubling thoughts keep cycling around and around. Sometimes we just don't know where thoughts come from. This is all perfectly normal!

Until we have a huge amount of meditation experience, it is very unlikely that thoughts will disappear almost entirely. Even now, after 25 years of practice, I still find thoughts distracting my attention. Yes, I have experienced complete clarity of mind, enjoying the stillness, but this is more the exception than the rule.

So the first instruction is don't try to stop thinking. If you try pushing thoughts away, you give them importance and power. So we have to come to terms with, and make friends with our thoughts.

The first level of insight into this issue, is that the thoughts appear in habitual patterns, which is based on previous experience. If the same types of thought keep reappearing, it's just a habit, and all habits can change. So in the beginning, just recognise the old patterns emerging. As you recognise them coming, name them, for example, 'worry' (anxiety, by the way, is a feeling that comes from worry).

As you do this, be friendly. It's like having your door open and food on the table, and being unsure who's going to come through the door and start eating. All guests are welcome.

The second level of insight is that thoughts are like any kind of object of experience. They appear in our consciousness, hang around for a while, and then leave. In particular, you may notice that the thoughts have no substance, they just drift in and out like phantoms.

The degree to which they are troubling, is the degree to which we give them power. By simply letting them drift in and out, noticing them but not engaging, they immediately lose their potency. Any thought brought into the spotlight of your attention, begins to fade and dissolve.

The next level of working with this goes very deep. You have already begun this process, by recognising thoughts as insubstantial and temporary phenomena. It's useful to use an analogy here: think of the sky and you probably imagine clouds, sun and weather patterns. However, clouds appear, drift past, and if you look at them closely are always subtly changing. So it is with the mind: the mind is like huge open sky, which can accommodate any kind of weather from wispy cumulus to thunderous storms, but whatever the weather, the sky is still open and clear and unaffected by it all. The mind is like this.

This may be a difficult concept at first. However, it is not unlike mindful breathing, where we sit back and simply observe the body's natural rhythm of breathing. It's that neutral observer or witness we are interested in. If you step back from thoughts as a neutral observer, just witnessing them arising and fading, you are on track to coping much better with the busy mind.