

## Week 3 – With our thoughts we make the world

We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.

Speak or act with a pure mind

And happiness will follow you

As your shadow, unbreakable.

- Saying of the Buddha

Humans are thinking animals. Some have argued that this makes us unique, hence the name of our species *Homo sapiens* (“Wise Man”), although today we know that many species think but in a way uniquely adapted to their life. While thinking has allowed us to become the most powerful species on the planet, it has also been the cause of much unhappiness and destruction. So for people developing their meditation practice, we need to cultivate our mind, and become much more aware about how our thoughts shape our perception of the world. Positive skilful thoughts can create a tremendously positive improvement in our life. Alternatives, negative unskilful thoughts can cause pain and suffering for us, and for those around us.

Let’s imagine an example, that many people would have experienced at some time in their life. Remember someone you were attracted to – a teenage fixation or ‘heart throb’. Remember what we thought about that person when we were in this state. We probably thought they were amazing. We suddenly liked the music they liked. We thought their taste in clothes was the best. You obsessed about this person. Do they see me? Do they like me? Suddenly you found yourself looking at yourself in the mirror. Am I good enough for this person? Then came the fateful time when you realised that they were not that into you. You were rejected. What did you do wrong? Is there something wrong with me? No, it’s them. They are stupid! Their music sucks. Why did I ever think they were cool! So many teenage romcoms are based on this basic emotional arc. But did you ever stop to consider that almost this entire drama occurred in your head. In fact, many times the object of this emotional investment is barely aware of the other person. All of these emotions come from your thoughts, that you created in your head.

Does this mean that putting positive affirmations on the fridge door will make us happy people? Pop psychology would say “Yes”. I am a good person! I will have a good life. Etc. Positive thoughts do influence our feelings, no doubt. Just as negative thoughts, negatively affect our mood. But will just a simple reinforcement mantra overcome our negative emotions?

In almost every ancient text, there are stories of negative thoughts leading to negative emotions and negative actions. The story of King Lear, who misunderstands his daughter’s

silence for rejection, cuts her off, setting in chain the destruction of his kingdom, is a good example. In the Jewish bible in Genesis, we have the story of Cain and Able, where negative emotion (Sin) is described as crouching at the door waiting to take over, and that it propels Cain to murder. Does this mean, therefore, that there is a linear causal relationship between through, emotion and action? The answer is **no**.

Professor Padmasiri de Silva (2016) from Monash University looks at the relationship between stimuli, thoughts and emotions. He observes that our brain has evolved to quickly convert stimuli (a red round object) into a thought (an Apple). But our brain has an even more primitive system working at the same time – when we see a dark moving object, we immediately relate with the emotion of ‘Fear’. In fact this emotional response is much faster even than our conscious mind – that’s perhaps why we talk about emotions being hard to control. Emotions have a hot element, this instinctive aspect, and a cooler element, one that is influenced by our thoughts and which kicks in shortly after. In classical Greek philosophy the ultimate aim of philosophical training was for reason to tame emotion – Plato talks about reason as the charioteer taming the wild horse (emotions). So for thoughts to control all our emotions. Such ideas have led in the west to all sorts of issues due to this desire to **repress** emotion. The problem with repression is that is not actually learning about, or dealing with, emotions, but rather painting over cracks that will inevitable drive our behaviour in an unknowing way. Freud was one of the first to link this repression of emotion by reason (and 19<sup>th</sup> century Viennese society was a pretty repressed place) and mental health issues.

We have a tool here, and that is mindfulness. We have begun practicing this over the past three weeks. If we learn to understand how our emotions feel and how our thoughts interact with emotion, we can learn to be less controlled by them, and become more self-aware. As we sit here we can observe emotions arise, we can say “oh look, there is Anger”, “ok look, there is discomfort”, “Look, there is boredom”. We can engage with it - “I’m so bored, I think I can’t go on” and we can say “ok, take me boredom” and we realise that actually no one has ever died of boredom. As emotions arise, we can enquire – “Look, I’m Angry. I wonder why”. You can explore the connections between thoughts, emotions and perception.

This exploration should be different to catharsis (the idea of emotional release). It’s not so much about reliving the emotions of past events, as understanding your emotional dynamics. In particular, the subtle undertones that make up emotions and their relationship to ideas and actions.

## Exercise

1. Select in your mind something that gives you great pleasure. It could be an activity, a food or even a group of people
2. Bring this to mind, and make it as vivid and real as you can.
3. Pay attention to the emotions that arise in your body.
4. Really concentrate on these emotions. Label them in your mind. Explore them.
5. How does your body feel? Is it light or heavy? Warm or Cold.
6. Now think of an activity that makes you a bit anxious – not screaming and hiding-under-the-bed anxious, but one where you have a little bit of dread. For me going to the Dentist is a good one.
7. Again, bring this situation you have chosen to your mind. Imagine yourself doing this event. If it is visiting someone, then imagine walking up the front stairs of their house. If it is an exam, remember the smell of the exam room, the noise of the invigilators.
8. Pay attention to the feeling of anxiety as you visualise this scene. Do you feel anything physically. Is your heart racing? Your stomach tightening?

9. Label what you are feeling. Is it anxiety? Fear? Sadness? Is it one emotion or many. Call it and say "Oh, that's anxiety"
10. Now recall the thing that gave you pleasure. Notice how the negative emotions that remain rapidly fade away and are replaced by pleasurable feelings.
11. Become aware that you are inside the Church, that you have not gone anywhere. That this trip was in your mind. Focus on watching the breath and slowly open your eyes.

## Reflection

In this exercise:

- How did thinking lead to the arising of emotion?
- As emotions arose, did you feel swept up in them?
- Did you feel a loss of control as emotions arose? Were you Ok about this?
- How did the positive and negative emotions differ from each other?
- Did the emotions elicit any thoughts in you?
- How comfortable were you with today's exercise?