



Is thinking never spiritual?

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Should you stop thinking if you want to develop yourself spiritually? This article attempts to answer that question.

There are spiritual movements and teachers who claim that thinking hinders the development of spirituality or even makes it impossible. They say that when you think, you are not spiritual.

Especially with regard to certain meditation methods, it is said that you have to kill your thoughts or at least you should ignore or forget them. But is this even possible? It is in any case very difficult.

A common complaint from people who start meditating is, indeed, that their thoughts disturb their concentration. They try to focus on something, but unwanted thoughts creep like thieves in the night into their consciousness and prevent the spiritual development.

Some Theosophists also believe that you must turn off or destroy thinking, if you want to come to spiritual development. They often quote this phrase from *The Voice of the Silence* of H.P. Blavatsky:

The Mind is the great Slayer of the Real. Let the Disciple slay the Slayer. (1)

If we want to deal with this issue in depth, we must ask ourselves what is mind and what is thinking. Furthermore, we will also have to ask ourselves what thoughts are. If we have found the answer to some extent, then we can examine the question whether or not we need to destroy our mind.

What is mind?

Anyone who tries to investigate and describe human consciousness, will be confronted with the fact that we don't have a generally valid vocabulary for the often subtle mental and spiritual aspects within us. The word "mind" for instance has many meanings. The online dictionary of Merriam-Webster gives among others the following meanings: *recollection, memory; the element or complex of elements in an individual that feels, perceives, thinks, wills, and especially reasons; the conscious mental events and capabilities in an organism; view; mood.* (2)

There is quite a difference between these words. Each translator who translates 'mind' into another language, must therefore study the context in which it is used, disregarding as much as possible his own views and then choose a word that best expresses the specific meaning of the word "mind". Not an easy task! Therefore, there is not always consensus on what is the best translation.

So we must ask ourselves what Madame Blavatsky meant by "mind" in the above quote. We can try to figure it out by examining how she used or defined that word in other articles and books.

In her article *Occultism versus the Occult Arts* she defines mind as the Human Soul. (3) Also in the *The Key to Theosophy* she states in several places that the mind is synonymous with the soul.(4) The "mind-principle" is what is called in Sanskrit *Manas*. In this Sanskrit word you can find the root word "man", meaning thinking, mental activity or mind. Furthermore, H.P. Blavatsky says in the above mentioned article, that *mind alone (is) the sole link and medium between the man of earth and the Higher Self.*

A link has two ends. In other words, our thinking is twofold or bipolar. There is a part that is rooted in that spiritual nature (*Buddhi*), and a part that is in connection with the "terrestrial" matter. In other words, the mind can focus itself on the spiritual side of life. It will be characterized by aspiration to noble objects, divine love, wisdom. And there is a thinking that is characterized by animal passions, earthly passions. Therefore H.P. Blavatsky concludes:

It is thus the mind alone, the sole link and medium between the man of earth and the Higher Self — that is the only sufferer, and which is in the incessant danger of being dragged down by those passions that may be re-awakened at any moment, and perish in the abyss of matter. (5)

This double-sided aspect of our thinking is a theme that frequently appears in the work of Blavatsky. Not without reason she makes a distinction between lower and higher *Manas*.

The wisdom we have due to the lower *manas* is obviously of a completely different nature than that of the higher *Manas*, the "wisdom from above". This is quite clearly expressed in the article "The dual aspect of Wisdom", in which she states that one aspect, the "terrestrial, psychic, or devilish wisdom" is focused on matter and the personal man; and the "divine or noëtic 'Sophia', Wisdom from above" – what she calls *Buddhi-Manas* – reaches beyond the temporary nature of this outer world: thinking which is illuminated by spirit.(6)



Schematic illustration of the principles of Man. The mind is twofold: thinking focused on unity, the higher mind (dark blue triangle), while the lower mind is symbolized by the green triangle. The link between these two is called the Antaskarana. The higher mind arises from our spiritual-divine core, depicted as the sun and the moon.⁽¹⁵⁾

Schematic illustration of the principles of Man. The mind is twofold: thinking focused on unity, the higher mind (dark blue triangle), while the lower mind is symbolized by the green triangle. The link between these two is called the Antaskarana. The higher mind arises from our spiritual-divine core, depicted as the sun and the moon. (15)

Finally, we would note that the term “mind” is not exclusive to humans, although thinking is what characterizes a human being. But there is also something called *Mahat*, the Cosmic Mind. However, this is not the place to elaborate on this doctrine. We just want to indicate that the concept of Mind is much wider than is often suspected. In short, mind is not a singular concept. It has at least two significantly different aspects.

