

Meeting 6

Thoughts are not facts

*John was on his way to school.
He was worried about the math lesson.
He was not sure he could control the class again today.
It was not part of a janitor's duty.*

(Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013, p. 299)

What do you notice when you read these sentences?

Many people notice that they keep adjusting their mental image when they read another sentence. First it's about a little boy, then a teacher, and finally it's about a janitor. It is a good example of how we tend to interpret the facts we encounter and draw conclusions from it. Automatically and unconsciously. In this week, these kind of automatic thoughts are our focus.

The comic strip consists of five rows of two panels each. Each panel shows a person's face and a thought bubble containing a dog. The dialogue is as follows:

- Row 1: Person 1: 'Ik heb een hond gekocht' (I bought a dog). Thought bubble: Small spotted dog.
- Row 2: Person 2: 'O ja? Een grote hond?' (O really? A big dog?). Person 1: 'Nee, niet zo erg groot' (No, not so very big). Thought bubble: Large dog.
- Row 3: Person 2: 'Is het een langharige?' (Is it long-haired?). Person 1: 'Nee, een met korte haren' (No, it has short hairs). Thought bubble: Dog with long hair.
- Row 4: Person 2: 'En welke kleur?' (And what colour?). Person 1: 'Zwart-wit gevlekt' (Black and white spotted). Thought bubble: Black and white spotted dog.
- Row 5: Person 2: 'Wat een leuke hond, zeg!' (That's such a lovely dog!). Person 1: 'Ja, hè' (Yes, indeed it is, isn't it?). Thought bubble: Giraffe-like dog.

Our thoughts can have a very strong effect on how we feel and on what we do. Often these thoughts arise automatically and hijack us into the stream of thinking.

By becoming aware of the thoughts and images that come to mind, it is possible to create some space in which we focus attention on the breathing and the present moment. This way we can see thoughts for what they are and it makes it easier to just let them be.

This gives us the opportunity to see that there may be other ways to think about situations, so that we become free from the tyranny of old thought patterns that automatically come to mind.

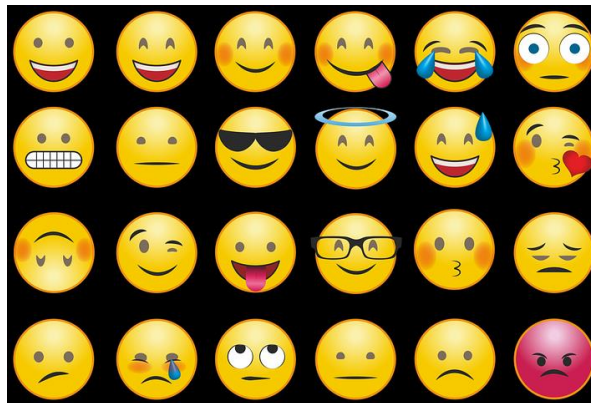
And the most important thing is that we eventually realize in depth:

- All thoughts are *just mental events*
- Thoughts are not facts (including those that say they are!)
- We are not our thoughts

Thoughts and emotions

You have probably noticed hundreds of times yourself while meditating or in your daily life, how busy our mind often is. Interpreting, analyzing, judging, reasoning, remembering, fantasizing, rationalizing, explaining, concluding, etc. It's like the mind is constantly occupied with what's coming to you.

Some thoughts are clearly accompanied by a feeling or state of mind. For example, the thought 'What an annoying sound' can go hand in hand with anger. The thought 'This meditation practice is not for me, I just can't do it' with a gloomy feeling. The thought 'I'm going to get that pain in my neck again' with fear or anxiety. And the thought 'Lovely to have a holiday in two weeks' with joy.



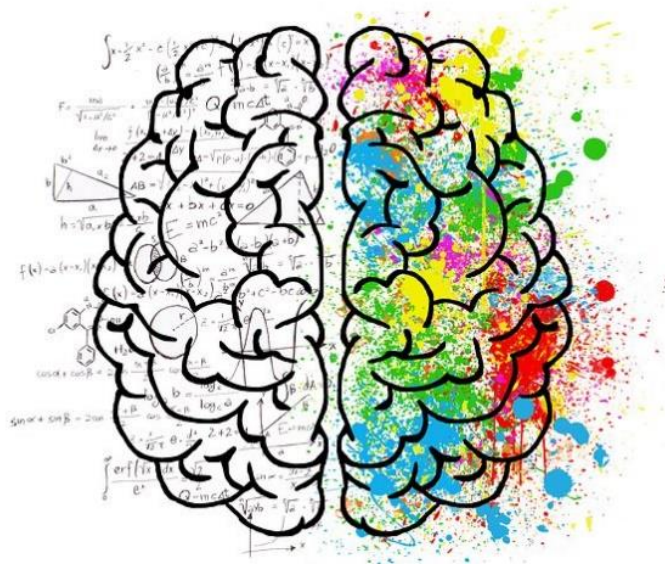
Thoughts not only affect our feelings, but our mood can also affect our thinking. For example, imagine what you would think in the following situations:

1. You feel bad because you just had a fight with a fellow student. Shortly after, you see another fellow student you want to tell, but she says she doesn't have time and walks on quickly. What do you think?
2. You feel happy because you and a fellow student have just received compliments for your work. Shortly after, you see another fellow student you want to tell, but she says she doesn't have time and walks on quickly. What do you think?

