



STEPPING BACK FROM THOUGHT

EXCERPT FROM
FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING
BY JON-KABAT ZINN

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Jon Kabat-Zinn

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not “you” or “reality.” For instance, if you have the thought that you must get a certain number of things done today and you don’t recognize it as a thought, but act as if it’s “the truth,” then you have created in that moment a reality in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

One patient, Peter, who’d had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realization of this one night, when he found himself washing his car at 10 o’clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn’t have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today, because he was already so completely caught up in believing it.

If you find yourself behaving in similar ways, it is likely that you will also feel driven, tense, and anxious without even knowing why, just as Peter did. So if the thought of how much you have to get done today comes up while you are meditating, you will have to be very attentive to it as a thought or you may be up and doing things before you know it, without any awareness that you decided to stop sitting simply because a thought came through your mind. On the other hand, when such a thought comes up, if you are able to step back from it and see it clearly, you will be able to prioritize things and make sensible decisions about what really does need doing. You will know when to call it quits during the day.

So the simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life. This liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself. When we spend some time each day in a state of non-doing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body, without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand.

As the mind develops stability and is less caught up in the content of thinking, we strengthen the mind’s ability to concentrate and to be calm. And if each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of its content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness.

We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are.