

III. HOW TO DEVELOP MINDFULNESS

8. MAKING FRIENDS WITH YOURSELF

Generosity and the Speed of Thoughts

Making friends with yourself might seem like a silly idea, as if who you are is someone you don't know or don't get along with. And yet...how well *do* you know yourself? Do you really get along with yourself all that well?

Sitting practice is about exploring these issues. We can easily assume a lot of things about ourselves, other people, and the world around us that go unexamined. Once you're sitting in meditation posture, spending real time trying to relate with your thoughts and feelings, you begin to explore a whole landscape that might not feel all that comfortable or even all that familiar in some ways.

The first, most obvious thing you might discover is the speed of thoughts. They're instantly appearing, one after the next. There are so many of them they start to seem like Niagra Falls—zillions of thoughts like drops of water roaring through your mind. It's relentless.

As you sit there with it, after a while you wish you could just turn it off. Once you start to witness it up

close, the speed and volume of thoughts can feel claustrophobic, and the mind immediately looks for distraction. Well, if you are friends with your mind, then why would you try to get away from it? This friendship has to be *genuine* friendship. A true friend doesn't just desert you when you're having a rough time. They'll show up and offer sympathy and aid when you're in bad shape, not only when it's a party and the good times are rolling.

So as we've emphasized in the sitting practice instructions, you become mindful of whatever thoughts arise rather than shoving away one thing and dwelling on another. This process can be hard to sit through thanks to many uncomfortable moments and tensions that surface. Some kinds of thoughts are inane and irritating, and seem to be on tape repeat, continuously replaying. The speedy, impulsive nature of thinking, darting here and there, constantly switching topics, dragging you along like you're tied behind a group of wild horses galloping away, takes a lot of effort to contend with. This requires a quality of generosity toward yourself as you practice. Being willing to sit there with the mind as it crazily babbles non-stop takes a generous attitude.

You're making a big space for those thoughts to take place in. You're expanding to accommodate the rush and energy of them. It only creates conflict and tension to try to force them to behave. This is the

kind of approach we already have to things—trying to force them to be different than they are, and fighting with them when they don't cooperate. Instead, we practice by letting the mind flow as it will naturally, but creating an open space for it to flow through. It's like having a wild horse we're trying to get control of. If we grab hold of it, yank its reins, and try to force it into the stall, it will only kick and resist harder. If we give it a big open corral with grass to eat, it will run around in agitation for a while, but eventually settle down and come to a standstill. Then it might be less opposed to being gently led.

Relaxing Aggression

That speedy, impulsive, irritated, and impatient mind is the mind of aggression. We often speak and act out of this very mind, communicating that aggression into the environment where it disturbs others. Because we operate from this basis, we get the results of manifesting this aggression—a world that we're often in conflict with.

We usually can't control who other people are or what they do, but we can work with how we respond to them. Friendship with this mind means we're giving space to all that speed and aggression of our thoughts, feelings, and projections. We're bringing openness and curiosity to what's going on. It's not a hostile interrogation of an enemy. It's an oppor-

tunity to learn, to see what's actually taking place inside us. We're giving it a chance to calm down and reveal itself.

The longer we sit there, the more we see, and at times the more we'll feel sad or exhausted or hurt. The more, also, we might witness our judgments on that—where we condemn ourselves for feeling weak and vulnerable, or acting in a way that seems different than what we expected of ourselves. It takes exertion to sit there and bring attention back to the breath. It takes an effort to be with our chaotic tumult of thoughts. It's hard to experience some of our raw emotions. But what does make this all easier and a lot more human is to have some empathy for yourself. This isn't punishment. This is a very human effort to come to terms with the mind. Warmth toward yourself is part of the mindfulness discipline, and the mindfulness discipline is to relax aggression and become more fully human.

If you continually condemn yourself as a failure, a loser, someone who's weak, incompetent, and so on, you're merely stirring up the echo chamber of the mind. If you did something wrong, if you hurt someone, or acted poorly, you have to admit that and face that. Trying to lock yourself into a box that way doesn't help, however. It only solidifies your mind getting stuck in its own sludge.

If you've acted in a harmful way, you can com-

mit to acting differently next time. To dwell endlessly and bitterly on your own failings, while berating yourself for not being the ideal person you imagine, only turns the aggression of mind on itself. The mind spins like a whirlpool of dirty water.

Therefore the warrior relates with these states with a kindly attitude. This has nothing to do with explaining away ugly behavior or blaming anyone else. It does have a lot to do with coming to terms with how the mind is, what motivates it, why things happen the way they do. It has a lot to do with extending some warmth and accommodation toward our own suffering and confusion. We have the bravery to face who we are, and we're willing to feel our own heartbreak. That's when we really start to feel alive.

Gentleness and Appreciation

The aggressive conflicts we have with the world reflect the aggression that we nurture inside ourselves. We can approach sitting practice with the same angry tone of intolerance, which only produces further tension and struggle. The more we synchronize body and mind and settle without aggression into the present moment, the easier it becomes to let go and feel some gentleness. Relieving the heat and intensity of mental speed starts to slow us down. Our harshness begins to melt, uncovering the awake world.

Perhaps you'll never see any beauty in a prison

cell. You could see the beauty that's in your own life. It's still there. It's hard to see it if your mind is endlessly distracted, chasing its phantoms. It's not apparent if you're encased in self-hatred. However, when those things ease up, your sense perceptions start to enliven. Inner struggle and depression relax. You can appreciate that you're still here, despite everything that's happened, your whole history. You appreciate that there's food to eat and a bed to sleep on. If you go out to the yard, you can appreciate the depth of the sky.

Releasing aggression means that we slow down; we start to really experience our senses and the world around us. We give up raging every minute of the day and start to remember that we do have a heart. This kind of gentleness contains a lot of strength because it's in the here and now, not rushing through one delusion after the next. It's recovering the healthy human being that's inside us who still feels some magic in being alive.