Chances are we're thinking something different in situation 1 than in situation 2. How we feel often affects how we think about an event. Especially if we are tired or tense, there's a danger that we pay particular attention to negative things, think black and white, generalize or jump to conclusions. It shows that thoughts are not facts.

Yet we often believe our thoughts. This way, our thoughts and feelings can take control of us without us knowing. Negative thoughts and emotions can occupy the mind when we are stressed and exhausted, and take away our zest for life. It helps to realize that *all* thoughts are just mental images or events in our head (including the thoughts that pretend not to be!) and that we are not our thoughts.

Thoughts and images can give us an idea of what is happening on an unconscious level; we can choose to keep thoughts in our awareness so that we can review them from different perspectives. By becoming familiar with our most important automatic, non-helpful thought patterns, we start to recognize them more easily when they automatically pop up. This way, we can, for example, experience situations with other people differently.



When we enter a social situation in an automatic, non-conscious way, we continue to believe thoughts and images that then pass through us, such as 'no one wants to talk to me', 'I look ridiculous', 'I don't belong', 'I'm not good enough', or 'they think I'm weird'. However, by focusing attention on what is happening moment-by-moment, and observing the situation as we observed the food item in the first session, we become aware of what is *really* happening, rather than taking the events in our heads as "truths". This way we can discover that these automatic thoughts are not reality and we can let new experiences come in.

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that belong to the hindrance 'doubt' and often block or undermine our practice, such as 'there is no point doing this' or 'this doesn't work, so why continue?'. Such pessimistic thought patterns make us helpless and powerless and are one of the most important factors stopping us from taking actions that would help us get out of a situation. It is therefore particularly important to recognize such thoughts as "negative thinking" and not to give these thoughts the power to stop applying the learned skills.

Orientation on our automatic negative thinking

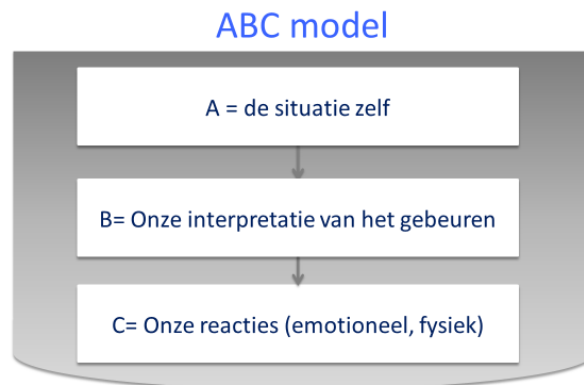
Stressful situations often automatically evoke negative thinking. If we get familiar with our own patterns in this, it is also easier to recognize the patterns when they come up in difficult situations. To investigate our automatic negative thinking patterns, we can use the list of *automatic negative thoughts* that you find after the thought exercise.

Seeing thoughts as thoughts

The way people interpret the world makes all the difference to the way they behave. It is amazing that EVERYONE has their own interpretation of events and that this can vary greatly. Everyone makes up stories - the importance lies in the difference between the story and knowing that your story is not (necessarily) a fact.

We see the world not as it is, but as an *interpretation* of what it is.

One way to get a better grip on thoughts and feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, is to learn to distinguish between the event as it comes to you and your thoughts and feelings about that event. Often we are so identified with our thoughts and feelings that we do not see that distinction at all. It is precisely because thoughts and feelings are such a part of us that it is difficult to view them from a distance.



Our responses (C) are almost always responses to our interpretations of a situation (B) rather than to the situation itself (A).

Meditating is a way to learn to see 'thoughts as thoughts'. Just as we can notice sounds like sounds and breathing as breathing. Until now, you mostly have been asked to notice, acknowledge, and then kindly release wandering thoughts and direct your attention back to your breathing or body. Last week we started practicing with another possibility, to deliberately direct our attention to our thoughts and observe these streams of thinking.

Focus your attention on your thoughts

We start by focusing our attention on thoughts. We don't have to look for thoughts. We can wait until they come up on their own. If we want, we can label our thoughts, such as 'thinking' or more specifically: 'remembering', 'planning', 'analyzing', 'assuming', 'judging', 'fantasizing', etc. It is important not to think about this for too long, the first thing that comes to mind is enough.

More generally, we don't have to worry about the *content* of our thoughts, why the thoughts are there at the moment and what it means. The most important thing is to notice thoughts as 'only' thoughts and possibly labeling them. So we can experience that we *have* thoughts, but that we *are* not these thoughts.

Sometimes a thought will disappear on its own, once we've noticed it. However, if the thought remains, then we can continue to observe and label it. If you find this difficult, you can also imagine your thoughts being projected onto a cinema screen. We look at the screen and wait for thoughts to appear. If they appear, we pay attention to them as long as they're visible on the screen. We can subtly label the thoughts: 'there is planning', 'now there is fantasizing', 'there we have judgments'. Then we let go of the thoughts as they disappear.

When thoughts are very prevalent, it can be difficult to focus our attention on them and merely observe them. In situations like this, we can focus attention on our breathing and our body.

