

THINKING
Part I
Understanding and relating to thought
by Ajahn Amaro

In Buddhist meditation circles conceptual thought tends to get the same rap as the ego. It is perceived as something bad, something that we don't want or that needs to be eliminated. And it's no wonder. Thinking can feel like a great burden. In our efforts to meditate we see how unruly the mind can be. It charges off here and there and everywhere chattering away insanely -- all day and night. And because the mind can be so hyperactive we tend to make thoughts the enemy. Meditation practice becomes a battleground between me, the meditator, and the invading thoughts.

We tend to forget that in our schooling -- particularly in the West -- we spend twelve, sixteen, eighteen and more years in education systems learning to think and think and think, to create concepts, to juggle many ideas at once, to compare them and critique them. And we get praised for our ability to do that well. So it is hardly surprising that when we come to meditation all of this is still going on. When we sit down to meditate we see the results of the actions of a lifetime. That's to be expected. We can't decide to stop thinking any more than we can decide to grow a couple of inches, keep our hair from graying, determine to be a bit more charming, or never get angry again. We can do all the deciding we like but it doesn't work.

Like many of us, I got interested in meditation to stop thinking. I wanted some peace of mind! I had spent many years endlessly stimulating the mind with all sorts of fascinating, useful, wonderful and interesting things and I felt immensely burdened by the resulting mental activity. I wanted to at least slow it down a bit if not stop it altogether.

Well, one day, after I had been living in the monastery for a little more than a year, I finally got my wish. It had been our custom at the monastery to do all-night meditation vigils. As you might imagine the body can get very stiff and achy from these long hours of sitting and it was customary to fire up the sauna the day after to soothe the stiffness and aching. (This may sound like a luxury but it is actually a tradition from the time of the Buddha. Most monasteries had a fire house, a *chantagara*. This was seen as medicine to be used to benefit people's health, to soothe aching muscles and bones.) Well, I was a novice at the time and part of my job was to get the sauna ready -- to stack the firewood and set up the water jars. Once I got it fired up, it was my habit to sit in the sauna before everyone else arrived. Then, after everyone left, I'd putter around a bit and sit in it again before I cleaned up.

On this particular occasion, I stayed on to sit a little longer after everyone else had left. It was around 9:00PM in the evening and I had been awake for thirty-six hours. The sauna was completely dark except for a little lamp in the window which was giving off a dim light. I had been sitting there for a couple of hours when suddenly, without any warning, the thinking stopped. I couldn't believe it! The thinking stopped completely. This was the first time in my life that my mind had ever ceased thinking! "Wow," I said. "This is what the mind feels like when it stops thinking. It is possible."

I was very excited! Granted I had to be driven to a state of complete exhaustion in order to get that effect, but that was okay. The thinking had finally stopped.

As time went by, however, I noticed that the mind began to slow down quite naturally. I didn't need one-hundred and eighty degree heat and fatigue for the thinking to subside. And as my fascination with stopping the mind began to wear off I noticed something even more interesting: Even though the mind was slowing down, even though I would have periods when the mind was not thinking at all, I noticed that it never actually stopped suffering! Even though the mind slows down and stops thinking it is not necessarily free of dukkha. Whether that was dukkha or not was independent of the presence or absence of that thinking. It is just a mind with no thinking in it. This was a big disappointment!

I had to conclude that the act of thinking itself was not the problem. Rather the suffering lay in the uncontrolled quality of thinking where the mind is running and racing and just chattering away. And I suddenly became very interested in how this random chatter occurred.

Papanca, the thinking mind run amok.

First, it isn't the case that the mind is inherently thinking all the time. Rather, thinking is a highly conditioned activity. In the teachings the process is described in this way: We come into contact with things -- objects in the world or our own thoughts. Each moment of such contact is accompanied by feeling which is pleasant, painful, or neither. Whatever is being cognized is then named. The Pali word for this is sanna. Most often it is translated as perception but the English word "sign" comes from the same root as sanna. Sanna is a kind of designation. There is a raw sensing of a stimulus and then our memory moves in and names it. "That is the sound of a dog barking."

Conceptual thought begins to cluster around that naming. That is, that which we name, we then think about. This is called vitakka. We may think, "I wonder who owns that dog." "Is that the same dog I saw yesterday?" Then vitakka takes off. It blossoms into what is known as papanca. This is conceptual proliferation. It is the mass of thoughts and conceptions which burden the heart and mind.

