

Talking to Yourself

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It's good to come to a quiet secluded place like this. Even though you're not in total seclusion, still you are away from the normal affairs of your daily life. It's a good way of getting some perspective on your life—what you've been coming from, where you're going—away from the usual influences that act on you, so you get an idea of what you really want to do, what kind of life makes sense to you.

But you've probably noticed that even though you may be in relative physical seclusion, the mind isn't necessarily in seclusion. It carries a lot of voices, a lot of narratives, huge crowds of ideas speaking in your mind, some of which you can identify as coming from other people, and some of which you tend to identify as your own. You need some ways of stepping back from those as well, because sometimes you picked up ideas from other people, from who knows where—your family, the media, teachers, and friends—and you've ingested them without really thinking about whether you really believe what those voices are saying.

So you need some way of developing mental seclusion, too. And part of the technique is to do what we did just now, in that chant on the sublime attitudes. You first think about yourself, what you really want. You want to be happy, free from oppression, free from suffering. Then you realize you're not the only one. Everybody wants to be happy, free from oppression, free from suffering.

That movement from just thinking about yourself to thinking about everybody is an important part of settling down, because it's so easy to get involved in your own narrative and forget about the narratives of other people, what you have in common with them. You also find, as you come to sit here, that you want to get out of unskillful ways of talking yourself.

I don't know how many people complain that when they sit down and meditate and find that it's not going well, they start berating themselves, get really upset with themselves. They tell themselves, "Here's proof that I'm worth nothing, can't do anything." All the unhealthy commentary that's been carried around in the mind gets applied to the meditation. They try to stop and just focus on the breath, but if it's not working, the old commentaries come in again.

What you've got to do is learn new commentaries. One, put yourself into perspective: Are you the only person who's had difficulty with meditation? How about all the other people in the world who try to meditate? The fact that you're trying to meditate at least puts you in good company. There are a lot of people out there who've never even tried. Those are the really hopeless ones, at least for the

time being. You're at least trying. And you can think of all the other people who've tried to meditate the past. They've had lots of problems too.

Sometimes it's good to read in the Theragatha and Therigatha, the verses of the elder monks and elder nuns. In some of the verses, they talk about the problems they had in meditation—meditating for years without getting any results at all. Then finally things came together, and they understood. So you realize that when you're sitting here having problems getting your mind focused on the breath, you're not the only one. Your situation isn't hopeless.

That's one step, getting a larger perspective, then putting yourself within the larger perspective.

The second step is to give yourself something to talk about in the present moment. As long as the mind is going to talk, teach it how to talk well. You can't stop the conversation without first turning it into a skillful conversation. This is when the Buddha gives instructions on getting the mind into concentration. Two of the factors of getting the mind to settle down are what he called *vitakka* and *vicāra*, directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought is when you focus the mind on a topic, decide that you're going to focus on one thing, and you keep thinking about it, reminding yourself to stay here, stay here, stay here.

For instance, you want to stay with the breath, so part of you has to keep reminding yourself that this is where you want to stay. Part of that conversation may involve reminding yourself why you want to stay here. In other words, meditation doesn't mean that you totally blot out thought. You learn how to use your thinking for a better purpose.

So you remind yourself that if you want to gain a sense of yourself, you have to get the mind to become still—and the breath is a good place to do it because the breath is one of the processes in the body that you can actually exert some control over. You can vary the breath and, through the breath, create a sense of ease in the body. When the body feels at ease, the mind feels a lot more comfortable in the present moment. When the mind feels comfortable, its thinking is going to be clearer. So this is a good place to stay.

This way, when you're keeping the mind here, it's not just a matter of forcing it. Sometimes you have to cajole it and then you use the act of evaluation to help you. You evaluate: "How are things going with the breath? Does it really feel like the kind of breath I would like to be focusing on, like to be feeling right now?" If it doesn't, you can change it. You can try longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow. You can think about the breath in different ways. Think about it coming in and out through all the pores of your skin, as if your body were

one large sponge, and there's nothing to obstruct the breath energy. That's another perception.

