

Why “One Beat Slow”?

The Phenomenon of Post-Retreat Slow-Wittedness Disorder

ĀYASMĀ KUMĀRA demystifies the commonly encountered phenomenon of slow thinking after an intensive meditation retreat. Besides explaining why it should be avoided and how, he also makes a case for proper use of thinking in the practice.

When I was on a Dhamma tour in Sarawak in April 2013, different people in different places asked me this same question: *Why is it that after a retreat my thinking becomes slower?* In Chinese, one of them described her situation as being 慢一拍, literally “one beat slow”. In this state, the mind is somewhat thick, somewhat confused. Loss of memory may also occur. Malaysians may describe it as *blur-blur*, or in Hokkien *gong-gong*.

I immediately understood what they meant, because I had experienced it before. Not only that. I had also somewhat taken it as normal. Having discussed this matter with others, I also came to realise that there were others who regarded it similarly. One said he thought it was part of being mindful. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Who would want to believe otherwise: that one has spent so much time and effort in a supposedly noble effort, just to realise that it has resulted in cognitive regression? Better to think it’s normal. Or, better still, a benefit, or even a sign of progress! Then you wouldn’t worry about it. Right?

I’d think if you find yourself in this situation, you’d probably worry a bit. If it persists beyond the period you expect to recover from it, then you might worry a bit more. Even more so if you depend on being quick-witted to earn a living, or identify strongly with your cognitive ability. In this case, you’d probably consider it a disability.

If you’re now in such a situation, worry not. You’d probably recover from it after some time. Nonetheless, I believe you would want to know why it happened and if it were avoidable. I’ll come to that.

Some cases are more extreme. At the end of a retreat, one meditator approached her car with the key in her hand. She then suddenly found herself in a state of loss. For a while, she stood next to the car, not knowing what she was supposed to do. Would you worry if that happened to you?

Another meditator, driving back from a retreat, found herself not being able to understand the traffic-lights! If you were her, would you worry?

Here is a case I’ve learnt directly from the person involved. She noticed that her mind was functioning abnormally. Poor reflex led her to almost hit cars in front many times. She tried to get help from mentors and teachers but they couldn’t tell her what was wrong. Then she had an accident. Luckily, no one was hurt, but she was shocked. She then chose to stop driving and stayed at home for quite some time to find out what had happened to her. She later fully recovered.

Regardless of what you think of the slow-wittedness, if you have such an experience, it should scare some wits out of you.

Now, what is the cause of this phenomenon of (what I call) *post-retreat slow-wittedness disorder* (PRSD)? Having been trained by Sayadaw U Tejaniya to be curious of mental phenomena, I believe I’ve arrived at some understanding of it by reflecting on similar experiences I had. During the retreat, these meditators have tried to suppress their thinking ability, and have succeeded to some extent. So, even when they want to think normally after the retreat, the mind can’t do that as well as it did before—at least for some time.

Now why do people try to suppress their thinking ability? It is commonly thought that thinking is antithetical to meditation. Not thinking is better; that's the idea. With this view in mind, one would at least subconsciously try not to think. Moreover, if the teacher teaches something along that line as well, the idea, and in effect the effort, is likely to be stronger. With practice, this effort becomes a habit. As soon as one thinks of meditating, there would be the accompanying idea: Don't think.

For many of us, even without any external prescription to not think when meditating, we tend to arrive at the same idea. So long as we think of meditation as an effort to concentrate our attention on something and exclude everything else, we would naturally find thinking a bother. With that, we would likely make the same effort: Don't think.

All the more for people who have established a tendency for negative thoughts. Having had enough of it, they usually try to get rid of it. With the unfortunately widespread perception that meditation is about making the mind go blank, we can expect them to approach meditation with the same idea: Don't think.

With persistent effort to disable thinking, one naturally impairs the thinking ability. This is very different from the practice of mental settling (*cetosamatha*), which naturally leads to a still, quiet mind. When the mind is still enough, it naturally stops thinking. The former paralyzes cognition, while the latter gives it a rest.

Let me explain this with an analogy. Say you're driving a car, and your foot is pressing on the accelerator. If you want the car to stop, the most important thing would be to lift the foot off the accelerator, right? Even without pressing the brake pedal, the car would naturally come to a stop. It just takes some time. All it takes is to know not to press the accelerator. The car is a simile for the mind. The moving is the thinking, and pressing the accelerator is the desire to think. So, what's necessary is to know *how* not to *desire* to think. I'll explain a little on this later.

Going back to the simile, what if you try to hit the brakes while still having another foot down on the accelerator? How well would the car stop? More importantly, what happens to the car when you keep doing this?

