

Talking Among Your Selves

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It's strange that the mind has to talk to itself. But then when you think about the different roles of self that function in becoming, you can understand. There's the consumer self that wants to enjoy pleasure, the provider self that feels that it can provide for that consumer self by doing whatever's needed to gain that pleasure. And then there's the self as commentator that speaks to the other two, telling the self as consumer what kind of things it should or shouldn't accept as legitimate pleasure, and telling the self as provider what to do. And of course, the commentator will comment on itself sometimes.

The Buddha calls all this *directed thought and evaluation*. It's in our directed thoughts and acts of evaluation that our sense of self largely resides. If you like the way you talk to yourself, you tend to be at ease with yourself. If you're driven crazy by all the voices in your mind, you might decide that you'd rather have no self at all. This may be one of the reasons people like the idea of no self: They want to get rid of those voices. But you can't just get rid of the voices as they are. You have to train them first, in the same way that the Buddha approaches the issue of self and not-self in general. You have to train your sense of self so that it's skillful before you perceive it as not-self. If you want to get rid of your self when it's unskillful, there's usually a lot of aversion behind that desire—and that creates more problems. So, to solve the problem, you have to train the way you talk to yourself.

It may feel unnatural at first to have a different kind of conversation inside. Your old conversations, your old ways of talking to yourself, are really familiar. But then, if you couldn't change your ways, the Buddha wouldn't have bothered to teach. The fact that he did bother—and he bothered a lot, forty-five years of bothering, going out of his way to teach this person, that person: That shows that you can change your ways, too. Think of all the difficult people he had to teach: Angulimala, Devadatta, Saccaka, and then all the monks and nuns who created trouble in ways that forced him to formulate the Vinaya. The Buddha went to great lengths to teach people to talk to themselves in new ways. And of course, from the talking to themselves in new ways, then they would learn to *act* in new ways, too.

This is why meditation starts by talking to yourself: directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath, and then you learn what kind of evaluation applied to the breath is useful and what kind is not. The kind of evaluation that looks at your actions and can tell you whether they're skillful or not right here, right now and then can offer constructive ideas about how you might

want to change: That's the kind of evaluation you want. As for other thoughts outside of that, for the time being you let them go. There will be occasions as you leave formal meditation where you have to talk to yourself about other things, but hopefully you'll begin to pick up the right attitude about how to talk to yourself in such a way that you stay on a skillful topic, a useful topic, and that your criticism is constructive. That way, you learn how to think up new ways of approaching things that have been problems all along.

So, focus on the breath. Talk to yourself about the breath. How does it feel right now? I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching his students, he would have them describe how they were feeling the breath. Then he would use their vocabulary to talk to them. There was one guy who had had trouble getting the mind to settle down with the breath, but then one day he was meditating while sitting on a bus going from a town outside of Bangkok into Bangkok, and he encountered what he described as the delicious breath. So from that point on, Ajaan Fuang, when he was teaching meditation to this guy, would say, "Okay, get to the delicious breath. See if you can stay there."

So, what kind of breathing would *you* find delicious right now: scrumptious, satisfying, gratifying, refreshing inside? Think of what you'd like to experience right now and see if you can provide a breath that provides that experience. In some cases, all you have to do is think that way, and the body will respond. Other times, it may be a little slow to respond, so you experiment. But as you adjust the breath, try not to use a heavy hand to adjust it. After all, you're looking for pleasure, and heavy hands tend not to be pleasurable.

Now, there are occasional times when you do have to breathe in a way that's uncomfortable. When I had migraines, I found that one way of getting out of the cycle of breathing that seemed to be aggravating the migraines was to breathe in, filling up the lower part of my torso as much as I could, expanding it as much as I could, even to the point where it was painful, and after a while that would reset my breathing. There are times where uncomfortable breathing has its role, but for the most part you want to get to a spot where it just feels good to be right here, right now. Whatever sense of hunger you have for pleasurable feelings in the body, you have a way of breathing that satisfies that hunger. The more you can do this, the more likely the mind will be to settle down.

Then, without even thinking about it, you've trained yourself to talk in new ways, because you've posed new questions and you've allowed your mind to think of new ways of providing answers. It's in this way that you train your sense of self so that the self can be its own mainstay, its own governing principle.

The self as a mainstay, of course, is the self that you can rely on to provide the happiness you want. The self as a governing principle is reminding yourself, “I came to this practice because I want happiness. If I give up in the practice, does that mean I don’t want happiness anymore?” Then you ask, “Well, how have I been going about the practice in such a way that seems to be getting away from happiness?” In other words, this is the self as the consumer, and of course the commentator is commenting on what your self as producer wants to do, and how it might do it better.

