

Views & Vision

July 29, 2009

The mind spends a lot of its time talking to itself. And so when we come to the practice, it's important that we learn how to use that habit in a skillful way, so that it actually helps the practice and doesn't get in the way.

If you've read any of the texts, you know that when the mind gets into deep concentration, the sentences and dialogues that go on in the mind get pared down really far to the point where there's just a mental note, like "infinite space," the *sañña* of "infinite consciousness." That's all the talking that's going on in the mind.

But right now, if you feel harassed by all the chatter going on in the mind, that sounds pretty good. Just hold on to one thought, one object, and get away from all the torment of what's being said inside the mind. But you can't get there until you've learned how to train the mind how to talk to itself skillfully, what sorts of things are important to talk about, and what sort of things are not, what attitude to take. And unfortunately for most of us, we've learned lots of unskillful ways of talking. If it's not from our family, then it's from school, or from the media. We talk about all the wrong topics, or talk about things in ways that actually discourage us from practicing, either specific ideas about ourselves, or attitudes in general.

One of the most virulent attitudes going around is the only way you're going to find happiness is through sensual indulgence. You can cite Freud. You can cite all these other psychotherapists as authorities, but then again, what kind of authority are they? It just so happens that their opinions fit in with the needs of the economy. And so those thoughts get pounded into our heads again and again and again: their idea of what's important to talk about. So we've got to learn how to retrain these voices in our minds, what sort of issues are important to talk about and what sort of issues are important to just leave aside. And as for the important issues to talk about, how do you talk about them? How do you encourage yourself in the practice?

The Buddha recommends ten topics for recollection for the purpose of giving you energy, counteracting any unskillful chatter in the mind and replacing it with skillful chatter. You can recollect the Buddha, to remind yourself that it is possible to find true happiness through human effort. After all, when the Buddha talked about his awakening, he didn't say it was because he was some special being beamed down from the sky. He simply developed qualities of the mind that all of us have in potential form. So that raises our sights as to what we can do with our lives.

You can think about the Dharma, in that it recommends a totally harmless form of happiness, a happiness that doesn't pose any danger to you, doesn't pose any danger to anybody else, doesn't harm anybody. This is why they recommend that when monks are in the forest, and they start getting scared about the dangers in the forest—the animals, the people who might be lurking in the wilderness, the diseases that can come, the fact that you are far away from doctors, anything of any comfort—simply remind yourself you're there in a totally

harmless way. And that can give you confidence.

You can recollect the Sangha. If comparing yourself to the Buddha seems like a far stretch, you can think, "Well, there were people who studied with the Buddha who were really like us. Some cases a lot worse off than we are right now. And yet they were able to pull themselves together, gain awakening."

So these are recollections to overcome fear and lack of self-esteem. Similarly with the recollection of your virtue, times in the past when you could have harmed somebody or done something against your principles, but you decided not to. Your principles were more important. Think about that. You have worth as a human being because of that.

The same when you were generous. For many of us our first real experience of freedom was when we realized we could give something to somebody else not because we had to, or it was their birthday or Christmas or anything. Simply because you wanted to share. Something you could have used yourself, but you said No, I want to give it to somebody else. It's good to reflect on that.

You can think about the qualities that would make you a deva, things like a sense of shame at the idea of doing something really harmful, other good qualities of the mind. You have those at least to some extent. So reflect on that. Again, these reflections are meant to give you a sense of self-confidence, self-esteem. To remind you that even though you may have done a lot of unskillful things in the past, you do have your skillful potentials. And it's up to you to decide which past actions are the important actions in your life story.

We all have a mixed bag in the past. You can think about this as if someone were writing your life story. And if you decide to stick with the skillful path, that means that the skillful qualities you had in the past are the important ones. If you stray away from the skillful path, that means the unskillful qualities, the unskillful things you did in the past are the important ones.

So as you shape the present, you're not only shaping the present, but also highlighting different things in your past. So why not highlight the good things? If you find yourself focusing on the bad ones, remind yourself, "At least I had some good qualities in the past and those are the ones that eventually won out. At least they are winning out right now." If a part of your mind retorts, "While you may be winning out right now, you're going to lose out further down the line," you respond, "I don't care about further down the line. I'm not responsible for further down the line right now. I want to make sure that at least right now I make the right choice." So at least there is a little uptick in the general line of your life. And once you've decided to do that once, you can do it again, and you can do it again, until it becomes a habit.

Then there are the reflections to make sure that you don't be heedless and complacent. There's recollection of death: the fact that death could come at any time and that you've got to prepare because death isn't the end. As long as there's craving in the mind, it jumps onto another life. The image the Buddha gave is of a fire burning one house that then jumps across to another house, burns the next house, then the next. So what kind of house are you going to? The image kind of breaks down here, but the craving is what pulls you on.

