Thoughts Are Just Thoughts

(A mindfulness exercise excerpted from *The Mindfulness Solution*, by Dr. Ronald Siegel)

Begin by focusing on your breath for a few minutes. See if you can follow complete cycles, from the beginning of an inhalation to the point of fullness, back to the point of relative emptiness, and then beginning again. If you’re worried, it won’t take long for thoughts about the future to arise. For the first few minutes, every time you notice that your attention has wandered from the breath to the thoughts, just gently bring your attention back to the breath.

After doing this for a little while, you can try introducing a little imagery. When thoughts arise in the mind, imagine them to be clouds passing through the sky. Notice that “you” are not these thoughts. Rather “you” are awareness itself. You are the sky, and the thoughts are the clouds, rain, and snow that occupy it for a time. The sky remains steady throughout.

An alternative is to imagine that thoughts are like bubbles in a stream—appearing and disappearing, passing by. Here, “you” are the stream bank watching the water continually flowing while the bubbles come and go, either bursting or traveling on. If you prefer machines to nature, you can try imagining that “you” are watching an conveyor belt, while the thoughts move along—clunk, clunk, clunk—only to fall off at the end of the line.