In this process there is a simple raw feeling, sensation or thought. There is no particular feeling of self or other with that. But as the process takes off, as the

naming takes place, we begin to get a sense of me in here experiencing the sound of that dog out there. As the thinking (vitakka) kicks in, the sense of self and other becomes more concrete and the sense of me not only experiencing this but also being burdened by it becomes more and more solid.

As meditators I am sure you have seen this pattern. With practice we start to recognize this pattern. We see how it works.

Usually we are caught up in the activity of mental proliferation -- half way through our great novel or fully through the saga of how our first marriage could have been "if only . . ." -- before we wake up and remember that it all started with the sound of the dog barking. "That sound reminded me of Binker, our dog. We got the dog when we first got married. Maybe if we hadn't had the dog the marriage would have worked out." Then we track it back and see where it began.

As meditators we see how this pattern occurs over and over again. The mind's propensity is to think habitually. It takes almost nothing to trigger it off. For example, I spent most of my youth listening to rock music at every opportunity. So when I entered the monastery in Thailand, I spent the first few years singing inside my head. My mind was so used to listening to music that for the first few years everything that happened at the monastery was a cue for a song. It could be a leaf falling off a tree or a car going by. It could be the clanking of a kerosene tin or comments that people made. It could even be just the random thoughts in my mind. Any one event, word or thought could translate into a lyric. It was like a Bing Crosby and Bob Hope movie. Before you know it you are playing the entire soundtrack. I was staggered by the amount that the mind remembers and conjures up!

That is the mind's habitual mode. It picks things up, chews on them and keeps creating -- all from a moment's stimulation.

What's a meditator to do?

We can approach thought by trying to dissolve it. If there's enough wisdom in our response to thinking we can simply say, "This is just a thought. It's not me or mine," and we can cut thinking off as if with the sword of Manjushri. But if there's not enough wisdom this can easily turn into an aggressive process. We may believe that thought is an infection, a kind of nasty fungal growth that is occupying the space between our ears. We can think that we need to wipe it out. Or it can become suppressive. As Westerners, along with our great capacity to think, we have tremendous willpower and we can use this to push thought down, to hold it back. And this can be effective for a certain amount of time. But when the will wobbles, and it will, the dam breaks and we are overwhelmed with conceptual thought again.

So for myself, I have learned that the best way to deal with excessive thinking is to just listen to it, to listen to the mind. Listening is much more effective than

trying to stop thought or cut it off. When we listen there is a different mode employed in the heart. Instead of trying to cut it off, we receive thought without making anything out of it.

During one of the monastic retreats at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, Ajahn Sumedho said emphatically, "All your thoughts are garbage. You may think that some of them are good but you should consider the possibility that *all* your thoughts are garbage." Some people may have felt that this was an insulting thing to say, but I found it brought a tremendous sense of relief. One of the biggest problems with thoughts is that we tend to believe everything they say: "If I am thinking it, it must be true." But actually our thoughts are just a collection of habitual judgments, perceptions, memories and ideas that are fed through consciousness. They may have some relationship with truth but they may not! If we take as a base line the notion that most of our thoughts are like the random barking of the dog, we make less out of them. And therein lies the sense of relief. We then find that we can relate to thought in a much more open way. We are not looking on it as being meaningful or true or realistic at all; and we're not giving it a value beyond what it really has.

Most of our thoughts are like dreams. Occasionally, perhaps once or twice a year we may have a dream that is significant and we know it. We may not know exactly what it is about but it is pretty clear that there's a message in it. But the other 364 days a year it's just the leftovers of the day. There is nothing particularly significant or important about any of our dream content at all. It's just the residue, the echoes of the day's events and activities, the things that we have rehashed a couple of times already.

When we look at thought in this way we aren't being pulled into it. We can just look at it. We don't reject it or suppress it, but we don't buy into it either. We don't make more out of it than is there. That attitude of listening, of opening to and receiving thought, has a liberating quality in-and-of itself.

Listening to the sounds of the world

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, along with Manjushri, one of the principle bodhisattvas is Avalokiteshvara, "the one who listens to the sounds of the world." Just as Manjushri is the embodiment of wisdom and the cutting of the sword, so Avalokiteshvara is the embodiment of compassion. Just as Manjushri is related to seeing, the seeing of light, enlightenment, so Avalokiteshvara is related to hearing. Wisdom has a masculine, assertive quality; compassion, listening, has a feminine receptive quality. (Even though Avalokiteshvara started out as a masculine figure, it has been transmuted over the years. Most people see it as feminine precisely because of this receptive, indiscriminating, open-hearted quality.)