Ways to view our thoughts differently

Here are a few ways that can help us in dealing with our thoughts:

1. Watch the thoughts come and go, without feeling like we have to follow or hold on to them.
2. Think of thoughts as an event in our head rather than a fact. It's tempting to think it's true, especially when a thought is common and keeps getting accompanied by the same feelings, but we're still the one who decides if it's true and how we want to deal with it.
3. Put thoughts on paper. Then we see them in a way that's less emotional and overwhelming. Moreover, it can give us time to reflect on its meaning.
4. Ask the following questions: Did this thought suddenly and automatically come into my head? To what extent do the thoughts correspond to the actual situation? What, in this thought, can I question? How would I have thought about it at a different time, in a different mood? Do I overlook things? Are there any other ways to look at it?
5. For difficult thoughts that are very dominant it can sometimes be helpful to use them as an object of our attention during a meditation exercise. As part of our exercise, we can approach these thoughts with openness.

If we become aware of negative thoughts

If we become aware of negative thoughts and images in our mind, we can pay attention to them in a friendly way, with genuine curiosity and interest and extend this to one or more of the following questions (and return to our breathing after each question):

- Do I confuse a thought with a fact?
- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- Do I think (too) black and white?
- Do I generalize?
- Do I condemn, shame or blame myself completely for doing one thing wrong?
- Do I focus on my weaknesses and forget about my strengths?
- Am I accusing myself of something I'm not guilty of?
- Do I judge myself?
- Do I set unreasonably high standards for myself so that I surely will fall short?
- Am I reading minds / predicting the future?
- Do I expect perfection?
- Do I practice 'doomsday thinking'?

It helps if we have a friendly, interested and curious attitude in exploring our thoughts.

Two Kinds of Intelligence

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world. You get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside through conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

Jalal al-Din Rumi

Persian poet and mystic

1207-1273

Dealing with thoughts

It is remarkable how liberating it works to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not 'I', 'me' or 'reality'. For example, we think we have to do a certain number of things today. We don't recognize it as a thought but act as if it's 'the truth' and in that moment we created a reality in which we truly believe that all those things need to be done today.

One patient, Peter, who had had a heart attack and wanted to avoid a possible next one, was in the driveway washing his car at ten o'clock in the evening with the garden lights on when he made a major discovery. He realized he didn't have to do this at all. It was the inevitable consequence of the fact that he spent all day trying to get all the things done he had set himself to do that day. When he realized what he was doing to himself, he understood that he had been so convinced that everything really had to be done that day, that he had not doubted whether it was actually true or not.

If you're doing things yourself in such a way, you'll probably also feel as hunted, tense and worried like Peter, without even knowing why. So if we're meditating and the thought comes to mind how much we have to do today, be aware that it's a thought. Otherwise we're already working on something else without minding that we've stopped meditating because of an emerging thought.

On the other hand, if, when such a thought comes to mind, we are able to distance ourselves from it and see what the thought really is, then we will also be able to prioritize certain things and make wise decisions about what really needs to be done. We'll know exactly when to stop during the day. So simply recognizing our thoughts as thoughts can rid us of a false reality. It gives us a clearer view and our life will no longer be so determined by those kinds of thoughts.

This liberation from the terror of thought is a direct result of meditating itself. When we spend a while every day 'not doing', breathing and observing the activities in body and mind without identifying with those activities, there will gradually come more calm, consideration and care in your life. As the mind becomes more stable and less concerned with the content of thought, we strengthen the mind's ability to concentrate and be calm.

Every time we recognize an emerging thought as thought, register its contents and discern how strongly the thought influences us and whether its content is correct, and then release the thought and go back to breathing and be aware of our bodies, we reinforce our awareness. We get to know ourselves better and accept ourselves more as we really are and not as we would like to be.

Thinking controls our lives.

Consciously or unconsciously, we spend most of our life engaging in our thoughts.



However, meditation is another process, which does not concern itself with reasoning or overthinking. Meditation has nothing to do with thinking. The process of silent observation - not going after our thoughts- can lead to new insights.

We don't have to fight or struggle with our thoughts or condemn our thoughts. If we notice that a thought is emerging, we can simply choose not to follow it.

If we get lost in thought, we identify with it to a great extent. It's an automatic process. The thoughts are raging through our heads and we are dragged along with them, and that can be very far in a very short time. We jump on a train of thoughts that are linked together without realizing that we have done that, let alone knowing where we are going.

Somewhere along the way we (hopefully) wake up and realize that we are thinking, that we were taken for a ride. And when we get off the train, it could be in a very different mental world than when we jumped aboard.



Now take a moment to look at the thoughts that are popping up in your head right now. Close your eyes and imagine you're sitting in a cinema looking at a blank screen. Just wait for thoughts to appear. Because that's all you do, it can happen very quickly. What kind of thoughts are they exactly? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magical representations that seem real when we are absorbed into them, but disappear when we consciously start looking at them.

But what about those intense thoughts that affect us? We look, look and look again and then very suddenly - oops! – we're lost in thought. What exactly is that? What are the states of mind or the special kinds of thoughts that hold us in their power, so that we forget that they are only illusions, fantasies?

It's amazing to see how much power we give to unwelcome thoughts, without being aware that we do so: "Do this," "Say that," "Remember," "Make plans," "Get obsessed," "Condemn." They can make us crazy, and they often do!

"When mind is calm and still, like a deep pond, we can see how thoughts come up and go, without getting involved in the story.

Each thought is like a stone thrown in the water, it creates ripples, disturbing the quietude. Some thoughts have a stronger effect as they come with feeling, emotion.

