

# Thinking Habits and Dispositions

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Humans are creatures of habit. We all have habits that affect the way we dress and groom ourselves, how and what we eat, how we travel to the university each day, and how we go about our work. In addition we have recreational and entertainment habits, reading and study habits, and even prayer habits. Just as we have habitual ways of behaving, we also have habitual ways of thinking. President Howard W. Hunter acknowledged the existence of thinking habits when he declared, "Outward circumstances do not determine the course of our lives as much as the thoughts that habitually occupy our minds."<sup>1</sup>

In 1910 John Dewey wrote the book *How We Think*, in which he described some of the ways that thinking habits influence the way people think. In recent years other scholars have elaborated on the idea of thinking habits.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars who have tried to create programs designed to teach people to think better have discovered that many people already possess the skills needed to think effectively. What they lacked was not the necessary abilities but the commitment and the willingness to invest their time and effort in using the thinking skills they had already acquired. This finding led researchers to conclude that people have dispositions that influence the way they think.<sup>3</sup> Consequently,

many scholars today believe that effective thinking includes both intellectual skills and positive dispositions regarding the use of such skills. For my purposes today, I shall treat habits of mind and thinking dispositions as being essentially synonymous and interchangeable.

Shari Tishman and her colleagues at Harvard define thinking dispositions as "abiding tendencies toward distinct patterns of thinking behaviors."<sup>4</sup> Hence a thinking disposition is a consistent tendency or inclination to think in certain ways. Thinking dispositions are somewhat stable and generalizable. To be disposed to think in a certain manner means that an individual has a consistent tendency to employ the same thinking pattern in different situations and on different occasions. For example, some people are disposed to be analytical and skeptical. They typically try to examine the available evidence before deciding whether to accept a proposition. Other people may be prone to rationalize. They make up their mind first and then search for evidence to support their chosen point of view while ignoring any evidence to the contrary.<sup>5</sup>

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Let me call your attention to an instance in the New Testament that provides an interesting example of a thinking habit. When Jesus described the Pharisees as being “blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:24), he was doing more than just using figurative language. He was accusing them of having a tendency to make mountains out of molehills when it was to their advantage, and to make molehills out of mountains when that was to their advantage. In other words, He was claiming that they exaggerated trivial matters into unnecessarily complex issues while downplaying weightier questions into trivial and insignificant concerns. This manipulative mindset was a thinking habit on the part of many Pharisees and was one of the problems that aroused Jesus’ indignation toward them.

Now consider the interesting assertion made by Alma the Younger in Alma 12:14:

*For our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts will also condemn us.*

Alma declared that people will be judged by their thoughts as well as by their behavior.

I believe that Alma’s statement in this verse refers more to the thinking habits and dispositions that characterize our minds than to discrete, isolated thoughts.

One reason the Lord will hold us accountable for our thoughts is because of the relationship between a person’s thinking habits and his character. This relationship is taught in Proverbs 23:7. We typically replace the pronoun in this passage and paraphrase the verse to read “As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he.” This scripture teaches that we become what we think. In the words of James Allen, “A man is literally *what he thinks*, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts.”<sup>6</sup>

The verb *thinketh* in Proverbs 23:7 is expressed in the progressive tense, suggesting that this passage refers more to our ongoing thinking

habits than to isolated, individual thoughts that temporarily occupy our minds. It is a person’s mental habits and thinking dispositions that will largely determine his or her character rather than random, isolated thoughts.

### Counterproductive Habits of Mind

Now I would like to get specific and focus on five examples of thinking habits that are counterproductive.

#### 1. Lustful thinking

We live in a time when it is difficult to avoid being exposed to risqué images and materials and sexual innuendo, but I encourage you to avoid harboring thoughts about anything that is lewd, coarse, obscene, or vulgar. Unwanted thoughts are like stray cats that trespass across our yards. You may not be successful in keeping them out completely, but a single thought that sneaks into your mind will not do much harm unless you invite it to linger and treat it as a welcome guest rather than as an intruder. Do not feed these strangers. Do not nurture a friendship with them. Do not allow yourself to develop the habit of entertaining them. Treat them as intruders and take affirmative steps to avoid mingling with them.

#### 2. Coveting

Coveting is another sin that we commit in our minds. It, too, can become a habit. Coveting is a form of selfish thinking that occurs when a person develops an inordinate desire to obtain the possessions, position, or status attained by someone else. Some of us have a tendency to dismiss coveting as a trivial matter, but it is specifically forbidden by the Lord in the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:17). Note that the injunction against covetous thinking is one of the most detailed of the Ten Commandments.

