

Week Four: Thoughts and Emotions (15 minutes)

00:00: This is a guided meditation on mindfulness of thoughts and emotions. Beginning now by simply settling into a comfortable seated position. Making sure you're caring for your body, adjusting it in any way you may need to reflect a sense of comfort, dignity, and stability. For some of you, this may mean choosing a lying down meditation posture or perhaps supporting your posture with cushions or a blanket. When you're ready now, gently closing the eyes, or if you'd prefer, having a soft fixed gaze. As you bring your attention inward now, inviting a sense of ease throughout the body, noticing any bracing, holding, or tightness, perhaps in the muscles of the face, the neck, shoulders, or lower back, and inviting a softening. If you'd like, take in a couple of deeper, fuller breaths now. And as you breathe out, releasing and softening into the body perhaps a bit more as you settle into being here now.

[15 second silence]

01:42: And when you are ready, turn your attention now to the belly and softening into the muscles of the abdominal region. Gently, tuning into the actual sensations of the breath and the belly. The subtle gentle movement of your belly as it expands with each inhale. In the sensations of your belly as it naturally falls with each exhalation. Coming up close to the natural movement of the breath, the full cycle of the breath. Perhaps noticing its changing qualities, maybe a shortness or a deepening of each breath. As your awareness, rest, with the rhythmic quality of each breath. Each breath held with a relaxed and curious attention. Each breath, fresh, new, and unique.

[45 second silence]

03:18: As you practice being with the breath and the belly, if you notice yourself thinking, for now, just gently reconnect your attention to the breath again, and allow the thought to recede into the background.

[30 second silence]

04:31: And now, allowing this focused attention you've had on your breath to recede into the background. Of course, the breath is always present for you to come home to. But for now, becoming aware of thoughts, allowing thoughts to become the object of your awareness, thoughts as they arise in the mind. Not contriving thoughts, but becoming interested in noticing when you are thinking. Allowing your attention to directly look at your thoughts and instead of returning to your breath as you've done before, noticing the process of thinking itself. Viewing thoughts and thinking as simply an event or in an activity of the mind, not having to engage with the content of a thought, to feed it, or to proliferate it in any way. Seeing if it's possible to be open and curious about this activity of the mind. Observing thoughts without having to engage with them, noticing them as they arise, letting them simply be, and to pass away, as they naturally do, just as clouds do, in a clear, open, expansive sky.

[15 second pause]

06:50: As you explore awareness of thoughts and thinking, you may be aware of many thoughts coming and going or periods of few thoughts or perhaps just resting and stillness. Observing, noticing how thoughts arise and dissolve. Aware of their changing and transient nature.

[10 second pause]

07:28: And if you find your attention has been carried away into a stream of thoughts, gently becoming aware that you're no longer observing your thoughts and without judging this or the content of your thinking, and with some kindness as well, coming back to the breath to refresh and then either choosing to stay with the breath or returning to awareness of thoughts and thinking as the central object of your awareness.

[30 second pause]

09:01: And as you observe thoughts, you may notice thoughts about the future or the past or thoughts about planning, evaluating, maybe fantasizing, or remembering. If you find it helpful, you may very gently and lightly label a thought silently to yourself with a single word such as "past", "future", or simply "thinking". Be aware of the thought, allowing it to be and pass, without having to identify with it or cling to it, just a thought being known. Labeling a thought may provide some distance, more objectivity, or spaciousness as you rest with an awareness of thoughts.

[30 second pause]

10:39: As you observe thoughts, you may also notice emotions arising along with the thoughts. You may observe a variety of human emotions, including fear or peace, anxiety, contentment, anger, joy, or sadness. And you may also notice a variety of body sensations associated with these emotions, including perhaps a tightness, bracing, or a softness or a tenderness. As best as you can with kindness and self-compassion, softening into and turning toward whatever is present, being with thoughts and emotions, with kindness and compassionately as they arise and pass away.

[30 second pause]

12:04: Some thoughts and emotions can be particularly compelling or challenging to observe for any number of reasons. There's no need to be hard on yourself or judge your thinking or emotions as good or bad or right or wrong. We all experience challenging emotions and thoughts and can easily fall into conditioned and reactive patterns. If at any time, while practicing awareness of emotions or thoughts should become too challenging or overwhelming for you for any reason, you can always return to the breath as the object of your awareness or choose to gently open your eyes for a few moments and simply observe your surroundings. Just like clouds in a clear expanse of sky, thoughts and emotions arise and fade away. The sky is unaffected by clouds and holds them all in its vastness, not grasping or following. So, too, your awareness can be like the vastness of the sky, not needing to follow or feed any particular thought or feeling or emotion, seeing and being with it instead just as it is, arising, being known and passing away, impermanent, transient.

14:00: So now, allow this awareness of thinking, of thoughts and emotions to recede into the background and for a few moments, return to the felt sense of your body sitting here now. Noticing the weight of the body being held and supported by the chair or the surface it's resting on now. And turning to your breath, being with the sensations of your soft belly breathing. As this practice comes to an end, take a moment to appreciate yourself and your good effort, your willingness to practice mindfulness, and being fully present to the unfolding of your life.