

# *The Not So Big Life*

## Chapter Nine: Proceeding Through the Construction Process

### **Your Turn: Associations**

*Try thinking just one thing without associating it with anything else. Think “tree,” for example. What happens? Close your eyes for a minute and see.*

*You may have conjured up a tree from your childhood, triggering a flood of memories. You may have brought to mind the names of types of trees that you know, or you may have recalled what you’ve read over the years about how a tree grows, from seed to aging giant. But you almost certainly couldn’t stay with just “tree,” because the word triggered thousands of associated thoughts and memories, which shape your experience in every waking moment without your even knowing they are there. One person I know even believes that she hates trees because one fell on her house once—for her this exercise could have put her in a bad mood. But that emotional response is based on arbitrary associations she made sometime in her past, which she has continued to identify with, believing that she is defined by that thought. It is just a thought—no more, no less—and if she chooses, she can let it go.*

### **Exercise: “I Am Not That Thought”**

This exercise is as simple as telling yourself, “I am not that thought,” whenever you find yourself getting attached to a particular notion and then associating other thoughts with it. But it takes practice. Although you may understand the process intellectually, to apply it when you are in the middle of reacting to something will severely test your abilities at staying present. Even people who’ve been working on themselves for years fall into the trap and forget all the things that can help them remain objective. In much the same way that you learn to ride a bicycle as a child, when you fall, you must simply pick yourself back up and start riding again, without self-judgment and without recrimination.

The challenge is to metabolize experience, both external and internal, as it happens. As you attach to a thought stream, take a moment to observe what happens. How do you feel as you attach to it? What’s the point of attaching to it? Have you done this before with this same kind of thought? Where did attaching to this thought begin? Where does it go? All this is food for you to metabolize. The nutrients for your own development are everywhere when you learn how to recognize them. Literally every thought you have has something buried in it that you can use to learn about yourself.

Many years ago, when I went to my first meditation retreat, the teacher told all of us that for the next four days we would be doing a lot of sitting. Although we were encouraged to walk slowly from time to time around the grounds of the retreat center, we were told to keep other physical activity to an absolute minimum. I remember one young woman's immediate protest. She asserted that she had to run for at least an hour a day. The teacher calmly explained that this would not be happening over the coming few days. She protested vehemently. It was clear that she was completely possessed by the thought that she must run for at least an hour a day. It had become her identity—who she believed herself to be—and without that thought she couldn't imagine herself.

All of us have such thoughts, but they are so much a part of our inner fabric we don't even know they are there. But by watching for the places in your life where you become reactive, you'll be able to root out some of your own beliefs.

Ask yourself: "What conditions do I believe are required in order for me to function?" For example, do you believe that without a cup of coffee or tea immediately upon rising, you couldn't face the day? Or do you believe that if you don't work through lunch every day you won't be able to get everything done? Or do you believe that unless you watch an hour or so of TV before going to bed, you won't be able to calm down sufficiently to sleep?

Once you've identified two or three such conditions of your own, ask yourself about each one, "Where did I get this thought in the first place?" and, "What makes me believe it's true?" Then look for a way to test the validity of each thought or belief.

If you believe you absolutely have to have that cup of java to get your engines going, try abstaining for one or two mornings, just to see what happens. You aren't being asked to give up this habit forever—just for a couple of days, so that you can experience what life is like without that stimulant. You may discover that your world will in fact keep going without the caffeine jolt—in other words, it's not an absolute necessity for survival. If you believe you must always work through lunch, take yourself away from your desk at lunch time for a day or two, and see if it really makes a difference in your productivity. If you can't imagine calming down enough to sleep without the help of Letterman or Leno, try turning the TV off an hour before going to bed, and see what happens. Unless you try something new, you'll never test your beliefs, and they will continue to define your existence.

Here's another question you can ask yourself, to get at other thoughts that limit your life experience: "What do I believe to be true about myself?"

A friend of mine used to believe that she couldn't tell what colors went well together, so whenever she was about to make a home decorating decision she'd always ask for my advice. When I pointed out to her that her clothing color combinations were never timid but were always excellent, she began to see that she actually *could* tell what combinations looked good to her eye, and in fact really loved to play with color. With a little inquiry into the roots of this thought about herself, she realized that her mother had always been tentative about color choices, and she had simply followed suit. Once she recognized the historical source of her feelings of inadequacy, she became much more adventurous with her color choices, and no longer looked to me for recommendations. Her apartment is now a veritable blaze of color that makes her feel right at home, and that expresses much more about who she is than if she'd had someone else select them for her.

Or do you think of yourself as weak—a common one for members of both sexes? Another friend, who'd always seen himself as a wimp and a weakling, when asked to probe the validity of this belief, decided to take a self-defense course. He was amazed to discover that not only did he enjoy the class immensely, but he discovered that he was much stronger than he'd ever imagined. Refuting his belief changed his life in many ways. Once he knew he was strong, he no longer perceived himself as a wimp, and began to engage in all sorts of activities that he would never previously have entertained. His favorite pastime nowadays is rock-climbing, a sport that would never have crossed his mind until he'd put his weakling notion to the test. More importantly, the way he conducts himself in the world has changed; I noticed a difference the last time we met for lunch. He was still sensitive and thoughtful, but also more assertive; after asking my permission, he made menu choices for both of us, something he would never have done in the past.

If you have any suspicions that a belief or even an idea about yourself isn't real, it's definitely worth investigating responsibly. You'll learn a lot about how you've created your own prison of unexamined limitations, all of which are keeping you from much of what life has to offer. In a very real way, we are what we think and what we believe, so when we change or shed those thoughts and beliefs, we change our life experience. The fewer limitations we have on what we can and can't abide or do, the more life can teach us about ourselves, and the richer our experiences will be.

If you employ this exercise over time, with any thought that causes a reaction, or to which you feel particularly attached, you'll be setting the conditions for your own flourishing. Very gradually you'll find that the barrage of free-floating thoughts that fill most people's minds will no longer plague you when you're not watching. There will still be thoughts of course, but they won't be constantly pestering you, and you won't

be associating them with particular meanings, and conjuring up imaginary problems in every corner of your life. That's what inner peace really means. It's freedom from the constant chatter of thought—not *your* thoughts, but *the* thoughts.