There is a Chinese sutra in which the Buddha asked all the bodhisattvas their method for realizing enlightenment. Each one described a specific meditation

practice. Avalokiteshvara described meditation on hearing. She said she starts her meditation by listening to the sound of the roar of the sea. Then she takes that sound and turns it inward. She returns the hearing to listen to the ear organ. By doing this she realizes the true way.

Some years ago Ajahn Sumedho was teaching a retreat at a Chinese monastery in California. For years the people at this monastery were puzzling over this phrase, "returning the hearing to listen to the ear organ." They couldn't figure out what that meant. Now, Ajahn Sumedho had been teaching a meditation on the sound of silence, the *nada* sound. Suddenly the people at the monastery realized this must be what he was teaching, this active inner listening. Listening to the inner sound brings the heart into a position of acute inner awareness. It is not that the inner sound has some magical property. Rather, it is that bringing of the alert mind, bringing openness and receptivity to sound, is symbolic of the presence of ultimate truth. The sound is always there. We don't have to create it. It is featureless. It is ever present. So it is a good symbol for Ultimate Reality itself.

In the sutra the Buddha praised this method, the meditation on listening, as the best method for enlightenment. Ajahn Sumedho had been teaching the meditation on the nada sound for some years so he was tickled by this connection to another Buddhist tradition. He hadn't realized that there had been so much emphasis on this in traditional Buddhist meditation practices.

I tend to prefer this meditation object over the breath because I have found that the quality of listening translates very well from being a meditation object to being a mental attitude of listening -- listening to thought, listening to the world around me. There is a quality of acceptance, nondiscrimination, compassion. Thought can be there but we can treat it in the same way as we treat a feeling in the body or a sound that we hear or a smell or a taste. Thought is just a sense object perceived by the mind. Just as a sound is perceived by the ear or as light is perceived by the eye, so thought is perceived by the mind. Just as we can be completely lost in something that we hear or feel or see or taste or touch, so we can be lost in thought. But just as we can be mindful of these, so, too it is with thinking. Just as the mind can be absorbed in thought and carried away by it, so too, it can be clearly aware of thought and unconfused by it. The thoughts actually decorate the silence of the mind.

When it is seen in its proper perspective, thought is seen as just another sense object. Just as we can be totally at peace with seeing or hearing or feeling, so, too, we can be at peace with thought. If we understand it in the right way it is possible to have thought in the mind and have no obstruction whatsoever to our natural peace and happiness.

Thinking is not a problem

So it doesn't matter if there is thought in the mind or not. This is not the issue. What matters is the way we relate to it. This makes the difference. When we have the right attitude, right view, we are able to establish a quality of knowing, of awareness. As feelings appear, as sights and sounds and memories and thoughts and ideas come and go, we see that we don't have to do anything about them. We don't have to push them away. We don't have to hang on to them. We needn't be intimidated by them. We don't have to get drunk on them. They just are what they are.

Even though it is pleasant for the mind to get calm and not think, we shouldn't praise that as the be-all and end-all. The mind can be in a state of not-thinking and this may not necessarily be a liberated state. You could take thiorazine or have a lobotomy and you wouldn't be thinking. If that was the way to *Nibbana* then the Buddha would have recommended it. We could just mix a few herbs together, make a potion, take a few cupfuls, and everything would be fine. But it's not a matter of not thinking. Not-thinking is not synonymous with liberation. We can close our eyes and block our ears and not sense anything but that does not mean we are liberated. It just means that the screen is blank. It is not an exalted state at all. It's more like watching TV with a blank screen. We may criticize American TV but it's better than watching a blank screen!

To be able to control thought, to be able to think when you want to think and refrain from thinking when you want to refrain, is an extremely handy skill to possess. I'll grant that. But it is crucial that we don't judge our meditation on the basis of whether or not we can stop thinking. It is important to look at thought in a new way. I've been describing the quality of listening to the mind, of looking at what is going on in the mind with an openhearted awareness, and inviting you to not be too particular about the object of awareness. It is important that you put as much emphasis -- more emphasis! -- on the nature of the subject, the one who is knowing. This is what will get you free.

