

## *The Languages of the Mind*

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The mind is always talking to itself, which makes you wonder: Why is it talking to itself? What does it have to tell itself? Why does it have to tell us things? You'd think that if the mind knew something, it would know it, without one part of the mind having to inform another part of the mind.

There's also the question of what language the mind is talking in. Even stream-of-consciousness novels, with all their strange wanderings around, can't even begin to replicate what actually is going on in this conversation inside the mind.

But they do point out something important: that the conversation moves from level to level, language to language, jargon the jargon, from one way of looking at things to another way of looking at things, all very quickly—sometimes in the space of a moment. You can see this clearly as you focus on the breath. You're talking to yourself about the breath and all of a sudden you're talking about something else. The shift from one topic to another can be based on all kinds of weird things—a random association, a total blanking out and finding yourself in another place entirely, little bits and snatches of songs and phrases, all kinds of crazy stuff.

So one of the things we're trying to do as we meditate is to bring the conversation to one topic and to one language. I'm not just saying keeping it in English, because even in English, you realize that when you're talking about things in terms of physics, it's as if you have a separate language. When you talk about music, there's a separate language. When you're talking about the breath right here in the present moment, there's a particular language that you're trying to learn here. Right now we're trying to stick with the language centered on the breath.

Some people have noted that when they first read Ajaan Lee, his way of explaining the breath seems kind of strange, but as they start focusing on their own breath, they find that his way of analyzing the breath really does make sense. It really does correspond to what's going on in their experience. That's why we have separate languages and jargons. As you get particularly adept in looking at things in a particular way, the language make sense. The jargon make sense. Of course, there is that other type of jargon, which is meant to obfuscate in order to make things unclear and give you buzzwords. They can mean all things to all people. But that's a different issue.

What you're trying to do here is get very precise about what you actually experience as you're staying here in the present moment, with this as your frame: the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself. Try to keep everything—all the discussions in the mind—on that one topic, in that one frame of reference. Not that you're never going to move to other frames of reference, but it's good to know, when you move, *why* you're moving.

The best way to do that is to get really good at this one frame of reference, really intent on this one frame of reference, so that anything that wanders off, you notice; anything that's superfluous, you can notice. In the beginning, it's pretty frustrating. You're here innocently talking about the breath to yourself, and all of a sudden you're commenting on the comments, or pulling outside, watching things outside. You don't want to do that yet, but that doesn't mean you have to get frustrated at what happens. Just learn how to drop the new conversation and come back. If it happens again, notice it, drop it, come back. The noticing doesn't have to be very formal—just enough to realize you've wandered off—and you can come back. And don't deal in a lot of recriminations, or get flustered or frustrated. Just develop this habit of being able to come back, come back, come back in a very matter-of-fact way.

That's what strengthens your frame of reference, so that you can experience the body just as breath sensations. Try to read every sensation in the body as a variation on breath. Learn to talk to yourself about the sensation of the body as breath. There's a down-flowing breath. There's an up-flowing breath. There's the breath that spreads through all the nerves and all the blood vessels. Learn to relate to the sensations you experience as variations on the breath property, the wind property.

It's like learning another language. In beginning, you find yourself slipping into old terms in your old language. But recognize that fact and try to extend your vocabulary about the breath, to cover more and more areas in the body, more and more types of sensations in the body.

Why do we learn these languages? Because they're useful. All our concepts have a purpose. They're meant to be used as tools for an end. Here the tool is exploring the present moment, exploring your experience of the present moment, so that you can understand where the suffering is, where the cause of suffering is, what you can do to bring about the end of suffering, and what the end of suffering is actually like. That last one is the real purpose—and only when you can focus all your concepts on that one purpose will they begin to fit together.

Here we're working on a whole vocabulary of concepts to deal with the breath, as a way of anchoring us in the present moment, so that we can watch it, feel at

home here, feel comfortable here, and also begin to understand what's going on, especially in terms of this issue of intention and attention, and the results of your intentions and acts of attention. That's the vocabulary we're learning. That's the pattern of concepts we're learning here.

This is why we need to learn this language. And this is why we need to keep our frame of reference solid, so that we don't go slipping off into other weird areas. Once your frame of reference is solid, then when you do need to switch off to another frame of reference—say, when you're dealing with other people—you can do it consciously, and you can know why you're doing it: It's because that series of concepts has its purpose in that context. It's like switching from one language to another. Say you're talking to a Thai person, you talk in Thai. If you're talking to an American person, you talk in English—because those languages work in those contexts. When you talk to yourself about the breath, you want to stay within this language of the breath, because this language works best in this context.

So it's not that you're trying to cut off your other mental functions. You're just learning how to keep your mental conversation directed in a way that's really useful, staying on-topic, relevant to the issue at hand. Then, when the time comes to switch languages, you know why you're doing it. It's not random and arbitrary, the way most of our mental chatter is. In this way, the habit we have of forming concepts—what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation, which are verbal *saṅkhāras*—instead of being the problem, actually become part of the solution.

When you find the mind wandering off, chattering about other things, just realize that those other things are not the issue right now. It's not that you'll never be allowed to think about them, it's just that this is not the appropriate context, not the right time and place for that kind of chatter. As you get more and more sensitive to getting the mind to settle down, you realize how much that unnecessary chatter really is a big burden on the mind. And you can happily do without it.

So for the rest of the hour, just converse about the mind and the breath and the body right here in the present moment. The more you keep on topic, the more you stay in the right frame of reference, the right language, then the more you'll find that the hour has been well spent.