How to go back to calmness? Let it all settle, don't throw more bricks into the pond, don't chase who is right and who is wrong in the story. Just see that thoughts are not permanent. They come and go.

They don't stick. See that the story is not the truth of how things are...

Stillness is found when thoughts are no longer taken so seriously."

~Ilona Ciunaite

A traditional Sufi story

Many years ago, in a poor Chinese village, there lived a farmer and his son. His only material possession, apart from the land and a small hut, was a horse he had inherited from his father.

One day, the horse ran away, leaving the man with no animal with which to work the land. His neighbours, who respected him for his honesty and diligence, went to his house to say how much they regretted his loss. He thanked them for their visit, but asked:

'How do you know that what happened was a misfortune in my life?'

Someone muttered to a friend: 'He obviously doesn't want to face facts, but let him think what he likes, after all, it's better than being sad about it.'

And the neighbours went away again, pretending to agree with what he had said.

A week later, the horse returned to its stable, but it was not alone; it brought with it a beautiful mare for company. The inhabitants of the village were thrilled when they heard the news, for only then did they understand the reply the man had given them, and they went back to the farmer's house to congratulate him on his good fortune.

'Instead of one horse, you've got two. Congratulations!' they said.

'Many thanks for your visit and for your solidarity,' replied the farmer. 'But how do you know that what happened was a blessing in my life?'

The neighbours were rather put out and decided that the man must be going mad, and, as they left, they said: 'Doesn't the man realise that the horse is a gift from God?'

A month later, the farmer's son decided to break the mare in. However, the animal bucked wildly and threw the boy off; the boy fell awkwardly and broke his leg.

The neighbours returned to the farmer's house, bringing presents for the injured boy. The mayor of the village solemnly presented his condolences to the father, saying how sad they all were about what had occurred.

The man thanked them for their visit and for their kindness, but he asked:

'How do you know that what happened was a misfortune in my life?'

These words left everyone dumbstruck, because they were all quite sure that the son's accident was a real tragedy. As they left the farmer's house, they said to each other: 'Now he really has gone mad; his only son could be left permanently crippled, and he's not sure whether the accident was a misfortune or not!'

A few months went by, and Japan declared war on China. The emperor's emissaries scoured the country for healthy young men to be sent to the front. When they reached the village, they recruited all the young men, except the farmer's son, whose leg had not yet mended.

None of the young men came back alive. The son recovered, and the two horses produced foals that were all sold for a good price. The farmer went to visit his neighbours to console and to help them, since they had always shown him such solidarity. Whenever any of them complained, the farmer would say: 'How do you know that what happened was a misfortune?' If someone was overjoyed about something, he would ask: 'How do you know that what happened was a blessing?' And the people of the village came to understand that life has other meanings that go beyond mere appearance. (Coelho, 2008)

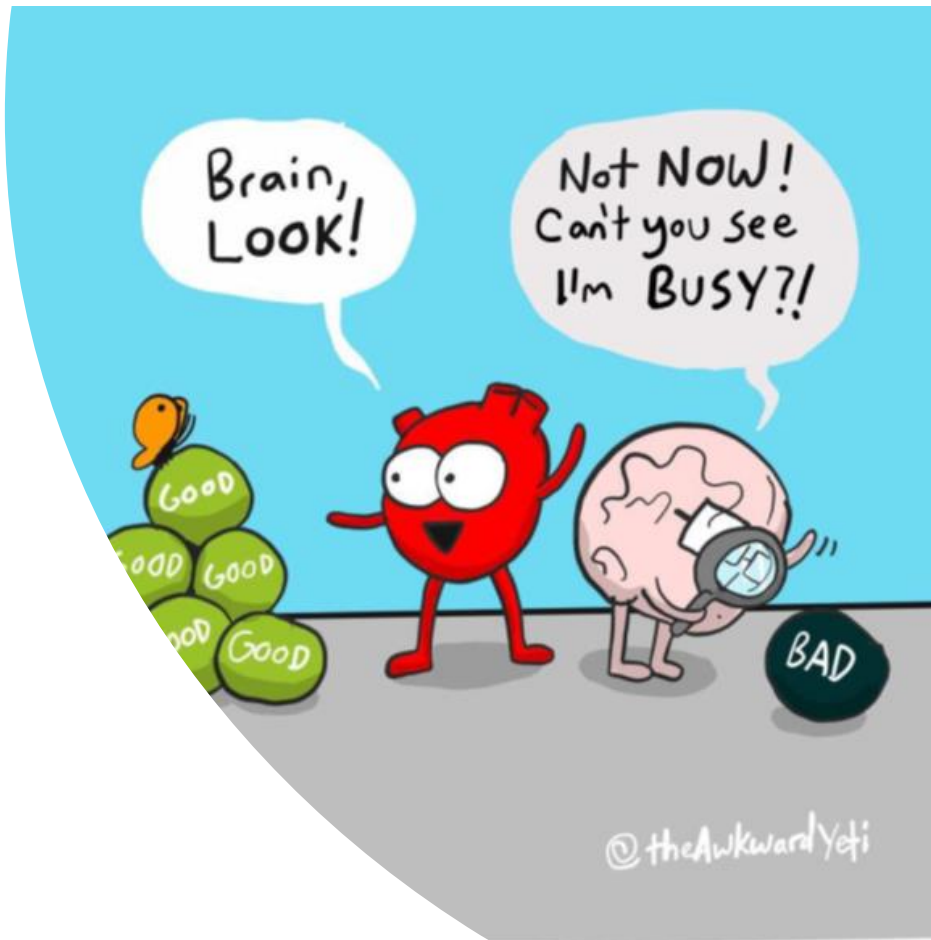


(Altmann)

The kind of thoughts we have and the influence these thoughts have on our lives depends on whether we understand things. If we are in a clear state where we confine ourselves to seeing thoughts rising and disappearing again, it doesn't matter what kind of thoughts we have in our heads. We see our thoughts as they are: a passing display.

