

Introduction

All the failures that we ever experience may be attributed to excessive thinking, and in particular the negative thoughts that pop up in our mind.

We may start the day full of energy, telling ourselves that we're ready to take on the world. But somewhere along the way, the mind seems to take a direction of its own and tells us to slow down or to stop what we're doing as it's too much trouble. Or perhaps we were planning to take a ten-minute break and our mind decides to make it an hour.

These are just a couple of examples that show how our thoughts may not necessarily be governed by our own free will and how they can pull us into negative territory. Our thoughts can get in the way and prevent us from living the way we want. But looking at it from another angle, if we're able to control our mind, maybe we'll be able to stop the continuous thinking that goes on in our head, dictating how we behave.

The problem here is that the mind has a habit of looking for stronger stimulation and can get out of control if we let it. Because negative thoughts have a much stronger impact on our brain than a mild, gentle sense of happiness, it's hard to prevent that from happening.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to speak about the brain with a sense of awe and gratitude for its functions. But this information-processing device that we all have is a rogue entity that continues to forge ahead in search of thought-provoking stimuli, regardless of the effects on us and whether we'll end up suffering as a result.

The problem is that the brain continues to churn out thoughts,

even when we want to stop thinking. For instance, it could very well be going on with incessant thoughts such as:

'Okay, I'm going to stop thinking right now.'

'Wait a minute, I didn't realize I was still thinking.'

'Oh dear, things just don't seem to go the way I want.'

'Come to think of it, the meal I cooked last night didn't turn out very well.'

'I'm starting to feel hungry.'

It's only after acknowledging that we can't stop these distracting noises – fragments of information that just end up exhausting us – from disturbing our peace of mind that we understand just how unaware we've been of the trains of thought that buzz through our mind on a regular basis. When we become aware that we haven't been noticing how these unstoppable thoughts continue to pop up in our mind, we begin to realize that we aren't really thinking in the way we thought we were or would like to be thinking.

Then maybe it's better not to think. But *thinking about not thinking* only means we're doing more thinking, and it isn't going to prevent us from thinking. We can try to convince ourselves that we've understood what's been happening, but the only way to gain control of our thinking is to practise stopping it.

The techniques that I outline in this book suggest ways to overcome our thinking, which can appear to have a will of its own. To do that, we can hone our five senses and bolster our perception of the physical. We'll focus on the five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch – and how we use them in our daily lives, and we'll practise controlling our thinking.

We tend to think too much because we can't control our thinking, and that can cause confusion in our thoughts and make our mind less sharp than it could be. Our goal is to stop thinking too much, prevent our thinking from getting tattered due to overuse, and to recharge our energy by practising the art of not thinking.

Once we've done that, our thoughts are sure to be crystal clear and full of inspiration.

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A thinking disease

By thinking, we can become ignorant

WITHDRAWING INTO OUR BRAIN DECREASES OUR POWER OF CONCENTRATION

As humans, we are always thinking. Thinking is usually considered a fine characteristic of humanity, and we tend to believe we're superior to animals because we think. But is that truly the case?

My feeling is that because we think, our ability to concentrate can falter, and we can sometimes get frustrated or lost. Let's call it *thinking disease*, a disease that occurs as a result of thinking. And let us first take a moment to consider this.

It's often said that people today aren't very good at listening to what others have to say. Maybe it's because we've experienced being frustrated or angry when we wanted someone to listen to us and found that they hadn't taken in a word we said. Were they *that* uninterested?

They had made the time to talk to us, so they couldn't have been completely uninterested at the outset. They were probably willing to lend an ear to what we had to say, at least in the beginning. But what often happens is that once you begin to discuss your problem with someone, a host of irrelevant thoughts start to pop up in the other person's mind. Maybe they want to show you their willingness to listen so they can win your trust, or maybe they are pretending to be understanding so you will see them as a wonderful human being. It certainly

isn't the worst outcome you could expect since the person is there out of consideration for you. But they can't help it if other thoughts start to cross their mind, such as *'I'd love a beer right now'* or *'Which bar should I stop by after this?'*

As someone who practises Zen meditation, I watch the flow of my awareness over long periods of time. By doing that, I can see that my mind is working continually and at tremendous speed. It moves around incredibly quickly, processing information, and travels on to parts of my body that are related to the five senses, such as my eyes, through which it will watch, or it might go to my ears and start listening. And these actions take place in no more than split fragments of a second.

It's during these brief moments that information is processed. The mind may flit from listening to watching, then from listening to thinking, listening, watching and back to listening again, and so on. Although we may think that we're only listening to someone speak, what's passing through our mind is a colossal amount of information that includes a vast mass of things that are often completely irrelevant.

While someone who listens without paying particular attention to what another person is saying may think that all they're doing is listening, there are a myriad tiny snippets of information passing through their mind at the same time. These are the briefest moments in time in which we glimpse our favourite foods, drinks or flashes of strange images that we might encounter in a dream. They appear at speeds so fast that we don't even realize it, creating disruptions as we listen. A huge amount of noise from around us is thrown in and combined in minute moments, and our concentration starts – and continues – to break up.

I think it's fair to say that, among all our faculties, thinking is what requires the greatest amount of effort. We use words to think, thus locking ourselves within the act of thinking and forgetting about our other faculties. It therefore makes sense that the more our thoughts take charge of our brain, the less information we're able to absorb from what is going on around us. We sometimes aren't aware of what is going on and what it means because we're unconsciously allocating a lot of energy to the process of thinking.

We don't think about so many things when we're relaxed. The number of thoughts we have and the time we spend on them increase when we're confused. Let's say you're watching a movie and there's something in the back of your mind that continues to bother you. It will prompt more noise to seep into your mind as you sit there trying to watch the film.

When we're walking hand in hand with a loved one, especially a partner in a long-term relationship, there's always a physical sense of touch that registers in our mind and makes us aware that we're holding hands. But if we're contemplating something else at that moment, the act of holding hands won't seem real, and we probably won't get into the right mood to enjoy it. One of us might be thinking about work while the other could be thinking about some other person. The two of us are together and there's physical contact between us, but neither is in the same place mentally. It's because we've both locked ourselves inside our brains.

THE THREE DISTURBING EMOTIONS: DESIRE, ANGER AND UNCERTAINTY

It's natural to get caught up in our thoughts and not be fully present when we are with our partner. It happens to a lot of people. Think back to when you first met your beloved. Everything about your budding relationship must have been fresh and exciting at the time. More specifically, you were seeing fresh, new images of that appealing person, and your heart began fluttering in response to the new stimulation. You were tuned in to that person, noticed the smallest changes in their hairstyle, wondered if they were bored if their face happened to cloud over even slightly, and you would quickly come up with something interesting to talk about.

But our mind gradually gets used to receiving information about that person. In reality, the face is just one part of a person in which changes continue to occur at lightning speed, but we become less attentive, to the extent it no longer appears that they're changing at all. This is what generally happens when we become bored with someone.