

# MINDFULNESS: FINDING PEACE IN A FRANTIC WORLD

Professor Mark Williams & Chris Cullen

## WEEK 4 'Moving Beyond the Rumour Mill' - Relating differently to thoughts and worries

[Chapter 8 - please read]

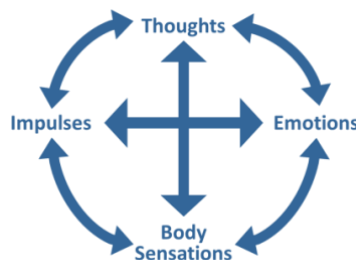
Our thoughts can have very powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often those thoughts are triggered and drive our behaviour quite automatically. By becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind and letting go of them as we return our attention to the sensations of the feet, breathing and the moment, it's possible to get some distance and perspective on them.

This can allow us to see that there may be other ways to think about situations, freeing us from the tyranny of the old thought patterns that automatically arise in the mind. Most importantly, we may eventually come to realise deep in our bones that **all thoughts are mental events, not facts** - they are representations of our current perceptions of reality, not reality itself. This means that **we are not our thoughts**.

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what's going on deeper in the mind: we can become dispassionately interested in them and look them over from a number of different perspectives. By becoming very familiar with our own "Top Ten" habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns, we can more easily become aware of and change the processes that may lead us into downward mood spirals of stress or depression.

The key issue becomes, "**How am I relating to my thoughts in this moment?** Am I totally lost in believing them or can I practise being aware of them coming and going?" One way of practising this view point is to imagine thoughts as 'Thought Buses' that try to pull us on board and take us for a ride. We can practise 'staying at the bus stop', grounding the attention in the body and breathing, and practise returning to these anchors whenever we notice that we've been carried away. This may seem difficult at first, but gets easier and increasingly liberating with practice.

	Thoughts	Emotions	Body Sensations	Action Impulses
Scenario 1				
Scenario 2				



## RELATING SKILFULLY TO THOUGHTS - guidance from Joseph Goldstein

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we all spend much or most of our lives there. But meditation is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Because meditation is not thought, through the process of silent observation, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen.

When we lose ourselves in a thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps our mind and carries it away, and in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop on a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line, we may wake up and realise that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them but then vanish upon inspection.

But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, then all of a sudden – whoosh! – we are gone, lost in a thought. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, so that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this! Say that! Remember! Plan! Obsess! Judge!” They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and their impact on our lives, depends on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arise and pass away, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind; we can see our thoughts as the passing show that they are.

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.

From Joseph Goldstein *Insight Meditation*

## WAYS TO PRACTISE RELATING SKILFULLY TO THOUGHTS & WORRIES

Here are some ways of working with thoughts:

1. **Watching them come and go.** Just allow thoughts to arise and pass away, without feeling that you have to follow them. You may find it helpful to think of them as **“thought-buses”**: they come and go and will take you for a ride if you let them. However, you don’t need to get onto a thought bus, or to stay on it if you find yourself on board!

Use the sensations of the lower half of the body, especially the sensations of contact between the feet and the floor, and the sensations of sitting on the chair and of your breathing to anchor you in the present moment and give some distance in relation to passing thoughts.

You may also find it helpful to use phrases such as the following to help you to step back from thinking and to take a more “de-centred” stance in relation to thoughts:

- “This is just a thought. It’s not a fact. I don’t have to believe it.”
- “Thinking...Thinking...”

2. **Remembering that thoughts are not facts.** The practices above can help us to see thoughts as mental events rather than facts. As we practise meditation, we begin to see that thoughts are constantly coming and going in our minds – just as sensations come and go in our bodies. Seeing this clearly can help us to take thoughts less seriously. We discover that although it may feel like the ‘truth’, a thought is simply a representation of our experience at a particular moment. Thoughts often feel very powerful because they are accompanied and fuelled by feelings. Yet, even when feelings are strong, this is simply how we are thinking and feeling in *this* moment.
3. **Writing your thoughts down on paper.** This lets you see them in a way that’s less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down can give some space in which to change the way in which you are relating to the thought.
4. **Questioning.** It can be helpful to step back from upsetting thoughts, to question them and explore whether there might perhaps be a bigger picture or alternative perspectives which we’re overlooking.

It can also be helpful simply to ask **“What perspective can my ‘wise mind’ offer on this these thoughts and this situation?”**

**‘Awareness is not the same as thought. It lies beyond thinking, although it makes use of thinking, honouring its value and its power. Awareness is more like a vessel which can hold and contain our thinking, helping us to see and know our thoughts as thoughts rather than treating them as reality.’**

**From JKZ *Wherever you go, there you are.***

**HOME PRACTICES** [see *Frantic World* p 140]

- Eight-minute **Breath & Body** meditation [audio track 4; *Frantic World* pp 125-127] followed by...
- Eight-minute **Sounds & Thoughts** meditation [audio track 5; *Frantic World* pp 141-146]. The recommendation is that you practise this sequence *twice* a day.
- Three-step **Breathing Spaces** to be practised 2-3 times a day at regular times [if needed, audio track 8; *Finding Peace* pp 129-132] and whenever you need it at any other time. *NB The Breathing Space is not an avoidance of situations, but a way of resourcing oneself in order to respond rather than react to what's happening.*
- Optional **Habit Releaser**: a visit to the movies [*Frantic World* p 158]
- **Read the notes** in this hand out on 'Relating skilfully to thoughts' and **Chapter 8** of the book

DAY / DATE	PRACTICE	COMMENTS & OBSERVATIONS [e.g. thoughts, feelings, body sensations, action impulses]

