

Practical Steps to Enlightenment: Discovering the Truth About Thoughts

There are three things that we can start doing today for enlightenment.

1. Stop seeking.
2. Practice being the witness.
3. Cease struggling with life unfolding.

Today we will talk about the second aspect – being the witness. And in particular practical steps to being the witness of thoughts, rather than being control by thoughts. Today we will examine three things you can practice today to shift your relationship with the mind's incessant activity and realize enlightenment.

The Buddha identified five aspects or aggregates that we mistakenly identify with as being our true self: form, feeling tone, perceptions, mental formations, and sense consciousness. Of these, I have found that human beings most often identify with thoughts as indicating who they are.

You may have heard me say before that "we are not our thoughts" or "just recognize and hold the thoughts in awareness", but these ideas can sometimes feel abstract or difficult to grasp. In this talk, we will go beyond theory and explore practical ways to directly realize the truth of this statement. We will learn how to let go of thinking and instead witness thoughts appearing. Oftentimes, when we hear the phrase "just let it go," but we may wonder how to actually do it. Today, we will explore in detail three steps to shifting our relationship with the mind.

Before we get into this, there is one important context for this work. There will be fear that arises when we consider letting go of thoughts. The mind often tricks us into believing that constant thinking is necessary for our safety, happiness and sense of self. But we can confront and dissolve these fears, so that we are no longer controlled by them. With the three steps is a continuous recognition that these fears arise from the egoic mind trying to remain center-stage. As long as we believe the thoughts that feed these fears, they can never self-liberate.

Here are the three steps to shift your relationship with thoughts and realize enlightenment.:

1. Realizing we can't stop thoughts

2. Not identifying with thoughts
3. Being that which is aware of thoughts

Let examine each of these steps.

Step 1: Realizing We Can't Stopping Thoughts

Recognizing that we cannot stop thoughts or solve them by thinking is the first step. The more we battle against thoughts, the more we get stuck in them. Trying to stop the mind from producing thoughts is a losing battle. The saying, "what we resist, persists, and even grows" applies here. The more we fight against the thoughts that appear, the more intense they become.

When we struggle with restless mind the mind produces self-talk that says, "I wish the mind would be quiet", but can you see that this is just more thought. It is thought about not thinking. A practice that I found useful in the past was to notice sounds arising and passing and then moving to witnessing thoughts in the same way. It is easy for us to see sounds as impersonal and not-self so it is a helpful way to set the stage for letting go of thoughts.

Sometimes I offer this exercise to help meditators see the futility in trying to stop thoughts. Take the next 30 seconds and think about anything that captures your interest. It could be relationships in your life, a favorite place, a heartwarming conversation, or even your plans for the day. And, at the same time do your best to avoid thinking about a pink elephant. Now, pause and reflect. How long did you manage to keep the thought of a pink elephant at bay? My wager is that it lasted less than 5 seconds. You may be curious about how this occurred. After all, when was the last time you contemplated a pink elephant?

The phenomenon is known as "ironic process theory" in psychology. It suggests that deliberate efforts to suppress specific thoughts make them more likely to occur. This theory was first studied by social psychologist Daniel Wegner in 1987. Wegner discovered that individuals who are prone to anxiety or obsessive thoughts may find it more difficult to inhibit these thoughts, especially during times of stress. This can result in ironic mental processes, where the very act of trying not to think about something can lead to intrusive thoughts about that very thing.

Once we realize that we cannot stop intrusive thoughts, how do we move forward in changing our relationship to thoughts. The next is looking at our attachment to our thoughts.

Step 2: Not identifying with Thoughts

Once we know that we cannot forcefully stop thinking, we can examine our relationship to thoughts. We can begin to see the true nature of thoughts – that they are impersonal mental events and not necessarily an accurate reflection of truth or who we are. When we realize this, we can begin to let go of our identification with thoughts. We learn to see thoughts as passing phenomena, like clouds in the sky, without attaching to them or believing in their inherent reality. The true path to liberation lies in slipping out of the identification with thoughts altogether.

Four Methods to Dis-identify with Thoughts

In my meditation practice, I've learned four methods for ceasing to identify with inner thoughts, depending on the type of thoughts and my current state of mind.

Method I: Questioning on whose behalf thoughts arise. This approach is helpful for those who have a logical or analytical mind and may need a reason or justification to let go of their thoughts. It involves questioning the ownership and responsibility of thoughts that arise during meditation. By realizing that thoughts arise spontaneously and are not necessarily reflective of oneself or one's identity, it becomes easier to let them pass by without getting attached to them. By realizing that thoughts appear spontaneously and are not necessarily reflective of oneself, it becomes easier to let them pass by. This method allows for a cognitive shift in perspective, helping to create distance between oneself and the thoughts that arise, reducing their grip on the mind.

