

The Koan of Control: A Problem in Teaching Clients to Meditate in Psychotherapy

Meditation is tricky¹. And teaching clients to meditate in the context of psychotherapy in a way that is truly helpful to them can be tricky as well. Meditation can be a very powerful tool in psychotherapy, potentially catalyzing powerful breakthroughs that provide clients much relief from symptomatic patterns and empowerment toward committed action. However, pitfalls in teaching and learning meditation can often derail progress and can even lead to painful and unhelpful experiences of “failure” and giving-up.

In this brief essay, I aim to describe a specific problem that appears to me to be central to the ‘trickiness’ of meditation as well as the trickiness of teaching meditation in the context of psychotherapy. I believe this problem is also central to the benefits gained from meditation in a psychotherapeutic context. The problem is simply this: meditators are inevitably seduced into attempting to control the processes of thinking and feeling, but at the same time, such attempts are intrinsically futile and counterproductive. Indeed what is learned in meditation is the relinquishing of such an agenda of control! In this article I will sketch out this problem, which has a degree of inherent subtlety and slipperiness to it. Then I’ll offer a few ways that I’ve found to be helpful to clients in extricating themselves from this apparently impossible contradiction.

Again, as I noted above, we generally come to meditation with the agenda of exerting some control over our subjective world (feeling better, “reducing stress,” and so forth), but such control simply cannot work in the long run. I call this problem “the koan of control,” referring to the traditional Zen Buddhist teaching method of assigning meditation students “koans” or stories or phrases that refer to specific aspects of meditation experience (from Chinese *gong-an*, Sino-Japanese *ko-an*, meaning a ‘public case,’ ‘teaching precedent,’ or ‘parable’). A Zen teacher might assign a koan such as “What is the sound of one hand [clapping]?” to help the student meditate upon the apparent paradox, in the hope that the student will struggle with it and understand its experiential meaning, and in so doing, eventually

¹ Thanks to Hank Robb, PhD for clarifying the distinction between “hard” and “tricky” in a recent peer consultation group.

transcend conventional, literal thinking and experience insight into the illusory nature of life-as-conceptualized-by-the-mind. If that last sentence is as clear as mud to you, don't worry! I'll explain further herein.

It takes a few steps to set up the problem, so please bear with me. First, let's consider a basic question: why meditate?

One answer is: to end suffering. That's what our clients typically want when they arrive in therapy and why many people come to meditation practice. I have sometimes heard meditation teachers say that the "purpose" of meditation is simply to meditate, that meditation is so worthwhile in itself no further justification is needed. The anxious client, however, is not typically looking for a new way of life; she is looking for a practical solution to a problem. The client is interested in relief from anxiety and depression, relief from "suffering."

So, what makes us suffer?

One common answer is that our thoughts make us suffer: The way we construe the world and think about life is the source of our suffering. Certainly that's the traditional answer in CBT-style therapies, which require clients to review their thoughts and subject them to rational scrutiny. One may point out that more recent "Third Wave" or mindfulness-based CBTs take the following approach: "well, it's not the thoughts themselves but *how we relate to our thoughts*." That is, the target of mindfulness-based CBT is not thinking per se, but rather thinking-about-thinking or 'metacognition.' Still, all CBTs implicate cognition in some form as the source of our suffering. Control the thoughts (or meta-thoughts), and you can control the suffering, right?

Not so fast. We know that thoughts lead to suffering, and for those of us coming from a CBT bent, it is not too difficult to help many of our clients see how their thoughts contribute to their suffering. What is difficult, however, is helping clients to actually suffer less from their thoughts. Well-meaning CBT-style therapists sometimes induce a new spiral of suffering. Therapists label certain thinking patterns as "irrational" or "dysfunctional," setting up clients to infer that, in the name of "feeling good," they must remove, eliminate, or otherwise control such thoughts. Could there be a way for clients to learn experientially to respond differently to their thoughts?

Enter meditation as a proposed tool—indeed already a popular tool—in psychotherapy. Now, meditation purports to have something to offer for those who are suffering from their thoughts. The ‘advertising’ of meditation can seduce us into believing, “If I meditate, I won’t have to have all these painful thoughts, right?” It turns out, though, that the notion of meditation as being about escaping painful thoughts is a very problematic misunderstanding, one of several impactful misconceptions both clients and therapists sometimes harbor regarding meditation.

The few representations of meditation in our culture grossly distort the practice of meditation in a number of ways. Think of the expression “Zen Calm,” one of the many instances of use of the term ‘Zen’ in advertising. Or think of how yoga and meditation products are marketed: how many times have we seen in such advertising the svelt 20-something-year-old woman in a leotard blissfully meditating away all of her stress? Or a placid, shaven-headed monk, perhaps sitting by a lakeside with a beatific expression, suggesting that he is enjoying perfect freedom from thinking. Meditation aids such as CDs and mp3s often propagate the myths that meditation must involve “becoming relaxed” or must mean “emptying your mind of thoughts.” Even meditation teachers propagate these misunderstandings by implying or even directly stating things such as:

- Meditation will lead to relaxation
- Meditation has to lead to relaxation in order to be “successful”
- Pleasant feelings are good; agitation is bad
- If you meditate, you’ll have fewer thoughts and less suffering
- Having thoughts while meditating is bad
- Judgmental thoughts are particularly bad!

