

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING



WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Discover how to alleviate your own suffering by hacking your mind.

“ From the Buddha to Freud, students of human nature have often noted a paradox in our behavior: no one chooses to suffer and yet most of us are attached to our own suffering. We know the things we do make us miserable, yet we find ourselves doing them all the same.

“ Freud blamed this tendency on the unconscious and irrational drivers of our psyches – the saboteurs of our conscious, rational selves. Buddhists, by contrast, don't need to identify hidden agents of unhappiness; for them, the very act of thinking is enough to imprison us in suffering.

“ Buddhists see a clear distinction between pain and suffering. The former is unavoidable: terrible things that cause us real pain happen all the time. Suffering, however, isn't caused by the disappointments and losses the world inflicts on us – it's a product of our thinking. When we interpret the things that happen to us through angry, resentful, self-hating, and anxious patterns of thought, we prolong and intensify pain. We choose suffering.

“ Surprisingly, breaking this pattern isn't about positive thinking – it's about suspending automatic thinking and allowing thoughts simply to be, without subjecting them to endless loops of interpretation. When we learn to do that, we not only suffer less – we also allow ourselves to tap into our full potential. Sounds wonderful, right? Let's explore how you can achieve this more peaceful state of mind.

WE CREATE OUR REALITY BY THINKING

Let's start with a timeless question: What is heaven and what is hell? Some religious traditions interpret these concepts literally. For example, many Christians and Muslims view heaven and hell as real places of either absolute goodness or eternal suffering. Most Buddhists, by contrast, conceptualize them figuratively and psychologically; for them, heaven and hell are states of mind, not locations or destinations. An old parable from the tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism illustrates this idea. It goes like this:

One day, a burly, battle-scarred samurai warrior went to visit a Zen master. He found the man meditating in his garden. The samurai, who was more used to issuing commands than discoursing on philosophical subjects, brusquely interrupted the master and demanded an answer to his question. "What is heaven and what is hell?" he boomed.

The master opened his eyes and looked up at the samurai. "Why should I tell a rude slob like you – a man who demands, rather than asks?" the master said. The samurai was taken aback. Men of his class were accustomed to being treated with deference and they were known to brutally punish anyone who disrespected them.

Outraged, the samurai raised his sword over the master's head. But the master neither flinched nor begged for mercy. He simply and softly said, "That is hell." The samurai froze; he instantly grasped the master's meaning. Anger, resentment, and entitlement had consumed him. For nothing but an inconsequential wound to his ego, he had been ready to kill this man. He sheathed his sword, placed his palms together, and bowed in gratitude for the master's insight. A smile flickered across the latter's face. "And that," he said, "is heaven."

What can this parable teach us? The Scottish philosopher Sydney Banks can help us here.

Banks argued that we experience reality through our thoughts. The objective world "out there" doesn't cause us to perceive things in a certain light – it's our internal thought processes that shape our perceptions of the world. In other words, we create our reality, good or bad, through thought. As the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton put it, "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, and a hell of heaven."

That's exactly what the master teaches the samurai. The hell the warrior experiences isn't caused by anything in the world – it's self-created, a product of his ego. Heaven, too, is an internal state of mind; he experiences it when he lets go of his ego.

Put differently, we live through our perception of reality, not in reality itself. On this basis, reality is nothing but a series of events occurring independently of thought. There is nothing either good or bad, as Shakespeare's Hamlet tells us, "but thinking makes it so." Whether we feel positively or negatively about something tells us little about the nature of that thing, but it tells us a great deal about our interpretative methods.

Of course, it's natural to interpret certain things in certain ways. For instance, it would be odd to claim that sadness was an inappropriate interpretation of reality if a loved one died. But we don't only suffer for understandable reasons. If that were the case, we wouldn't need sages like the Buddha or analysts of human psychology like Freud. We do need them, though, because we are so often the authors of our own – needless – suffering.

But this type of suffering can be cured. After all, if thinking creates our reality, it stands to reason that we can change our experience of reality by changing our thinking. And if that's true, we're only one thought away from making our own heaven out of hell.



THINKING HELPS US TO SURVIVE, NOT THRIVE

Before we get to the cure, let's talk about the diagnosis. How does thinking cause suffering? To answer that, we need to take a brief detour through the evolution of our species.

Evolution equipped humans with huge brains capable of rationalizing, analyzing, and thinking for a good reason: it helped us survive. Thought, in short, is a defense mechanism.

Our brains are programmed to scan our surroundings for potential dangers, and it excels at this task. Our minds don't only analyze the world in front of us – they also dredge through memories of past experiences and generate predictions about the future.

So far, so rational. The problem is, our brains were designed for a world in which threats to life and limb lurked behind every bush. But the world has changed. We don't need to hunt dangerous animals or take our chances with potentially deadly berries to avoid starvation – most of us have credit cards and access to well-stocked supermarkets. Our neighbors are more likely to annoy us with loud music than to kill us. A broken leg was once a death sentence; today, it's an inconvenience. Our surroundings are simply much less dangerous now than they were in the past.

Evolution, though, plays out over millions of years, and our brains haven't caught up with the miraculous advances humanity has made over the centuries. Our bodies live in the information age but our brains are prehistoric. Adrenaline-charged preparedness for fight or flight made sense in the distant past, but it mostly doesn't today. Our minds don't know that, though, so we continue scanning crime-free suburbs, comfortable offices, and annoying neighbors for existential threats.

