

Living Beyond Thought

Questioner: Do you have thoughts?

Bhagavan Ramana: I usually have no thoughts.

Questioner: And when someone asks you a question?

Bhagavan Ramana: Then, too. I have thoughts when replying, not otherwise.

In the middle of doing an asana that I had literally done thousands of times before, suddenly, like a leaf falling from a tree or a page turning, thoughts stopped. There was no blinding flash of light, no great surge of mystical energy, there was just stillness, great presence and a complete, full emptiness.

As I was at that time responsible for four industrial research laboratories with 1,000 engineers, scientists and technicians, with a budget of over \$250MM, and was a senior vice president involved in every important executive decision in a major corporation, feelings arose “Now YOU’VE done it! What am I going to do? How is this going to “work” today as I go to my office?” Will people notice how different I am now?”

These same questions are faced by every serious seeker on the “spiritual path”, particularly if one is a “knowledge worker” whose identity and apparent survival depends on their finely sharpened intellectual skills and presumably their abilities to “think”. If one does become “awakened/enlightened”, how will one be able to provide for and protect oneself as well as those for whom they are in some way responsible? This is one of the major arguments the ego makes in slowing or stopping this “dangerous” spiritual work which eventually requires large doses of surrender and recognition of the impossibility of control of what was previously regarded as “one’s life”. Whether or not one is currently awakened, or aspires to be, these are major concerns.

The intent of this article is not to provide approaches to “awakening”; those are covered in the author’s “Happiness Beyond Thought: A Practical Guide to Awakening”. This article will focus on what actually occurs in living and functioning in complex, contemporary society and the workplace when one is without the endless stream of thoughts about the past, future, fears, desires, regrets, etc.

The surprising and amazing result of Sri Ramana’s Direct Path of inquiry into “Who/What/Where am I?”, in my personal experience (IME), is that there is a selective loss of exactly those self-referential based thoughts. Other “mental” functioning is unimpaired, in fact in most cases, significantly enhanced, as there is not the ceaseless high level background/foreground of internal debate on every conceivable self-referential concern du jour imaginable. One retains abilities to plan, read, learn, speak and write coherently, understand directions, eat and navigate through the day as did Sri Ramana.

Another concern is whether one will lose the ability to experience pleasure (or pain, but few worry about not being able to psychological pain/suffering). What occurs, again IME, is that pleasures are experienced even more deeply, fully, clearly and completely without distracting thoughts during them, in the desiring before they arise, or in the longing after they have faded. Sensory experiencing is total, and then gone – whether or not it returns is of little or no concern or interest.

Also, without thought, one meets situations without bias, expectation or fear, however they arise, moment after moment. Every time, every time, this ice cream cone is a new one, whether one has ordered the same flavor from the same shop a hundred times. The ice cream cone is almost certainly different in some way from the “last time”, and you are similarly different, as your energies change throughout any day. No one steps into the same stream twice.

A challenge that does arise, IME, is that pleasures increase in intensity significantly, and can become sublime, beyond anything previously felt, and sometimes of a completely different nature. Interactions with other “sentient beings” will also change as they have likely never been met with such a direct, aware, present relating. It is a practice to not get pulled back into identity as the “doer/creator” of the experience, who is certain that (s)he will make it happen again, the same or even better. ((S)he can’t – it only happened because (s)he wasn’t there.)

The antidote, not surprisingly, is to again invoke the magic of Sri Ramana's Direct Path, "Who/what/where is the doer/creator of this experience?" Persist, again and again, inquire, inquire, surrender, surrender. It works, just like Sri Ramana said it would.

OK, but what about being in meetings, writing, giving presentations or when you're teaching? If you're not thinking about what to say or write next, how will you be able to perform "intelligently", "effectively" or "appropriately"?

Again, IME, coming to meetings, presentations, writing or teaching is just like meeting a potentially pleasurable situation; come to it prepared, knowing the background material (like where the ice cream shops are located in our previous example), but be completely open and present for what does actually arise as it will be different from what you anticipated, in some regard, always. If you think it's the same, you're not paying attention.

You will likely find that you will appear to be "the smartest one in the room" (or at least a lot smarter, creative and perceptive than before). This may be a surprise, but in comparison to the rest of the attendees, students, or participants, you will be the only one who is there 100%. Everyone else is there 38%, 83%, 11%, etc. on a continually varying basis as thoughts of varying interest or coherence stream through their minds, perhaps pondering what they need to say next or remembering a point they really MUST get in. Shifts and flow of the energy in the room, or what someone actually said, or expressed through their body language, are missed, as are many parts of the discussion or presentation.

The question often arises from knowledge workers who are nominally problem solvers, on whether it is possible to solve complex problems or solutions requiring "non-linear", $a > b > 4 > 5 > c$ processing. Surely, they have to "think" in these situations, they argue.

Two recent scientific articles in this field by Sheth, Sandkuhler, Bhattacharya, et. al. (1,2) on actually solving such problems are very informative on this issue. In solving such problems it was discovered that the solution had been found in appropriate regions of the brain (right frontal cortex) by fMRI and EEG scans 4 to 8 seconds BEFORE it was communicated to the "conscious mind" and subsequently announced as "I've found the answer! Eureka!!" The "unconscious mind", however long it took to solve the problem posed by the conscious mind, whether it was minutes or hours, solved the problem and then alerted the conscious mind, which expropriated credit for the achievement. Fortunately, the literally thousands of engineers and scientists who worked with/for "me" over many years had many eureka's; none ever said, "my sub(un)conscious mind has just solved the problem and I'm reporting on its success", although that would have been the actuality.

This is exactly the approach that manifests whether one is giving a presentation, participating in a critical strategic business meeting, having a conversation or answering a complex question. Whatever is required will arise from "emptiness/Presence/the Universe", perfectly appropriate to the situation and often uniquely creative and insightful, perhaps something that one didn't even know they knew. With time, and success, trying it first in smaller, less critical situations, and then in increasingly critical ones, the process is trusted implicitly, as the only safe, sane and rational approach.

The fascinating issues of how one makes choices without thinking, and how one navigates through the day with frequent surprising precognitions occurring, which appear to accompany the "no thought" state for many folk, are similarly amenable to such an approach, but require a separate discussion.

In conclusion, having "no thoughts" is not a terrifying, lost, stumbling in the Void with no way home; it is, on the contrary, clear, present, and aware with enhanced sensitivity, awareness and creativity which makes everyday contemporary work and social life a fascinating, mysterious and magical dance.

References:

1. Sheth, BR, Sandkuler, S, Bhattacharya, J, "Posterior Beta and Anterior Gamma Oscillations Predict Cognitive Insight." J Cogn Neurosci. 2009, Jul; 21(7): 1269-79.

2. Sandkuhler, S, Bhattacharya, J, - "Deconstructing Insight: EEG correlates of Insightful Problem-Solving" – 2008, PLoS ONE 3:1, e1459.