However, it does not take misleading media or misguided therapists, meditation teachers, and practitioners to create these myths about meditation. Whether we are told these things or not, our minds naturally want to end suffering by getting rid of thoughts and feelings that bother us. One can be given a good set of instructions such as, “just let thoughts come and go without following them or giving them any energy by trying to stop them,” but most of us will find that our minds want to end our suffering via a covert form of avoidance, namely by getting away from our thoughts. Such avoidance is particularly seductive if one is suffering acutely.

We are sometimes told by meditation instructors to “let go” of thoughts. Then we think, “If I just let go of it, then it’ll go away, right?” We don’t realize, and teachers often do not make clear, that the instruction “let go of thoughts” is better understood as “be willing to have any thoughts you may be having, no matter how disturbing to you they may be, but also notice when you use thoughts as a way of escaping the experience of being in the moment.” In short, we simply do our best *not to think* while meditating, especially if we are new to meditation. Soon however we discover that it is not possible to suppress thinking via an ordinary act of will. We typically find that after some time of such suppression, we are having more thoughts than before! As a direct consequence of this failure experience, those learning to meditate will often experience one or more of the following thoughts:

- “This isn’t working”
- “I’m no good at this”
- “This is too hard”
- “This is making my problems worse”

If you meditate, consider whether these thoughts occur to you during meditation. What is your experience of meditation? Do thoughts ever stop? Do you struggle with them? Does it help much to try not to think or even to try to “Let thoughts come and go?”

I am guessing your answers to these questions are “No, Yes, and No.” This is the crux of the problem: *Trying not to think simply creates a new set of thoughts, perhaps even more painful thoughts about failure and futility of our efforts. We sometimes react to such hopeless thinking by giving up the whole enterprise as futile and concluding, “I’m no good at meditation.”* Thus, trying not to think in meditation is simply unworkable and counterproductive. What would be more workable?

Giving up the struggle to control thoughts and feelings during meditation would be more workable. Teachers and therapists often know this intuitively. Instructions such as “neither suppress nor cling to thoughts and feelings” attempt to get across the notion of relinquishing an agenda to control private experiences during meditation. However, as we have seen, such instructions are typically misinterpreted by beginning meditators. Rather than relying on explicit instructions, a skilled meditation teacher will employ metaphor to skirt the pitfalls of literal thinking. For example, one

Zen master described the problem of control in meditation as that of “Trying to catch a feather on a fan.” Such visuospatial metaphoric imagery can often be much more helpful to beginning meditators than direct instruction. What happens if you close your eyes and picture that? The feather is floating, a tiny thing, perhaps a goose-down feather, and we have a big, fancy Chinese fan in our hand, trying to catch it. The slightest movement of the fan, though, will send the feather off in the other direction. If we keep the fan perfectly still, the feather, which is being caught by air currents, may not fall on it. How would it go?

Think about this image for a few moments, imagining the frustration or perhaps bemusement. Could we come to accept the process despite its apparent futility? What would happen if we were OK with the experience of “trying to catch a feather on a fan?” What if we were to simply look at thoughts like “this is futile” and experience them as thoughts, which is what they in fact are? Or look directly at the associated feelings of sadness and frustration that accompany such thoughts and experience them as physical sensations, which is what they in fact are?

On a personal note, when I meditate, I almost invariably spend the first 15 minutes or so struggling with thoughts. This is especially true if I skipped my meditation the day before, but I may struggle in a subtle way even if I’ve been very consistent. Somehow, after about 15 minutes of struggling, I seem to spontaneously “remember” how to give up the struggle as if I’d never learned that before. I seem to recapitulate each time the experience of trying to master thought, failing miserably, and then remembering that there is no need to make that kind of control-oriented effort. I only need to look, and look, and look. Could this be precisely what we hope our clients will learn in meditation?

I have come to believe so. In meditation we are confronted with the bare, undisguised futility of attempting to control our private experiences. Over much time and many repeated trials of practice, we learn from immediate experience what works and what does not. Our control efforts are “punished” by consequent amplified suffering; this unnecessary suffering becomes more and more obvious to us over time. By virtue of this learning, we are able to let go of efforts to control our experience, and so undergo a profound release from suffering. This release constitutes the resolution of the koan of control: the experience of “defusion” from undesired thoughts and associated feelings that is among the primary goals of mindfulness-

based therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, Hayes and Wilson, 1994).

I hope I have conveyed clearly the problem at hand: the koan of control in meditation. The question remains, how best to lead clients through the minefield of early meditation practice. Here, then, is a partial list of approaches I have taken with clients that have seemed to help them learn to meditate properly (that is, with a minimal agenda to control thoughts and feelings), and in turn, to apply in everyday life what they learned on the cushion. These suggestions appear here in rough order of complexity and in sequence of presentation to the client. I hope other therapists will find them useful.

