Talk IV Compulsive Thinking Is Not the Truth
Laura Good 11/11/2020

We are going to explore the role obsessive thoughts can play in causing suffering especially when they seem to be uncontrollable and we what we can do about it. We’ll also investigate how Tara uses the “real but not true” technique to help be present with our obsessive thoughts and how it can release us from their power.

We can’t stop thoughts. It’s what the mind does; thoughts arise and fall, and we know that as “thinking”. It’s how we evolved. Everything humans have brought into the world, our technological achievements, our culture, our buildings, have started with thoughts and ideas in our minds. Yet so have the actions humans have done that have negative, violent consequences. We also know so much of our suffering comes from inside our minds.

Most of the time we know the difference between skillful and unskillful thinking. Skillful thinking is wholesome and causes beneficial results. Yes, we need to plan, to weigh hard decisions, to take our time with our thinking, sometimes complex issues take a huge amount of mind space, and it’s how we use our powers of reason, perception and choice. Repetitive thoughts can also awaken us to fear and perhaps let us know we are in danger or to pay attention. But when these thoughts become stuck in a loop, beyond their immediate use, they can transition into a negative pattern and we feel driven into unskillful territory: we are obsessing.

Unskillful thinking is not only unwholesome but is also a false refuge. Instead of it helping us, it can seem to get out of control as if the thoughts have a life of their own. The more we try to NOT think of something the more we do. Elephant anyone? The thoughts become obsessive and compulsive, and it can seem impossible to stop them.

Why? Why would we want to engage in something that doesn’t serve us? Very simply, to relieve anxiety.

“Obsessive thinking is an inability to gain control over recurrent, distressing thoughts and images. The process may be mildly distracting, or utterly absorbing. Obsessive thoughts and images are embedded in a complex network of feelings, sensations, and often, behavioral routines.”

When we talk about OCD, The Mayo Clinic defines it like this:
Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) features a pattern of unwanted thoughts and fears (obsessions) that lead you to do repetitive behaviors (compulsions). These obsessions and compulsions interfere with daily activities and cause significant distress.\(^1\) You may try to ignore or stop your obsessive thinking, but that only increases your distress and anxiety. Ultimately, you may feel driven to perform compulsive acts to try to ease your stress. (I tend to vacuum when I’m stressed) Despite efforts to ignore or get rid of bothersome thoughts or urges, they keep coming back. This leads to more ritualistic behavior — the vicious cycle of OCD.

What are types of OCD?
- Checking.
- Contamination/Mental Contamination.
- Symmetry and ordering.
- Ruminations/Intrusive Thoughts.
- Hoarding.\(^2\)

Whether these patterns have a genetic predisposition or arise from trauma or extreme stress, or both, I’m sure we are all aware of our own tendencies (extreme or occasional) or that of some of our loved ones, to suffer from compulsive thinking at some points in our lives. Severe OCD in this talk will be left the professionals. But even in those cases, mindfulness practice has been shown to help.

**Nature of the Mind**
In one of my early sitting groups I remember someone saying during meditation that her mind was always going to the worst case scenario and she even could feel her mind reaching for the worst of the worst: murder, torture, car crashes etc. She led a nice life and couldn’t understand why, when she tried to mediate or quiet her mind, it would just go for the most outrageous extremes. I realized that I often experienced the same thing. These scenarios would seemingly have nothing to do with me or my past, it was like fear was playing a game in my head and I had no control. My teacher simply said, “it’s just what the mind does”. He had no further explanation or advice except for not judging or trying to push the thoughts away. Using breath, and awareness about how these thoughts felt in the body, I noticed that the thoughts became less and less frequent, like they lost their power to “come to life” in the mind. It rarely happens to me anymore.

**It’s just what the mind does**
Having courage to let the thoughts be, lets the mind observe and practice non-judgmental awareness. The loops of thinking may have started from real circumstances, like maybe a severe car crash, that set a certain pattern of neurons to fire together, and sometimes we may not even remember what that was, but we know how it feels. Even when we know the source, once the pattern gets set, it’s like grooves in a vinyl record, and our top ten hits of compulsive thoughts start endlessly playing. Then our body reacts, it feels so real.

