

## The Mind (I)

### Breaking the Web of Story

By

Mary Jaksch

One of the challenges of Zen practice is to learn to work with our stormy mind. It can sweep us along as though we were a piece of cork bobbing in a rough sea with riptides, eddies and choppy waves dragging us this way and that. It can seem like a miracle when we return to the present moment and find that the waves are just the froth on the surface of an ocean of fathomless tranquillity.

In this and the next essay I will explore how to recognize different cognitive patterns and how to work with them in the context of Zen. It takes experience and skill to practise with thoughts that threaten to overwhelm or drown us.

One of the changes that is wrought through Zen practice is that we begin to see into the activity of our mind. As we sit quietly in zazen, we can observe our mind in action. It can be a shock to see that the mind is hardly ever in the present moment!

When we look carefully, we can notice different kinds of thought patterns. In our everyday life, these thought patterns are usually below the radar of our consciousness. But in zazen, when we reconnect with the present moment, we can notice the kind of cognition we have just emerged from. This is rather like turning a street corner and suddenly coming upon a familiar face!

Although each thought has its own individuality, thoughts can be classified, because they correspond to particular patterns of cognition. For example, sometimes our mind engages in long, dreamlike meanderings where thought fragments are linked by association. Or we are suddenly struck by creative ideas. At other times our mind is in a problem-solving mode. Most often, however, we are ruminating. That is, we are locked into circular thoughts fuelled by emotion. Ruminations abide in the 'me-space', that is, they circle around 'how I am', 'how I was', 'how I will be', and their function is to continually edit and confirm our concept of self. They are like a sticky web that we spin and get caught in.

From a practice point of view, each particular pattern of cognition needs a different technique to work with, so that you are able to return to the present moment. For example, dream-like meanderings dissolve easily when you shine the light of attention on them and return to the breath. Likewise, problem-solving thoughts respond reasonably well to a gentle reminder to return to the present, if they are not fuelled by strong anxiety. However, ruminations are particularly 'sticky' thought patterns. The basic practice injunction to 'let go of your thoughts and return to the present moment' doesn't work well when dealing with this particular pattern of cognition.

The form that ruminations take is usually a story. In our minds we tell ourselves or someone else the story of an event, real or imaginary. And, depending on the emotion that fuels a particular rumination, the story lines proceed along well-worn grooves. Let's examine some emotions and track the kind of story lines that they

evoke, for each emotion breeds a similar story line. We'll also take a look at the kind of emotional field and physical feeling-state that is associated with each particular story-line. In this essay I will focus on four of our emotions of low or medium intensity that breed 'sticky' and repetitive thought patterns: resentment, disappointment, irritation, and unworthiness. (Thought patterns that are fuelled by high emotions, such as anger, jealousy, grief or fear, need a different kind of approach and I will take this up in the following essay.)

Let's take a look at *resentment*. Imagine that you have been passed over for promotion at work. Or imagine that you are in a relationship and are having to do the lion's share of work at home. The story line that goes with resentment is: 'It's not fair...!' If you listen carefully to your inner voice at such a time, you will notice that it has a rather whiny quality. Emotionally, there is often a sense of being slighted, i.e. of being diminished, and a corresponding feeling of creeping anger. Physically, there is often a feeling of tightness in the body, particularly in the belly, when you are in the grip of resentment.

*Irritation* also leads to endless rumination. Often the story line that goes with this emotion is something along the lines of, 'Why does he/she always have to... instead of simply ...!' The tone of the inner voice is often that of a governess and the physical expression is a click of the tongue, compressed lips, folded arms and a slow shake of the head. In the stories that irritation breeds, you see yourself as superior and competent and diminish others accordingly.

Another source of 'sticky' thoughts is the emotion of *unworthiness*. This emotion reflects low or shaky self-esteem and there are pervasive and destructive story lines that accompany it. The stories tend to circle around themes, such as, 'I don't measure up', or 'I'm not the real thing', 'I'm hopeless' and so on. These stories are often laced with painful feelings of hopelessness, self-loathing and even despair. The physical expression is loss of body tone, a feeling of exhaustion and a droopy posture that collapses at the sternum.