Thoughts lead to actions and actions have all kinds of consequences. What thoughts are we going to invest in? Our important task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which thoughts we take action on and which ones we should leave for what they are.

The stories we tell ourselves are often negative due to the human 'negativity bias': In ancient times, one small mistake in avoiding threatening situations could often lead to death. People are thought to have developed a 'negativity bias' as a result. We pay more attention to things that are potentially threatening or harmful to keep us safe than to the beautiful positive things that happen to us because nice things probably won't kill us!



"Don't be alarmed; research by American psychologist Timothy Brown and others have shown that people have an average of about 40,000 thoughts per day. 40.000! And, more importantly, at least 70% of those thoughts are negative or have an alarming function.

Converted, this means that you get at least 28,000 negative thoughts per day. Thoughts about things you're afraid of, what you feel gloomy about and what you need to watch out for. We translate a lot of what we experience in thoughts, and then those thoughts keep coming back, every day."

Translated from: "Denk wat je wilt, doe wat je droomt."

("Think what you want, do what you dream.")

Gijs Jansen

Nice-to-Watch:

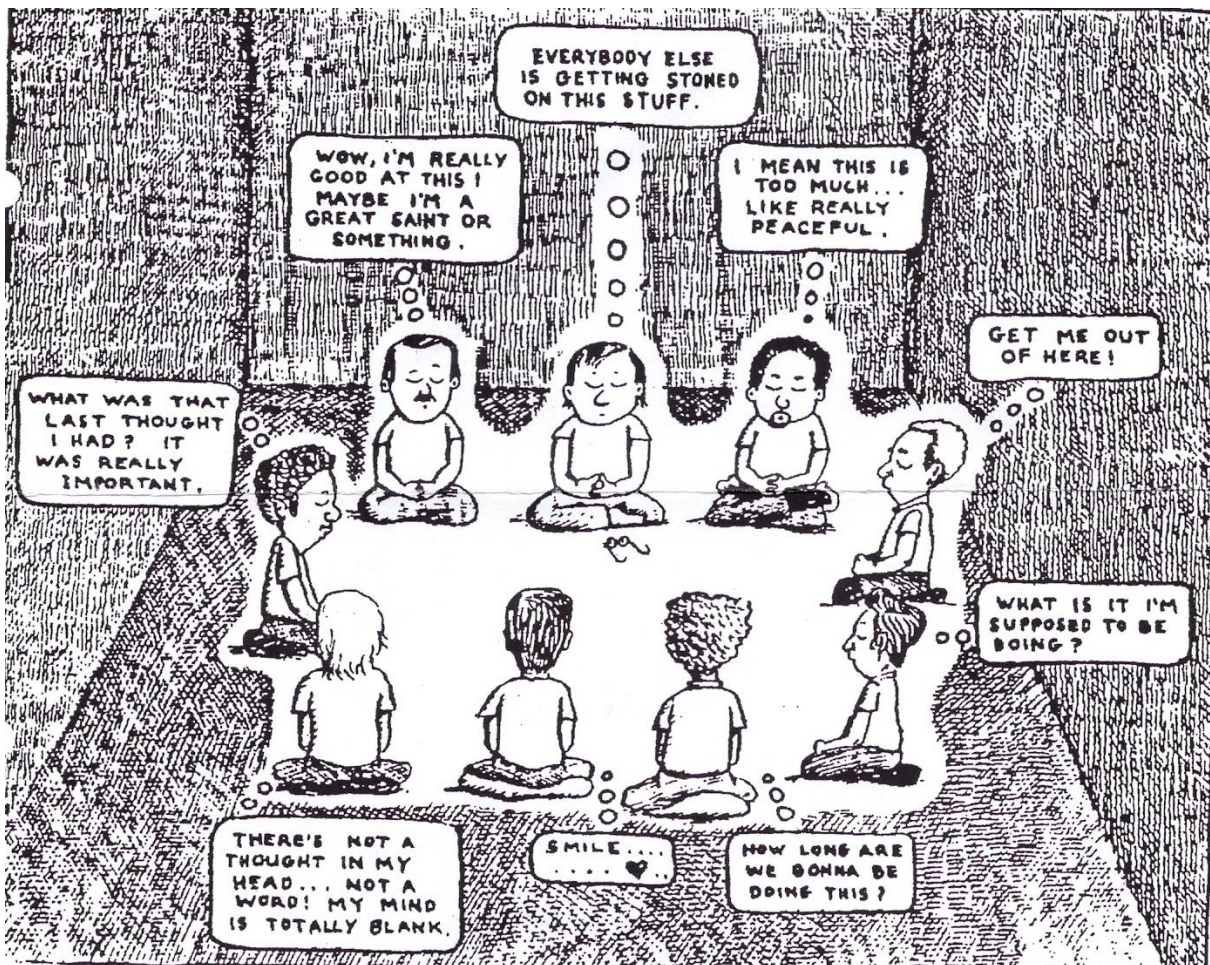
- Lisa Feldman Barrett | You aren't at the mercy of your emotions – your brain creates them (18:29): https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_feldman_barrett_you_aren_t_at_the_mercy_of_your_emotions_your_brain_creates_them
- Headspace | Meditation | Changing Perspective (1:16): <https://youtu.be/iN6g2mr0p3Q>

