

Two Sorts of Thinking

It's an indication you're moving forward when you're able to refrain from acting unskillfully with your body and mouth. There's much benefit in abandoning unskillful physical and verbal action. But when it comes to developing skillful qualities, abandoning unskillful physical and verbal action isn't the whole path. It's good, but it's not good enough. The Buddha asks that you go further, that you purify not only physical and verbal action, but mental action as well.

Mental action is thinking; specifically, the thinking you purposely fabricate. Thoughts constantly enter the mind. They arise unbidden. There's nothing you can do about it. But you have an opportunity to do something once the thoughts arise. You can pursue the thoughts. Or not. You take mental action when you pursue the thoughts that enter the mind. You take action when you grab on to the thoughts, when you take the thoughts and fabricate more thoughts, when you construct narratives, stories.

“Pursue” is a word the Buddha frequently uses in describing the manner in which we take mental action. Thoughts arise, we pursue them. We chase after them, like cops chasing a getaway car, like a dog chasing a squirrel in the town park.

The fact is, we spend a lot of time, a good portion of our lives, pursuing thoughts. We engage in mental action much more frequently than we engage in physical action and verbal action. Every now and then we take a physical or verbal action. But we're constantly taking

mental actions. We're constantly thinking. And, unfortunately, most of our thinking isn't skillful. It brings about affliction, suffering.

Doesn't it?

The fact is, our unskillful mental action causes us an enormous amount of suffering. Think about the suffering, blatant and subtle, that you've experienced in the last twenty-four hours. In all likelihood the majority of it was the product of unskillful mental action.

All things considered, it's extremely important to learn to be heedful of your mental actions.

In the sutta, "Two Sorts of Thinking," the Buddha describes the strategy he employed as a Bodhisatta, in an effort to be heedful of his mental actions.

"The Blessed One said, "Monks, before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened Bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me: 'Why don't I keep dividing my thinking into two sorts?' So I made thinking imbued with sensuality, thinking imbued with ill will, & thinking imbued with harmfulness one sort, and thinking imbued with renunciation, thinking imbued with non-ill will, & thinking imbued with harmlessness another sort." (MN 19)

The Buddha divided his thinking into two categories: unskillful and skillful. Under the heading of unskillful he included thinking imbued with sensual desire (sensuality) and aversion (ill will, harmfulness). Skillful thinking comprised mental action informed by renunciation, love, goodwill, compassion.

Having made his categories, the Buddha paid attention to his mental actions.

"And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, thinking imbued with sensuality (desire) arose. I discerned that 'Thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen in me; and that leads to my own affliction or to the affliction of others or to the affliction of both. It obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & does not lead to Unbinding.'

"As I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided. As I noticed that it leads to the affliction of others... to the affliction of both... it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & does not lead to Unbinding, it subsided. Whenever thinking imbued with sensuality had arisen, I simply abandoned it, destroyed it, dispelled it, wiped it out of existence." (similarly, with ill will, harmfulness....) (MN 19)

The Buddha practiced heedfulness. And as you can see, he didn't go about it in a lackadaisical manner. He was "heedful, ardent & resolute." He made steadfast effort. He watched his thinking closely, scrupulously. He noticed when his thinking was informed by unskillful qualities (sensual desire, aversion). He noticed the drawbacks in this sort of thinking. He saw that it led to affliction. Recognizing the damaging consequences of involving himself in unskillful thinking, he sought to abandon it.

As the Buddha studied his unskillful thinking he recognized that "it leads to my own affliction." Here the Buddha gives a critical strategic instruction: in practicing heedfulness, you have to discern that your unskillful mental action causes you affliction, suffering. It's important to see that your unskillful thinking causes you harm. There may be a tendency, when you fabricate thinking imbued with sensual desire and aversion, to minimize the potential effects, to

tell yourself that your thinking “isn’t hurting anybody.” It may very well be that the angry thinking you’re generating with regard to another person isn’t hurting that person. But you have to realize that you are hurting somebody: you’re hurting yourself. In being heedful of your unskillful mental actions, this, largely, is what you’re asked to see: you’re hurting yourself.

The Buddha recognized that thinking driven by sensual desire and aversion “obstructs discernment” and “promotes vexation.” Following the Buddha’s lead, you’re asked to see that when you take unskillful mental action you experience agitation, dis-ease. You’re prevented from following the path, from finding true happiness. When you engage in this sort of thinking, you suffer. That’s the bottom line. You suffer.