What is thinking?

In our materialistic oriented world, thinking is understood as the effect of the physical brain. Brain cells connect with each other and that would be thinking. It is obvious that Madame Blavatsky does not agree with this. In a footnote in *The Secret Doctrine* she says that it would be absurd even to assume that a thought is movement of matter. (7) How could material particles ever generate mental consciousness? How could moving electrons ever produce a logical argument, a desire, a philosophical idea or universal vision?

Although every thought causes a change in the brains, Blavatsky writes, it has also a (transcendental) objective aspect.

That transcendental aspect – which is beyond our sensory perception – has of course to do with the mind. Thinking cannot be disconnected from the ability to think, just like driving is always related to a vehicle such as a car; or like writing is related to writing utensils, such as a pen. What characterizes the ability to think? We can only get an answer to that question, when we reflect on what a thought is.

What is a thought?

The various current definitions of thoughts explain practically nothing. A thought is defined as something of which one is aware of. What that *something* is, is not mentioned. The English Wikipedia honestly says that it does not know what a thought is.

Though thinking is an activity considered essential to humanity, there is no general consensus as to how we define or understand it. (8)

Now, thoughts are not purely cerebral activity. They are things which, in the words of Master Kuthumi, one of the teachers of Madame Blavatsky, *have tenacity, coherence, and life, — that they are real entities.* (9) H.P. Blavatsky confirms this. (10)

In his letter to Sinnett, the Master put forth the fact that thoughts are living beings, in order to explain that a human is attracted to ideas he has wrought, or shaped himself. Distorted and degenerate thoughts about hells and purgatory, about paradises and resurrections, the Master argues, exercise a strong attraction to people who have helped to create and strengthen those thoughts. But this applies of course to all thoughts of any quality whatsoever that any man has thought.

It might be hard to imagine that thoughts are living beings, but that's because we only focus our consciousness on this outer world. We only lend reality to the world of senses. But our mind is not made up of the substance of the outer world. Thoughts are therefore not beings which we can perceive with our outer senses.

If it is true what Theosophy asserts, that everything is an expression or manifestation of consciousness, then things we cannot perceive with our senses, are *consciousnesses* too. Then everything is a living, growing and changing entity. Because there are different, yes, endless hierarchies of life however, there are also varying degrees of living beings. Thought-beings belong to the mental sphere, the world of thought. This is a world or sphere between the spiritual and the material world, in which the human soul or mind belongs to by nature. They fulfill in that world the same function as the molecules on the physical plane. Molecules help to build up and shape the material vehicles. In the same way, the human mind can use those thought molecules in order to shape mental images. And this applies as well for the spiritual and divine realms. There are also living building blocks which shape the spiritual and divine expressions of consciousness of the beings who belong to that sphere.

Would any being ever be able to live without the help of those building blocks; would it be able to manifest itself without them? That would be impossible.

Everything works together. The more advanced beings make use in all spheres of less developed beings. And those less developed beings need, for their existence, the more developed ones. They need each other. No being can live without the cooperation with much less evolved beings. If man would kill all his thoughts, he would deprive himself of the opportunity to express who he is.

The sphere to which humanity, according to its degree of development, belongs, is the thinking sphere, the world of thought. And just as the mind, this sphere has at least two different characteristics.



Map of the earth as a flat surface. This map is drawn in the 19th century, on the basis of a text written around 700 CE by an unknown clergyman in Ravenna, Italy, called the "Ravenna Cosmography".

Again: what is thinking?

When we assume that thoughts really are living beings, then it is easier to determine what thinking is: observing these thought-beings.

