

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Angle of Vision: You Are What You Think About All Day

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Welcome everybody, I hope you're having a good month. It's good to be back with you.

We're going to be talking about how thinking shapes perception and how perception shapes not only our vision of the world, but also our identity. This is a very important topic. Ralph Waldo Emerson called this our angle of vision, as he wrote: "A man is what he thinks about all day long." When you consider how attached most of us are to our point of view and how reflexively we equate that point of view with who we are, it's clear that this isn't true.

Now, for most of you in The Seekers Forum, this is not new information. As seekers, you're already aware of the mind's preeminent role as the prime mover of your experience. You're aware that your mind is coloring reality with its own biases, preconceptions, expectations, desires, fears, and so on, at every moment of everyday. You're familiar with the fact that practices such as meditation, self-inquiry, psychoanalysis, and cognitive therapy are useful in helping us to better understand these mechanisms in ourselves and how we project our internal world outward. The more we illuminate the mind with intention and attention, on the path of awakening, and recognize our thoughts as thoughts, the less deluded we become and the more able we become to distinguish thoughts from things, concepts from facts. We distinguish our self, our essential self, from this whoosh of mental impressions that are forming our sense of reality. You come to realize that what you call the "self" – this imaginary cruise director in the mind, leading you through your days, narrating your perceptions – is inseparable from your idea about it. You see that this identity that you believe to be yours, is actually a chimera that is constantly changing with your passing moods.

Just think about how quickly your image of self can morph in the space of a few seconds, following some major loss or change or some big shift in good fortune and, how this change in circumstances can make you feel that you've actually become a different person in the world. In times of transition, you hear people say things, "I don't feel like myself," or, "I don't know who I am anymore," statements that can sound exaggerated, but are actually closer to the truth than we realize. Functionally speaking, who one is when he's deeply depressed and unable to summon his personal strengths, is not the same person he is when he's feeling confident and powerful. His body may be more or less the same, but the mind has taken a completely different turn, and with it, his sense of who he is.

Now that wouldn't be a such problem if we were able to accept this moment to moment shifting with less resistance, instead of clutching on to one version or other of the self. The trouble is acknowledging the flimsiness of this identity that we hold so dear is unacceptable to the ego. As we've discussed before, the ego, the self idea, is characterized by a knee jerk refusal to change and will often do nearly anything to maintain the status quo, even if that means being miserable. The ego far prefers its own unhappiness to the prospect of the unknown or being free. Everyone who has tried to make positive changes in their lives and yet, met with perverse resistance to doing what they know to be best is aware of this paradox. The ego will nearly always choose the familiar and fight off things that might blow its cover and show it for the shifting phantasm that it actually is. It will deny the prospect of self-transcendence as well as the promise of spiritual freedom. That's one of the most confusing aspects of the seeker's life, especially at the beginning of the journey. The ego, with which we attempt to find freedom, is itself the primary obstacle to that freedom. The subjective mind, the thinking, discursive, self-reflecting mind can't

transcend itself or have any sense of what exists beyond the mind. It takes practice, openness and trust go acknowledge that our higher faculties do indeed exist before such time as we've discovered them. The mind simply cannot think its way to god, any more than the ego can cogitate its way to love or inspiration, epiphany or wonder. To experience the higher dimensions means relaxing the mind's fanatical need for control, it's clinging to this fixed identity. The ego will tell you this is ridiculous, that no such higher dimensions exist, just as flat earth thinkers once believed that there was nothing beyond the visible horizon. But if our ancestors had put ultimate trust in what they could see with their own eyes, imagine how much poorer we would be as a race. We might never have discovered the new world at all.

The same principle applies to spiritual life. As long as we believe what the mind that tells us and put ultimate faith in our physical senses, as long as we limit the path of knowledge to the puny possibilities of the separate, subjective self, we're going to stay stuck on the landmass of fear and denial, too scared and too brainwashed to set sail on the sea of spiritual experience.

That's why doubt is so critical to freeing ourselves from our personal prisons. Until we cultivate skepticism, we are unable to doubt our own doubts or be skeptical of our own skepticism. This would leave the seeker unable to travel beyond the limits of the ego-bound mind toward the encounter with something greater, the expansive mind of god or Buddha consciousness, whatever you want to call that source of intelligence. As long as your angle of vision is skewed, magnifying the preeminence of the personal self, by basing our sense of what's real on our thinking, we remain prisoners in the penitentiary of our own mind. We confuse who we are with what we are thinking and imagine the truth to be what we know. This fixation on the familiar is bound to bring unhappy results, whatever your identity.

Just look at what's happening in our politically polarized world. Even the most liberal, compassionate, inclusive among us can fall into this trap of "us vs. them," when we become overly attached to our particular worldview. That's why it's become okay to murder in the name of justice, imitate behavior we despise in others when we convince ourselves that we're on the right side. As far as I can tell, the history of humankind really is the story of wrong imitating right in the fight for so called justice.

Just look at how often victims become perpetrators themselves, how easy it is to become blinded to our own offenses, by a myopic belief in worthy motives. That's because the shadow side of self-belief is delusion, regardless of how well-meaning you are. That's why it's so critical to question our own questions, to doubt our own doubts and to remain skeptical about our own skepticism, if we hope to maintain the big picture, the truthful view of this complex and dangerous world.

Let me give you an example.