#### 3. Bearing a Grudge

The third thinking disposition that I want to describe involves the tendency to remember

events that we ought to forget. Some of us have developed the habit of remembering incidents from the past when someone offended us or took advantage of us. Believing that we were wrongfully victimized, we replay the incident over and over again in our minds and often make it worse that it really was. Consequently we come to resent the person who perpetrated the wrong, and we develop a grudge against them. We not only harbor the grudge in our minds, but we nurse it, believing that by doing so we somehow obtain retribution.

Permitting yourself to be preoccupied with feelings of resentment and revenge will not hurt the other person. Instead, it will likely cause you to become bitter and spiteful. If you allow these thoughts and feelings to continue, they will canker your soul. Remember the words of the Lord in D&C 64:9: "He that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin."

#### 4. *Piling Pity upon Oneself*

The habit of feeling sorry for yourself and engaging in self-pity is another counterproductive habit in which some of us regularly engage. We all experience the ups and downs of life, and we all have a tendency to feel discouraged once in a while. But sometimes we allow this discouragement to feed upon itself. We focus on the negative and talk ourselves into the downward spiral of believing that we are no good and that we can't do anything right. We pile pity upon ourselves and permit our initial discouragement to develop into despondency and despair.

Take affirmative steps to avoid this downward cycle. Moods like sadness, gloom, anxiety, and anger do not just passively descend upon a person like rain without that person having some control over them. Your thoughts affect your feelings, and "you can change the way you feel by [changing the way] you think."<sup>7</sup> Do not allow yourself to be victimized by your own thinking.

#### 5. *Ignoring the Impact of Your Thinking on the Lives of Others*

Sometimes we allow ourselves to mistakenly believe that what we think and how we think is purely a personal matter that has no effect on others. That idea is not only naïve but false.

None of us lives in a vacuum completely isolated from other people. Instead we interact with others on an ongoing basis. In this sense life is like a chess game. The thoughts and the moves of each player are influenced by the thoughts and the moves of the other player. Whether you like it or not, how and what you think is influenced by the thinking of others with whom you associate. Conversely, your thoughts and thinking habits will influence their thoughts and actions. This interdependence is emphasized by the following quotation: "Human beings are not only *moral agents* or subjects of moral action, but also *moral patients*, or subjects which are acted upon and affected by what they and others do."<sup>8</sup>

Because of our God-given moral agency, we have freedom of choice and the right to make our own decisions. However, in addition, each of us is a *moral patient* in the sense that we are acted upon and influenced by the ways in which others think and act.

In recent years I have come to realize that some of my thinking habits have been directly impacted by other influential persons in my life, including my parents, my wife, and some outstanding teachers, colleagues, church leaders, and neighbors. This insight is sobering because it has helped me realize that how and what I think will likely have an impact upon others, even when I don't intend it to do so. May I suggest that the same is true with you. Be careful about how and what you think, because it is likely to have both intended and unintended effects on others. The person who believes that how and what he thinks has no impact on others is not only selfish but irresponsible.

The five thinking habits that I have discussed so far are not the only ones that are negative and

counterproductive. We could discuss many other examples, but we don't have time. If you currently have one or more of these destructive habits, I urge you to change your customary ways of thinking. Repent! We tend to believe that repentance is needed only when we have committed a sinful act, but repentance also applies to how and what we think. In fact, the word *repent*, as used in the New Testament, comes from a Greek verb that literally means "to change one's mind or purpose."<sup>9</sup> Complete repentance involves more than refraining from discrete acts of sinful behavior that you committed sometime in the past. It involves changing your thinking habits and dispositions as well. Changing your thinking patterns will likely lead to changes in your behavioral patterns.

#### Thinking in Which We Ought to Engage

We have spent enough time focusing on the kinds of thinking you should avoid. Now let's see what the scriptures admonish us to think about. Two scriptures help us describe the types of thinking in which we ought to engage. First, consider the imperative presented in D&C 121:45. The verb *let* is often interpreted as being synonymous with *allow* or *permit*, but the dictionary suggests that *let* also means "to cause to: make."<sup>10</sup> So the statement "Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly" is a command directing members of the Church to take charge of their thoughts and cause them to be more virtuous.

Second, consider a similar directive given by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:8:

*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

The structure and meaning of this long verse is not as complex as it first appears. To

simplify the structure and reveal the meaning, let's temporarily remove the long series of clauses in the middle of the verse and insert ellipses in their place. Simplified in this manner, the verse reads: "Finally, brethren, . . . think on these things."

We could simplify the sentence even further by removing all but the subject and the verb. So, in its simplest form this lengthy sentence is an imperative statement encouraging members of the Church to think.