THINKING

Part II

Investigation, the use of reflective thought

Investigation or reflective thought can be a very helpful tool in spiritual practice. This is something that is not often talked about. Thought is generally looked upon as an intruder in the mind. But if you look at the Buddha's teachings you see that over and over again the Buddha described the use of reflective thought as a tool: "Wisely reflecting one considers thus . . ." On the night of the Buddha's enlightenment he was reflecting on causality, on dependent origination. This kind of reflection involves the skillful use of thought, not the avoidance of it.

Investigation refers to the quality of mind, a natural intelligence, which recognizes patterns. It is the quality of mind which discerns order, which looks into things and determines what is going on, what is the nature of the experience. It is an innate function of the mind.

Investigation figures strongly in the Buddhist teachings. The term shows up in a number of places. Dhamma-vijaya, for example, means “investigation of reality,” and it is one of the seven factors of enlightenment. Yoniso-manasika-ra is another term which appears often. It means “going to the root of things” or “paying attention to the source.” It is sometimes called wise consideration or wise reflection. Both of these are highly valued and encouraged in the Buddha's teachings and practices.

When you realize the importance of investigation in the Buddhist teachings, you can no longer see thought as an intrusion or a corruption. Thought is a natural occurrence in the mind and investigation, a natural aptitude. It is a function of awareness. Investigation is a discerning of the relatedness of different elements in our experiential field.

There are two ways to use investigation -- applied to a specific theme, for example, if there is something that mystifies you or is a big issue in your life, or applied as things come up on their own.

Investigating a specific theme

We usually think, “Now that I am meditating I have to switch off the thinking. But actually during meditation is the best time to do our thinking. If there is something that you want to investigate, sit down, relax the body, center the mind, and deliberately bring that into awareness.

One way to use this approach, for example, is to ask about a specific theme that you want to understand. “What is selflessness?” or “What does death mean to me?” or “How do I relate to the idea of my own death?” Ajahn Chah said that three times a day (morning, midday, and evening) we should ask ourselves the question, “Why was I born?” When the mind is steady and clear you can use this kind of inquiry. This is a fertile environment.

You might use investigation to understand an aspect or subject of the teachings. “How does desire lead to grasping? How does feeling turn into grasping?” Or you might ask, “When I use the word ignorance, what is that? What is ignorance?” Then consult your own wisdom. Don't try to enter into a logical process but rather wait and see what arises in response to that question. Pursue the questioning in this fashion. Thus, while there is thinking going on, it is happening within a spacious medium.

Now, if the mind races off and starts chattering, then come back, relax, and realize that the issue is too charged. You will need to establish more tranquility and concentration before going back into it.

There is no end to the usefulness of this manner of investigation. Sometimes if I have to take part in a conference, or someone has asked for a Dhamma talk with a particular theme, I'll sit myself down with a legal pad and pen, write the title of the talk or workshop on the top of the page, close my eyes, and repeat the topic to myself. It might be something like: "The Dhamma and Nature", or "The Buddhist Attitude Towards Death and Dying." It doesn't matter. I just repeat the topic and see what comes up. Then I take notes and jot it down.

You can also look at something more mundane, some aspect of your life. Perhaps you are madly in love with someone or you are trying to break up with someone. Perhaps you are having a conflict with your parents or boss or friend. The idea is to consciously bring that up. Establish your focus. And then state what is going on in your life, and witness what arises: What is going along with that / What is contributing to that / What effect does it have?

One of the most useful aspects of reflective thought is to understand the assumptions we have about identity, the feeling of self. We can start with a statement such as, "Who am I?" Thus our habitual assumptions about who we are become challenged. They are punctured. There is a moment where the questioning itself changes things. It is like turning the camera onto the photographer. The sense of self is startled. It trips over its own feet. For a moment the self-creation mechanism is interrupted. In that moment there is a gap. The mind is awake. There is clarity, but no sense of self.

When using this method of investigation the thinking mind will wade in with verbal answers but we are explicitly not interested in these. We want to create an interruption in the flow of self-creation. So that if the mind comes back with answers, we don't stop there. We keep the questioning open-ended. We keep reflecting. We keep challenging the conceptual answers that the conceptual mind gives. We have to repeatedly use different angles to get out of making habitual responses. When a hesitation or gap occurs, just let yourself rest in that. Keep going back to that. Keep looking to see what it is.