I know a woman who has dedicated herself very seriously to saving the planet. Let me put it a different way. She has dedicated herself to focusing on the extinction of the human race, which she believes to be far more imminent than almost anyone is willing to admit. This person begins the day by immersing herself in the latest catastrophic reports from around the world,

corresponding with her fellow “end of world-ers” who share data, news of coverups and ecological offenses, in the sense of the ticking clock growing louder.

I admire her seriousness and I admire her willingness to stare into the abyss without flinching, but I’ve also noticed a radical shift in her identity and her behavior since this detour into apocalyptic thinking began. The humor, wonder, the spiritual uplift, the willingness to be wrong, uncertain or flexible, have been replaced by a kind of resolute mask of grimness, like someone sitting on a plane that’s going down, bracing for impact. That’s how she lives her life. I don’t blame her for this. She is genuinely horrified, and she lives with a level of disillusionment that few of us can bear. In a very real sense, this person has become what she thinks about all day. Her angle of vision has been tilted to a crippling degree, it seems to me. Because, for all the protestations of nature being raped and the desecration of the planet, she’s also, inadvertently, it seems to me, stolen something very precious from herself, an essential part of her own nature which has space in it for the unknown, and not just ironclad pessimism. It’s not her fault, it’s the fault of her mind which she thinks that she’s mastered, which in fact has mastered her. The truth is, she has lost her mind to the message of hopelessness, and along with it, a certain willingness to imagine what might be possible beyond this impenetrable shroud of bad news.

Now, we do this, every one of us, every day of our lives. We morph under the influence of our own thoughts. We shape ourselves by where we place our attention. We expand or contract according to our mental lens and how much light we allow to enter the frame. We open the aperture in the mind that allows the light to enter or not, through our thoughts, by allowing or blocking exposure, allowing ourselves to see the space beyond thought if the lens is wide enough.

That’s how meditation works, of course, opening the aperture of the thinking mind, letting the light of awareness in to reveal our ricocheting minds for what they are. Anything that opens the mind to this space beyond thought is a path of liberation.

So, here are four things to think about when it comes to becoming your thoughts and how thoughts shape reality and how we can live with these self-reflective, convincing minds.

The first thing to remember is that a rambling mind is an unhappy mind. We know from science that lack of focus is one of the primary causes of mental suffering. When thought takes over, we are invariably drawn either backward or forward in time and tend to go to worst outcomes, catastrophic thinking, playing out scenarios that may never come to pass but which the body, mind, and its stress hormones experience as if they had. Notice when your mind is rambling and remember how important it is to practice bringing yourself back to the moment, the present moment, the way you would when a rambunctious child is out of control. You bring it back, you help it to calm down firmly, but lovingly. That’s how we regain our balance mentally as well, by becoming aware of when we have been taken over by thought and drawing ourselves back to the present moment.

The second thing to remember is that voice in your head is not you. *The voice in your head is not you.* The egoic sound of the discursive mind, that cruise director in your head is nothing but a megaphone of thoughts that have contracted into a single message. It sounds so familiar in your

head that you take it to be who you are, this companion voice. In fact, it's only an echo of thinking, channeled into what sounds like a single voice but it's actually a myriad of thought strands brought together into a monologue. It's not one voice, it's many different thoughts, but we don't realize they're rising from different corners, sort of threading together. The way to calm this voice is through silence, anything that makes us aware of the silence out of which this voice is booming. Learning to listen to the quiet spaces beyond thought, we come to associate ourselves with that quiet. Just notice the ease this brings to your body and the flexibility it creates within this self-idea, which is no longer quite as ironclad or imprisoning.

The third point is to choose where to place your attention. This is a skill that we all have access to that can change our lives in radical ways. Nobody can tell you where to place your attention, it's your ultimate ace in the hole as a seeker and as a human being. Just like being in a room with a bully, you have the ability to leave the room more often than not; you have the choice to allow this voice or stimulus dominate your attention or not. Unfortunately, most of the time we abdicate this power of choice and behave as if our thoughts have us rather than the other way around. We forget that we, ourselves, are feeding the bully and that when we stop, the bully withdraws. When we refuse to sacrifice our attention to inferior objects, we take back our most precious resource, which is this power of choice.

Finally, choose a dependable practice for maintaining your emotional and spiritual hygiene. The practice that we choose enables us to take our attention back and improve the quality of our own minds. Because, thinking beautiful thoughts makes the mind beautiful. Elevated thoughts raise our frequency and ennoble how we see ourselves. We expand our compassion and our ability to love. On the flip side, when we immerse ourselves in ugly thinking, partisan hatred, social disgust, pessimism, we darken the mind and we make ourselves smaller. You could say that when you focus on rats, you become a rat. When you focus on extinction, a part of you goes extinct, you inadvertently cast a pall on the world instead of bringing some brightness through the moment to moment choices of what to think about and where to place your attention. Practice can help you turn this around and save yourself from suffering, and make yourself not only a more effective and helpful human being but a much happier person.

So we want to remember these four points: a rambling mind is an unhappy mind, the voice in your head isn't you, you have the choice where to place your attention, and finally, choosing a dependable practice is important for maintaining emotional and spiritual hygiene. All of these steps can help a great deal in separating from this rampant mind stream and reclaiming our own freedom, reclaiming the sovereignty that is ours when we're not trapped or being manipulated by the contents of our minds.

So, that's what I wanted to say to you today about the angle of vision.