

Winter 2011 The Stream of Thinking

Week 6 Orientation

DTS 245-first paragraph of 246

First, a reminder that there will be no phone call next Sunday, February 20. The week 6 phone call will take place on February 27. The remaining three sessions will take place on March 6, 13, and 20.

We are looking at the stream of thinking. As we have been exploring, there are two ways to do this: through setting aside time during the day to let thoughts arise and see what you can see, and by watching thoughts arise during your daily activities. Both are important, and each supports the other.

At the end of the phone call for this week, I suggested three different ways to look into thoughts and thinking:

The first is to 'entertain' the thought (to play host to it, we might say), without getting caught in it. The thought passes by, or it drops in, stays a while, and then moves on. You are aware of it, but not 'committed' to it, not drawn in by its gravity. Although the thought occurs 'to' me, I am not identified with it.

The second happens when we 'emerge' from the thought. Unlike the first situation, we get lost in the thought. The classic example here is when we are driving along a well-known route and we realize we have not noticed our surroundings at all; instead, we have been caught up in a fantasy, a daydream, a replayed memory, a worry, etc. In this case, we still have the option of looking back at the thought we just left, a little like looking back at a dream at the moment we wake up. We may notice something important and characteristic about how thought exerts this hold on us. Perhaps what we notice is the feel of being involved, engaged, or committed. Perhaps we have a visceral sense of the gravity of the thought.

The third is to reflect on or experience the present situation that you are experiencing right now as itself being a thought. For instance, I am typing right now, and there is the sound of a vacuum cleaner, the warm air of the room, heated by the sun outside the window, and some scrabbling sounds made by a squirrel that lives outside the window. These are all background experiences; they are not really the focus of the experience. But is there a sense in which they are the outcome of a thought, the 'thought of the whole'? This came up in our phone call with regard to feelings. If a thought doesn't fully form, and if instead I notice how I am feeling (in terms of physical sensations, perhaps, or emotions, or something more subtle), how much of this feeling is due to my 'inhabiting a thought'?

Perhaps these distinctions will help in your investigations.

Finally, since we have a two-week break now, and since I want to encourage you to use this time to investigate your thoughts and thinking as you go about your life, here is the list of questions I posted at the beginning of the course to review and reflect on.

What counts as a thought?

Does the self own thoughts? Generate them? If not, where do they come from?

What is the relation between thoughts and the world we experience as real?

What is the relation between thoughts and emotions?

What is the link between the thoughts we have and the decisions we make? Between thoughts and the actions we take?

Can we control our thoughts – either their frequency or their content?

Why don't we do what we think we want to do?

What is the relation between thoughts and time?