Observing thoughts, however, is not without consequences, as is apparent from the above-quoted letter from Master Kuthumi. We think a thought, when we perceive that extremely primitive, completely unself-conscious living being, that appears, as it were, on the horizon of our consciousness — our mind. But perceiving such a thought also keeps it alive. When we think a thought, we energize it with the power that comes from our mind.

To put it simply: by thinking a thought, we nurture it. And the more strongly we think a thought, the easier it is to be captured by others. Thus, we reinforce a particular characteristic in the sphere of thought, which makes it easier for others to think that type of thought.

Let us illustrate this with an example. In the Middle Ages in Europe, the idea that the world was flat, and that you could reach the end of the world, yes, even that you could fall off it, prevailed. The idea of a round Earth was not thought, or at most only by some enlightened people. That's why it was so difficult for most humans at that

time to think that thought – which is: to perceive that thought – that the Earth was round, rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun. As more people thought that thought – and thus strengthened it with their consciousness – it was easier for others to think it as well.

In short, thinking is perceiving thoughts and by doing so, you strengthen those thoughts.

Quality of thoughts

No two living things are the same. That certainly includes thoughts. Thoughts differ therefore qualitatively from each other. There are so-called everyday thoughts, but there are also lofty thoughts. From the fact that there is a lower and higher Manas, as was previously stated, it appears that there are two different types of thoughts, or two types of wisdom; one that has to do with the material world and one that has to do with the spiritual world. Man – the thinker – stands, as it were, between those two worlds. He can choose: does he choose for thoughts that naturally belong to the spiritual sphere — thoughts of understanding, love and compassion? Or does he choose for thoughts which belong to this material sphere, which tend towards selfishness, greed and self-interest?

This freedom of choice reflects the deepest human characteristic. If you take away this human freedom – and you do so by prohibiting or preventing him from thinking independently – you take away all human dignity. Even when a man tries to turn off his own thinking, he deprives himself of what makes him human.

If, therefore, the freedom of thought vanishes, a dark night of ignorance and barbarism will fall down on society, as was the case in the Middle Ages. Renaissance roused humanity from this nightmare. Plato's philosophy was once again studied. It was in the late 15th century that again, and especially by Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) in his treatise on human dignity, free will was regarded as most essential to humans. Thanks to this free will, human beings can turn into a divinity, and perceive the Reality of Being.

A human is essentially a noble being. It is because of his developed free will that he is able to focus his independent thinking on noble thoughts and thereby come to understand the purpose of life.

Do thoughts distract of truth?

By thinking, we can choose consciously for the spiritual side of our nature. If this is true, why are there people who think thoughts that distract you from truth and spirituality?

An important reason for this is, I think, that a lot of people associate “mind” and “thinking” with thoughts directed on matter; thoughts that belong to the lower manas. The lower manas is also called the brain-mind. Because *this* mind identifies itself with the ever-changing and perishable physical world, it knows no rest. If a man lives in his lower – or personal – mind, thoughts jump over each other like puppies. One thought almost immediately evokes another one. Here, thinking is accompanied by vitality, desire and anxiety.

In the Christian Gospel this type of thinking is symbolized by the figure of Martha, sister of Mary. Christ pays both sisters a visit. Martha is busy with all kinds of things to please Christ. Her sister, however, flatters herself at the feet of Christ. Christ says to Martha, who complained that Mary was doing nothing, that Mary has chosen the better part of him, which will not to be taken away. (11)

The symbolism is clear. Mary is the higher Manas which focuses on the spiritual side, on the Christ-principle or *Buddhi* within the consciousness, while Martha symbolizes the brain mind, which is always busy, always restless, it does not have itself under control and always seeks help outside itself.

Thoughts: source of suffering and bliss

If *The Voice of the Silence* states that the mind is the slayer of the Real and that we must destroy the destroyer, then it is obvious that what is meant here, is the lower manas. That's something we can all recognize.

