

Circular Thinking

By Nancy Jackson

Releasing the Mind

Have you ever had the experience of your mind caught in thinking about the same thing over and over? Like a mental chess game, the mind can so firmly grasp a situation that even when you beg your own mind to stop, it won't. It might be an imaginary dialogue: "If he says that, then I'll say this. . ." Or you might feel that someone is judging you or treating you unfairly. Maybe you're right and simply want your say. Countless interactions can trigger the mind to act as though it's an independent radio program in your head.

And it doesn't have to be about someone else. Your mind can get caught in a vortex while making a decision or anticipating the future. Like a roundabout with no exit, the mind can have a tendency to latch onto an issue, wanting a certain outcome. If it's an issue in the past, of course, no amount of thinking will change it. And if it's an issue in the future, obsessive thinking only depletes energy. Circular thinking can erode relationships, work situations and your own peace of mind.

Inquiry into Circular Thinking

Fortunately, most of the time, the mind releases itself fairly quickly with resolution or understanding. But sometimes old issues arise. Or new situations trigger a fresh round of circular thought. If you find yourself feeling as though your negative mind has more control than you do, there are techniques you can use.

One approach is to get some distance. As though you are a witness, separate yourself from the circular thinking. Focus on your mind and inquire: What is my mind thinking? Go deeper and be more specific. What exactly is my mind saying? Listen carefully.

You can ask yourself any number of fruitful questions. The basics are: Am I not getting what I want? Is something I don't want being imposed on me? Other questions you can ask are: Do I want someone's opinion or actions to change? Do I think I should do something differently? Have I been here before? What is my true underlying motivation? Has this thinking gotten me closer to my goal?

Emotional Fuel

Along with the mental grasp come the emotions, which can fire circular thinking. They can be low-burning frustration, worry, anxiety or regret. But given enough fuel, they can generate into intense and deep feelings of bitterness, rage or depression.

If you find you're holding onto unresolved feelings about a person or situation, ask yourself: What am I feeling? See if you can go deeper and be more specific. What exactly am I feeling? Are these feelings uplifting or contracting? Expansive or stressful? Most importantly, do you want to continue to generate these feelings?

Antidotes to Circular Thinking

The first step towards release is to recognize the groove of circular thought. Have you heard the same phrases more than a few times? Take a moment to focus on your thinking itself. That alone may stop the momentum. Or, you can apply a number of methods to release its hold.

- Stop yourself when you find yourself caught in circular thought. As soon as you catch yourself, recognize you're on that roundabout and take the first exit. You can simply tell the mind to get off it—don't continue on the roundabout.
- Drop the story. There's always a story behind circular thinking. How many times can you bear to hear your mind repeat it? It's already a bad movie—why watch it over and over.
- Go straight to what your goal is. What do you want in the situation? Be as honest as you can.
- Take action if you need to. Have you been putting something off? Maybe the circular thinking is a symptom of a need to do something.
- Notice when some thinking is fruitless. Have you realized you want someone else to change? Or maybe recognized you have again revisited an old, unhappy outcome? Forget it.
- Use a mantra. Simply repeat om, which represents the universal sound. Or use English words that you find helpful. These might include: be gentle, stay in your heart, or let go.

Contemplation on internal strength

The most effective antidote to circular thinking is to feel your own power. One method is to stand up straight, aligning your body as best you can. The shoulders in line with the hips, in line with the feet. Feel as though you are a puppet with a string coming out the top of your head and gently tug on that string, allowing everything to fall into perfect alignment. Bring your awareness to your heart and focus on the breath. Connect to your awareness and your spiritual being. Draw strength from your own inner light.