



STEP 2

Skillful Thinking

IT'S NO MYSTERY that thinking can make us happy or miserable. Let's say you're sitting under a tree one fine spring day. Nothing particular is happening to you, except perhaps the breeze is ruffling your hair, yet in your mind you're far away. Maybe you're remembering another spring day several years back when you were feeling terrible. You had just lost your job, or failed an exam, or your cat had wandered off. That memory turns into a worry. "What if I lose my job again? Why did I ever say such-and-such to so-and-so? No doubt this or that will happen, and I'll be out on my ear. Now, I'm really in for it! How will I pay my bills?" One worry brings up another, which brings up yet another. Soon you feel your life is in shambles, but all this while you've been sitting under the tree! Fantasies, fears, and other kinds of obsessional thinking are a big problem for us. We all tend to lock into unhealthy thought patterns—grooves we have worn into our consciousness that keep us circling in familiar tracks leading to unhappiness.

The second step of the Buddha's path offers us an escape from this pattern, a way of redirecting our thoughts in positive and helpful directions. When we begin to understand things rightly—through mindfulness of the key points of the first step of the path—our mind naturally flows into Skillful Thinking. Thinking here refers not only to thoughts but to any intentional mind state. As we come to understand that desire is the cause of dissatisfaction, we see that thoughts connected to attachment and aversion always lead to unhappiness. Skillful Thinking consists of abandoning negative thoughts, such as grasping, hatred, and cruelty, and replacing them with wholesome thoughts, such as letting go, loving-friendliness, and compassion. These skillful thoughts work as antidotes to obsession and worry and move us along on the path toward permanent happiness.

LETTING GO

Letting go is the opposite of desire or attachment. Think of it as generosity in the highest sense. Along the Buddha's path, we will have opportunity to give away or let go of everything that holds us back from our goal of the highest happiness—possessions, people, beliefs and opinions, even our attachment to our own mind and body.

When people hear this, they sometimes start to worry. They think that to follow the Buddha's teachings they have to give everything away and join a monastery. Though becoming a monk or a nun is indeed one way of practicing generosity, most people can let go in the midst of busy, family-centered lives. What we need to reject is not the things we have, or our family and friends, but rather our mistaken sense that these are our possessions. We need to let go of our habit of clinging to the people and the material things in our lives and to our ideas, beliefs, and opinions.

LOVING-FRIENDLINESS

As you let go of negative states of mind, you create the space in your mind for the cultivation of positive thoughts. Skillful Thinking means that we replace angry or hostile thoughts with thoughts of loving-friendliness. Loving-friendliness, or *metta*, is a natural capacity. It is a warm wash of fellow-feeling, a sense of interconnectedness with all beings. Because we wish for peace, happiness, and joy for ourselves, we know that all beings must wish for these qualities. Loving-friendliness radiates to the whole world the wish that all beings enjoy a comfortable life with harmony, mutual appreciation, and appropriate abundance.

Though we all have the seed of loving-friendliness within us, we must make the effort to cultivate it. When we are rigid, uptight, tense, anxious, full of worries and fears, our natural capacity for loving-friendliness cannot flourish. To nurture the seed of loving-friendliness, we must learn to relax. In a peaceful state of mind, such as we get from mindful-ness meditation, we can forget our past differences with others and forgive their faults, weaknesses, and offenses. Then loving-friendliness naturally grows within us.

As is the case with generosity, loving-friendliness begins with a thought. Typically, our minds are full of views, opinions, beliefs, ideas. We have been conditioned by our culture, traditions, education, associations, and experiences. From these mental conditions we have developed prejudices and judgments. These rigid ideas stifle our natural loving-friendliness. Yet, within this tangle of confused thinking, the idea of our friendly interconnection with others does come up occasionally. We catch a glimpse of it as we might glimpse a tree during a flash of lightning. As we learn to relax and let go of negativity, we begin to recognize our biases and not let them dominate our minds. Then the thought of loving-friendliness begins to shine, showing its true strength and beauty.

COMPASSION

Compassion is the third skillful thought the Buddha encouraged us to cultivate. Compassion is a melting of the heart at the thought of another's suffering. It is a spontaneous, wholesome reaction, coupled with a wish to alleviate another's pain.

Compassion requires an object. In order to cultivate compassion, you must reflect on the suffering you have personally experienced, notice the suffering of others, and make the intuitive connection between your own painful experiences and theirs. Suppose, for example, you hear of a child being beaten or abused. You open your mind to this child's suffering by perhaps recalling the pain you felt in your heart when you were mistreated. You develop the prayerful wish, "May such pain not happen to anybody in the world. I

wish that no child be abused the way I have been abused." Or, when someone is ill, you reflect on how unpleasant and painful it is to suffer from sickness, and you wish that no one else suffer similar pain and anxiety. Or you recall the heartbreak of separating from someone you love. This memory leads to compassion for anyone separated from a loved one by death, distance, or rejection, and to the wish that no one need go through such pain.

Compassion and loving-friendliness are mutually supportive. When you are full of loving-friendliness, your heart is open and your mind is clear enough to see the suffering of others. Say, for instance, that someone treats you in a snobbish or disdainful way. An attitude of loving-friendliness helps you to recognize that this harsh behavior must arise from some problem or inner hurt this person is experiencing. Since you also have suffered problems in your life, your compassion arises, and you think to yourself, "This person must be suffering. How can I help? If I get angry or upset, I will not be able to help in any way. I may even aggravate this person's problem." You are confident that if you continue to act in a loving and friendly way, this person will benefit, perhaps immediately and, if not, eventually. Perhaps at some later time, this person will admire how you remained loving in spite of provocation and begin to imitate this friendly way of dealing with others.