What kind of cravings are you nurturing in your mind right now? What cravings would be more skillful to nurture? What habits do you want to take with you as you go on? You realize there is work to be done in the mind. You can't just

put it off to tomorrow or the next day or next week or next month or next year. Because you don't know if you have a next day or a next month or a next year. But you do know that you have right now. This breath coming in and out right now. If it so happened that you suddenly died right now, wouldn't you prefer to be in a moment of mindfulness and alertness rather than wandering around thinking about who knows what? So that's a recollection to make you more heedful, to help overcome laziness.

There's mindfulness immersed in the body, which is to help you remember, "Do you want to keep coming back as a human being, or would you rather come back as something better?" There's always that issue at death when people are really possessive of their bodies. They come back as a spirit hovering around their dead body. Would you like to do that? This body may seem okay while it's alive, but when it's dead, it's really not that attractive a place to be. Can you learn how to develop a sense of detachment from your own body now, so you're not afraid to let it go when you have to?

And then mindfulness of the breath is a practice for developing all those good qualities that you need to make your aims a reality: mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, and discernment. This is the recollection that you can make your home.

Then finally there's recollection of peace: the peace of nirvana. Remind yourself that this is really the direction you want to go, that there is an attainment of true happiness. Keep reminding yourself of the direction where true happiness lies so that you don't get distracted by other ideas about happiness.

Now if you find yourself having trouble settling down with the breath, you've got these other topics to think about. They should always be there in the background where you can draw on them when you need them. As long as the mind needs to think, have it think about something that's really useful. As long as it's going to talk to itself, make sure the conversation is actually a skillful conversation. Otherwise, you can spend all your time in views, without any vision. It's a distinction the Buddha makes in the *Metta Sutta*. He describes the ideal meditator as "not taken with views, but consummate in vision." We spend most of our time talking about, "I think this about that, I think that about this, this is my opinion on politics, this is my opinion on the Michael Jackson feeding-fest in the media and whatever." But does it really matter?

A while back I was reading Mark Twain's autobiography, and occasionally he talks about political issues of the day. His political opinions are really the least interesting part about Mark Twain. His more interesting opinions are those about the universals of human nature. You should have that attitude towards your own thoughts. Your really interesting thoughts are about the more universal things, particularly this issue of vision, which means that you actually see what the mind is doing, see how it's creating suffering for itself. And this may not be a topic that you can talk about with other people, but at least it doesn't lead to controversy. And it's the most important issue you can talk about with yourself.

As the Buddha said, the source of all conflicts in the world comes from a type of thinking he calls *papañca*, mental proliferation, where your thoughts just get out of control to the point where they come back and attack you, i.e. they put you into difficulties, they create trouble for you. These thoughts come from one basic

notion: "I am the thinker." You want to establish your identity through your opinions about things. The Buddha did not encourage this kind of thinking. Questions that come from this—"Who am I? What am I? What will I be?"—are, he said, questions that are inappropriate if you really want to put an end to suffering, because instead of freeing you, they get you more tied up with views and opinions.

For instance, the question about what happens to an awakened person after death: Does the person exist? Not exist? Both? neither? If you're asking these questions because you're worried about what's going to happen to this "I" who's been doing the thinking, the Buddha wouldn't answer you. He didn't want to encourage that kind of thinking. He wanted to encourage the type of thinking that looks at: "Is there suffering here right now? Where? What am I doing that's causing the suffering? What can I do to put an end to it?"

It's interesting to reflect that here we are, learning about ourselves through meditation, but what kind of self-knowledge is this? The questions, "Who am I, what am I, what was I in the past, what am I going to be in the future?"—those questions the Buddha said to put aside. The self-knowledge he was more interested in is, "What am I doing right now? What are the results of what I'm doing? What when I do it will be skillful, leading to good results? What when I do it would be unskillful, leading to harmful results? What would be for my long-term suffering, what would be for my long-term happiness? Those kinds of questions are worth asking. In other words, seeing yourself as having the power to create long-term happiness and then asking yourself, "How can I develop that potential?" But you should also learn to see that you have the potential for creating a lot of harm and suffering, so how can you avoid *that* potential?

That kind of self-knowledge: that's vision. And it's really useful. Unfortunately, our society encourages us to have views about things yet doesn't encourage much vision. But you can train yourself. You can drop the ways that society teaches you to talk to yourself, and train yourself in new ways that point you in the direction of vision. You're not simply a product of social pressures and social influences, because there is something that really is totally yours, which is suffering. No one else can experience your suffering. Nobody knows how much you suffer, how you suffer. That's something only you can know, but you can really know it. And as the Buddha points out, you can also learn how not to suffer. That kind of self-knowledge: that's vision. And you have the freedom to develop that if you want.