This tendency takes the form of constant, automatic, anxious thinking. Our danger-obsessed lizard brains cause us to overthink what to wear or eat, to ruminate over old conversations, and to fret about how what we said or did was perceived. They're the reason we second-guess colleagues and bosses, endlessly re-draft emails, and convince ourselves minor health symptoms are premonitions of impending death. Worst of all, they make us replay past events on an endless loop, refreshing and prolonging the pain they caused us.

This is a recipe for suffering. From a Buddhist perspective, the diagnosis is clear: much of our misery is caused by our attachment to patterns of thought. Which brings us back to the cure. How can we end this needless suffering? The answer, as we'll see, is to stop thinking.



THOUGHTS CREATE; THINKING DESTROYS

Thoughts are nouns: they're something you have, not something you do. They're effortless and spontaneous – they simply happen. Thinking, on the other hand, is a verb: it's something you do. Essentially, it's the act of thinking about your thoughts. Thinking is energy-intensive, requiring effort and willpower, both of which are finite resources.

Let's try a little thought experiment to make this distinction easier to grasp.

All you have to do is name your dream annual income. Don't overthink it – just let the number appear in your mind. Got it? Okay, now multiply it by five. Notice anything?

If you're like most folks, the first number popped into your mind without much prompting. Chances are, it felt good – you might have even experienced a little rush of exhilaration. The second number was probably different, though. Did you suddenly find yourself worrying and fretting? Did you question how you could earn that much money or whether you deserved to? If your answer is yes, you've just experienced the transition from thought to thinking. As you can see, the latter is an emotional roller coaster; it hurtles you onto the crests of anxiety and anger, and plunges you into the depths of self-doubt, guilt, and unworthiness.

So, what does this little thought experiment tell us? Well, simply put, it's thinking about thoughts, not the thoughts themselves, that are at the root of psychological suffering. Thoughts are simple and easy; they require no great effort and trigger little resistance. But things go wrong when you start to process and judge those thoughts.

But here's the thing: you don't have to engage with your thoughts. You don't have to think about them and you don't have to judge them.

Thoughts are creative and positive – they tell you what you truly desire and care about. Thinking is neither of those things – in fact, it's downright destructive and negative. As soon as you start thinking, you begin casting your limiting beliefs, judgements, criticisms, programming, and conditioning onto your thoughts.

The question is, how can you stop negative programming from tarnishing your thoughts? The first step, as always, is recognition. Since you only feel what you're thinking, feelings are like an internal dashboard telling you whether you're in your head. If you're experiencing lots of negative emotions, you're probably overthinking things. Let's have a look at what you can do, when you find yourself stuck in this loop.

WE ACHIEVE MENTAL CLARITY WHEN WE STOP TRYING TO DO THINGS WITH OUR THOUGHTS

If thinking causes suffering, shouldn't we stop thinking? That, though, is an odd notion. Can we really just stop doing something that our brains are biologically hardwired to do? The short answer is yes. Let's wrap things up by unpacking the longer version.

First, let's define our terms. To stop thinking isn't the same as stopping thoughts in general – as we've seen, thoughts and thinking aren't synonymous. What we're working towards is a state of mind in which thoughts flow through us with no resistance. In other words, to stop thinking is to stop thinking about – and judging – thoughts.

This isn't a specific action – really, it's the absence of action. The more we become conscious of the fact that thinking causes us to suffer, the easier it becomes to detach ourselves from that thinking. An analogy can help us grasp the meaning of this idea.

Imagine you're given a bowl of murky water from a puddle. Your task is to make the water clear. There are lots of ways to solve this problem; you could boil the water, for example, or pass it through a coffee filter. These kinds of solutions are active: they're about doing something to the water. But there's a simpler solution: leave the water alone. Given enough time, the dirt will settle at the bottom of the bowl and the water will clarify itself.

The mind works in this way too. We often try to actively “boil” or “filter” our thoughts – in other words, we try to do something with them. That is what thinking is. But if we leave them alone, thoughts settle down on their own. Just as undisturbed water tends towards clarity, so do our minds. The key is to avoid agitation.

In Japanese culture, this phenomenon has its own word: mushin. It describes a mental state in which the mind is freed from anger, fear, random thoughts, and – most importantly – ego. Typically, it's used to describe a martial artist's state of mind during combat, but it also applies to other areas of life. When mushin is achieved, the practitioner is able to react to what's in front of her without hesitation. Rather than getting lost in rambling thoughts or self-doubt, she draws on her training and intuition to act quickly and decisively.

In Western contexts, we often use the concept of a “flow state” to describe the kind of mental clarity we achieve when we're completely absorbed in a task. Both flow state and mushin are about being purely present in the moment. Our brains aren't shut off, however – on the contrary, we are usually at our most creative and innovative when we achieve such states. That's because we're not thinking, but rather letting thoughts flow through us.

Thinking hinders performance in all areas of our lives. Hesitation, reluctance, doubt, insecurity, and fears are the byproducts of thinking. By contrast, we're at our best when we enter a state of non-thinking. When we stop thinking, we free ourselves from the ego's limitations and become capable of living up to our full potential.



FINAL

SUMMARY

“Our brains have evolved to overthink.

Without minds that were capable of constantly scanning their surroundings for signs of danger, our species wouldn't have made it as far as we have. But in today's safer world, this ability leads to needless suffering. If we want to escape that suffering, we need to stop believing everything we think. To do that, we must allow thoughts to pass through our minds without judgment or resistance. Japanese culture calls this state of mind *mushin*; Western culture, a “flow state.” Both describe a state of liberated non-thinking that frees us from suffering and allows us to unlock our true potential.