This is using the mind when it is settled in its most relaxed and intelligent state. More often than not you will find associations, ideas, images that wouldn't normally occur to you. This is because you are not driving the thought towards some kind of logical conclusion. You are not looking for answers. Rather you are simply open to receiving jewels.

In the silence of the mind lies the answer to all questions. At that moment there is the recognition of the reality of all things. We see life in its essence. Thus, reflective thought is a very useful tool to recognize the nature of mind which is so

easily obscured by the patterns of our conditioning. It is ironic that it is actually the use of thought which can bring about this most clarifying of insights.

When things come up on their own

The other method is to apply investigation when things naturally pop into the mind. Using this method we process things in that same reflective manner. Ajahn Chah used this a lot. He had an inner analysis going on much of the time. When something came up he would think about it, contemplate it like this. He would have internal dialogues, very actively using thought to explore. He'd ask, "Why is this? What does it say about that?"

We can employ this method throughout the course of the day. When on retreat, for example, you might come into the hall and find that someone has moved your cushion and you may notice a strong emotional reaction -- outrage or irritation. So you can reflect on that. "Isn't that interesting? I see this space as my patch and I am defending my territory. It's as if my territory has been invaded. A week ago this was not mine. Last week it belonged to the retreat center. Now I call it mine and I want to kill the person who invades my space! Here I am contemplating homicide. Isn't that interesting?"

Similarly, if you find that you are critical of yourself, you can look at it. If you notice that you are twitching like an ant on a hot plate, and you notice that the person next to you hasn't moved all week, that he or she is sitting there all noble and serene, never blinking, totally composed and restrained . . . and if this causes you to think of yourself as a vibrating intrusion on the universe . . . this can be contemplated. We judge ourselves against our neighbors and with investigation we can see and understand this. If you want to help the investigation along you can even take the issue to absurdity. "I am the most agitated person on the universe. Everyone else is in eighth jhana. They are all arahants but me. I am just an infection that has been sent along to try the patience of these noble and holy beings." Thus, you begin to see how absurd it is.

The idea here is to take the habitual reactions and judgments and open them up. We look into what we want, what we fear, what we dislike. We look into the compulsive reactions and opinions, the way we judge people. This is all within the realm of meditation.

One might imagine that the sitting posture or the walking posture is some kind of sacred space that no thought should be allowed into. No visas will be issued. But the time when we are meditating is exactly the best time to use investigation and reflective thought. It is when the mind is as its most sharp and clear. This is when you can get the deepest results!

When I first went into the monastery I used to use this kind of reflection to shed light on my relationship with my mother. I have a wonderful mother but we've had

a somewhat fraught relationship -- particularly when I went off to the Far East and became a Buddhist monk without any warning. I'd get tense letters from England on a regular basis. So I'd sit quietly in my kuti and I'd think the word "mother." I'd watch what followed, the volcano erupting like Mt. St. Helens. And I'd witness the patterns of reactivity. Then I'd establish a sense of calm again and, some time after, drop it in once more.

Now the issue, or question at-hand, doesn't have to be emotionally charged. We can investigate anything. This kind of reflective thought has an entirely different quality than papanca. You can use it to watch papanca, but it is more usefully engaged in as a way of investigating the teachings or our patterns or habits of thought. "What are the teachings about? Why do I react to things in the way I do? Why am I shy? Why do I get over-enthusiastic and excited? What is behind that?" We put a question forward and listen for a response.

So try this and see what comes up. Some thought or intuition will probably arise. "Well, I do that to fill up the space. I meet someone new and I am afraid that they are going to reject me so I swamp them with interesting things to say." You might ask, "What am I afraid of?" Maybe nothing in particular will arise. You may not know what it is. You may feel a sense of fear and not know what it is. Sometime later you can pick it up and look at it. You may notice yourself doing that particular thing in daily life and then you'll notice, "Ah, I'm doing it again." Just setting the intention to look at it will make it more apparent and gradually you'll begin to see into it. It might take years but that's okay. Be patient.

Stay open to all possibilities

In using thought in this way we are not demanding a fixed or certain answer. We must remain open to any possibility. If something arises, fine. If nothing arises, fine. You are consulting the oracle of your own heart because that is what knows. In our hearts there is a well of infinite wealth and wisdom. We are using that turning to that. When the papanca gets running we can let it go and then come back to this place of investigation.

