

## CHAPTER 6

## Controlling Thought

---

It is easy to relax the *body*. It takes no great skill or effort. We only have to sit or lie down and close our eyes for long enough. This sends a potent message to our bodies that we have disengaged from the world. Our muscles no longer need to be primed for action. Just closing our eyes gives them permission to relax and they do. Everyone lowers their muscle tension and arousal to some degree when they meditate, even the most incompetent.

Unfortunately, our minds don't relax so easily. We don't stop thinking just because our bodies have stopped moving. The freed-up mental capacity gets redirected into the 'virtual action' of thought. Whenever we have nothing to do, we don't switch off the mind and rest. Our default behaviour is to think over what we've just done and to plan for future actions. While this is an essential mental activity, we frequently overdo it to our detriment. Sitting down and closing our eyes certainly doesn't switch off that default habit. The brain is hardwired to revert to thought in the absence of immediate action.

Cognitive psychologists have various names for this perpetual mental activity. They call it the 'Automatic Processing System' or the 'Default Network' or the 'Narrative Network' or the 'Interior Dialogue' or the 'Stream of Consciousness.' We can regard it as the stream of *automatic* cognition that underpins our *conscious* thought. Whether we are aware of it or not, automatic thinking never stops, not even when we periodically shift into conscious, goal-directed thinking. We can think both automatically and consciously at the same time. Cognitive psychologists explain this according to what is called the 'Dual Process Theory.'

Automatic thinking is complex and powerful. It processes many issues simultaneously, operating on parallel tracks continuously day and night. It is the mental equivalent of the digestive system. It thinks over, digests, sifts through, files away and organises all the information we take in each day. It discards the junk, clears the decks and primes us for coming activities.

This is the huge substrata of automatic and unconscious cognition that keeps our lives on track. We would be in a lunatic asylum or dead without it. While conscious, directed thought does certain things so much better than automatic thought, it is just the luxury top end of this vast factory of cognition. Thinking is thus a continuous, automatic and mostly beneficial process. Nor do we have to decide to think. It happens by itself just like breathing does. It would be futile to try to shut it down, or switch it off, or blank it out as many people would like to do. By meditating, we just learn to interact with it more effectively.

We control automatic thought in several ways when we meditate. By *calming* our bodies down, the mental noise and busyness diminish. By *slowing* our minds down, we become more able to choose our thoughts. By getting *sleepy* we dull them out (not an ideal strategy). By becoming *mindful* – by seeing what actually happens in the mind – we understand how it all works.

Meditating calms automatic thought through the way we direct our attention. In particular, we focus *towards* the body and *away* from our habitual thoughts. We give *more* attention than usual to the flux of bodily sensations, and *less* attention to our thoughts. We feed X by starving Y. This results in our automatic thoughts becoming weaker, less emotionally charged and easier to ignore or tolerate.

Where attention goes, the energy follows. Because energy is a limited resource, giving more to our mental representations of the body (the body schema) means less is available for runaway thought. When starved of oxygen and glucose, our background thoughts (and the neural networks that support them) become weaker. Their emotional charge declines and the chains of thought break apart more quickly.

Focusing on the body disarms most intrusive thoughts, but they never completely disappear. Nor would that be a useful goal. We don't want to go mentally blank. It is much better to lightly monitor that peripheral stream of cognition and data. It could contain something we need to respond to (i.e. the house is burning down).

## Focusing and Monitoring

This means that ‘paying attention’ is not as single-minded as it might seem. It consists of two mutually supporting skills. We can call them ‘focusing’ and ‘monitoring.’ We *focus* on the body while *monitoring* the peripheral activity. Nor do we have to toggle between them. We both focus and monitor simultaneously. As the instructions say: focus on the body while noticing thoughts with detachment. We *consciously* focus on the body, while monitoring the *automatic* thinking in the background.

Paying attention to something always divides the world into two: what we focus on and everything else. The body and the thoughts. Foreground and background. The centre and the periphery. Figure and field. The path and the scenery. What we regard as most important in the moment, and what we see as potential distractions to that.

Attention highlights one thing alone. This is critical whenever we try to do something physical. Action is always unitary. Our thoughts can scatter and fragment, but we can’t walk in five different directions at once. We have to make continuous this/not-that choices to do even the simplest activity.