One way that I have found helpful in non-identifying with thoughts is to ask the question: on whose behalf do thoughts arise? Here is a short exercise to explore this. Think of the color purple. Can you easily do that? Now think of the color blue, and then the color yellow. Was that difficult? Probably not. Now, here's the exercise: always have happy thoughts, no matter what your circumstances are. How difficult was that? You probably found that you could not control whether or not a happy thought appeared.

The reason I bring this up is because we can realize that not all the thoughts we have are actually ours. Can we see that all these thoughts do not define who we are. Some thoughts are generated by our upbringing, our culture, and other external influences. It's important therefor to consider not just the content of each thought, which would be impossible to monitor, but rather on whose behalf the thoughts arise.

On whose behalf do thoughts arise? There are only two possibilities: the separate self or the true self of awareness. Look and see. If the thought arises on behalf of a temporary, finite, separate self, then investigate the reality of that self. Once we recognize that the separate self, on whose behalf our thoughts arise, may not be present, we can simply drop the thoughts that arise on behalf of an illusory separate self. By practicing letting go of these thoughts, we will find that they diminish over time. Instead, we can focus on thoughts that are practical, creative, and useful, as these thoughts will continue to arise naturally. The only category of thoughts that cease to arise are those that arise on behalf of an illusory separate self. As these thoughts diminish, the accompanying feelings and activities based on the sense of a separate self will also decrease.

Method II: Shift attention to body rather than the mind's activities. This approach involves observing bodily sensations associated with emotions that arise with thoughts such as frustration, anxiety, or other mental states. We bring the focus of our attention down the abstract realm of the mind to the concrete realm of the body. By bringing attention to the body, we can step outside the train of thought and notice the freedom from being entangled in thoughts.

Method III: Realizing how we create our own suffering by believing thoughts. This approach involves developing awareness of one's current state of mind without judgment, and investigating the main causes of mental suffering, which are often thoughts from the past or future. By recognizing that thoughts are subjective and conceptual in nature, and that they play a role in creating suffering, one can reduce their attention and credibility, allowing them to naturally drop away. This method involves cultivating a non-judgmental and accepting attitude towards one's thoughts and seeing them as passing phenomena rather than absolute truths.

Method III: Contemplating Counteracting Forces. We can use specific mental states as counteracting forces to combat runaway or disturbing thoughts. One powerful counteracting force is reflection on impermanence and death, which helps us gain clarity on our priorities. When we recognize that death is certain, but its timing is unknown, we realize the importance of cultivating positive mental states in the present moment. Worry cannot persist in a mind that is content with what we have and who we are, as we see that all things are transient and stop craving and clinging to them.

Personally, one counteracting force that works well for me is realizing that my self-centered mind tends to revolve around "Me" as the center of the universe. However, acknowledging the vastness of the universe and the countless sentient beings in it who also seek happiness and avoid suffering, I see the absurdity of my self-centered rumination. My worries and concerns seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Step 3: Being That Which Witnesses Thoughts

It is through the power of awareness, the seeing that is prior to thought, that we can break free from the grip of incessant thinking. This knowing, being, or presence is already within us, with or without spiritual practice or meditation. We are already aware and knowing, but often this knowing is mistakenly attributed to thinking. We become trapped in the illusion that to think is to truly know. But there is a deeper knowing that transcends the realm of thinking. By learning to acknowledge this knowing, free from the entanglements of thinking, we can become more familiar with ourselves as the aware presence that exists prior to constantly identifying with the movement of thoughts, fears, and anxieties.

As we awaken to our deeper nature that exists beyond the confines of thinking, we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and reality as they truly are, unfiltered by the ideas and beliefs imposed on us by thought. Through meditation and other contemplative practices, we cultivate the ability to clearly see, again and again, the knowing that is prior to thinking. We shift our attention away from the incessant stream of thoughts and become less fascinated with the projections and judgments produced by thinking. In this process, these projections begin to dissolve and fall away, as they lose their hold on us. As they fall away a big chunk

of the egoic self falls away, and we come to rest in the silence and spaciousness of pure awareness.

Through this practice, we begin to untangle ourselves from the web of constant thinking, and we gain the ability to simply rest in the presence of awareness itself. We become more rooted in the present moment and recognize the spaciousness, clarity, and peace that exists beyond the noise of thoughts.

Asking “Am I Aware”

To access the state of stillness amidst the busyness of daily life, we can cultivate the habit of punctuating our day with moments of awareness. This can be as simple as asking ourselves the question, "Am I aware?" and resting in the timeless pause between the question and the answer.

In that moment of stillness, we can touch the timeless essence of our existence, beyond the conditioned patterns of the mind. It is in the ending of the mind that we can truly find the answer to the question of who we are. This practice of asking "Am I aware?" directs our attention to the direct experience of being aware itself, cutting through the clutter and taking us straight to the heart of consciousness.

