



Stuck in the Mind

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When I was growing up in Kansas City, I lived in a neighborhood where there were few children of my age. I spent a lot of my time alone, reading, playing music, and doing homework. I was fine with that as I loved to do things in my head such as figuring out how things worked. I got bored easily and was always looking for something to do. In other words, I was always in my head, thinking about something. I had no idea at the time that I was suffering from an addiction: seeking pleasure through my thoughts.

When we think of addictions, drug and alcohol use, sex, overeating, and greed come to mind. A good definition of addiction is “a disorder characterized by a compulsive desire to continue taking a drug or continue a harmful behavior, such as gambling, despite harmful consequences.”¹

Why am I calling thinking an addiction? Can thinking be a harmful behavior? What are its harmful consequences? Well, it not only depends on what you are thinking but also how much you are thinking. Contrary to popular belief, the mind can do only one thing at time. So when you are thinking you are not open to experiencing life in the present through the other five senses (feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting). Excessive use of thinking takes you out of the present. You are asleep in the fantasy world of thoughts.

This is not to say that all thinking is harmful; it is just that it is critical that you be mindful of what you are thinking and why.

What are the Characteristics of Thoughts?

1. Impermanent, Unsatisfactory, Selfless Nature
2. There are two types of thoughts.
3. Thoughts proliferate.
4. We get attached to thoughts.

Impermanent, Unsatisfactory, Selfless Nature

Thoughts, as with all phenomena, share the three characteristics of being impermanent, unable to give lasting satisfaction and are of selfless nature. Thoughts arise from causes and conditions. The mind becomes conscious of an experience of one or more of our six senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking) and compares it to our stored memories and belief and then communicates the experience to us with an overlay of identification and judgement (perception).

For example, we have thoughts about whatever we see with our eyes. If we are looking at a painting, it is just an image. That it might be beautiful or ugly comes from the mind, not from our eyes. Someone else looking at the same painting might have a different perception.

It is important to remember (be mindful) of the true nature of what we perceive; it is colored by our memories and beliefs.

There are two types of thoughts.

In the Eightfold Path component, Skillful Effort, the Buddha mentions the importance of being aware of our thoughts and dealing with them. Thoughts that arise are either wholesome or unwholesome. If we allow unwholesome thoughts to continually occupy our mind, we will develop unwholesome habits which will lead to suffering.

Wholesome thoughts are those that lead to awakening can be categorized by the Seven Factors of Awakening: Mindfulness, Inquiry, Perseverance, Joy, Calm, Concentration, and Equanimity; the four Brahma Viharas (Divine Abodes): loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and as already mentioned, equanimity; and letting go (generosity). For example, when stress arises, thoughts of the first three factors of awakening: mindfulness, inquiry and energy are wholesome.

Unwholesome thoughts are those that lead to suffering, and most can be categorized by the Five Hindrances: Greed, Ill-will, Restlessness/Worry, Mental/Physical laziness, and doubt, and delusion (one of the three poisons). For example, harboring ill-will against someone leads to suffering.

Thoughts Proliferate

One of the major challenges with unwholesome thoughts is that they tend to proliferate so that they completely occupy your consciousness, blocking out other thoughts and senses. Tara Brach calls this being in a trance.

For example, I have often experienced mental proliferation when I am preparing to take a trip. Will I be on time for the flight? Will I find a parking place for my car? Will the plane be on time to reach my destination? Will the rental car be ready? Can I find my way to the destination? These thoughts can arise weeks before the departure date! When these thoughts start to arise, with mindfulness I can see what they are: just thoughts with no inherent reality. Nothing is certain; I just need to be appropriately prepared and then let life happen.

We get attached to thoughts.

Chinul, a noted Korean Zen Monk in the 12 century,² discussed the consequences of attachment to thought as follows (in italics with my commentary):

Ordinary people have been revolving in circles since time immemorial, being born and dying in the five courses of existence. Because of clinging fixedly to self images, false ideas, and misperceptions, the habits of illusion eventually become second nature to them. Even if they suddenly awaken in this life and realize that their essential nature is fundamentally empty and silent, no different from the Buddha's, nevertheless past habits are difficult to remove all at once.