Even when we meditate and apparently do nothing, we still split our attentional resources. One part looks inwards. We use conscious, top-down, controlled ‘selective attention’ to focus on the body. The other part looks outwards. We use automatic, bottom-up, reactive ‘monitoring attention’ for the peripheral thoughts that push their way onto the mental stage.

‘Focusing’ is ‘selective attention.’ It means making a conscious choice to focus for longer and more deeply than usual on the sensations of the body. Although this calms us down, it is also surprisingly dynamic and enjoyable in a quiet way. It is ‘approach’ behaviour guided by the reward circuitry of the brain.

‘Monitoring attention’ on the other hand is vigilant and dismissive. It is ‘withdrawal’ behaviour. Monitoring involves noticing, evaluating and mostly discarding the peripheral thoughts, sounds and emotions as rapidly as possible.

Monitoring attention is economical and aims to conserve resources. It ‘notices’ but doesn’t ‘process’ or ‘elaborate’ on the peripheral data any more than necessary. It is a space-maker. It aims to keep the mental stage uncluttered for the chosen task of focusing on the body. Most of the

peripheral input can be dismissed instantly, but some will be important enough to be briefly processed ('Don't forget to make that phone call!')

Ideally we give whatever arises just the right amount of attention it needs: no more but also no less. If we give it too little attention or try to ignore it, it may continue to niggle at us from the sidelines. If we give it too much attention, we will lose focus on the body. The few seconds or milliseconds it takes to process a peripheral stimulus is not enough to break the body-focused flow of a meditation. In fact, by removing potential distractions rapidly, it keeps the meditation running smoothly.

This focusing-monitoring duality is reflected in most meditation instructions. For example: Focus on the body and let everything else go. Focus on the body while noticing thoughts with detachment. Focus on the breath while noticing everything else with nonjudgmental acceptance.

There are many rule-of-thumb instructions relating to the monitoring of peripheral data: Just watch. Be an observer. Let it all pass by like leaves in a stream or clouds in the sky. Notice thoughts without reacting to them (or without 'processing' them, or without 'elaborating' on them). Accept whatever happens with an open, curious mind.

The PM approach, derived from Zen, is slightly different. It cultivates an 'open' or 'empty', unfocused state of mind. Although thoughts invariably arise, they are to be seen as the unimportant epiphenomena that goes with being alive. There is no need to either attach to or resist them. They are simply allowed to pass through the mental space.

Most of these instructions are gentle and encouraging but this is often not enough. Trying to lightly brush aside unwanted thoughts, or contain them through 'acceptance', or let them pass through, is a strategy that can only go so far. Some of our thoughts and our patterns around them are so obsessive that they won't readily submit to such mild treatment. Just ask any anxious person if they find it easy to 'let thoughts gently float away.'

My students often complain that they're not thinking well (too scattered, can't focus, can't remember, can't stop). Although they would like a quick-fix, the first step towards controlling thoughts is to realise that we can't just 'switch the mind off'. (Thinking is a continuous automatic process.) Nor can we focus better by trying harder (too stressful and tiring). We can't argue ourselves out of runaway thought, or force ourselves to go to sleep. (The brain usually ignores top-down commands.) Nonetheless we can learn to control our thoughts much better than we normally do.

## What happens when you meditate?

When you start to meditate, you will find that it takes at least half a minute to mentally settle into your body. You have to shift attention from outer to inner, from thought and action to internal body sensations. That's a big shift. It takes time to activate the mental map of your body, so don't expect it to happen instantly.

Eventually, you connect well with the breath. You feel it rise. You feel it fall. You feel the beginning and end of each breath. This is 'selective, sustained attention.' You gently explore the moment-to-moment sensations of the breath. This is good attention and it feels satisfying to do.

Sooner or later however, you're likely to get sidetracked. You may revert to a previous thought, or to something that seems much more important than the breath. It could be last night's TV, or lunch or the mortgage. When you realise you've been distracted, you've got a choice. You could continue thinking about that subject for as long as you normally would. Or you could say, 'Not now. I need to relax.' So you tick that thought off and refocus on your object.

It might take only a second to do this but a lot will have happened. You were mindful of the thought and you stopped the conversation with it. You evaluated it as useless. And you deliberately abandoned it: perception + evaluation + response. This is good economical 'monitoring attention' at work. It didn't take long enough to seriously distract you from your primary focus on the breath. You were tempted but you didn't succumb. Only when you stay with a thought for more than 10 seconds does it start to become a serious distraction.