When we handle things with this ease we are changing the way we usually relate. The mind wants to know everything. Even if it doesn't understand, it will have some belief. It will form an opinion or view and hang on to that just to fill up the space of not knowing. It wants to be on top of things. But this whole method of investigation and inquiry depends upon not knowing. It depends upon us being open and ready to not know. It depends upon us allowing mystery and letting the knowing arise out of that. It depends on our not being threatened. From the ego's point of view, the unknown is frightening. It is threatening and it responds to that threat by clinging to a belief as a way of dispelling it. But from the point of view of the heart, the unconditioned mind, the unknown is mysterious . . . but it is beautiful. You don't have to fill up the unknown with a belief or a concept or idea. You can leave it as mysterious because 99% of it will be mysterious anyway.

There is no way that we can understand it all. So the heart's response to that mystery is faith - a trust in the fundamental orderliness of the universe.

Investigate all the time

Using these methods we learn that even though thinking might be going on it is not irritating, not an intrusion or invasion. Thinking is happening within the context of pure awareness.

When we are outside of retreat time and having to deal with more complexities of perception, when we have bigger decisions to make than how many bowls of cereal to eat, when you have to look after your family, when we have to deal with intense emotions and projections and perform as personalities, etc. then developing this quality of reflection/investigation is incredibly useful. It becomes a way of sustaining mindfulness.

If you think mindfulness involves labeling what comes up and doing everything in a very deliberate fashion, you will suffer enormously because the world is not under your control. If you feel that in order to be mindful you have to have a sterilized environment like on retreat, you put yourself in a very weakened position. And you misunderstand mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a mind that is full. It is not a particular attention to detail. When the mind is full of the present, the moment, this mind-full-ness is what we are aiming for. When it is full it is full of wisdom.

Developing the quality of investigation is a way of keeping track, of being tuned in to what is going on inside of us -- the mood, the flow of feeling. Some people leave the retreat and then go into Safeway, for example, and become paralyzed by all the stimulation. But this can be investigated. You can realize that this is the experience of being hit by Safeway. "It's like *this* when the mind is hit by color and choices. This is the feeling of being overwhelmed." Thus you are picking up and processing, digesting, using the thinking faculty to notice what is going on. "This is agitation. This is the frenzy of over-stimulation. I'm in Safeway and this is what that feels like." It's ordinary. It is not necessarily an intrusion.

When you sit, you sit with the resonance of the day. If you keep ringing the bell all day there will be resonance. We sit to meditate and expect that there will be stillness. But, big surprise, we see the after-effects of the day. A few well-placed reflections can save you weeks of grief. You think, "Oh this is terrible. I can't meditate. I've got to go into the forest, off to the mountains." We keep holding that experience as indicating something is wrong with our practice. But there is nothing wrong with our practice. If you experience a lot of agitation and noise during the day, when you sit, there it is. You don't have to argue with it or fight against it. Just by reflecting we see that it is the natural effect of certain causes and we find peace in relation to it. We are not looking for peace in the absence of perception, emotion or moods. Peace is found in the attitude that we have

towards it. Then you find that there can be an immense buzz or noise going on and there is peace in the heart. That is freedom. It's not in wiping out all the experiences.

When we want to hold a retreat we don't hold it in the freeway. We find a quiet place. But if we think this is the only way we can be peaceful -- to do a ten day retreat, and that the rest is just being a wage-slave to save up enough money to go do the next retreat -- then we have really wasted the opportunity. We haven't learned anything useful. We have turned the quietude of the retreat into a very dependent refuge. Certainly, it is better to have that kind of refuge than none at all. But if we set that up in our minds then we are not making full use of what Buddha-Dhamma can provide.

Retreat is like five finger exercises. You run the scales over and over again so that when it comes time to improvise, to get out there and play, your fingers know where to go. You don't have to think about it. The point of the exercises is not to perfect the running of scales. You may become very good at scales, but the point of the scales is to be able to produce music. That's how to properly see retreat time. The point is to learn skills that can help us along in the flow of the experience of living, in the rest of our lives. The retreat is not the real thing. Try not to set that up in your mind. This won't help you at all.

No matter whether we are in retreat or outside, whether we have to be in charge or submissive, if we have to take responsibility or get out of the way, the heart knows this is the way to respond. The usefulness of this practice is in discovering that quality of response and trusting it. We are learning a responsiveness to each situation. Then we use the props like keeping the Precepts, investigation, mindfulness of the body, etc. to support that basic process of attending, opening the heart to the present moment, and letting ourselves respond from a place of naturalness, simplicity and an unbiased heart.