

Rumination

Rumination, a dysfunctional problem solving method, involves repetitive thinking about negative feelings. Our thoughts churn over how we can solve a long unresolved problem, but for every imagined solution we recognize negative consequences and turn to another solution, and then another. In a repetitive loop, we come back to earlier solutions we had rejected and come up with the same negative consequences.

While ruminating, we feel distressed, anxious, and negative. We repeatedly think about how the problem has harmed us in the past and uncertainty about how to avoid being harmed again. The more we ruminate, the worse we feel, which contributes to more rumination. This fruitless speculation about how someone did us wrong or how we messed up, and about what we should do has no purpose and goes nowhere. We find ourselves ruminating while taking our morning walk, washing the dishes, or driving. It becomes the default way we rest our minds.

The thoughts of a rumination circle around an unresolved problem. We may have a very specific problem, like not feeling appreciated by our family, or a global problem, such as the state of national politics. However, rumination never solves a problem. Excessive thinking disengages us from doing and keeps us locked within negativity. We need to overcome this harmful way of thinking.

View ruminating as a problem of overthinking. People who spend a lot of time in their heads have a high proclivity to overthink. Ruminating about how to stop ruminating verges on the absurd. To stop ruminating, simply do something that does not involve thinking.

We first must perceive that we ruminate, something that we can most easily do within meditation. Once we realize that a circular thought pattern keeps us distracted, we can tell ourselves to simply drop the story, the circular inner narrative in which we tell ourselves about the hopeless problem. Then return to the breath.

Outside of meditation we recognize that the same story pops up while washing the dishes. We give ourselves the same instruction – drop the story and refocus on washing the dishes. Any rumination loop dissolves by us doing something different - standing up and moving, breaking into a song, or just laughing at ourselves.

Ironically, what we ruminate upon generally does not have a solution we can act upon further. Often, we ruminate about something over which we have no control as it requires changing others or situations beyond our sphere of influence. If we recognize that we cannot change what we perceive as the cause of a problem, then we need to turn to accepting the situation and learn to live with it.

We might come to realize that we have done all we can do to resolve a problem and recognize that further efforts on our part would only make the problem worse. In this case, we do not act but turn toward the sacred. The path teaches us that we must patiently wait within sacred time for the situation to unfold on its own while restraining ourselves from acting further. We have the confidence that the sacred moves through our lives. We do not withdraw into a sulky gesture of refusal. Rather, we stay alert and open to sacred guidance on how to move through

the danger without harm or harming, without imposing our will upon the situation. We may find, without a move on our part, the situation transforms in unexpected ways. A beneficial outcome often comes in a form that seems strange to us.

Paying attention to the incessant chatter of our thoughts wastes our time. It spins our wheels in the mud of thinking negatively about others, what was, what could be, or how things should be, fruitlessly and endlessly. Just don't think about it.

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