So you recommit to the breath. You feel it rise. You feel it fall. You feel the breath starting to loosen up. Your whole body starts to feel good, but before you know it, another thought captures you. When you are mindful of this new distraction, you go through the same procedure. You stop that thought, evaluate it, tick it off and return to the breath. This is the natural rhythm of any meditation. You focus, get distracted, dismiss the distraction, refocus and so on.

Fairly soon you realise that it is quite pleasant to return to the breath. It is a much quieter place than chasing your thoughts. The pleasure principle now kicks in. At a gut level you start to understand the value of focusing, and the sense of mental control is quite lovely. You feel the mind settling and the body relaxing, and the positive sensory feedback makes it so much easier to stay on track. Peripheral thoughts will still tempt you but they won't be such a problem. They will have lost their 'stickiness',

their usual emotional charge. This is the ideal place in any meditation. You are actively focused on the breath while ‘noticing’ but not ‘processing’ your thoughts.

Sometimes however, this is just not enough. When a thought truly becomes a capital-D ‘Distraction’, you need a better strategy than noticing it and letting go. Unless you also learn to manage strong, intrusive (and often important) thoughts, your meditation will always be liable to disintegrate.

### Name the Thought

Good thought control starts with learning to manage an *individual* thought that has grown into a ‘distraction’. To do so, we have to bring that thought out of automatic runaway mode into full consciousness. The best way to do this is to become mindful of it – to ‘hold it in mind’ – and verbally identify it. As the Buddha said, you are mindful if you know what is in your mind, *and you can describe it to yourself*. In the *Sutta* he gives precise examples of how to do this, as you will see later in this book.

I briefly introduced this technique in Chapter 3. The strategy is simple but immensely powerful. We just ask: ‘What is this? What am I thinking about?’ and we come up with an appropriate word to describe it: ‘Work’ or ‘money’ or ‘Daniel.’ This is called ‘naming’ or ‘categorising’ or ‘labelling’ or ‘noting.’ To do this, we have to stop the momentum of the thought and ‘hold it’ in the mind for long enough to classify it.

This has the effect of objectifying the thought. Naming a thought puts it ‘outside’ the body (which remains the main focus of attention) and gives us a choice about how to respond. Shall I give it more energy or less energy? Shall I feed it or starve it? Shall I process it further or refocus on the body? To name a thought is not to suppress it. Nor is it a way of consciously reappraising it as we would with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. It means that we recognise its presence while nonetheless suspending our tendency to engage further with it.

This is what psychologists call ‘nonjudgmental acceptance’ – a kind of cunning, strategic, let-it-be laziness. If we stop processing a thought for more than a few seconds, it usually gets depressed (this is the correct technical term!) and it starts to fade. Even if it remains in consciousness, the neural networks that represent it decline from the active processing state to a passive, waiting state. The thought drifts from centre stage to the wings. If we don’t feed the stray cat it eventually wanders off.

Naming works so well because it inhibits the emotional charge that powers the thought. To use language engages the left hemispheric prefrontal cortex. This region is essential for rational, verbal thought. When activated, it has an inhibitory effect on the limbic system deep in the brain where emotions are generated. This means that the act of naming saps the emotional energy from the thought.

I confess that it took me years and my studies in Cognitive Psychology to realise how potent this technique was. I find that my students generally fail to take it seriously either. It might seem relatively simple, but Naming a Thought is a skill that benefits from being done with precision. When I ask my students how they named a troublesome thought, they usually don't give me a name. They give me instead a description, which is often quite lengthy, of what they were thinking about!

This tells me that they were still 'elaborating' on it. I often have to prompt them by saying: "The name for this thought is 'work' or 'shopping'." To name is to give a single word label to something. It is the kind of word you would put on a filing cabinet file. It is not about resolving the issue or understanding it more deeply.

To be mindful of something also means holding it *still*. If you don't actively feed it, it will naturally shrink in importance. To categorise a thought and to see it outside of yourself, is quite enough to diminish the vast majority of your thoughts. Students gradually learn to notice the difference between elaborating on a thought and 'just seeing' it.