Suppose you have a wonderful and lofty ideal you are trying to focus on. Or imagine that you are listening to a lecture, reading a spiritual book or are trying to meditate quietly in your room. What keeps you from doing this? What makes you lose your concentration? Your thoughts. The thoughts you have created yourself. They may be very trivial thoughts, such as that you still have to do the laundry or that you should not forget to send an email. Those thoughts come forth from and are evoked almost always by the personality or the personal ego, e.g. the lower manas. They are your own, unself-conscious children, returning to their "creator".

It is our conviction that H.P. Blavatsky is pointing out these type of thoughts, or this lower aspect of our mind, when she says that we should destroy our mind. Moreover, we believe she does not mean this in the literal sense of the word, but more in the sense that we must learn to control our mind. We must destroy its dominance.

When meditation techniques require that we should stop thinking, then this is only true if they mean the "Martha-type of thinking": thinking with the lower manas.

Destroying personal thinking, however, is an almost impossible task, especially when you try to do that consciously. That has everything to do with the fact that we ourselves created and nurtured the thoughts we think. Any attention one gives to a thought, reinforces it, even when it is negative attention. So when you concentrate on *not* thinking, the thought of which you want to get rid of, will only get stronger. The more negative attention you give, the less control you have over your mind and thoughts.

Suppose you try to meditate, but there is a fly in the room. Your attention is drawn time and again to the fly. Does it help when you think that you should not think of that fly? Of course not! It helps somewhat when you observe as a spectator your own thoughts. Then you take a neutral stance. Then you do not feed the thoughts that come along, but you do not enoble them either. You do not have any alternative. But when you are completely absorbed in an exalted mental image, your thoughts coalesce with that lofty image and you do not even notice the fly.

So how do you control your thoughts? The answer may sound paradoxical, but it is the mind that must control the mind. In other words, it is the higher Manas that should take the leadership and master the lower manas. The higher Manas is characterized by impersonality. We must self-consciously think supra-personal thoughts. We do this by pondering on universal laws, meditating on supra-personal ideals. We must immerse ourselves in the noble within our consciousness and nature. We cannot do that without thinking.

Therefore, thinking is both the slayer of the noble within us, and it is also the path to accomplishing this nobility. It is the lower mind which binds us to this mortal world. It is the higher mind which is our link with the spiritual, imperishable life.

This doctrine also explains the first two verses of the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, which state:

All the phenomena of existence have mind as their precursor; mind as their supreme leader, and of mind are they made. If with an impure mind one speaks or acts, suffering follows him in the same way as the wheel follows the foot of the drawer (of the chariot).

All the phenomena of existence have mind as their precursor; mind as their supreme leader, and of mind are they made. If with a pure mind one speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his shadow that never leaves him. (12)

Could this be said any clearer or simpler? We are what we think. We are always the result of our thoughts. Thinking precedes suffering or happiness. Seeing the Reality is therefore not the result of the cessation of thinking, but is the result of *right* thinking.

Destruction of the *Antaskarana*

In the duality of Manas lies many of the mysteries of human consciousness. It explains on the one hand why thinking inhibits us to connect with what we essentially are, but on the other hand thinking is also the only way through which we can reach our essential Self.

It is good to realize that the lower manas is the emanation or the product of the higher Manas. In other words, the truly spiritual human, the supra-personal Mind, is the source from which the personal man comes forth. The original thinking is pure, noble and radiant. And because the lower manas, the personal man, arises from the noble thinking, and has therefore in itself the qualities and capabilities of pure thought, even the personal thinker is in its core not evil.

Why then is alleged that the lower manas muddles or pollutes thinking?

That's because it has forgotten its source. If it is left to itself, it does not know where it comes from. In other words, the personal man, living in, yes, so fully identifying himself with the lower manas, considers himself as the center of the world and lends only reality and truth to the material world, which is perishable like a mirage. That world is an illusion, a shadow of a more real world. That is the reason for the turmoil in the personal man, who gets caught up in the illusion and is constantly darkening and veiling his consciousness.

But this is a passing phase. Eventually every human being will perceive the illusory nature of the world of phenomena and will return to the original consciousness of pure thought, pure Being, albeit enriched with the experience gained in this and many subsequent outer lives.

