

Not worth a thought¹

The Loka,cintā Sutta (S 56.41) is quite a straightforward, yet enigmatic, discourse warning us of the dangers of worldly speculations, and the urgent need of proper practice for spiritual awakening. A man, it is said, inclined to “think about the world,” sits down on the bank of a beautiful lotus pond and ponders about it. In due course, it is said, he sees “a fourfold army entering a lotus stalk on the bank of the pond”! Terrified, he goes about telling others what he had “seen.”

The Buddha then warns us of similar dangers -- of seeing what is not there, of fabricating our own truths and realities -- by speculating on the 10 undeclared points.² Such speculations are “not beneficial, not relevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.” Instead, we should reflect on what are really conducive to our own personal and spiritual growth, awakening and nirvana, that is, the four noble truths.³

“Thinking about the world” is one of the 4 “unthinkables” (*acinteyya*), that is, beyond the range of thought. This interesting and important teaching is found in **the Acinteyya Sutta** (A 4.77), where the 4 unthinkables are listed as follows:

- (1) The range of the Buddha’s understanding (*buddha,visaya*),
- (2) The range of a meditator’s dhyana (*jhāna,visaya*),
- (3) The result of karma (*kamma,vipāka*), and
- (4) Thinking about the world (*loka,cintā*).

Thinking about any of these would “bring one a share of madness or vexation” (*ummādassa vighātassa bhāgī assa*).⁴

THE RANGE OF THE BUDDHA’S UNDERSTANDING (*buddha,visaya*) is unthinkable because the Buddha is a fully self-liberated being. This liberation arises from a wise understanding of the nature of body and mind, so that his own awakened mind is no more hindered or limited by them. Above all, the Buddha has transcended the conditionality of thinking and attained to the unconditional reality of nirvana.

Since we are not Buddhas and we are not yet awakened, our minds clearly have their limits, although we tend to think a lot. Here, the Buddha’s advice is not that we stop thinking (although there are situations where this would clearly help), but that we should reflect on our own minds and personal tendencies. In short, what sort of persons are we really?

Like it or not we are somehow, at some point in our lives, perhaps even now, troubled by one of the 4 biases, that is, lust, hate, delusion and fear. If we are lustful, it means that we are seeking gratification in something outside of ourselves. This usually means we think that having something, or a lot of it, may solve our problems. The real problem is that we are limited by our thoughts, mostly because we are deeply influenced by how others around us behave, or by our habitual ideas, mostly from our past.

What we have – whether it is something expensive (we paid a lot for it), or something powerful (like a great title or some “power”), or something that makes us popular (like wealth) or respectable (like a clever title) or feared (like the way we treat people) – is not the real “we.” We are as false as those worldly things we look up to.

¹ This reflection is inspired by **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (7): [link](#).

² On the 10 questions, see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (5): [link](#).

³ S 56.41/5:446-448, SD 77.11.

⁴ A 4.77/2:80), SD 27.5a(5.5.2) = SD 35.1(7): [link](#).

What we are is the real thing. Are we really generous (giving even when unasked), or loving (accepting others as they are), or wise (looking at the goodness in us and others), or courageous (speaking out what is right without fear or favour)? These are qualities that better us, help better others, and make our community a better one.

THE RANGE OF A MEDITATOR’S DHYANA (*jhāna,visaya*) is unthinkable for the simple reason that it is experiential, a private event that is beyond thought. Dhyana refers to a state that has transcended all the physical senses, and even the mind as we know it. Hence, it is a supralinguistic state, one that is beyond words and concepts, beyond language itself.

This means that we are limited by our own thoughts, especially thoughts about ourselves. If we can rise above our own thoughts, then we will be able to see ourselves and others from a new height and in new light, as it were. What empowers us here is a profound and persistent joy that simply changes our lives forever. We are truly and really happy. We are so happy that we do not need the approval or admiration of others, or the false masks of titles and exteriors. Before this, we were only saying and lying about this, but now – because we truly love the Dharma -- we are now more independent individuals, able to really think for ourselves. Dharma joy empowers us like nothing else in this world.⁵

THE RESULT OF KARMA (*kamma,vipāka*) is unthinkable. We would never be able to fathom the potential range of moral conditionality and karmic consequences. Karma is not a “knee-jerk law” of causes and effects, much less, some ordained system of rewards and punishments. It is about how we condition ourselves through our own habits, especially thinking and reacting to our own thoughts and the actions of others. Our tastes of karmic fruits or reactions to them have the range of probabilities as there are the thoughts behind our actions.

We would be patently superstitious if we think that karma alone brings us or anyone wealth, health, power, beauty, respect, or wisdom. It is how we think that makes things seem to be that way. And if we keep thinking this way, no matter how much we talk about Buddhism or think we know it, we are nothing more than empty thoughts. What we are, what others are, come from the past (karma) and present conditions (conditionality). This means that we can change our karma for the better: we only need to work on the present conditions with a wholesome mind, and good karma will follow.

THINKING ABOUT THE WORLD (*loka,cintā*) is trying to think about something unthinkable. We might conceive ideas and imagine possible scenarios for the nature of existence, but we have been revising, even debunking, them for new ones every generation of specialists and thinkers. We would never be able to fathom the range of the universe or existence because we do not have the mental capacity for it, and that the world out there cannot be reduced to ideas and words alone.⁶

It is really harder to learn Buddhism today than ever before because we are flooded with Buddhist information. Our common fatal error is to take such information as Buddhist wisdom. We may have all the Buddhist information in the world, but we are no better than the books, computers or persons we took it from. We can never “have” Buddhism; we must “be” Buddhism, or better, “be Dharma.”

To “**be Dharma**” means to let go of all the thoughts we have of ourselves and of others – they are just thoughts, anyway. We need to renounce those thoughts. Of course, this is harder than we think; it’s even harder than renouncing to become a monk or a nun, especially if we still do not renounce our thoughts after our exterior change. We are limited and stunted by our thoughts: why not renounce our thoughts?

⁵ On meditation absorption, see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4: [link](#).

⁶ See esp **Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72), SD 6.15: [link](#).

To renounce our thoughts means to really feel. To feel means to make every effort to observe and know all our sense-faculties. How we see things; how we hear things; how we smell, taste and touch; and above all, how we think. The point is that we are, as a rule, wrong when it comes to really knowing ourselves: this is perhaps the only right thing we can know, for now. But it's a good place to start, that is, accepting ourselves just as we are, and to learn and move on from there.

We see ourselves tightly strapped by the cocoon of our own views and thoughts about selves, ours and others. Self-acceptance means allowing ourselves (and others) to grow within this cocoon so that we can break out of it. Some struggle is needed here. Once out of our cocoon, we bask in the warm light of wisdom, ready to fly freely in the space of lovingkindness. Then we are more than a butterfly.⁷

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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⁷ See reflection, **The story of a butterfly**, R104 091014, in *Simple Joys 2*, 2011: ch 7: [link](#).