Choiceless awareness

Starting this week, we can extend the sitting exercise to what we call 'choiceless awareness'. This means that we hold everything in awareness that presents itself in that moment, without a specific selected object of attention (such as breathing, or the body, or observing thoughts). Without directing the attention, we are aware from moment to moment of where our attention is, one moment at hearing a sound, then at a thought, then there is a feeling that we see coming up, a tingling that we notice, etc.

It sounds so simple to 'just sit down', without having to focus our attention in a specific way. But it is not very simple, precisely because there is no clear anchor point. For this reason, this part of practice is sometimes perceived as difficult at first. With enough time and motivation, choiceless awareness will become increasingly interesting.

Start this week with a few minutes of choiceless awareness at the end of the sitting exercise. After the next meeting you can do it a little longer or you can choose to do the whole meditation in choiceless awareness.



When summer was upon its hottest and the leaves of the trees hung down limply and longed for autumn, when they would whirl and fall and lie down on top of each other and adopt other colors, when it would be fresh and bright, with translucent raindrops on each branch and twig, the squirrel set sail.

He got into a small boat moored on the banks of the river. The little boat was round like the setting sun, so he didn't know what was the front and what was the back. And so he also didn't know which way to go. He pulled the oars in and let himself float along with the flow of the river. The bright sunlight bounced from the water to his head and back again, and he watched himself wiping the drops of sweat from his forehead, which flowed from his crown over and over again.

He was busy with his thoughts. They didn't leave him alone. He didn't want to think, but he couldn't control his thoughts. They were stronger than his will. They thought he wasn't in a small boat, but in a pan that was on a fire. Anxiously, he jumped up. The boat started rocking violently and flipped over. The squirrel disappeared underwater.

When he resurfaced, he was furious with his thoughts. But it's impossible to hit your thoughts or squeeze them hard. And while he was thinking that, the little boat drifted away and he had to swim to reach the side.

Sadly he pulled himself up on the warm shore and lay down on his back. Immediately his thoughts jumped forth, as if they had been lurking. They came up with thoughts of him floating through the air, like a leaf lighter than the air, and that he landed at the ant's door, and that the ant just came out with a large glass of beech nut juice, ice-cold beech nut juice. Suddenly, his thoughts were gone again. They had just had him reach for the glass.

The sun went down and the squirrel trudged home. At the door of the ant's cabin was a note: "Squirrel, I didn't know if you were coming over, but when you came by, I was gone. Ant."

The squirrel sighed. The door opened and the ant came out. "But not really," he said, with a smile reaching from far beyond his right ear to far behind his left ear. "I have a treat for you," he added.

Translated from: "Misschien wisten zij alles, 313 verhalen over de eekhoorn en de andere dieren", ("Maybe they knew everything, 313 stories about the squirrel and the other animals"), Toon Tellegen (1995).

Observing thoughts and feelings

What do you notice when you do the Sounds and Thoughts meditation? Remember, there is no right or wrong way to feel—no success or failure.

Dana found something strange happened when she turned toward thinking: “When I was focusing on the sounds, then the thoughts were coming thick and fast and interfering with the sounds, but when I started actually to focus on them, the thoughts themselves seemed to go away altogether.”

This often happens. In the full daylight of awareness, thoughts seem shy. Why is this? We can think of it like this: thoughts consist of a momentary flicker of activity in a network of the brain, followed by a slower spreading of activation along a much larger network of associations. The flicker may be a very short “pulse” (probably corresponding to a brief image), but what we think of as a “thought” is made up of both that momentary pulse and a following tail. The tail follows the pulse like a retinue following a king or queen. The retinue is more like inner language with subject and object, verbs, nouns and adjectives, all strung together in a daisy chain of associations that, themselves, provoke further images that evoke further inner speech. Because much of the retinue that follows the pulse comprises mere associations triggered by habit, the act of bringing full awareness to the thinking process dissolves the daisy chain of inner language, leaving you more aware of just the pulses themselves. So, the thoughts soon lose their momentum and run into the sand. Of course, it’s often not very long before the thoughts find a gap in awareness just long enough to start another daisy chain, and then, once again, you start to see the retinue that follows the pulse. And so the whole train of thought begins to gather momentum until you are again pulled into the thought stream. It is truly intriguing to witness the activity of your own mind/brain.

During the Sounds and Thoughts meditation, Simon could not focus at all: “I have tinnitus—a high-pitched noise in the background all the time. When I was listening to sounds, the tinnitus became really prominent. I didn’t like it at all. Normally, I just try and shut it out, but I get so frustrated. It really spoiled it for me.”