So you’re training all three aspects of self—consumer, producer, commentator—as you learn how to talk to yourself in more fruitful ways. This is how you learn how to depend on yourself. This is how you become your own teacher.

This is a point that Ajaan Fuang made often: that you can depend on outside teachers only so much. For one thing, they’re not there all the time, and two, you should know your problems better than anybody else knows them. When a teacher’s talking about ways of dealing with the breath energy, it’s usually based on what he or she has experienced. How *you* experience your breath may be a little bit different. So you have to take the instructions and adjust them. And of course there are times when you’re meditating and things come up, and you can’t go running to the teacher all the time. You’ve got to learn how to figure things out on your own.

This is where the element of ingenuity comes in: thinking up new questions, so that you can arrive at new answers. If you just keep asking the same old questions over and over and over again, you’re going to get pretty much the same old answers.

For instance, when I was reading Ajaan MahaBoowa’s instructions to the woman who was dying of cancer, I was struck by how many of the questions he had her ask about the pain of her disease would never have occurred to me. For me, that was the most useful part of the book: realizing that you can ask different questions, trying to find new ways of evaluating which questions are useful. You’re trying to find new ways of making things better, so learn to think in terms of new questions. Where is the breath coming from? Does it come from inside the body or outside the body?

There’s a passage in the writings of Dogen, the Zen master, where he has you ask questions like: “Where is your mind right now? Is the mind in the body? Is the body in the mind?” Ask questions to loosen up the way you’re relating to things in the present moment. And ask questions that are directly related to the present moment. Most of our ways of thinking are conversations to ourselves about we’re planning to do or what we did do in the past. We’re not paying much attention to what we’re actually doing right now, so to look at that requires a different set of questions. Think in terms of the aggregates. Where are the intentions? Where are

the perceptions? What exactly are the feelings right now? Are the feelings the same as the breath? Is your awareness the same thing as the breath?

There are times in the meditation when it's actually helpful to think about the breath and the awareness going together as they spread through the body. Other times, you have to ask yourself, "Are they really the same?"

So, train yourself to talk to yourself in new ways. Train yourself to ask questions of yourself in new ways, and in that way you train yourself to be a more useful self on the path. There will come a point where you don't need that sense of self anymore, but don't drop it out of aversion. It's more like a tool. When you no longer need the tool, you simply put it aside in a matter-of-fact way.

Years back, when I was writing a brief introduction to Buddha's teachings, I was looking at what other people had written in their introductory booklets, and I was struck by a strange pattern. Often, they would start out by saying that the Buddha taught a religion where you have to rely on yourself, you don't rely on outside powers. But then toward the end of each little booklet, they would say something about how, well, actually there is no self. I wondered why nobody had ever noticed that before. A self-reliant religion where there is no self? It doesn't make any sense.

What *does* make sense is that as long as you're going to create a sense of self, make it a reliant self, something you can actually use. After all, what is our sense of self? It's one of our ways of trying to look for happiness, a strategy for trying to decide what will be worthwhile keeping, what will be worthwhile doing for the sake of what lasts inside of us. As we practice, we're learning how to adopt that strategy and use it skillfully on the path. We're looking for our long-term welfare and happiness. Who's going to do it? We're going to do it. Who's going to reap the benefits? We're going to reap the benefits. That's where you need that sense of self.

Then, as you learn how to talk to yourself in more skillful ways and ask more skillful questions about what's going on, you can finally turn the questions on the commentator, turn the questions on the consumer and the producer. Turn the questions on: Who is this asking the questions? Who is this that's giving the orders? When you find that you don't need that sense of self anymore and that it's actually getting in the way of more refined work inside, okay, then you put it aside.

This is like when you're working with tools on a piece of furniture. There comes a point where you don't need the saws anymore; everything has been sawed. When you put things together, then it becomes simply a matter of finishing. So, the hammers and the nails, you put those aside. You hold on to the sandpaper and the various things to get the finish right. Then you put those down, too.

So, when you're talking to yourself, you'll find that the question of "What is this phenomenon of talking to yourself all about?" becomes more and more the issue as

other issues have been taken care of. But take care of the other issues first. Learn how to talk to yourself well. When people try to let go of their internal dialogue without having trained it properly, rejecting it out of aversion, that of course is an unskillful mind state that leads to unfortunate results. So, learn how to talk in a way that you *like* the way you talk to yourself because it's useful, it gets good results. *Then* you can think about putting it aside.