

## CHOICE, CHANCE AND LUCK

We make choices. We take chances. We find luck. These all sound like powerful ways to use our cognitive ability. And they are. But they are neither the most powerful, nor are they the most likely to lead to meaningful elevation of our well-being and enjoyment of life. Whenever I start to talk to people about the power of thought, though, choice, chance and luck are ideas that come up immediately.

In the arena of choice, people say: “Oh, you mean choose to replace negative or anxious thoughts with positive or peaceful thoughts, right?” Or they say, “Oh, you mean choose good rather than bad?” Or they say, “Oh, I get it! If you’re thinking about something depressing, you can just choose to stop thinking about it and think about something else.”

In the arena of chance, people say, “Oh, you mean don’t be afraid to take a chance. Go for it! Brush aside your fear.” Or they say, “Oh, you mean everyone always has chances; we just have to think about them all and figure out the right ones and then act on them.”

In the arena of luck, people say, “Oh, you mean something just like the saying, ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.’ You’re saying luck is all perception, right? Just reframe it and you can make anything look lucky.”

People do believe those ideas are “empowering” and demonstrate our ability as human beings to carve out the best life we can for ourselves. They are such strong notions in our culture that it’s hard for us to look beyond them. But none of them has anything to do with the principle of thought as a gift, the power to create a new life in every moment.

One way to draw distinctions between these mental activities and the infinite power of thought, the knowledge that we use to create our experience moment-to-moment, is to separate *before* from *after*. Before a thought forms in our mind, we are in the formless realm of possibility, which is boundless. As soon as a thought forms in our mind, we are in the form that thought represents, which is delimited by the idea itself. It’s as though we were like the pioneers, looking across the vast plains, knowing that we could build anything, anywhere in all that empty space with resources the space contains, but not knowing what we would actually build, how, or where. Then we build, and what we have built defines our perception of the endless capacities of that space and delimits what we call “home” or “barn” or “meeting hall” or “place of worship.” Looking across the vast plains is *before*. Looking at what we have built is *after*. Before the formation of thought. After the formation of thought. Before our imagination has created anything. After our imagination has created something.

Before, anything is possible and the form we are about to create is unknown. After, we can do whatever we want with the thought we have. But we are working only with something we know – what has been formed.

Cognitive activities like choice, chance and luck are phenomena of after-the-fact thinking. They involve rearranging, analyzing, re-casting, switching, substituting, thoughts already in our already-formed reality.

So choice, in the way most use the word, means thinking about what we're thinking about, making a decision about whether it's what we want to think about, then going to the library of all our past thoughts and selecting something we'd rather think about, then telling ourselves to stop thinking about what we're thinking about, then deliberately trying to put our attention on the new, preferable thought.

Chance, in the way most use the word, means paying attention to options in life, keeping a mental list going of what we could be thinking and doing, and consistently evaluating opportunities, trying not to think too much about our fears or concerns but trying to follow what seems good or right or adventuresome for us.

Luck, in the way most use the word, means taking each thought as it comes and then turning it over and over in our minds, maybe adding some thoughts from our mental bank of good things, until we can move it over to the shiny side.

In each case, we are making constructive use of our cognitive abilities, but the ability we're tapping into is the ability to do the best we can with after-the-fact thoughts. For most people, this proactive self-improvement feels much more powerful and satisfying than what they might call passivity or resignation. For many people, fine-tuning one's cognitive skills in these ways seems like the only way to get in control of one's life. For some people, this kind of choice, chance and luck represents their salvation from life as a powerless victim.

So it makes sense that when someone mentions thought as a "power", people grab onto these ideas, and have difficulty listening beyond them. The notion triggers things we know and talk about in our current reality. Our first instinct is to "figure things out" and make them fit that reality. While we are focusing on our current reality and manipulating our knowledge base, the idea of a new reality, a different reality, doesn't appear on the mental landscape.

When this happens, those of us who look to share the principle of thought tend to tell people to "stop thinking so much." My experience with that is, if people are in a light-hearted state of mind, they'll brush it off but not know what to make of it. And if people are immersed in their thinking and taking it seriously, they get annoyed and decide I'm a Pollyanna or an intellectual lightweight with an unrealistic, airy-fairy view of life. At

either extreme – and everywhere in between – the instruction to “stop thinking so much” has generally proven to be worthless because people cannot follow it on command.

How do people ever see the different reality of *before* if they don't stop trying to figure it out? For a while, I thought they had to see it through someone else's eyes and then come to understand it – what I have recognized as a fatal flaw in my own thinking. I could call it the “teaching habit.” If one calls oneself a “teacher” or “trainer” or “seminar leader,” one becomes easily seduced by the idea of knowing something other people don't know. Then the challenge becomes putting this knowledge forward to them in a way they can learn it. There is no difference between trying to meet this challenge and trying to “figure out” a new idea. The “learner” does it quietly within his own head; the teacher does it out loud. In either case, the trap is being caught in the known while trying to describe the unknown, trying to use knowledge and analysis to describe intuition and insight. That is figuring it out. Figuring it out is a learned cognitive skill. We learn it because we can, and because it is useful to us to be able to do it.

But it is not a skill that ever leads to deep, intuitive knowledge at the level of principles, to one's own recognition of the truths at the essence of things. It is not a skill that flattens the distinction between “teacher” or “trainer” or “seminar leader” and “student” or “trainee” or “seminar participant” and allows for the equality of shared curiosity and the willingness to enter the rich quietude of not knowing. It is not a skill that sets us free to look within, to look behind our knowledge and wonder how it became.

The paradox of this deeper experience is that the unknown actually is comfortable and familiar. It is the home of the soul. It is the *anima* of being. It is the source of wonder, hope, awe, inspiration, passion for life. It is the origin of our inborn knowing that we can think, feel, do anything. It is the birthplace of possibility. We can access it any time, and in it, we are all equally creative human beings. If there were metaphorical gears at the center of the universe that kept creation going, those gears would power the infinite dynamic of movement from the unknown to the known, from the formless to form, from energy to matter, from nothingness to all things.

We don't need to depend on others to “get” this because we always have it. But we need to depend on our own free will to look for it when we find ourselves in feeling states that are troubling, or distressing, or unpleasant, or negative. We can ruminate indefinitely in the already formed world of our current knowledge and experience. Or we can turn away and look to see something else, something we have not thought of yet.

It is our fate to live the inexorable connection between what we form within our own minds and what we experience as our sensory world. It is our free will to change that fate. Change is the natural expression of life in motion.

From this perspective, choice looks like the simple knowledge that we are not bound to the ideas and experience we have already created any longer than we are willing to keep them on our minds. Chance looks like the eternal opportunity we have to turn our backs on the known and relax into the always available state of reflection that opens the door to the unknown. Luck looks like the remarkable gift we have to change, simply by allowing life its graceful dance within us.

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