Many things can disturb our practice, but tinnitus can be a particularly unwelcome visitor. It is like chronic pain, so unremitting, so intrusive and so intimate. People vary in how they cope with it. During the day when there is a lot of other sound around it can seem OK, but at night, when trying to get to sleep, it can be very troublesome. Meditation on sounds seems just the opposite of coping. So why persist? Simon’s experience begins to show why: “I experimented with allowing the ringing in my ears to be there, together with all the other sounds around the place. The noise in the ears did not seem to get any quieter, but my thoughts about it seemed to lessen—I think I was fighting it less, so I was able to relax more. I’ve tried to relax before, but relaxing always seemed to be about desperately trying to ignore it. I’d never tried allowing it to remain. It felt different somehow. And liberating.” Notice Simon’s willingness to experiment, to explore. In “turning towards” the very thing that was bothering him, he was noticing that the “tinnitus” consisted not only of the sound, but of the sound plus the whole retinue of “not wanting” and angry thoughts and feelings that were, in the end, attacking him and disturbing his peace of mind.

Sharon’s experience shifted dramatically just a few minutes into the meditation. “It felt easy at first because I had no thoughts, I wasn’t drifting away. Then—I know this sounds silly—I felt as if my whole body was getting light, floating; it was great, but when it disappeared I felt really disappointed. Then I started to remember other times when I’d felt let down ... and this made me really sad. What a roller coaster.” Sharon had experienced the way in which the weather pattern in the mind can change in an instant. One moment she was enjoying the floating feeling, the next it was gone, and the resulting disappointment left her with a stream of unwanted thoughts and associations.

The thought stream is so powerful that it can pick us up and whisk us away before we’re even aware of it. You can imagine yourself sitting on the edge of a stream or small river, watching your thoughts as if they were leaves on the stream floating by. The next moment, you find that you’ve left your seat and sleepwalked into the middle of the stream. It’s only a little later that you wake up and see that, yet again, you’ve become immersed in your thought stream. When this happens—as it surely will—you might congratulate yourself for having woken up, then compassionately acknowledge

that your mind is wandering, gently haul yourself back on to the bank of the stream and start over again. The experienced meditator is not someone whose mind does not wander, but one who gets very used to beginning again.

Wandering, gently haul yourself back on to the bank of the stream and start over again. The experienced meditator is not someone whose mind does not wander, but one who gets very used to beginning again.

If you're feeling especially wound up or tense, the thought stream isn't a gentle babbling brook, but a tsunami of enormous power. It drags you along, kicking and screaming. It might take several minutes before you even realize you've been swept away from the meditation. And, even then, you'll forget where you were. You can struggle to remember if you were focusing on the breath or the body or sounds. This confusion often happens if you're beginning to do the meditation without listening to the audio files. When this happens, you can steady yourself by focusing on the breath as it moves in and out of the body, without giving yourself a hard time. After a few moments, you'll remember the point that you'd reached and will be able to start over, picking up the thread from where you left it.

What is particularly difficult is to notice the thoughts that somehow get under the radar, and are not seen as "thoughts" at all.

You may be sitting quietly, observing thoughts as if they were appearing on a screen or stage in front of you, or as if they were leaves floating past on the stream. Some thoughts are easy to see: perhaps you find yourself thinking, I wonder what's for dinner tonight? And very quickly see, "Ah—there's a thought about dinner." But, sooner or later, you may suddenly remember an email you meant to send, and you find yourself planning when you can get back to the computer. Even then, you may eventually see that this too was a thought. But what if you then say to yourself, "This is not going well—I shouldn't have gone off for so long" or, "I'm just not getting this." It is much more difficult to see *these* intimate self-judgments as "thoughts." They feel more fundamentally true — realistic comments on "me" and how I'm doing.

So if we are imagining watching a movie, we need to be aware, not only of what's on the screen, but the whispers that come as if from the seat behind us. The cinema has "surround sound"! And if we are imagining sitting on the bank of a stream, then we need to be aware that there may be a tributary to the same stream that is running behind us as well as in front. Some thoughts just don't feel like thoughts, and these require our special attention, and special reserves of quiet patience. In these times of maximum stress and confusion, we learn the most, for it is when we see the most compelling thoughts as mental events— rather than truly reflecting reality—that we glimpse the possibility of freedom most of all.

If some of these practices seem a little repetitive, *it's because they are*. Meditation is a simple practice that gains its power from repetition. It's only through this that we can become aware of the repeating patterns in our own minds. Ironically, meditative repetition frees us from endlessly repeating our past mistakes and the automatic pilot that drives self-defeating and self-attacking thoughts and actions. Through repetition, we gradually tune into the subtle differences that each moment brings.

Think of the meditation as planting seeds. You give young seeds the right conditions, but you don't try to dig them up each day to see if they've grown roots. Meditation is like cultivating a garden: your experience deepens and changes, but this takes place in horticultural time, not clock time.

