**Week 6 – Turning towards difficulty with kindness to ourselves**

**Thoughts are not facts**

“It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts, and they are not ‘you’ or ‘reality’…the simple act of recognising your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Full Catastrophe Living

Our thoughts can have very powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Often thoughts are triggered and then run quite automatically. We practice becoming aware, over and over again, of the thoughts and images passing through the mind. By letting go of them and returning our attention to the breath and to the present moment, it is possible to get some distance and perspective on them. That can allow us to see that thoughts are just mental events, not truth, reality, or “me” and that there may be other ways to think about situations. This can free us from the tyranny of some of the old, familiar thought patterns that automatically pop into the mind.

Eventually, we may crucially come to realise, deep in our bones, that all thoughts are just mental events - including the thoughts that say they are not –

### Thoughts are not facts - We are not our thoughts

Thoughts and images can often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind. It is also possible to get hold of them, and look them over from a number of different perspectives. By becoming more familiar with our habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns we can become more aware of, and change, the processes that lead us into unhelpful downward mood spirals or escalating stress.

### Thoughts 1

It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and not “you” or “reality”. For instance, if you have the thought that you must get a certain number of things done today and you don't recognise it as a thought, but act as if it's “the truth”, then you have created in that moment a reality in which you really believe that those things must all be done today. One patient, Peter, who'd had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realisation of this one night, when he found himself washing his car at 10 o'clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn't have to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he thought needed doing today. As he saw what he was doing to himself, he also saw that he had been unable to question the truth of his original conviction that everything had to get done today, because he was already so completely caught up in believing it. If you find yourself behaving in similar ways, it is likely that you will also feel driven, tense, and anxious without even knowing why, just as Peter did. So if the thought of how much you have to get done today comes up while you are meditating, you will have to be very attentive to it as a thought or you may be up and doing things before you know it, without any awareness that you decided to stop sitting simply because a thought came through your mind.

On the other hand, when such a thought comes up, if you are able to step back from it and see it clearly, then you will be able to prioritise things and make sensible decisions about what really does need doing. You will know when to call it quits during the day. So the simple act of recognising your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear- sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

Our mindfulness practice can support us to gain some distance at times to the thinking mind. When we spend some time each day in a state of non-doing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body, without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand. And if each time we recognise a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of its content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are. Segal, Williams & Teasdale (2002)

**Relating to thoughts (II)**

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we all spend most of our lives there. Mindfulness practice is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Through the continuous process of silent observation, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen. When we lose ourselves in thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps our mind and carries it away, and, in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop on a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line, we may wake up and realise that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them but then vanish upon inspection.

But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, and then, all of a sudden – whoosh! – we are gone, lost, in a thought. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, so that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and their impact on our lives, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arise and pass, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind: we can see our thoughts as the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.

Segal, Williams & Teasdale (2002)

**Examples of unhelpful though patterns**

It can be helpful to recognise some common thinking patterns that all of us can easily fall into. Recognising and naming these can help give some distance and perspective on them.

* Mind-reading: “He thinks I’m stupid / boring / unattractive”
* Crystal-ball gazing: “I’m not going to enjoy this”
* Over-estimating the negative: “This is going to be a total disaster”
* Eternalising: “I’ll never manage this.” “I’ll always feel like this”
* Expecting perfection: “I / people should never make mistakes”
* Over-generalising: “This is difficult – everything’s such an effort.”
* Judgementalism: “I wasn’t able to do that – I’m just not good enough.”
* Taking the blame: “When things go wrong, it’s my fault.”

### Using the Breathing Space with Thoughts

At the end of the Breathing Space if you are still troubled by thoughts, then here are some of the things you can do:

* Watch them come and go without feeling that you have to follow them
* See your thoughts as mental events rather than facts. It is true that this event often occurs with feelings and it is tempting to think of it as being true. But it is your choice whether you decide it is true or not and how you want to deal with it.
* Write them down. This can let you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. The pause between having the thought and writing it down can give you time to reflect on its meaning.