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TWO KINDS OF THOUGHTS

Our first selection shows methods that the Buddha, even before he became the Buddha, developed to watch the patterns of his experience. Here he watches his thoughts, turning them into objects of scrutiny and then dividing them into two piles, based on his direct empirical experience of whether and how they lead to harm.

This mindfulness practice of noticing and observing what occurs can help one relate to one's experiences differently by becoming disenchanted with harmful experiences and casually observant of, but not overly stimulated by, beneficial ones.

Most of us have addictions—to obvious substances like tobacco, drugs, alcohol, and

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food, as well as to our phones, to our compulsive habits of mind, and even to ourselves.¹

Our brains are formed by reward-based learning, where we fall into habits based on positive and negative reinforcement. When we step back from these and observe their reinforcing cycles of craving and gratification, we can grow disenchanted. Neuroscientists and psychiatrists have begun to show that certain mindfulness practices based on the Pali Canon are remarkably effective in treating addiction because they address these reward-based systems by careful and curious attention to how they feel.²

I invite the reader to notice the structure of this passage, wherein thoughts have their opposites. Thoughts of sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty can be replaced by, respectively, “letting things go” (disengaging from or renouncing sense desires), “lack of ill will” (which can

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include kindness but also experiences simply lacking anger and malice), and “noncruelty” (thoughts free of any desire to harm oneself or others). Pervading one’s experience and habits with kinder and gentler thoughts crowds out their opposites and reshapes one’s inclinations. The brain has its ruts and habits. But it is also plastic, and we can gradually restructure its neural pathways.

A final insight of the passage is that for all their beneficial qualities, even thoughts lacking sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty can themselves become overstimulating when we ruminate on them. We can persevere, addicted to our own thoughts and prone to whiling away time in daydreaming. Better to simply note their coming and going, permitting oneself to become calm, composed, and open, rather than getting drawn into them.

Dvedhāvitakkasuttaṃ
(*Majjhima Nikāya i. 114–118*)

Evam me sutam—ekam samayaṃ bhagavā sāvatthiyaṃ viharati jetavane anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāme. Tatra kho bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi—bhikkhavoti. Bhadante ti te bhikkhū bhagavato paccassosum. Bhagavā etadavoca—

Pubbeva me, bhikkhave, sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattasseva sato etadahosi—yaṃnūnāhaṃ dvidhā katvā dvidhā katvā vitakke vihareyyanti. So kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, yo cāyaṃ kāmavitakko yo ca byāpādavitaṅko yo ca vihiṃsāvitakko—imaṃ ekam bhāgama-kāsim; yo cāyaṃ nekkhammavitakko yo ca abyāpādavitaṅko yo ca avihiṃsāvitakko—imaṃ dutiyaṃ bhāgama-kāsim.

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying at Jeta's Grove in Savatthi in Anathapindika's Park. There the Buddha addressed the monks: "Monks!"

"Yes, sir," the monks replied to the Buddha.

The Buddha said this: "Previously, monks, as an unenlightened bodhisatta prior to my awakening, I thought: *What if I were to spend time dividing my thoughts into two categories?* And so, monks, I placed on one side any thought of sensual desire, any thought of ill will, and any thought of cruelty. And I placed on a second side any thought of letting things go, any thought lacking ill will, and any thought lacking cruelty.

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Tassa mayhaṃ, bhikkhave, evaṃ appamat-
tassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharato uppajjati
kāmavitakko. So evaṃ pajānāmi—uppanno
kho me ayaṃ kāmavitakko. So ca kho atta-
byābādhāyapi saṃvattati, parabyābādhāyapi
saṃvattati, ubhayabyābādhāyapi saṃvattati,
paññānirodhiko vighātapakkhiko anibbāna-
saṃvattaniko. Attabyābādhāya saṃvattatītipi
me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham
gacchati; parabyābādhāya saṃvattatītipi me,
bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gac-
chati; ubhayabyābādhāya saṃvattatītipi me,
bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gac-
chati; paññānirodhiko vighātapakkhiko anib-
bāna saṃvattanikotipi me, bhikkhave,
paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gacchati. So kho
ahaṃ, bhikkhave, uppannuppannaṃ kāmavi-
takkaṃ pajahameva byantameva naṃ akāsiṃ.