(From: Mindfulness, a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world. Mark Williams and Danny Penman, p. 147-152)

Home practice suggestions after meeting 5

1. Practice **Sitting with Breath, Body, Sounds, Thoughts & Choiceless Awareness** (23:24) once a day
2. Do the **thought exercise** as often as you like with the description on the next page. When you looked and answered the questions, go about your business and wherever you are, whatever you do, once in a while, focus on what is going on around you, and notice how naming everything and telling stories about it is happening automatically.
3. Look at the list **Automatic negative thoughts** (p. 79) and tally mark the ones you recognize. Then create your personal top 5 automatic negative thoughts; i.e. which 5 negative thoughts happen most often to you? These may include thoughts that are not on the list.
4. Be extra aware of your **thought patterns** this week. Are you often thinking about the future or the past? Do you notice that you are fantasizing, planning, worrying, analyzing or reflecting? Are there any particular themes that often come back in your mind? Write down your experiences briefly. Then also look at how thoughts and emotions go together and how thoughts and feelings are expressed in your body.
5. Keep paving this particular neural pathway and keep doing the **three step breathing space**:
 - 3 times a day at **predetermined** times.
 - every time you sense **unpleasant thoughts or feelings**, write down your experiences or problems. Pay particular attention to thoughts. If you still have negative or unpleasant thoughts after applying the breathing space, write them down. Reread p. 66 to get a different view of your thoughts: 'Ways to view our thoughts differently' and 'If we become aware of negative thoughts'.
6. Read the **information** belonging to meeting 5.
7. Keep a **daily record** of your homework. Fill it in as accurately and honestly as possible on the exercise form. Bring the form to the next meeting.

Thought Exercise (partly derived from (Liberation Unleashed, 2012))

A key tool in mindfulness is: being able to distinguish between the actual, raw, sensory input and our interpretation. The interpretation of sensory input happens very quickly. So while practicing it will always be there. However, it is possible to concentrate only on the sensory input.

Observe your thoughts for a few moments. Just close your eyes and notice. ... They come, one by one, ... a stream of thoughts, labelling everything that is being felt, that is being sensed, that is being experienced. An automatic labelling machine, providing our life with sub-titles and voice-overs. See if you can look at the mind as an automatic labelling machine, a narrator without an on-off switch.

Then look around your room slowly. And notice how thoughts spring up and label objects, maybe people, telling a story about everything, ... naming everything. ... Don't pay much attention to content, but *observe* how this labelling mechanism works. ... A sound is heard and thoughts describe what happened. ... A tingling sensation comes and thoughts label it. Just pay attention to how something is experienced and then labelled *immediately* afterward. ... Notice how your thoughts provide your experience with labels, subtitles, voice-overs ...

Then close your eyes again and answer the following questions one by one, from your *actual direct* experience, so not from theory, thinking or analysing, but from actual *looking* at what you can notice about your thoughts:

What *is* a thought? Can you touch a thought, hold it, show it to someone?

Where do thoughts come from, and what decides which thought will come up into existence next?

Where do thoughts go when they disappear?

Is one thought more important than another, is there a hierarchy of thoughts?

Is there one thought thinking the others?

Can thoughts *think*? Can thoughts DO anything?

Do thoughts have an owner? If thoughts run through the mind, *who* is doing the running, who's in charge of the *running*? ... Or if your "head is full of thoughts," *who* put them in there? ...

Is there a 'thinker'? Something or someone that '*does*' the thinking? Or is thinking just happening?

Can you stop a thought in the middle?

Can you choose not to have any painful or negative thoughts?

Can you choose, can you control, what and what not to think?

And what is *noticing*? Does noticing also happen *between* thoughts - when there are *no* thoughts? — are thoughts what you are? ... Are you your thoughts?

How do you know if a thought is 'true'?

Automatic negative thoughts

In the list below, cross to what thoughts you recognize. Then put together your 'top 5' of automatic negative thoughts: which 5 negative thoughts (these may also be thoughts that are not on the list) are most common with you? You can top up the list if you have other automatic negative thoughts. If you don't find 'fit' thoughts, ask yourself what would happen if you feel very gloomy, or insecure, or very stressed. Which thoughts come up first?

Everybody's against me.

Otherwise, n.l.:

I'm bad.

Why am I never successful?

No one understands me.

I've let others down.

I can't take it anymore.

I wish I was a better person.

I'm such a wimp.

My life doesn't go the way I want it to.

I'm so disappointed in myself.

Nothing makes me feel good again.

I can't stand this anymore.

I can't get going.

What's wrong with me?

I wish I was somewhere else.

I can't get things sorted out.

I hate myself.

I'm worthless.

I wish I could disappear.

What is happening to me?

I'm a loser.

My life is a mess.

I'm a failure.

I'll never be successful.

I feel so powerless.

Something has to change.

There must be something wrong with me.

My future isn't worth much.

It's not worth it.

EXERCISE FORM WEEK 5

Keep a daily record of your homework every day. Fill it in as accurately and honestly as possible.

DAY	PRACTICED YES/NO	NOTES
DAY 1 Date:	Breath, Body, Sounds, Thoughts & Choiceless Awareness Thought exercise/Patterns 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular 3x: • Responsive 	
DAY 2 Date:	Breath, Body, Sounds, Thoughts & Choiceless Awareness Thought exercise/Patterns 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular 3x: • Responsive 	
DAY 3 Date:	Breath, Body, Sounds, Thoughts & Choiceless Awareness Thought exercise/Patterns 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular 3x: • Responsive 	
DAY 4 Date:	Breath, Body, Sounds, Thoughts & Choiceless Awareness Thought exercise/Patterns 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular 3x: • Responsive 	
DAY 5 Date:	Breath, Body, Sounds, Thoughts & Choiceless Awareness Thought exercise/Patterns 3 Step Breathing Space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular 3x: • Responsive 	