You may think, "This is different. I want the car to stop. I don't want to think." Consciously, yes, but you probably know from your own experience that we don't have complete control over our thinking mind. You may have no conscious desire to think, but the larger, subconscious part of your mind may still desire thinking. If we have full control of the mind, it can't be *anatta* (not-self), can it?

So, what happens when we hit the brakes when the car's momentum is strong? We can expect some damage, right? In the same way, when we try to stop thinking when the momentum to think is strong, we can expect that to damage the mind, or at least the brain. (Ever wondered why some meditators look and behave like zombies?)

When I was new to meditation, I remember practising what one well-known teacher taught: "Note the thoughts quickly as if you are hitting them with a stick: - 'thinking, thinking, thinking....'" (Actual quote from his book.) Doing that made me mentally exhausted. Now, I also see it as harmful. Fortunately, I abandoned it after a while because I just couldn't stand it any further. Had I devotedly pursued that way of practice, I believe that I too would have had trouble understanding the traffic-lights.

Another way to restrain thinking is by choking. (No, no. Not strangling yourself.) Once, I somehow learnt how to choke the energy supply for verbal thinking. Even as the mind is talking mid-way, I could do just that, and the inner talking immediately stopped. When I released the grip,

inner talking happened again after a while. I could do it again and again, like playing with a water hose by kinking and releasing it. It was rather fun in the beginning. It felt like I was in total control of whether there should be verbal thinking. However, as I went on, I felt injured. Something was clearly not right. So I stopped.

Looking back, I realise that it was an egoic effort. The ego loves being able to assert control. I can't say for sure which of these two ways is worse, but the effects tell me that both are harmful.

A long-time meditator once told me with much pride that he could stop thoughts as if launching a missile at them and blowing them up mid-air. It reminds me of my choking method—though missile-shooting does sound cooler. At any rate, I now see all these as very much the ego's effort to aggrandise itself.

Besides, this sort of persistent sabotaging of the thinking faculty is against the Buddha's teachings—at least as I see it. It is unkind and violent, which is part of wrong attitude (*miccha-saṅkappa*). As Buddhists, we have heard countless times the virtue of being kind even to people who are unkind to us, yet we can act rather unkindly to our own thinking—and even take pride in doing so. This wrong attitude leads to wrong effort, whereby we cultivate pride and aversion to thinking. Can this be right meditation?

Some may argue that we should try not to have concepts, then only can we see ultimate reality. I'm aware that that's what some people teach. However, a wise mind is not an unthinking mind. A wise mind knows what is concept and what is ultimate reality. Therefore it uses concepts without being deceived by them. To be able to see concepts as they are, we need to know them, not ignore them.

If there's a kind of practice that leads to the disabling of cognitive function, I wouldn't want it. Would you? Maybe some of you would. But can you imagine the Buddha emerging from a deep state of calm and have trouble recognising his disciples?

Nevertheless, there are situations wherein we may need to forcefully restrain thinking. For example, let's say defiled thoughts have invaded the mind to the point that we're about to kill someone or commit sexual misconduct, and we *see no other way* to prevent it. Restraining those thoughts forcefully is still damaging, but transgressing basic morality is even more damaging. So, under such circumstances, forcefully restraining the defiled thought would be a wise thing to do. *But* we shouldn't stop there. When the urge has passed, we should then reflect on the matter, and be interested to understand why we have such a great urge to do wrong. If we can't resolve it on our own, we should seek the help of others who are competent enough to give wise counsel. Restraining thoughts relentlessly is not the way.

To have a still mind (*ekaggacitta*) is wonderful, but we don't have to force the mind not to think. The still mind the Buddha spoke about is malleable (*mudubhūta*), which is a quality often mentioned in the texts to describe the mind that is composed or collected (*samāhita citta*). With such a quality, when it is necessary to think, one should be able to. Though that may mean having to be less collected, the thinking will be clear and not excessive.

There are two ways to stop thinking: by force, as mentioned earlier; or with discernment (*paññā*). When we do so by force, the mind may think less, but only because it has become *less able* to think—and perhaps even afraid to think—having been choked, beaten or shot at. One monk quite aptly calls this “petrified brain syndrome”. When we do so with discernment, however, there is no forcing. Instead the thinking stops because there is enough collectedness (*samādhi*) and enough discernment to know *how* the mind can be still—*with or without* thoughts.

Although the idea of meditation as an effort to stop thinking is quite popular, it does not agree with the Buddha's teachings in the Suttas. For example, in Sati Sutta (SN47:35):

And how, monks, is a monk clearly knowing (*sampajāna*)? Here, monks, a monk's... thoughts (*vitakkā*) are known when they arise, known when they remain present and known when they go away.