When all else fails however, the Buddha said that 'holding a thought in mind' also means 'holding it *down*', in the way that 'a strong man forces down and subdues a weaker one.' This use of will-power however is only a last resort after the gentler strategies have failed. Will-power is never as potent as we would like it to be and it is always a limited resource.

Many people find it a revelation to understand that they don't have to respond to every one of their thoughts. If they are fully mindful, they can make an executive choice whether to follow a thought or not. This is a crucial life skill, since giving energy to any one thought necessarily excludes others which may be more valuable.

For some people, using imagery can work just as well at this task as language. 'Naming' a thought 'captures' it in a word and 'boxes' it up. It is very natural and intuitive to use imagery to enhance this process. As human beings, we 'think' with pictures just as much as with words. If our thought is about Daniel, we could see also 'see' him as an image (like a computer icon).

Once we have converted a thought into a picture we can manipulate it. We can put it 'outside' of ourselves or in the distance. We can put it on a shelf or a mental list or in a rubbish bin or in a filing cabinet. We can schedule it for a time in the future. We can place a thought in the geographical space around us, left or right, up or down, near or far. We can bury a thought, or put into a thought-bubble, or throw it off a cliff, or grind it under our feet or throw it back into the stream of consciousness. You can be confident that any image that spontaneously occurs to you about how to manage a thought is likely to be useful.

Another strategy to escape a thought is to switch obsessions. We can disengage from a thought by actively thinking about something else that is strong enough to hold our attention. This is not a last resort strategy. It is a way of practising the vital cognitive skill of 'attention-switching.' This is what Erasmus called 'using a nail to extract a nail.'

An even more drastic approach is to continuously stonewall thought or to 'play a dead bat' or to basically say 'no' to everything indiscriminately. Meditation as a monastic tradition places high value on inactivity and emotional withdrawal: 'Be firm and unmoving like a mountain.' This sweeping indifference to all worldly vanities may lead to a dull mind, but that could be better than mental chaos. Experienced meditators occasionally take this too far. They cultivate an automatic 'do nothing' response to everything.

If all else fails, it is best to stop meditating altogether. There is no point in struggling with the inner tar-baby. It is better to get out of your head and distract yourself with some fully engaging activity. Exercise or a conversation or some physical activity can be excellent diversionary options.

Most of the strategies above still rely on having a primary focus on the body. We can only escape a thought by having somewhere else for our attention to go to. Focusing on the body is the ultimate escape from thought, and 'naming the distractions' is basically a way of patrolling the borders.

You might realise that most of the strategies above have little in common with the 'nonjudgmental acceptance' recommended by many psychologists. They all imply that getting tangled up in thought is not a good thing at all. Runaway thought can make us very miserable indeed, and some people have their lives destroyed by it.

The old Buddhist language describes thoughts and behaviours as being either right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy, 'skilful' or 'unskilful.'

*Sati*, which we can define as ‘the conscious perception and evaluation of something’, is what makes those discriminations. The purpose of mindfulness is to decide what is good or bad in any situation, and to steer us towards advantage and away from danger. The quality of our lives depends on it. As the Buddha said, our actions follow our thoughts, ‘as the cart follows the ox.’

In the long run you may still have to tackle the problem of destructive thought closer to its source. If your quality of mind is persistently bad, then tackling individual thoughts is not going to fix that. If you are drifting into depression and your life is starting to suffer, you might need to also work on the preceding causes. In the *Sutta* the Buddha said: ‘Be mindful of what causes good and bad states of mind to arise.’ Here are some good long term solutions to consider:

Let the brain rest. Fatigue is a guaranteed cause of poor thought, so try to get more sleep or down time. An extra hour in bed each night will vastly improve your ability to think the next day.

Don’t tax your brain unnecessarily. Cut down the information overload and be ruthless about it. How much media junk and gossip do you really need? The brain has to waste energy processing it all no matter how trashy it is.

Spend more time alone, even if you’re not actually meditating. It may be a little boring and anti-social, but that’s when your brain has a chance to tidy the mental desk and put out the rubbish.

Avoid conflict whenever possible, even when you are right. It often triggers a hurricane of thoughts. It’s sometimes better to be a relaxed loser than a stressed-out winner.

Finally, learn organisational skills to make your life more orderly and less cluttered. If necessary, dump activities and people from your life. You can’t expect meditation alone to give you a calm, well-functioning mind.