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“While I was spending my time with care, effort, and determination, a thought of sensual desire occurred in me. I understood it in this way: *This thought of sensual desire has occurred in me. It surely leads to my own harm, leads to another’s harm, or leads to harm for both of us; it obstructs wisdom, causes trouble, and leads away from nirvana.* Monks, for one reflecting, *This leads to my own harm,* it comes to an end. Monks, for one reflecting, *This leads to another’s harm,* it comes to an end. Monks, for one reflecting, *This leads to harm for both of us,* it comes to an end. Monks, for one reflecting, *This obstructs wisdom, causes trouble, and leads away from nirvana,* it comes to an end. And in fact, monks, whenever a thought of sensual desire occurred, I just let it go, abandoned it, and brought it to an end.

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Tassa mayhaṃ, bhikkhave, evaṃ appamat-
tassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharato uppajjati
byāpādavitakko . . . pe . . . uppajjati vi-
hiṃsāvitakko. So evaṃ pajānāmi—uppanno
kho me ayaṃ vihiṃsāvitakko. So ca kho atta-
byābādhāyapi saṃvattati, parabyābādhāyapi
saṃvattati, ubhayabyābādhāyapi saṃvattati,
paññānirodhiko vighātapakkhiko anibbāna-
saṃvattaniko. Attabyābādhāya saṃvattatītipi
me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham
gacchati; parabyābādhāya saṃvattatītipi me,
bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gac-
chati; ubhayabyābādhāya saṃvattatītipi me,
bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gac-
chati; paññānirodhiko vighātapakkhiko
anibbānasamvattaniko tipī me, bhikkhave,
paṭisañcikkhato abbattham gacchati. So kho
ahaṃ, bhikkhave, uppannuppannam vi-
hiṃsāvitakkaṃ pajahameva vinodameva by-
antameva naṃ akāsiṃ.

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“While I was spending my time with care, effort, and determination, a thought of ill will occurred in me, and then a cruel thought occurred. In each case, I understood it in this way: *This cruel thought has occurred in me. It surely leads to my own harm, leads to another’s harm, or leads to harm for both of us; it obstructs wisdom, causes trouble, and leads away from nirvana.* Monks, for one reflecting, *This leads to my own harm*, it comes to an end. Monks, for one reflecting, *This leads to another’s harm*, it comes to an end. Monks, for one reflecting, *This leads to harm for both of us*, it comes to an end. Monks, for one reflecting, *This obstructs wisdom, causes trouble, and leads away from nirvana*, it comes to an end. And in fact, monks, whenever a cruel thought occurred, I just let it go, abandoned it, and brought it to an end.

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Yaññadeva, bhikkhave, bhikkhu bahula-manuvitakketi anuvicāreti, tathā tathā nati hoti cetaso. Kāmavitakkaṃ ce, bhikkhave, bhikkhu bahulamanuvitakketi anuvicāreti, pahāsi nekkhammavitakkaṃ, kāmavitakkaṃ bahulamakāsi, tassa taṃ kāmavitakkāya cittaṃ namati. Byāpādavitaṃ ce, bhikkhave . . . pe . . . vihiṃsāvitakkaṃ ce, bhikkhave, bhikkhu bahulamanuvitakketi anuvicāreti, pahāsi avihiṃsāvitakkaṃ, vihiṃsāvitakkaṃ bahulamakāsi, tassa taṃ vihiṃsāvitakkāya cittaṃ namati.