1. *The 'Leverage' Talk.* I tell the client, “What we are doing in meditation is leveraging two facts: First, that you can control your four limbs to a fair extent and can usually sit fairly still if you choose to do so; and second, that in any given moment, you can control where you direct your attention. In any given moment, you can direct your attention wherever you like. For example, while you are listening to me talk, you can direct some of your attention into the soles of your feet. You can also look at my face, and without moving your eyes, direct your attention to the left side of the room ... then the right side of the room ... then the upper-right corner of the room. The eyes are staying still, the attention is shifting at your will.”

2. *Zany Body Movements.* Say to the client something like, “What is happening over time is that we are gaining independence of functions. Have you ever learned an instrument or a sport? Can you do this? (Pat your head with one hand while rubbing your belly with the other, then switch hands.) Can you raise one eyebrow at a time? Or wiggle your ears? Learning to meditate is very similar to learning these unusual bodily movements. Just as one eyebrow can become independent in its movements from the movements of the other eyebrow, so can you learn to observe something without attempting to control it.”

3. *Weight Training Metaphor.* “By repeatedly shifting the attention back to the breath or whatever object of meditation we have chosen to use, we gradually gain independence of function that allows us to ‘let go of thoughts.’ Normally, the directing of attention is yoked to the assertion of effort. Over time, we learn to direct attention without attempting to interfere with the thing to which we are directing attention. It takes many, many

repetitions, just like the ‘reps’ one does while working out. Each time we shift the attention, it’s like one of these (mime the action of curling a barbell). We get better at it precisely through the process of our minds wandering again and again. If our minds didn’t wander, there wouldn’t be any point to the exercise.”

4. *What Is ‘Hard’*. “When your mind tells you ‘I can’t do it,’ your mind is using the language of physical capability in an inappropriate way. What your mind really means is, ‘This meditation thing doesn’t go the way I think it should go.’ But this meditation thing is **not** like trying to lift a 500-pound weight, which most of us literally CAN’T do. Everyone is capable of keeping the body fairly still and directing the attention over and over again to bodily stimuli. In some ways it’s actually easier than falling off a log. What makes it seem ‘hard’ are our demands and expectations, our view that it should go a certain way.”

5. *Five Minutes*. I usually have clients begin by making a commitment to meditate for five minutes, once per day, preferably first thing in the morning. “The mind has endless resources available to derail your practice. The mind does not want you to practice, because that would mean giving the mind less power. The mind tells you, ‘You’re too tired to meditate right now!’ ‘There’s no time to practice now!’ But it’s hard for the mind to argue with five minutes. If the mind is still winning the argument, even against five minutes, how about sixty seconds of meditation? How about three mindful breaths?”

6. *Using Traditional Sources*. Depending on the client’s religious background, I sometimes quote a Zen scripture that says, “Do not judge by any standard.” No standard; every meditation session is 100% perfect for the length of the period of time in which we have intent to meditate. (I would think there is an equivalent quote from Christian scripture, but I don’t know what it is, maybe someone can help me with that!). I have also used the Zen metaphor described above: “trying to catch a feather on a fan”. My own version of that metaphor is “trying to wipe a smudge off of a white tablecloth using hands that are covered with ink!”

7. *Yoda on ‘Trying’*. Sometimes clients say, “I tried to meditate.” Usually this means that they meditated, but their minds told them that the meditation was no good. I like to remind clients of my generation in particular of the Yoda character in Star Wars, who said, “There is no ‘try’, only DO – or DO

NOT!” To unpack this notion a little, the very idea of ‘trying’ implies struggle and implies getting mired in the koan of control. From an objective third-person perspective, it is much easier to describe what someone else we observe has *done*, rather than what they have *tried*. They either did something, or they didn’t do it. The actor experiences “trying,” but the observer sees only “doing.” In meditation it’s helpful to observe oneself as one would observe others, shifting from the usual perspective of actor. In fact some would argue such a shift away from “actor-consciousness” to “observer-consciousness” comprises the heart of meditation practice.

8. *The Perpendicular Metaphor*. “We struggle back and forth along the dimension of high-versus-low effort. First we try too hard, then we try too feebly. We go back and forth between these two, and it seems there is no way to find the right level of effort. But what we are actually looking for is not up or down on this continuum – it’s sideways in a whole other direction. We aren’t really looking for effort. Rather, we’re looking for a commitment to simply paying attention to what is here in this very moment. Our level of effort doesn’t matter so much as the quality of our commitment to simply be here now, and look, and look, *and look*.”

Reference

Hayes, S. C. & Wilson, K. G. (1994). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Altering the verbal support for experiential avoidance. *Behavior Analyst*, 17(2), 289-303.

Joseph Rhinewine, PhD, is director of Portland Mindfulness Therapy, a newly formed group practice in downtown Portland committed to the provision of mindfulness-based psychotherapy. He is also a member of the Zen Community of Oregon and student at the affiliated Heart of Wisdom Zen Temple in southeast Portland.