

You Cannot Judge and Understand At the Same Time

By Peter B. Williams

In working with judgmental thoughts, it is very important to remember that all judgments are false. This is because all thoughts are false. Thoughts cannot be true in an ultimate sense because thoughts can only symbolize reality. Thoughts are the map and not the territory. The best they can do is point accurately at something, like, as the Zen saying goes, "a finger pointing at the moon." Our thoughts cannot be reality any more than a pointing finger can be the moon.

While thoughts can never be ultimately true, of course they can be useful in a relative sense. We can use thoughts to ponder the world, rehearse various possibilities, and take informed action. It is a miraculous gift of the human mind to be able to do so. Obviously, to read this is to involve a great deal of thinking. This essay uses thinking mind to dethrone thinking mind, not to get rid of thoughts, but to put them in their proper place. This is especially important with judgmental thoughts, because they cause so much difficulty.

The way we can be most accurate with our thoughts is through discernment. Judgment and discernment are very different. Judgments are much less accurate, and therefore much more divorced from reality than discerning thoughts. Discerning thoughts notice basic distinctions in reality, such as "There is a cloud in the sky." A judgmental thought would be something more along the lines of, "The cloud is bad," or "The cloud is wrong." This sounds preposterous, as we all understand a cloud is just a cloud, and is in the sky due to conditions. It cannot be bad or wrong. Human thought, speech, action, character and personality all arise due to conditions, and yet we reserve special status for humans as being judge-able. People and their actions can be right or wrong, good or bad. But it turns out we can get all of our needs met, relate to others in a fulfilling way, help instead of hurt others, be safe, and be deeply motivated, all without judgments. Instead, we can act from discernment and compassion.

Discernment has three hallmarks that separate it from judgment: it focuses on harm and benefit instead of right and wrong; it focuses on specific actions and not conclusions about someone's personhood; and it acknowledges the reality of change by staying focused in the present moment. When a person cuts you off in traffic, a judgmental thought might be something along the lines of: "That is so wrong. What a rude person!" Note the value judgment. The moment we invoke right or wrong, we are removing ourselves from reality and evaluating actions based on code, rules, or standards. While this is sometimes useful, it is also divorced from the true situation at hand. (For instance, we can avoid feeling the horrible pain caused by child abuse when we call it horribly wrong.) When we think of the person who cut us off as "a rude person," we define their entire being by their behavior. Characterizing someone's personhood also ignores the reality of change: Once a rude person, always a rude person. A discriminating thought would be more along the lines of, "Wow, that was a dangerous action!" This is more accurate. It describes the action, without making assumptions about the person. Who knows, maybe the person was distracted by a crying infant in the back seat or just plain spaced out, rather than purposely cutting you off. Notice that giving up judgment does not prevent you from dealing appropriately with the situation. In fact, a gentle honk of the horn to help the person become aware might be just the appropriate response.

To help us let go of our judgments (and all thoughts) more easily, I describe some common thought errors below. While discerning is the best we can do with thoughts, they are still thoughts and still have all the limits described below. Judgments compound the errors with right and wrong, conclusions about personhood, and fixing people in time.

Thought Errors

PRACTICE - After reviewing these thought errors, consider taking this thought in to your

life and using it anytime you notice you are making judgments: "I know my judgment is not true. Is it useful?"

Freezing – Thoughts take changing events, objects, and situations and freeze them in time. A 30-minute run is constant flow, but we call it a "run," using a noun. This turns the flow into an object, and a single one at that, even though the run was so many things. The same is true of a meditation session. We call it "a sit," and, yet, many things flowed on through. It's really not very accurate to denote such a complex happening in one word.

Mascotizing – Thoughts dramatically simplify very complex realities. For instance, you can take all that New York state is – millions of people from hundreds of countries; millions of acres of farms, forests, lakes and mountains; cities, towns, villages, highways, etc. – and represent it with the Statue of Liberty on a car license plate. A nice mascot, but it definitely is nothing close to the reality of the state.

Splitting – Thoughts take elements of the interconnected web of reality and isolate them. The concept "tree" splits the plant away from the sun, soil, air, and water that is essential to its survival.

Lumping – Thoughts take disconnected elements of reality and bind them together. The tree becomes lumped into the concept "forest," even though it does have some separateness. The Boston Red Sox is a "team," even though it's composed of many things. The most extreme example is to lump everything that exists into one thing – the universe.

Viewpointing – Thoughts are limited by having a viewpoint. This viewpoint sees reality from one perspective. For instance, when you make a map of something, you have a particular concern from which the map is made. A map of the U. S. can be a road map, a map of entertainment hotspots, restaurants, geologic formations, vegetation zones, weather, and on and on. A social convention, due to our fondness for driving, makes the highway map the default map, the likely map that comes to mind when you think of the U. S. That's not reality. Just a convention.

Scaling – Thoughts have not just a point of view, but also a spatial or temporal scale of concern. Think of the past. Are you in a moment, or a broader time span? Are you thinking of your personal life or of some span of history? To go spatial, picture Boulder, and notice what scale are you in? Likely one that involves something you can personally see. But imagine what Boulder would look like from an airplane, a hot air balloon, from Pearl Street Mall, from right up against a tree on the Mall, from inside the bark of the tree to see its cells, to the molecules in the cells, to the atoms in the molecules, to the sub-atomic particles in the atoms, and so on. From each view, you see entirely different things. Which is the correct view? The problem is, they all are. It just depends on your scale of concern. If you go broad you miss the details, if you go narrow, you miss the big picture. It'd be cool if the mind could think of all of them at once, but the mind can really only focus on one thing at a time.

Comparing – Comparisons can never have ultimate truth. Comparative measures such as size, speed, intelligence, etc. depend on pitting one thing against another. If you take ball A and put it next to a bigger ball, ball B, A is small. Take A and put it next to a tiny ball and it becomes big. Comparisons are never about intrinsic qualities of something and so always change, depending on the comparative frame.

Thinking Errors - The above errors relate to individual thoughts. If you link thoughts together, it becomes thinking. Thinking pastes hundreds of thoughts together in a minute, complete with all their errors. Add to all these thought errors the flaws of the thinking process itself:

Story Making - On top of this, we add in all sorts of images, associations, and opinions in our thinking. When you read the phrase "soccer player," notice the image that pops into your head. Notice the age, gender, race, nationality, length of hair, etc. of the person. It wasn't provided, but that does not matter. We take it and run with it.

Impermanence – Even if thoughts could be true, then they would still have the problem of they are true only when you are thinking them. This is important to remember in the context of judging mind. If you have a self-critical thought, such as “I am bad at math,” as soon as you move on to a new thought, say about when the daffodils in your garden will bloom this spring, you are no longer bad at math. What a relief!

Identification – Thoughts only have power over us when we identify with them, when we are not aware they are happening. When we do this, it is like we are lost in a movie. The good news is that all we have to do is wake up and realize we are thinking. We can let go of the thought

and bring our attention back to the breath or body and – poof! – away goes the thought, a whole movies worth of drama popped like a bubble.

PRACTICE - Let me remind again to take this thought in to your life and use it anytime you notice you are making judgments: “I know my judgment is not true. Is it useful?”

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR JUDGING WORKSHEET

Deconstructing a Judgmental Thought

Write down a few sentences that describe one way you judge yourself or someone else.

List all the thought errors in what you wrote using the essay on thought errors.

A bit more challenging – write down the story making errors – what have you added with your own interpretations, assumptions, opinions, etc...

Take one of your judgmental sentences and write it in a way that avoids all the errors in the essay.