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, vassānaṃ pacchime māse saradasamaye kiṭṭhasambādhe gopālako gāvo rakkheyya. So tā gāvo tato tato daṇḍena ākoṭeyya paṭikoṭeyya sannirundheyya sanni-vāreyya. Taṃ kissa hetu? Passati hi so, bhikkhave, gopālako tatonidānaṃ vadhaṃ vā bandhanaṃ vā jāniṃ vā garahaṃ vā. Evameva

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“Monks, a monk’s mind comes to be inclined towards whatever it frequently ponders and thinks about. A monk who frequently ponders and thinks thoughts of sensual desire has abandoned thoughts of letting things go and developed thoughts of sensual desire, and so inclines the mind to thoughts of sensual desire. So too with thoughts of ill will and cruel thoughts. A monk who frequently ponders and thinks cruel thoughts has abandoned kind thoughts and developed cruel thoughts, and so inclines the mind to cruel thoughts.

“Consider, monks, a cowherd guarding cattle in the last month of the rainy season, the autumn harvest time when the crops are full. From all sides, he would strike, beat back, block, and keep the cows away with a stick. For what reason? The cowherd sees, monks, the punishment, imprisonment,

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kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, addasaṃ akusalānaṃ
dhammānaṃ ādīnaṃ okāraṃ saṃkilesaṃ,
kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ nekkhamme āni-
saṃsaṃ vodānapakkhaṃ.

Tassa mayhaṃ, bhikkhave, evaṃ appamat-
tassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharato uppajjati
nekkhammavitakko. So evaṃ pajānāmi—
uppanno kho me ayaṃ nekkhammavitakko.
So ca kho nevattabyābādhāya saṃvattati, na
parabyābādhāya saṃvattati, na ubhay-
abyābādhāya saṃvattati, paññāvuddhiko av-
ighātapakkhiko nibbānasamvattaniko'. Rattiṃ
cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anu-
vicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ sa-
manupassāmi. Divasaṃ cepi naṃ, bhikkhave,
anuvitakkeyyaṃ anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva ta-
tonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. Rattindi-
vaṃ cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ

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loss, and scolding that would occur on their account. Similarly, monks, I saw the drawbacks, the inferiority, and problematic nature of bad states, and in letting them go, I saw the benefits and purifying power of good states.

“While I was spending my time with care, effort, and determination, a thought of letting things go occurred in me. I understood it in this way: *This thought of letting things go has occurred in me. It does not lead to my own harm, does not lead to another’s harm, and does not lead to harm for both of us; it amplifies wisdom, does not cause trouble, and leads toward nirvana.* Monks, if I were to ponder and think about it at night, I see nothing to fear from it. If I were to ponder and think about it by day, I see nothing to fear from it. And even were I to ponder and think about it night and day, I see nothing

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anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. Api ca kho me aticiraṃ anuvitakkayato anuvicārayato kāyo kilameyya. Kāye kilante cittaṃ ūhaññeyya. Ūhate citte ārā cittaṃ samādhimhāti. So kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, ajjhattameva cittaṃ saṇṭhapemi sannisāдеми ekodiṃ karomi samādahāmi. Taṃ kissa hetu? ‘Mā me cittaṃ ūhaññīti.

Tassa mayhaṃ, bhikkhave, evaṃ appamat-tassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharato uppajjati abyāpādavitaṃ . . . pe . . . uppajjati avihimsāvitakko. So evaṃ pajānāmi—uppanno kho me ayaṃ avihimsāvitakko. So ca kho nevatta-byābādhāya saṃvattati, na parabyābādhāya saṃvattati, na ubhayabyābādhāya saṃvattati, paññāvuddhiko avighātapakkhiko nibbāna-saṃvattaniko. Rattiṃ cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. Divasaṃ

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to fear from it. And yet, pondering and thinking about it too much would tire the body. And when the body is tired, the mind gets overstimulated. And when the mind is overstimulated, it is far from concentrated. And so, monks, I steadied my mind internally, calmed it down, unified, and composed it. For what reason? So that my mind was not overstimulated.