The eight clauses that we temporarily removed specify the kinds of things Paul admonished the Philippians to think about. They include:

1. Whatsoever things are true,
2. Whatsoever things are honest,
3. Whatsoever things are just,
4. Whatsoever things are pure,
5. Whatsoever things are lovely,
6. Whatsoever things are of good report,
7. Any virtue,
8. [Anything that is] praise [worthy].

Both the Bible and the Book of Mormon teach the need for every person to be born again. The Book of Mormon describes this spiritual rebirth as a "mighty change" of heart (Mosiah 5:2; Alma 5:14). This process not only includes changes in our innermost feelings and desires, it also presupposes big changes in our thinking habits and dispositions. The Apostle Paul's directive in Romans 12:1–2 emphasizes this need to change the way we habitually think and what we think about. He instructed the Romans, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (verse 2).

Various scholars and curriculum reformers have recommended lists of productive thinking habits and dispositions that students in universities and public schools should be taught to develop.<sup>11</sup> We don't have time to discuss many of them, but I would like focus on two thinking

habits and dispositions that are particularly relevant for students and faculty at a university.

## Two Useful Thinking Habits

### *Seek Understanding*

John Biggs and several other scholars have distinguished between two different approaches to learning that they call the “surface approach” and the “deep approach.” The surface approach occurs when a student tries to complete an assigned learning task with minimum effort while giving the appearance of having properly learned what was expected. Learning to rote recite the verbatim definition of a concept or principle without any understanding of it is one example of the surface approach. Some forms of factual knowledge need to be memorized, but memorization becomes a surface approach when a student relies on it instead of striving to understand the ideas to be learned.<sup>12</sup>

One of the mistakes students often make is to substitute memorization in place of understanding. I urge you to develop the habit of striving for understanding whenever you study. Seek to understand the basic ideas, procedures, and criteria that you encounter in whatever subject you are studying. In the language of the scriptures, “with all thy getting get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7).

Understanding cannot be developed without thinking. To understand a new topic you must thoughtfully process the new ideas you encounter and relate them to your prior knowledge. You must integrate isolated bits and pieces of information into some meaningful structure or framework.

Understanding has three important advantages in comparison to rote knowledge. First, understanding is enabling.<sup>13</sup> The person who possesses understanding is able to use his knowledge flexibly and adaptively. Understanding provides new concepts, principles, procedures, and criteria to *think with*. By *thinking with* these new ideas, the person who has developed understanding is able to (1) explain relationships, (2)

make predictions, and (3) solve problems that he could not have done without this new conceptual knowledge. To the extent that the person’s understanding is inaccurate or incomplete, his thinking will be misleading or limited. Hence, a person’s understanding shapes his thinking.

The second advantage is that understanding is generative. By *thinking about* the concepts, principles, procedures, and criteria that he has come to understand, the understanding person is better able to recognize relationships, construct meaningful analogies, generate new insights, formulate productive questions, and conduct further inquiry activities. In contrast to the inert nature of factual knowledge, understanding is productive. In other words, understanding provides a basis for acquiring a new and deeper understanding.

A third advantage of understanding is that it tends to have more staying power. Rote memorization of factual information may get you past a test, but you likely will not retain this information very long afterwards. Understanding is more likely to result in learning that lasts.<sup>14</sup>

### *Monitor and Manage Your Own Thinking*

Another useful habit to develop is to learn how to more effectively monitor and manage your thinking. Mindful people think about their own thinking. They consciously strive to be aware of the thinking strategies and processes that they use when they try to solve a problem or accomplish a cognitively demanding task. In addition, they evaluate the products of their thinking processes. They question their assumptions, check their inferences, and attempt to validate their interpretations and conclusions. They try to distinguish between paths in their thought processes that seem to be leading them toward a successful solution and any that might seem to be leading them in an unsuccessful direction.

Psychologists use the noun *metacognition* to refer to this kind of thinking about one’s own thinking.<sup>15</sup> Metacognition is typically



conceptualized as including two complementary components. The first is to be aware of your own thinking processes. The second is to monitor, evaluate, and regulate those processes. I encourage you to become proficient in performing both of these aspects of metacognition. You will be a better student and a better lifelong learner if you become proficient at doing both of these.

### “With All Thy Mind”

I invite you now to compare two interesting passages from the Bible: one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Deuteronomy 6:5 contains a commandment in which the Israelites were directed to “love the Lord . . . with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” According to the record in Mark 12:30, Jesus quoted this passage from Deuteronomy in response to a scribe who tried to trick Him by asking Him which was the first or greatest commandment in the law.

If you carefully compare the two passages, you will discover that the New Testament account includes the extra phrase “and with all thy mind” that Jesus appears to have inserted. Matthew’s account of this incident includes the same insertion (see Matthew 22:35–37). This textual variation should cause us to “marvel” (D&C 76:18) and to wonder “why?” and “so what?”

