

The Removal of Thoughts MN 20

A question was asked on "**How to deal with difficult emotions**". The most helpful method I have found is the "Holding technique", which is referenced below.

Our emotions are fuelled by our thoughts, so I thought the Buddha's teaching on The Removal of Thoughts (MN20) would be very important in settling our difficult emotions. However, Bhikkhu Thanissaro, at his recent retreat in Saskatoon, commented that this sutta is a teaching to use when you are meditating with the goal of stilling your mind. In this situation, all thoughts are a hindrance to the goal. I will go over this teaching first, then pass on the method Bhikkhu Thanissaro shared for dealing with disturbing, unskillful thoughts that arise in everyday life. And I will end with the "Holding Technique".

Unskillful, in the Buddhist context, refers to actions, speech and thoughts that lead to suffering for oneself, for others or for both.

In MN 20, The Removal of Thoughts, the Buddha gives five methods to use when unskillful thoughts arise. Method one is the preferred method. Only go on to other methods if the thoughts persist despite doing the previous method(s).

1. Focus on a skillful aspect of the situation you're thinking about.

This method has also been termed, "substitution". You substitute a more skillful thought for the one that is causing suffering. There are recommended substitutions for types of thoughts that arise:

- If the thoughts are desire for an inappropriate person: do the meditation on the 32 body parts: MN 119. You focus on the unattractive parts that lie beneath the skin: feces, phlegm, saliva, bile etc.

(an inappropriate person is a student, an underage person, someone committed to another or someone other if you are in a committed relationship OR you want to meditate and the desire at this moment is inappropriate as it prevents stilling of your mind)

- if the thoughts are desire for an object: pay attention to impermanence. For example, food: how short the yummy phase is and how long the extra pounds or the tummy ache; objects: how quickly we tire of new things, or they break, wear out, or they need to be maintained....time consuming! The pleasure is impermanent, as well as the object; holidays/entertainment: how quickly over....is it worth the time, the expense, the hardship.

- if the thoughts are hate towards a person: practice metta meditation.

Compassion: think of the person as a young child. What happened to them so they developed this unlikeable characteristic?

Does the person speak good words but exhibit bad behaviour, or vice versa? The Buddha gives the analogy of a pond with scum. Brush it away so can drink the water. Look at the positive aspects of the person and focus on those. Ajahn Brahmali suggests building a memory bank: while doing walking meditation, think of the positive aspects of people around you, so when they annoy you, you can quickly remember their endearing qualities.

If they have zero goodness – bad words and bad behaviour – think of them as a man crawling in the desert, parched, burned: feel compassion.

Ajahn Sona has an excellent Dhamma talk on five ways to let go of a grudge.

Also there is the Peace Treaty – great to use in relationships.... you can even use it one-sidedly.

- aversion towards an object: meditate on the elements: earth, water, fire, air

dog barking: air element touching earth (ear)

too cold/hot: fire element (lacking or excessive)

This impersonalizes the situation...just one element contacting another. You can also use the Holding Technique for this.

- delusional thoughts: delusion means not seeing reality.... e.g. thinking something is permanent when it's impermanent: listen to Dhamma talks and inquire into the causes of things.

2. If the above doesn't work, **examine the drawbacks of your thoughts**, the suffering they cause. Ajahn Brahmali also suggests making a library of the negative aspects of particular thoughts so that when a negative thought comes up, the drawbacks are readily accessible.

3. If the above doesn't work: **ignore the thoughts**. Return to the breath or whatever your meditation object is or, to what you are doing at the moment.

4. If the above doesn't work: **stop the thoughts by stilling the will to think** by being mindful of the mind, watching the mind. You won't be adding any fuel to the thoughts.

5. If the above doesn't work: **clench the teeth, press the tongue against the roof of the mouth, squeeze, squash mind with mind**. This is not a healthy thing to do regularly. Only do it in an emergency, to prevent bad words from coming out of your mouth or to prevent yourself from doing something harmful.

Unskillful thoughts during day to day life:

If it's a difficult emotion that is in your face, become aware of what thoughts you are thinking. It's the thoughts that are fuelling the emotion! Once you are aware of the thoughts, ask yourself, "What is the allure, the appeal for why I go for these thoughts?" Then think of the drawbacks of having these thoughts.

The number one useful technique I have found for dealing with overwhelming emotions is the "Holding Technique" described in [lesson 3](#) on our web site. Once you have settled down your anger, then you can think clearly and decide what is the most useful action to take, or if non-action is the best approach.

The "[Peace Treaty](#)".

Excellent to use in close relationships to ensure arguments don't escalate into unskillful speech or actions. The Treaty is agreed upon by both parties when all is well, to be used when strife arises. If it's not appropriate to sign the Treaty with the other, e.g. a boss, you can follow the steps yourself to ensure that you don't escalate in your emotions or add fuel to escalate the other's emotions.