“While I was spending my time with care, effort, and determination, a thought lacking ill will occurred in me, and an uncruel thought occurred. In each case, I understood it in this way: *This kind thought has occurred in me. It does not lead to my own harm, does not lead to another’s harm, and does not lead to harm for both of us; it amplifies wisdom, does not cause trouble, and leads toward nirvana.* Monks, were I to ponder and think about it at night, I see

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cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anu-
vicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ sa-
manupassāmi. Rattindivaṃ cepi naṃ, bhik-
khave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva
tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. Api ca
kho me aticiraṃ anuvitakkayato anuvicārayato
kāyo kilameyya. Kāye kilante cittaṃ
ūhaññeyya. Ūhate citte ārā cittaṃ samādhim-
hāti. So kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, ajjhattameva
cittaṃ saṇṭhapemi, sannisādemi, ekodiṃ kar-
omi samādahāmi. Taṃ kissa hetu? Mā me cit-
taṃ ūhaññīti.

Yaññadeva, bhikkhave, bhikkhu bahula-
manuvitakketi anuvicāreti, tathā tathā nati hoti
cetaso. Nekkhammavitakkañce, bhikkhave,
bhikkhu bahulamanuvitakketi anuvicāreti,
pahāsi kāmavitakkaṃ, nekkhammavitakkaṃ
bahulamakāsi, tassaṃ taṃ nekkhammavitak-
kāya cittaṃ namati. Abyāpādavitakkañce,

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nothing to fear from it. If I were to ponder and think about it by day, I see nothing to fear from it. And even were I to ponder and think about it night and day, I see nothing to fear from it. And yet, pondering and thinking about it too much would tire the body. And when the body is tired, the mind gets overstimulated. And when the mind is overstimulated, it is far from concentrated. And so, monks, I steadied my mind internally, calmed it down, focused and composed it. For what reason? So that my mind was not overstimulated.

“Monks, a monk’s mind comes to be inclined towards whatever it frequently ponders and thinks about. A monk who frequently ponders and thinks thoughts of letting things go has abandoned thoughts of sensual desire and developed thoughts of letting things go, and so inclines the

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bhikkhave . . . pe . . . avihimsāvitakkañce,
bhikkhave, bhikkhu bahulamanuvitakketi
anuvicāreti, pahāsi vihiṃsāvitakkaṃ, avi-
hiṃsāvitakkaṃ bahulamakāsi, tassa taṃ avi-
hiṃsāvitakkāya cittaṃ namati.

Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, gimhānaṃ pac-
chime māse sabbasassesu gāmantasambhatesu
gopālako gāvo rakkheyya, tassa rukkhamaṇḍala-
tassa vā abbhokāsagatassa vā satikaraṇīyameva
hoti—etā gāvoti. Evamevaṃ kho, bhikkhave,
satikaraṇīyameva ahosi—ete dhammāti.

Āraddhaṃ kho pana me, bhikkhave, vīriyaṃ
ahosi asallīnaṃ, upaṭṭhitā sati asammutṭhā,
passaddho kāyo asāraddho, samāhitaṃ cittaṃ
ekaggaṃ

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mind to thoughts of letting things go. So too with thoughts lacking ill will and cruelty, monks. A monk who frequently ponders and thinks kind thoughts has abandoned cruel thoughts and developed kind thoughts, and so inclines the mind to kind thoughts.

“Consider, monks, a cowherd guarding cattle in the last month of the hot season when all the crops have been harvested in the village. Hanging out at the foot of a tree or in the open air, it is enough for him to just be mindful that the cows are there. Similarly, monks, it is enough to just be mindful that these phenomena are there.

“Then, monks, unshaken energy was aroused in me, unclouded mindfulness was present, my body was calm and unruffled, and my mind, centered and unified.”³