Even if they realize at one point the true empty nature of thoughts, they succumb to the force of habit and forget and continue to suffer.

Therefore, they rage and rejoice as they encounter irritating and pleasing situations; judgments of right and wrong arise and pass away in profusion, and afflictions caused by outside influences are no different from before. If they do not make use of the power within transcendent insight, how can they quell ignorance and reach the state of great rest and tranquility? As it is said, "When suddenly awakened, although you are the same as Buddha, the energy of many lifetimes of habits is deep seated. Though the wind stops, the waves still billow; though noumenon is manifest, thoughts still invade."

As noted, they continue to suffer, seeing the experiences of the outside world as causing their stress. When they achieve greater awareness, the mind still intercedes with conditioned thoughts. (thoughts still invade). (The noumenon is the concept of the unconditioned pure experience which we can never experience directly but can be aware that what we are seeing is conditioned (distorted).)

Master Gao said, "Time and again those who have sharp faculties awaken without much effort, then they become complacent and neglect further cultivation. Eventually they drift back into their former confusion, unable to escape revolving in circular routines." So how can we neglect subsequent cultivation because of a single awakening?

Therefore, after awakening it is necessary to always observe and examine yourself. When errant thoughts suddenly arise, do not go along with them at all, reduce them, reduce them, until you reach the point of non-fabrication, which alone is the ultimate end.

Awakening is not a one and done. It is necessary to remain vigilant, looking out for unskillful thoughts and not letting mental proliferation occur. One reduces the thought by maintaining awareness. As Krishnamurti said, the seeing is the doing. In this case, the seeing is the reducing! The state of non-fabrication is when you are not encouraging mental proliferation.

Errant thoughts are fundamentally empty; the essence of mind is fundamentally pure. To stop evil over and over without any stopping, and cultivate goodness over and over without any cultivating, is true stopping and cultivation. Therefore it is said that even as you fully cultivate myriad practices, only no thought is to be considered a basis.

Chinul is saying that even though there are many practices for the cessation of suffering, no thought is the core. Being aware is the best practice.

Fabrication is the mind's attempts to set things in motion in an attempt to control outcome.

There is no control.

Non-fabrication is when instead of trying to control our lives, life is now living us. When we can truly say, "I am that."

Final Words (not final thoughts!)

If we are not mindful, thoughts can be addictive. Our true insights come from silence. In a recent article by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, he notes that group brainstorming is a waste of time. He quotes studies that have shown that individuals are more likely to generate a higher number of original ideas when they don't interact with others. "Sometimes leaders bring employees together to create the illusion of wide-open input, says Erika Hall, co-founder of Mule Design Studio, a management consulting firm in San Francisco. In-person brainstorming is part of the back-to-office rationale for many of her clients, and she generally advises the ones that truly want to improve collaboration to first carve out some alone time for their workers.

When Hall needs inspiration, she goes for a run.

"It's freaky," she says. "I will go run on a problem, and things will happen in my head that do not happen under any other circumstance."

Others might find "Aha!" moments in the shower or while listening to music. Leaving breakthroughs to private serendipity can feel, to bosses, like losing control, she acknowledges, but it might be more effective than trying to schedule magic in a conference room."³

In summary, be mindful of your thinking, know the limitations of your mind, and just let thoughts arise and fall away back to emptiness.

¹ https://www.emedicinehealth.com/what_are_the_four_components_of_addiction/article_em.htm

² Jinul Puril Bojo Daesa (1158–1210), often called Jinul or Chinul for short, was a Korean monk of the Goryeo period, who is considered to be the most influential figure in the formation of Korean Seon (Zen) Buddhism. One of his most famous writings was *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*, an outline of basic Zen practices written between 1203 and 1205. See Buswell Jr., Robert *Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul's Korean Way of Zen*

³ Callum Borchers [Cancel That Brainstorm](#): There's a Better Way to Spur Good Ideas: Giving workers alone time could yield more innovation than getting everyone in a room, research shows