

Phagmo Drupa: "THOUGHTS ARE AWARENESS!"

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What follows is a little abstract, for which I apologize, but I hope you will find it more than worth the effort to slowly read through it until at least understanding occurs. This is about Vipassana, what is called "Insight Meditation."

Thoughts and thinking are an integral part of meditation, but they are often looked down on by even good meditators, but this (or so the great meditators tell us) is a big mistake.

In other words, thoughts are too often thought of as distractions that need to be eliminated in meditation, when in reality thoughts are what pull us out of our distractions, and only thoughts. Without thoughts we would permanently remain in a closed loop – a hopeless catch-22. The Tibetan Buddhists teach that thoughts are not distractions, but rather they are opportunities for awareness itself to break through the cloister of our mental firewall and wake us up. In fact the great meditation master Phagmo Drupa, a disciple of Lord Gampopa, said this:

"Thoughts are awareness."

This single line is a profound teaching! Phagmo Drupa says that thoughts themselves ARE awareness. And that awareness is brilliant, vivid, and so bright that due to our obscurations we can't help but ignore the illumination awareness brings in favor of objectifying every thought. Check it out.

If you look at your own mind you will find that what we normally call a thought is always the awareness of something. A thought catches our attention and wakes us up from who-knows-where-we-are? There is an illumination, like a light turning on. In other words, we notice something and become aware. Thoughts get our interest. They arise to our attention in the mind, but usually as the awareness or illumination of something. And unfortunately we are habitually dualistic. Otherwise we would be aware of our own awareness. Instead all we can see is the object or content of thought-- what has been illuminated, which becomes the object of our thought.

So, there is a duality here, our awareness (subject) that pops up in our mindstream and then the something we are aware of (the object). And in every case (every thought) this duality remains for us to resolve.

From sheer force of habit, in the increased light of the illumination of awareness we tend to focus on the "something" that we think thoughts are about (the object or meaning) rather than on the awareness itself (the actual illumination). Think about this carefully please.

In other words, by ingrained habit we tend to follow the train of thought, the "content" of a thought, rather than look (or notice) the awareness component of that thought – the actual illumination. It is a simple case of misdirection, but one with serious consequences. Yet if we will watch our own mind, it is easy to see that every thought is an awareness intruding or interrupting whatever current freight-train of thought we were on before it arose. Arising thoughts create breaks or gaps in the static flow of our stream of consciousness, like flashes of lightning -- illuminations.

Experienced meditators know that while the content or objects of thought (what our thoughts are about) may differ, their true nature does not. All objects of thought share a common nature. This proves to be a crucial fact.

In other words, we can group all thoughts together and, while the content (meaning) of the various thoughts can be totally different, they share a class or group nature in common. The nature of what thoughts all have in common is this awareness and illumination. All thoughts share this, the very same awareness that breaks through and interrupts whatever we are involved in when they arise in our mind. The point here is that the common nature of all thoughts is this awareness that wakes us up. Yet, we tend to ignore it in favor of whatever we are shining the light on, whatever happens to be illuminated, i.e. the content of thoughts, what they are about.

To repeat: the nature of the object of all thoughts (regardless of their varying content) is identical and that nature is awareness -- no matter what the object of thought is. This distinction is well worth contemplating. It brings rewards.

Moreover, skilled meditators look directly at the common nature of whatever thought arises rather than at the varying content of thoughts. They look directly into the awareness (into the light) and rest there. And this simple act changes things. While you and I tend to look at the meaning or content of each thought and follow that out wherever it goes, a skilled meditator instead looks directly at the true nature of each thought, which in every case is the awareness itself. And here is the subtle part.

Awareness is the common nature of all thoughts, so all thoughts are pure or impure awareness. And it is misleading if you understand that by saying that because the nature of thoughts is awareness, thoughts somehow contain or have awareness. They do not. What is being said is that thoughts ARE awareness. No dualisms here. Therefore, the common nature of all thoughts is that they are pure awareness itself, regardless of their content. And we have more in common with the awareness than the objects of awareness, if only because we have systematically ignored it.

So, thoughts are awareness, not distractions. They illuminate content, but the content of thought (what we think about) is not the awareness itself, but related. Thoughts illuminate! We habitually tend to focus on the meaning or content of thoughts and follow that, when it would be more to our advantage to identify with the awareness itself that, like lightning, is illuminating our mind. In other words, we might want to increase and get to know the illumination, not just the content of the thoughts. This is (quite literally) the

road to enlightenment.

What I have not mentioned so far, so as not to be confusing, but which I will at least just touch on here is that the Buddhists go on to say not only that "thoughts are awareness," but that all appearances (everything) are awareness, nothing more than the endless display of the mind.

And last, but not least, the great meditators state that awareness and emptiness are inseparable -- identical.

What are your thoughts about this concept?



[Michael Erlewine](#) OK, I can see from comments that I failed to make myself clear enough. Sorry about that. Let me try again.

Imagine that you and I are out walking late at night in the countryside on a warm summer evening (I wish that it was summer now). The sun has almost set and there is no moon, so it is pretty dark. We can't see much at all. Suddenly there is lightning in the distance. Let's make it heat lightning, so we don't have to run for cover.

In the darkness, when the lightning happens, it lights up the scene so there is something to be seen. We can see things by the light of the lightning. This is similar to how thoughts light up our mind. They illuminate and we can see. We can then think and talk about what we see.

Thoughts that arise in the mind are like the lightning. They illuminate. Now what they illuminate, of course, varies, because they illuminate everything equally. They are illuminators. They bring awareness.

Now, what they illuminate, what thoughts make us aware of, as mentioned, totally varies. It could be anything, literally whatever we think! In our life and society we have been brought up to always look and remember, if we can, what the awareness or light of thoughts shine on – the object of thought. In fact, we follow the object of our thoughts sometimes to great lengths. We call it our train of thought.

However, and this is the point of my earlier blog, we have never learned (or been shown) how to focus on the illumination or awareness aspect of our thoughts, but only on the object of thought, what we can see by that awareness, what we are aware "of."

When we learn Vipassana meditation, we don't care what the thought is about. It makes no difference. It could be a good thought, a bad thought, a happy thought, or an "evil" thought. Instead, we direct our attention and look directly into the light of the awareness that thoughts have. Not only do we look into the light, but we look intently at that light until it becomes a window for us to look through the moment, the object, and the thought itself into the true nature of that thought, which is greater clarity.

What we see through these thoughts is not "something." The "something" would be the object of the thought that we are not following here. Instead, what we see through these thoughts is clarity and clearly. In other words, we see clearly and great clarity itself is what we see.

Seeing clearly, vividly, and so on is part of what is called Insight Meditation or in Sanskrit "Vipassana Meditation." It is something we have to learn and for most of us it has to be pointed out to us, because our habitual tendency is to ignore or look away from the light (Illumination or awareness) and only at the object of the thought, what the thought means or is about. Yet, that object of thought is just what happens to have been illuminated by (you got it) the illumination.

We ignore the illumination and clarity available to us in favor of following the meaning or train of thought, but like summer lightning, we are soon back in the twilight again. With Vipassana meditation training, we learn to stay with the clarity and light much or all of the time. Vipassana is our mental flashlight, one with ever-lasting batteries.

Is this any clearer?