In being heedful of your mental actions, you’re asked to see that thinking informed by desire and aversion leads to painful consequences, consequences you suffer in the short term and long term as well. You’re asked to see that you experience pain, agitation, dis-ease as time goes on as a result of your unskillful thinking. The repercussions when you pursue unskillful thinking are far-reaching. You feel the effects in the ensuing hours, days, weeks, months, years.

When you chase after certain kinds of thinking, you condition your mind, you create grooves in your mind. Your thinking becomes habitual. Over time, the grooves in your mind grow deeper; your thinking travels the same tracks, again and again, with the regularity of suburban commuter trains.

If you indulge in angry thoughts on Monday, you’ll probably indulge in the same kind of angry thoughts on Tuesday. That’s basically how it works.

This is a primary drawback of unskillful thinking. It leads to more unskillful thinking. And more unskillful thinking. And more. And more.

In the sutta, the Buddha describes the process of conditioning:

"Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking & pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with sensuality, abandoning thinking imbued with renunciation, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with sensuality. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with ill will, abandoning thinking imbued with non-ill will, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with ill will. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with harmfulness, abandoning thinking imbued with harmlessness, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with harmfulness." (MN 19)

Your mind, the Buddha says, is "bent" by your thinking. Like Superman, who bends steel in his bare hands, you bend your mind when you pursue different lines of thinking. This is something to consider when you're proliferating thoughts of sensual desire and aversion. What kind of mind do you want? Do you want a mind bent toward sensual desire? Toward aversion?

Sometimes while traipsing the sidewalks of New York I'll notice that I'm fabricating unskillful thoughts, aversive thoughts, about people walking on the sidewalk, talking on cell phones. (People talking on cell phones in public places is one of my pet peeves. We've all got our pet peeves.) Centered in the breath, practicing heedfulness, I'll notice my mental action. Usually I'll notice that I'm thinking something along those lines of: You jerk! Why are you talking on that cell phone! Put that thing away!

Recognizing that I'm feeding on aversive thoughts, like a hungry teenager scarfing fastfood burgers, I'll assume the role of the observer. Like a person standing looking at somebody sitting

on a chair, I'll observe my mental actions. I'll question my actions: Is it useful to feed on these thoughts? Is it serving me? Is it in my best interests?

Looking at my thinking objectively, truthfully, compassionately, I might ask: What are the consequences in doing what I'm doing? How is this thinking affecting me? This is the pivotal question. How is it affecting me? Forget about the guy gabbing on the cell phone. What am I doing to myself? Am I hurting myself?

I'll make an effort to investigate what's happening in my body. Acquiring a felt sense, I'll discern the consequences of my thinking. I may notice an inner dissonance, the sure sign of suffering.

I might try to gain insight into the long term consequences of my thinking. I might ask: If I chase after these aversive thoughts, how is it going to affect me going forward? How is it going to affect the rest of my day? How is this thinking going to affect my ability to teach the dharma later this evening? How is it going to affect my efforts to find true happiness in my life?

I might ask: What kind of mind am I shaping? How am I bending my mind? Is a mind bent by aversion the kind of mind that I want?

In drawing this scenario I'm describing different strategies I might use in an attempt to comprehend the drawbacks in my unskillful mental action. In most cases I wouldn't use all these strategies. Taking that into account, the reader might still wonder if this method of looking at mental action isn't extreme, excessive. Really, it isn't. It's important to remember that when it comes to the state of your mind, there needs to be a sense of urgency. Your thinking is incredibly important; you have to pay close attention to it; you have to make every effort to understand the drawbacks in unskillful thinking.

In the sutta the Buddha depicts the ardent effort we should apply in abandoning unskillful mental action.

"Just as in the last month of the Rains, in the autumn season when the crops are ripening, a cowherd would look after his cows: He would tap & poke & check & curb them with a stick on this side & that. Why is that? Because he foresees flogging or imprisonment or a fine or public censure arising from that [if he let his cows wander into the crops]. In the same way I foresaw in unskillful qualities drawbacks, degradation, & defilement...." (MN 19)

You have to make sure to take care of your mind, the Buddha says. If you allow yourself to become involved in desirous and aversive thinking, you're going to pay a stiff penalty, you're going to put yourself at risk. You're going to suffer.

The Buddha realized that if he abandoned unskillful mental action and developed skillful mental action, he would move toward ending suffering, finding true happiness. The strategy of being heedful of "Two Sorts of Thinking" is one you can apply. So, apply it. Learn to look at your thinking in this manner.

It's a strategy that worked for the Buddha. If you put effort into it, it will work for you, too.