*Disappointment* is another source of rumination. You were looking forward to something, you expected something, but it didn't happen and you didn't get what you wanted. The story line here is 'Why didn't I get...?' This can relate to a present-day experience but can also reach far back into the memories of childhood. There is a sense of bitterness that goes with disappointment. Physically, the expression is often pouting lips, turned down at the corners, and a dull heaviness of heart.

These are just four examples - there many more emotions that fuel rumination. Often people live all their life in the shadow of one or more of these story lines. What about your own life – can you recognize some of them? It is very important to free yourself from habitual thought patterns. As I point out above, different kinds of emotions breed their corresponding stories, but the opposite holds true as well. If you habitually run particular story lines, the corresponding emotional field will colour your life.

Through Zen practice we can learn to unhook ourselves temporarily, and, ultimately, free ourselves completely from our stories about self and other. These pervasive stories bind us, create a sense of separation, and stunt our growth and unfolding as human beings. Story binds us; letting go sets us free.

Let's take a look at how to work with stories in Zen practice. Your first task is to notice that you are involved in rumination. Because this particular thought pattern

is extremely 'sticky', it may be that you only notice it after you have been going around and around your story for a while. As soon as you notice your thought pattern and detect a running story, say gently, firmly and kindly to yourself: 'Let go of story.' And then smile a little as you taste the peacefulness of the present moment! Stories are usually grim, but the present moment itself is sweet. When the story returns, repeat with kindness: 'Let go of story.' This can be hard work, because stories have such a strong presence and there is a pressure and will to express. Please keep on going resolutely. After a while, you will suddenly taste the freedom of being in the present moment - what a relief!

If you carry this practice resolutely into your everyday life, you can expect some miracles! Letting go of story is the fastest way to move from conflict and stuckness to peacefulness and compassion. It is an extremely powerful practice and it can transform your life. Here is how to do it.

Choose a time after you have had an argument with a loved one or experienced a conflict at work. Spend some time alone in a quiet space so that you can be mindful. Focus on your mind and notice how strong the urge is to go over and over your story. Observe how isolated the story makes you feel and how deeply you feel separated from your loved one or work colleague at such a time. Notice that you seem to be unable to access compassion – at the mere thought of compassion your story rears up again and fills the foreground with its noise. Now say to yourself quietly whenever the story surfaces: 'Let go of story.' You will need to be consistent and disciplined. At first, when you do this, you may notice a roiling and boiling inside your body and mind as if furies are thrashing around, wanting to pour out their grievances. Keep on repeating gently and firmly, 'Let go of story.' Soon you will notice a sea change within yourself, as if waking up from a bad dream. As you continue to let go of story you will notice compassion creeping back in and you will begin to feel more spacious and connected. Keep on going and you will suddenly be able to reconnect and talk with your loved one or colleague again without feeling stuck or awkward. This is truly a miracle! Instead of sulking for hours or days or building up a store of resentment, you will be able to reconnect after only minutes and see a way forward.

This technique is extremely effective, but it is hard work. Story is seductive because the narrative we spin seems to offer a sense of meaning and continuity to our lives: 'I am like this because this happened.' Accordingly, you will feel a constant pressure to dive back into story. When your emotions run hot, you will feel a desire to contact your friends and relate your story to them. Or, you might feel like contacting therapists and pouring out your story to them. I suggest that you refrain from this for a while (except if you are experiencing mental health problems). Because every time you tell your story, you spin a web that binds you tighter and tighter. This is what the Sixth Grave Precept, *I take up the Way of not Discussing Faults of Others*, refers to: when you relate your grievances to yourself or others, your peace of mind is disturbed and you get more and more deeply stuck in your stories.

Letting go of your stories of self and other is the way to freedom and joy. When you let go, you can touch the vast Mind of One-ness and come to rest in complete spaciousness.

Exercises:

1. What is **your** most pervasive story-line?
2. Experiment in zazen: What happens when you say: 'Let go of story'?
3. Experiment in everyday life: What happens when you let go of your story after an altercation?

© Mary Jaksch 2004