As we can see, thoughts can be allowed to come and go on their own.

Nonetheless, as shown in the example earlier, there are occasions where we should not just know them. *Vitakka-sañḥāna Sutta* (MN20) provides five ways to abandon “evil, unskillful thoughts — imbued with desire, aversion, or delusion”.¹ Notice that the sutta is specific about the kind of thoughts to be abandoned. Also, in such a mental condition, we don't see thoughts as just thoughts—we see them as real. We're already deceived by them. So, knowing them is not enough, as the knowing is already compromised by delusion. We need to make special effort.

As it would be too involved to even summarise the sutta here, I suggest that you read it yourself. You will find that only the last of the five ways uses force, and it is used only when the first four have been tried without success.

In *Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta* (SN47.10), it is obvious that well-directed thinking is *used* to compose a distracted mind.

Here, Ānanda, a monk lives as one who contemplates the body in the body—ardent, properly aware, mindful—putting away dejection due to wanting in regard to the world. While he lives as one who contemplates the body in the body [*similarly for feelings, state of mind and mind-objects*], either a burning in the body—based on the body [*similarly for feelings, state of mind and mind-objects*]—or mental sluggishness arises, or the mind is distracted outwardly. **Then, Ānanda, the mind is to be directed to some inspiring sign (*pasādanīye nimitte*).** For one who directs his mind to some inspiring sign, delight is born. For one who is delighted, joy is born. For one of joyful mind, the body calms down. One whose body has calmed down feels happy. **Being happy (*sukhino*), the mind is collected (*samādhīyati*).** He reflects (*paṭisañcikkhati*) thus, “The purpose for which I directed the mind has been accomplished. So now I withdraw it.” He withdraws, and neither thinks nor explores (*na ca vitakketi na ca vicāreti*). He discerns (*pajānāti*), “Without thought (*avitakka*), without exploration (*avicāra*), I am internally mindful, I am happy.”

Perhaps this would make a good summary: **We want to skilfully use thinking to abandon unskillful thoughts. Then with discernment we abandon gross thinking.** Far from becoming a zombie, in this state the mind is silently discerning.

So, we can use thinking to our benefit. Although much of our suffering is due to thinking, this does not mean that we should completely reject thinking in our practice. There is useless and even harmful thinking, and there is useful thinking. Thinking is a tool that can be used—or misused—in many ways. In our practice, we can use it appropriately to develop the mind whenever necessary.

Another way we use ‘thinking’ is in developing perceptions—such as the perception of not-self (*anatta-saññā*). This kind of thinking can be quite subtle. Perhaps it is better described as “viewing things with an idea in mind”, though in the English language we may term it as some form of ‘thinking’ too.

At any rate, this contradicts the popular idea of practising ‘bare awareness’. When the mind is in contact with something, perceptions or ideas about it arise easily and quickly, and mostly

1 Translation from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.020.than.html>

without our conscious knowing. If our awareness is truly ‘bare’—as in bare of concepts—how can one eat or even walk, since concepts are necessary for these actions? What we might think of as ‘bare’ is actually imbued with lots of unconscious ideas, including the idea of something being ‘me’ or ‘mine’. The application of wise perceptions, such as *anatta:saññā*, is quite necessary to countervail this habitual misperception.

Another relatively subtle form of useful thinking is *dhammavicaya* (investigation of phenomena), which is one of the seven factors of awakening. Besides discerning whether hindrances are occurring in the mind, we are to also discern *how* they arise, *how* they are abandoned and *how* they will not arise again. It is a wise form of thinking that is a necessary part of the practice.

It may surprise many of you that *dhammavicaya* is applied as one learns how to progress to higher *jhānas* (meditative states). This is clearly presented in *Tapussa Sutta* (AN9.41), where the Buddha recounted his experience of ‘discovering’ the *jhānas* before his awakening. For example, when he was in first *jhāna* wanting to get to second *jhāna* but the mind didn’t get there, he asked himself *why*. Then the answer occurred to him. Upon cultivating what was necessary, the mind eventually got to second *jhāna*. This process of cultivation involving self-inquiry went on through all the *jhānas*, and even all the formless states, finally arriving at *saññā:vedayita:nirodha* (cessation of perception and what is felt).

As we can see from the above, PRSD or the ‘one-beat-slow’ phenomenon is neither necessary nor healthy. It happens due to misunderstanding of the practice. The way of practice according to the *Suttas* is not an effort to constrain all thinking and have only bare awareness. Instead, we are to *use* thinking properly, in the way that leads us to the ending of suffering.