

Session 4-Thoughts are Not Facts

Read the four lines of text below, pause at the end of each sentence, and observe your thoughts.

1. Alex was on the way to school.
2. And was worried about the math lesson
3. And was not sure they would be able to control the class today
4. It was not part of a janitor's duty.

Our interpretations of events reflect what we bring to them as much as, and sometimes even more than, what is actually there.

Thoughts are not facts
(Even the ones that say they are)

-Teasdale, Williams, Segal (The Mindful Way Workbook)

What did you notice as you read these sentences? Most people find that as they move from one sentence to the next, they update the thoughts they are having about the scene. The first sentence typically brings to mind a child going to school. The second typically brings the idea that the child is worried about the math lesson. In the third sentence, the mental model typically changes from student to teacher, before changing to the janitor in the fourth sentence.

We are always making meaning of our sensory experience. For example, when doing the Breath-Body-Sounds-Thoughts meditation, people often notice how we make stories about sounds. We think to ourselves “oh there’s someone walking”, rather than thinking “oh, there’s a low volume intermittent sound that grows in intensity then fades away”. For the most part, we are barely conscious about the running commentary our mind keeps, until we are asked to do so during a meditation practice, or we do an exercise like the “four lines exercise” above.

It’s easy to see how this running commentary leads to inference that might create or maintain an emotional reaction. For example, most of us have, at one time or another, received a difficult email or text from a colleague, client, or family member that provoked a strong emotional response. We see words on the screen and create a commentary about what the writer intended. This commentary often is accompanied by an impulse to respond. This is just how the mind works. However, problems can arise from these “automatic pilot” responses. During times of stress, our minds are more likely to create negative inferences about ourselves or others as a result of our experience. These negative inferences can be really sticky and may encourage us to respond without having a full picture of what’s happening. Later, once our minds settle, we might have different thoughts or perspectives on the situation.

It is possible to change our relationship to thoughts, viewing thoughts as mental events or sensations of the mind, rather than seeing those thoughts as “you”, “the other person”, or “the truth”. As Joseph Goldstein noted:

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.

In this program, we have explored three ways of viewing thoughts in a new way—seeing “thoughts as thoughts” rather than as unchangeable facts. Once we see our thoughts more clearly, we can decide which ones we wish to follow.

Three ways to practice viewing thoughts as mental events or sensations of the mind, not as facts:

1. **Meditation Practices that Focus Attention:** Focusing on breath, body, or sounds, and then becoming aware of when your attention has been pulled to thinking. When you notice this, perhaps saying “thinking” to yourself as a reminder to see the thoughts as thoughts and returning your attention to the meditative target (e.g. breathing, sensations in the body, or sound).
2. **Meditation Practices that make thoughts the primary target of attention:** Bring your attention to thoughts, noticing them arrive, capture your attention, linger, and then fade away, just like sensations in the body or sounds. It might be helpful to use images or metaphors to help bring your attention to thinking, for example:
 - i) Thinking about thoughts like leaves floating on a stream, carried by the current, that capture your attention while they are in view
 - ii) Thinking about thoughts like images projected on a screen, that capture your attention while they are on the screen in front of you.
3. **Deconstruct your experience:** Remind yourself that thoughts come in a package together with body sensations, emotions, impulses to act and notice what’s present for you right now. If it’s helpful, use the “three minute breathing space” practice to help you do this.

Home Practice for the Week Following Session 4

As we move into the final third of the program, the task is (hopefully) to find a form of meditation practice, either formal or informal, that you can incorporate into your daily life. Use this week to experiment, since next week you will be asked to pick a practice or set of practices that you will commit to for the four weeks following completion of this program.

1. On a daily basis (or at least some days!), can you incorporate at least 10 minutes of formal meditation practice? This might include a breathing meditation, scanning of the body, mindful walking, mindful movement, or any combination.
2. Practice the three minute breathing space 1-2 times every day, ideally at the same time every day.
3. Deconstruct (and ideally write down) two pleasant and two unpleasant events in the course of the next week.
4. Use the three-minute breathing space as a tool for responding to an unpleasant event, ideally when it is happening.