When a man has totally united himself with his higher Manas, the bridge between the lower and higher mind can be disposed. That bridge is called *Antaskarana*. In *The Voice of the Silence* it is stated – and we paraphrase slightly the words — that we have to destroy the *Antaskarana*. (13)

In an explanatory note Madame Blavatsky says that the *Antaskarana* is the lower manas, and that it functions as a link between the personal man and the higher Manas, the Human Soul.

If you want to reach your own spiritual core, then it is obvious that you eventually have to turn off this channel to the external world, because all sorts of sensual thoughts can be thought by it and distract the searcher of truth from his goal.

Five minutes' thought may undo the work of five years. (14)

Thus Madame Blavatsky warns us to guard our thoughts. In fact, this is something we all know very well. If we have lived a whole day according to our most spiritual

and selfless ideal, and we fall back for a brief moment in a level of personal thinking, because of an annoying incident, an insulting remark of a colleague for example, or by a sudden irritation about something that does not want to succeed, then all of a sudden the merit of that whole day can be destroyed. Only one thought can already achieve that.

Therefore, we must ensure that the influence of the lower mind does not prevail.

Master of the mind

However, if we use compassion as a driving force in our lives, we should not disconnect entirely from the phenomenal world, but in one way or another stay in contact with it. Now you may ask, why it is necessary to keep in contact with the outer world, when you have transcended it. However, this only applies if you strive for your own bliss, your own nirvānic state. But if you want to use the accumulated wisdom for the benefit of others, then you have to keep a channel open, allowing you to continue to communicate with your fellow human beings.

In fact, this already occurs among beginners on the path of spiritual evolution, because they too will have to continue to speak the language of their fellow men, and therefore have to continue to use the mental images of their fellow men. They will need to know what is going on in the world. And this is the case only when you know which ideas prevail. Everything in the human world is thought, is built out of thought. Reading a newspaper is observing the thoughts of today. Getting informed on what is happening in your city, what trends there are, is thinking thoughts.

However, the point is that you will not be controlled by those thoughts.

Therefore, instead of destroying or even killing the lower mind, you'll better master it. That means that thoughts may only come into your consciousness when you 'invite' them consciously. Moreover, even everyday thoughts will always be influenced and controlled by the higher mind and they will be overtaken by the impersonal characteristic of the higher Manas.

Let us illustrate this with an everyday example. In order to do your daily work in society, you have to think quite a few thoughts. You'll get up in the morning, have breakfast, go to your work by bike, car or public transport and so on. For that you have to think a lot of everyday thoughts, for the basis of any action is a thought. But it is not necessary to be controlled by those thoughts. If you think, "I'm going to leave home earlier, so that I'm not stuck in traffic", then you do not need to think that in an annoyed way. You are not governed by that thought. All such thoughts you may think from a personal motive or form a supra-personal motive. In the first case the personal 'I' is always in those thoughts. You do it always for your own personal comfort, your personal ambition, pride, or even your personal disgust, or any other personal motivation whatsoever. In the second case, you do it from an underlying ideal of brotherhood, love and universality. So you can think all those thoughts in two ways. Do you do it in a personal way, then you are more or less the slave of that thought. You cannot do without it. You are dependent on it. Do you do it in a supra-personal way however, then the thought is as a device for you, of which you make use, in order to fulfill your task in the world. The latter is actually a state of continuous meditation. In the background of your consciousness is always a strong mental image of Universal Brotherhood, by which all the other thoughts that you think, are colored and ennobled. If you practice this, the moments of quiet contemplation and meditation will be much easier. The thought that you still have to put out the garbage, or what do your colleagues think of your new clothes, don't

sneak into your mind when you quietly concentrate on a spiritual or even divine image. You have become the master of your mind. This mentality will eventually lead to the situation, that even when you are so highly evolved that you cannot resist the attraction of the spiritual world, you have taken some measures so that your compassionate influence will remain in our earthly spheres. In the last fragment of *The Voice of the Silence* this teaching is explained. But that is another subject on which we want to elaborate in detail in a next article in *Lucifer*.

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