**Top Ten Hit Meditation**
Pause: Don’t try to stop, or get angry, or push your thoughts away. Have compassion for yourself.
Ask yourself what could be behind the rumination. Are they wanting thoughts about appearance or achievement? Are they fearful thoughts about loved ones, money, health, safety? Name the feeling behind the feeling: care, love, rest in the positive emotion.

Try to distinguish the depth of the unskillful thinking. If the obsessive thoughts are causing compulsive behavior (Ritualistic actions like excessive handwashing, exercise, drug or alcohol abuse, etc) it’s time to get help by professionals. If the compulsive thinking has not resulted in harmful actions or behavior, perhaps using mindfulness is a place to start.

**Use RAINS**
R-Recognize you are suffering or in distress from the thoughts. Name it! “Ruminating.” Try to name what’s happening
A-Allow it to be in your awareness
I-Investigate what’s really true
N-Non identify with it
S-Self nurture

**The Buddha’s Teaching**
Luckily, the Buddha gave a sutta on ending unskillful thoughts, The Relaxation of Thoughts Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta³

In a blog, 5 ways to resist obsessive thoughts (Vitakkanthanā)⁴, Josh Korda, a teacher at the New York and Brooklyn Dharmapunx meetings summarizes the Buddha’s teaching as the five “R’s”. In other words, the five ways to neutralize repetitive, invasive thoughts are (adapted from the blog):

1. **Substituting Thoughts** *(replace)*
   “This is like when a carpenter uses one peg to knock out another peg that is stuck. In letting go we exchange something compelling for something greater in the long term” i.e. replacing with skillful thoughts like good will, compassion, generosity”

2. **Analyze the Thoughts** *(reflect)*
   “If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, one should ponder the disadvantages of these unskillful thoughts. like one who has become disgusted by the carcass of a snake, dog or human.” Ask yourself, “is this thought really serving me?”

3. **Ignore the Thoughts** *(reject)*
   "If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, one should pay these unskillful thoughts no attention whatsoever, like one who trains himself to look away from sights unworthy of his attention."

Think of the thoughts like they are coming out of mentally ill person. Widen your sense awareness, touch your seat, feel the air, listen to arising sounds. Connect with the outside world, with what’s in front of you.
4. Relaxing the Underlying Stress (relax)
"If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, one should relax the underlying physical foundation of the thoughts, like one who is stressed out and walking quickly relaxes by walking slower, or simply standing, or sitting, or lying down."

5. Physically Constrain (remove)
"If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, with teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, one should beat down and destroy the unskillful parts of the mind with the skillful parts" —if the other method is relaxing the body, this in essence is substituting awareness of the thought by clenching the body, by creating pressure or tension in an area that will redirect our attention away from the obsessive thoughts.
— to be used as a last resort, after the first four methods have failed. Generally, this method is used to avert one’s impulse to cause harm.

Other techniques:
BREATHE, count, put your hand on your belly and try to slow down your breathing.

Visualize the thought is a fishhook and you just swim on by without taking the bait. Or, if your compulsive thoughts involve another person, imagine you have scissors and are cutting ties between you and them.

Don’t take the bait, don’t get hooked. Break the trance, take the pause and gently remind yourself, “real, but not true” and give them friendly attention. There may be some information to learn, but it is only one part of the situation. All of these techniques help us to de-energize unskillful thoughts. Most simply are not true even though they can feel very real and have real effects in your body. Have faith in the dharma, have faith in your skills.

Rilke says, ”I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers which could not be given you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

1 https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/obsessive-compulsive-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20354432
2 https://www.ocduk.org/ocd/types/
3 https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN20.html
4 http://dharmapunxnyc.blogspot.com/2010/01/5-ways-to-resist-obsessive-thoughts.html