The beauty of this practice lies in its accessibility. We can make it a habit by asking ourselves the question before going to bed at night and resting in the experience of being aware. It's a modern twist on the age-old question "Who am I?", but more direct and without the need for effort or mental analysis.

The question "Am I aware?" is clear and straightforward, allowing us to rest in the pure awareness that is always present. We can set up camp in that space and get familiar with it, returning to it whenever our minds are called upon to engage with the external world.

The key is to keep coming back home to the heart of bare presence, letting our minds rest there instead of constantly seeking and resisting external objects. Our minds may still generate thoughts, but we can always find our way back to the source of pure awareness, where true freedom and ease can be found.

My Story

I discovered a powerful tool that transformed my perspective and brought me greater peace and freedom in my life. It all started with a simple shift in how I

viewed my thoughts - as fleeting mental events rather than reflections of my true self. This change in perspective opened up a new way of relating to my emotions, memories, and events.

One practice that has been particularly helpful for me is thought labelling. When faced with a powerful or challenging situation or emotion, I would first examine the underlying believed thought that was fueling it. For example, I might notice that I am holding onto a belief that I am not good enough or that someone else should not have done something they did. By identifying the thought, I could bring awareness to it and loosen my attachment to it.

Next, I would pay attention to where the emotion was manifesting in my body. This step was crucial because it helped me recognize that emotions are not just thoughts, but also physical sensations. I would allow myself to fully experience the sensation in my body without judgment or resistance. This process required courage and practice, as it was uncomfortable to confront my pain and difficulties head-on.

During this practice, I would repeatedly ask myself, "Is it true?" about the believed thought that was fueling the situation. This simple question helped me challenge the validity of the thought and create distance from it. As I continued to inquire, I often found that the belief lost its grip on me and started to dissolve, like a bubble popping. I realized that the belief was not inherently true, but rather a construct of the mind.

As the belief pattern dissolved, I was able to approach the physical experience of the emotion with a new perspective. I began to see the situation as less personal, not something that defined me or my identity. I could witness the situation from a place of awareness, holding it in the spaciousness of the present moment. This shift in perspective allowed me to see the situation as simply a collection of thoughts and sensations, without inherent reality or solidity, like a cloud passing through the sky.

The practice of allowing everything to be experienced, rather than denied or avoided, is crucial to this process. It requires reconnecting with the present moment, with the "isness" of life as it unfolds. It's about being willing to experience our lives as they are, without trying to escape or control our emotions. In this space of non-identification with our thoughts, our conditioned patterns and

unhealed wounds can begin to unravel, and we can let go of our attachment to a separate egoic self.

As we continue to cultivate this practice, we may notice a shift in our relationship with thoughts. We no longer feel as entangled or controlled by them. We develop a greater sense of freedom and choice in how we respond to thoughts, rather than reacting to them impulsively. We come to realize that we are not our thoughts, and that we have the power to choose how we relate to them.

This practice of letting go of identification with thoughts and resting in pure awareness is not always easy and may require ongoing effort and commitment. But with practice, we can develop a deeper sense of presence, clarity, and peace in our lives. We can awaken to our true essence that exists beyond the incessant stream of thinking and come to rest in the boundless truth of our being.

As we continue on this path of letting go and resting in pure awareness, we may experience a shift in our relationship with thoughts and the mind. We may begin to see thoughts as tools that we can use when needed, rather than being controlled by them. We may notice that we are able to respond to thoughts with greater clarity and wisdom, making conscious choices rather than reacting impulsively. We may also develop a deeper connection with our true selves, beyond the fluctuations of thoughts and emotions.

It's important to remember that this practice is a journey, and it may not always be smooth sailing. There may be moments when we get caught up in thoughts or find ourselves identified with them again. But that's okay. It's all part of the process. With patience, compassion, and consistent practice, we can continue to cultivate a state of resting in pure awareness and letting go of the grip of thoughts.

Rewire Our Brains

Recent research on neuroplasticity challenges the old belief that the brain's functioning remains stable in adulthood. Studies at the University of Toronto and the National Institute of Mental Health show that mindfulness meditation can have measurable effects on the brain, leading to changes in brain activation patterns associated with the "narrator" of our thoughts.

These findings suggest that we can become more in touch with our present moment experience and less consumed by our inner commentary. The "narrator"

in the brain becomes less dominant as attention is directed elsewhere. While our early childhood experiences and attachment styles may have influenced the development of our inner narrator, we can rewire some of these patterns and shift our awareness to the present moment and our bodies. Although external events may not change, we can change how we understand, perceive, and react to them, leading to happier lives and glimpses of our true nature.