Our thoughts can have very powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often those thoughts are triggered and run off quite automatically. By becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind and letting go of them as we return our attention to the breath and the moment, it is possible to get some distance and perspective on them. This can allow us to see that there may be other ways to think about situations, freeing us from the tyranny of the old thought patterns that automatically “pop into mind”. Most importantly, we may eventually come to realize deep “in our bones” that all thoughts are only mental events (including the thoughts that say they are not), that thoughts are not facts, and that we are not our thoughts.

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind. We can “get hold of them”, so that we can look them over from a number of different perspectives; and by becoming very familiar with our own “top ten” habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns, we can more easily become aware of (and change) the processes that may lead us into downward mood spirals.

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that may block or undermine practice, such as “There's no point in doing this” or “it's not going to work, so why bother?” Such pessimistic, hopeless thought patterns are one of the most characteristic features of depressed mood states, and one of the main factors that stop us taking actions that would help us get out of those states. It follows that it is particularly important to recognize such thoughts as “negative thinking” and not automatically give up on efforts to apply skilful means to change the way we feel.

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Handout 6.2

Ways You Can See Your Thoughts Differently

Here are some things you can do with your thoughts:

1. Just watch them come in and leave, without feeling that you have to follow them.

2. View your thought as a mental event rather than a fact. It may be true that this event often occurs with other feelings. It is tempting to think of it as being true. But it is still up to you to decide whether it is true and how you want to deal with it.

3. Write your thoughts down on paper. This lets you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down can give you a moment to reflect on its meaning.

4. Ask yourself the following questions: Did this thought just pop into my head automatically? Does it fit with the facts of the situation? Is there something about it that I can question? How would I have thought about it at another time, in another mood? Are there alternatives?

5. For particularly difficult thoughts, it may be helpful to take another look at them intentionally, in a balanced, open state of mind, as part of your sitting practice: Let your “wise mind” give its perspective.

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Handout 6.3
When You Become Aware of Negative Thoughts

When you become aware of negative thoughts and images in your mind, hold them in awareness, with an attitude of gentle interest and curiosity, perhaps expanding awareness to include one or more of the following (go back to the breath after each one):

- Perhaps I am confusing a thought with a fact?
- Perhaps I am jumping to conclusions?
- Perhaps I am thinking in black-and-white terms?
- Perhaps I am condemning myself totally because of one thing?
- Perhaps I am concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?
- Perhaps I am blaming myself for something that isn’t my fault?
- Perhaps I am judging myself?
- Perhaps I am setting unrealistically high standards for myself, so that I will fail?
- Perhaps I am mind reading / crystal ball gazing?
- Perhaps I am expecting perfection?
- Perhaps I am overestimating disaster?

The keynote attitude to take with your thoughts is gentle interest and curiosity.

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Handout 6.4
Relating to Thoughts (I)

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not “you” or “reality”. For instance, if you have the thought that you must get a certain number of things done today and you don't recognise it as a thought, but act as if it's “the truth”, then you have created in that moment a reality in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

One patient, Peter, who'd had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realisation of this one night, when he found himself washing his car at 10 o'clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn't have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today, because he was already so completely caught up in believing it.

If you find yourself behaving in similar ways, it is likely that you will also feel driven, tense, and anxious without even knowing why, just as Peter did. So if the thought of how much you have to get done today comes up while you are meditating, you will have to be very attentive to it as a thought or you may be up and doing things before you know it, without any awareness that you decided to stop sitting simply because a thought came through your mind.
On the other hand, when such a thought comes up, if you are able to step back from it and see it clearly, then you will be able to prioritise things and make sensible decisions about what really does need doing. You will know when to call it quits during the day. So the simple act of recognising your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

The liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself. When we spend some time each day in a state of non-doing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body, without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand. As the mind develops stability and is less caught up in the content of thinking, we strengthen the mind's ability to concentrate and be calm. And if each time we recognise a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of its content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are.

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Handout 6.5

Relating to Thoughts (II)

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we all spend much most of our lives there. But meditation is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Because meditation is not thought, through the continuous process of silent observation, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen.

When we lose ourselves in thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps our mind and carries it away, and, in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop on a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line, we may wake up and realise that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them but then vanish upon inspection.
But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, and then, all of a sudden – whoosh! – we are gone, lost, in a thought. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, so that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and their impact on our lives, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arise and pass, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind: we can see our thoughts as the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.

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Handout 6.6
Practice for Week Following Session 6

1. Practise sitting meditation daily – with or without the audio – for a minimum of 40 minutes (e.g., 20 + 20, 30 + 10, etc.). Record your reactions on the Practice Record Form.

2. 3-Minute Breathing Space – Regular: Practise three times a day, at the times that you have decided in advance. Record each time you do it by circling an R on the Practice Record Form; note any comments / difficulties.

3. 3-Minute Breathing Space – Coping: Practise whenever you notice unpleasant thoughts or feelings. If negative thoughts are still around after the breathing space, then write them down. You might like to use some of the ideas in Handouts 6.2 and 6.3 to get a different perspective on these thoughts. Record each time you use the 3-Minute Breathing Space by circling a C on the Practice Record Form; note any comments / difficulties.

4. Notice situations in which you use the breath as an anchor to handle the situation as it is happening, and situations in which you use the mindfulness practice to deal with the issues later.

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# Practice Record Form – Session 6

Name: ________________________________

Record on the Practice Record Form each time you practice. Also, make a note of anything that comes up in the practice, so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.

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<th>Practice (circle)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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**Breath Space:** R = regular; C = coping

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