

The Reality Below Thoughts

by Jack Kornfield (excerpted from [The Wise Heart](#))



As we observe our thoughts and question our beliefs, we come to understand that while thinking, planning and remembering are vital to our lives, they are more tentative than we believe. Our thoughts are always more provisional and one sided than we admit. Ordinarily we believe them. But questioning our thoughts is at the heart of [mindfulness] practice. Is what we believe real, solid, certain? As writer Richard Haight observed, “Chief Roman Nose of the Cheyenne and his people believed he was immortal and he, and they, were right every day of his life except one.”

When we believe our own thoughts and opinions we become fundamentalists. There can be fundamentalist Buddhists, fundamentalist scientists, fundamentalist psychologists. But no matter how strongly we believe our perspective, there are always other points of view. In our personal relationships this is really obvious. A relationship matures when each partner grants the possibility that the other may be right (though we may not always believe it).

Most of our mental suffering comes from how tightly we hold our beliefs, thoughts and perspectives. In the monastery Ajahn Chah used to smile and ask “Is it true?” He wanted us to learn to hold our thoughts lightly. In Buddhist training... thoughts are deconstructed, the entire structure dismantled plank by plank.

The Sufis illustrate the one sidedness of our thought with a story from the holy fool, Mullah Nasrudin. A king, disenchanted with his subjects’ dishonesty, decided to force them to tell the truth. When the city gates were opened one morning, gallows had been erected in front of them. A royal guard announced, “Whoever will enter the city must first answer a question which will be put to them by the captain of the guard.” Mullah Nasrudin stepped forward first. The captain spoke, “Where are you going? Tell the truth...the alternative is death by

hanging.” “I am going,” said Nasrudin, “to be hanged on those gallows.” “I don’t believe you!” replied the guard. Nasrudin calmly replied, “Very well then. If I have told a lie, hang me!” “But that would make it the truth!” said the confused guard. “Exactly,” said Nasrudin, “your truth.”

When we are bothered by our thinking... psychology tells us to ask, is it really true? If we listen from the heart, we will see how much trouble comes from believing stories that may not even be true. Ajahn Chah said, “You have so many view and opinions, what’s good and bad, right and wrong, about how things should be. You cling to your views and suffer so much. They are only views, you know.”

Within the stillness of meditation we see the unreality of thought. We learn to observe how words and images arise and then vanish, leaving no trace. The succession of images and associations – often called mental proliferations – builds thought castles. But these castles, ideas, and plans float for a time and then they disappear, like bubbles in a glass of soda. We can become so silent that we actually feel the subtle thought energy appear and vanish again.

But, if thoughts are empty, what can we rely upon? Where is our refuge? Here is how the Indian sage Nisargadatta answered this question: “The mind creates the abyss, the heart crosses it.” The thinking mind constructs views of right and wrong, good and bad, self and other. These are the abyss. When we let thoughts come and go without clinging, we can use thought, but we rest in the heart. We become more trusting and courageous. There is an innocence to the heart. We are the child of the spirit. And there is an innate wisdom. We are the ancient one. Resting in the heart we live in harmony with our breath, our body. Resting in the heart our patience grows. We do not have to think it all through. Life is unfolding around us. As the Indian Master Charon Singh put it, “In time, even grass becomes milk.”

Of course, stories have value. As a teacher and storyteller, I have come to respect their evocative power. But even these stories are like fingers pointing to the moon. At best, they replace a deluded cultural narrative or a misleading tale with a tale of compassion. They touch us and lead us back to the mystery here and now.

In my individual meditation interviews, I try to help people drop below the level of their story and see the beauty that shines all around them. Psychologist Len Bergantino writes about frustrating therapy sessions with a patient who was disconnected, detached and aiming to please. “The feeling I had on one particular day was, I just didn’t want to say one more word to him about anything. So, to his surprise, I took out my mandolin and in the most loving, mellow, beautiful way I could, I played, “Come Back to Sorrento.” He broke down in tears and cried for the last forty minutes of the session,

saying only, “Dr. Bergantino, you sure earned your money today!” I thought, “And to think, I wasted all these years talking to people.” When we drop below the stories, our heart shines.



Jack Kornfield has taught meditation internationally since 1974 and is one of the key teachers to introduce mindfulness practice to the West. He holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and is a father, husband and activist. His books have been translated into 20 languages and sold more than a million copies. (see jackkornfield.com)

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