Remind yourself: You're not necessarily focusing on the air coming in and out of the lungs, you're keeping track of the movement of energy around and throughout the body. This can be related to the blood, can be related to the dynamics of breathing. When you expand the chest, there's pressure put on different parts of the body. Different parts of the body have to be held still so that other parts can move. Sometimes that stillness becomes a blockage that you don't want. So can you breathe in a way that doesn't block that particular part of the body?

You can survey the body in any way you want. You can start at any spot and move to any other spot. It's good to do it systematically so that if you lose track of where you are, it's easy to remember what you already did. Say you start around the navel, then you came up to the stomach, and then you seem to have lost it. So go back to the stomach. Then follow through.

But you may also find, when you've done the body systematically, that one particular part really interests you. That's fine. Concentration doesn't happen unless you're interested. So when you find yourself naturally drawn to a spot, work on that spot for a while and see what happens. There are times when you may have chosen a spot that's not going to work for you very well, but at least you've learned. And have the attitude that you're here to learn, which means sometimes making mistakes and then learning from your mistakes. Mistakes are okay as long as you approach them with the right attitude.

This way, you learn how to talk yourself in a way that's more skillful, that helps you actually to settle down. Ask yourself: What kind of breath would you like to feel right now? Then allow it to happen. And then with the next breath: What would you like to feel right now? It might be the same type of breath again, or you might decide you want something different. That's perfectly fine. Just try to do your best to stay with this one topic of conversation: how the breath energy in the body's going right now.

As you're focused on this, you find that the mind begins to lighten up. The tensions and the worries that it's been carrying around, you can put aside for the time being, because you're basically in a different world. You're in the world of the breath in the body. It's called the form world, i.e., you're getting back in touch with how the form of the body feels from within. You're learning about which parts can you change, which parts you can't change, which parts could use some energizing, which parts could use some calming down. You learn to recognize when the breath feels so depleted that you should give it more breath. That

doesn't necessarily mean breathing more heavily, but just allowing the breath, as you breathe in, to fill the whole body, down to every cell, and seeing how to maintain that sense of fullness. When you work with the breath energy, as Ajaan Lee said, it's like charging a battery: The breath energy is fully charged.

As you get to know the form of the body this way, get to re-inhabit it in this way, you feel more comfortable in your own skin. At the same time, you've trained the mind to talk to itself in a more intelligent, more mature way.

So concentration is not just a matter of forcing things. It's like the old story of the contest between the sun and the wind cloud. A traveler was traveling along a road with a cloak tightly wrapped around his body, and the wind cloud wanted to place a bet with the sun, saying, "Which of us is stronger? Let's see who can get that cloak off that guy." So the wind cloud went first, and it blew and blew and blew, but the colder and stronger the wind got, the more the man clutched the cloak around his body. The wind couldn't get it off. So then it was the sun's turn. All the sun had to do was beam, and as the sun beamed, the man got warmer and he finally took off the cloak himself.

In the same way, the strength of concentration comes, not from forcing, but from giving the mind a good place to stay. Learn how to be with the breath, be with the body, be with your mind in the present moment. Give the mind good reasons for why it wants to stay here, why it enjoys to stay here. That way, the concentration becomes a lot more pleasant, a lot more solid, a lot easier to maintain, even as you get up from your meditation seat, walk around, do whatever else that needs to be done in the course of the day. You get entertained by the breath. You get intrigued by the breath. You find that by staying with the breath in different situations—when you're dealing with other people, when you're doing work—it keeps you grounded. You can have this sense of your own inner seclusion as you inhabit your own body wherever you go. That way, when you have to leave the seclusion of the monastery, you've still got your own space inside that nobody else has to penetrate.

So learn how to talk to yourself in a skillful way, because this is one of the essential skills of the meditation. It's one of the essential skills in getting the mind to settle down. There will come a time when we've talked enough, and the mind and the breath seem to become one. When they become one like that, then there's no need to chat. There's a real sense of stillness and solidity because you've made friends with each other.

But until you reach that point, try to talk yourself in a way that's really healthy and mature. If you find the conversation getting unhealthy for the mind, just stop, take a couple of good, long, deep breaths, and start over again. With time, you'll

feel more and more at home here, more and more at home in your own skin, at home with the chatter in your own mind. That way, everything inside you starts to work together. And when you're working together, you get a lot more done.