The Doctrine and Covenants includes a version of this commandment recorded in section 59, verse 5. This version also includes the added idea that we should love the Lord with our minds.

I do not know why the extra stipulation to love God with all your mind is included in the New Testament and in the Doctrine and Covenants, but I believe it is a noteworthy addition that we ought to ponder. Latter-day Saints should remember that D&C 4:2 contains a directive that is similar to the one we have just examined in Mark. Instead of specifying that we should *love* the Lord, this parallel verse

in D&C 4 directs that we “serve him with all [our] heart, might, mind and strength.”

What does it mean to love and serve the Lord with all one’s mind? I don’t claim to have any profound answers to this question, but I will share with you three simple ideas that represent my current thinking.

First, Jesus declared Himself to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Therefore, to love Him with all your mind is to devote all your intellectual skills and mental capacities to learning and knowing the truth. Second, to love Him with all your mind means to “always remember Him” (D&C 20:77, 79) and to make a habit of thinking about Him and His teachings so that He has an active presence and influence in your mind. Third, to love and serve Him with all your mind is to consciously choose to be His disciple by striving to habitually think the way He would have you think and to do what He would have you do.

In summary, I suggest that you carefully examine the thinking habits and dispositions that function in your life. Become more aware of them. Monitor and evaluate them in terms of the influence they have upon you. Take steps to manage these habits instead of allowing them to manage you.

I thank the Lord for blessing us with the ability to think, and I pray that we will all strive to live up to the responsibility that comes with this blessing. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 74.
2. See F. James Rutherford and Andrew Ahlgren, *Science for All Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1990); *Benchmarks for Science Literacy* (New York: Oxford University Press with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1993); *Discovering and Exploring Habits of Mind*, ed. Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick (Alexandria, Virginia:

- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000); *Activating and Engaging Habits of Mind*, ed. Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000); and James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
3. See Jonathan Baron, *Rationality and Intelligence* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert H. Ennis, "A Taxonomy of Critical Thinking Dispositions and Abilities," in *Teaching Thinking Skills: Theory and Practice*, ed. Joan Boykoff Baron and Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Freeman, 1987), 9–26; Ron Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002); David N. Perkins, Eileen Jay, and Shari Tishman, "Beyond Abilities: A Dispositional Theory of Thinking," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1993):1–21; and Shari Tishman, David Perkins, and Eileen Jay, *The Thinking Classroom: Learning and Teaching in a Culture of Thinking* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995).
4. Tishman, Perkins, and Jay, *The Thinking Classroom*, 39; see also 40.
5. See Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, *The Art of Thinking: A Guide to Critical and Creative Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 40; and Douglas J. Soccio and Vincent E. Barry, *Practical Logic: An Antidote for Uncritical Thinking* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992).
6. James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (New York: Crowell, 1913), 7; emphasis in original.
7. Martin Seligman in Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 246.
8. Richard M. Fox and Joseph P. DeMarco, *Moral Reasoning: A Philosophic Approach to Applied Ethics* (Fort Worth, Texas: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990), 21; emphasis added.
9. William Edwy Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, in *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, ed. Merrill F. Unger and William White, Jr. (1952; dictionaries of Old Testament and New Testament words originally published as separate works and reprinted as 2 vols. in 1, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, revised 1985 with cover copy *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*), 525, s.v. "repent"; see also Theodore M. Burton, "The Meaning of Repentance," *Ensign*, August 1988, 7–8.
10. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., 713, s.v. "let."
11. See Costa and Kallick, *Discovering and Exploring Habits of Mind*; and Ennis, "A Taxonomy," in Baron and Sternberg, *Teaching Thinking Skills*.
12. See John B. Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (Buckingham [England]; Philadelphia: Society for Research into Higher Education: Open University Press, 1999).
13. See David Perkins, "What Is Understanding?" in *Teaching for Understanding: Linking Research with Practice*, ed. Martha Stone Wiske (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 39–57; and Ritchhart, *Intellectual Character*.
14. See Marcia Mentkowski and associates, *Learning That Lasts: Integrating Learning, Development, and Performance in College and Beyond* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
15. See James G. Greeno, Allan M. Collins, and Lauren B. Resnick, "Cognition and Learning," in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, ed. David C. Berliner and Robert C. Calfee (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 15–46; *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. Robert A. Wilson and Frank C. Keil (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 533–35, s.v. "metacognition" (by Louis J. Moses and Jodie A. Baird); and Thomas O. Nelson, "Cognition Versus Metacognition," in *The Nature of Cognition*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 625–41.