

Talking to Yourself

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There's a phrase that gets tossed around at a lot of meditation retreats: noble silence. What they mean when they use it is that as you're meditating in the retreat, you don't want to talk to anybody except for times when it's really necessary or you're having an interview with the teacher. In the Canon, though, noble silence is when you're in the second jhana on up. In other words, you're not talking to yourself at all. If they could record the conversation in your mind, there wouldn't be anything to record.

Now, for those of us sitting here, unless you reach the level of noble silence like that, you'll probably be talking to yourself through the hour. So you want to be very careful: What are you going to say to yourself? What things are worth saying, and what things are not? After all, to get into concentration, you do have to talk yourself into it. Partly, it's a matter of giving yourself a pep talk. Remind yourself: This is something that human beings can do. Whether you've been successful with it in the past is not the issue. The issue is what you're going to do right now. Then you have to learn how to cajole yourself when it's necessary and flatter yourself, sometimes yell at yourself, depending on what works.

A lot of us have a lot of trouble with the voices in our minds, the voices we picked up from our parents, our teachers, school, the media. They're there, they're chattering away, and they're saying things that can be very unhelpful for the meditation—in some cases, just changing the topic and other times, trying to discourage you.

You have to learn to turn the fact that the mind is talking to itself to your advantage, reminding yourself that this is really where you want to be. You want to be sitting down meditating. You want to be with the breath. See what happens when you can stay with the breath. Try to get interested in the breath. Ask yourself questions about it. What are these breath sensations in the body? They're already there. It's a question of simply viewing them as breath sensations.

This is where another type of fabrication comes in. It's called mental fabrication, *saññā* or perception: the words you use to label things, the images you use to present things to yourself. What kind of image is good to hold of the breath energy in the body? Do you want to be aware of the breath energy along the skin? Or do you want to have it go deeper into the different organs? That's your choice. Do you want to have it go up or down? Sometimes if you're feeling drowsy, you want to have it go up a bit. If you're feeling like too much up-flowing energy is

giving you a headache or what one Zen master called “Zen sickness”—it’s a dullness in the head—that’s when you want the energy to go down. When you breathe in, think of the energy flowing down from the nose, past the mouth, down the throat. Don’t think of it going up through the forehead or whatever.

There are lots of ways you can label the energy to yourself and present a picture of it. Probably the most useful conversation you could be having right now is what you can do to make the breath interesting. Because if it’s just in-out, in-out, in-out, you’re going to leave pretty soon. *You’ll* be out, who knows where. So that should be your top priority: learning how to make yourself interested in the breath.

As for the other voices that come along that try to discourage you, you may have to realize that these are your worst enemies, as when you identify with the voices that say, “I can’t do this—it’s too much for me.” As the Buddha once said, the things that an enemy could do to you are nowhere nearly as bad as the things you can do to yourself. You can be your worst enemy. But you can also be your best friend, so which do you want it to be? There will be part of you that says, “I don’t want to do this. I want to find some excuse for not burdening myself with this, for telling myself, ‘I can’t manage it; I can’t cope.’” You’ve been listening to that voice for who knows how many lifetimes. Do you want to keep on listening to it? Or do you, as the texts say, want to realize something you’ve never realized before, attain something you’ve never attained before? It’s your choice.

So look at the voices in the head. What are they doing to pull you away from the breath? You have to learn how to argue with them. One of the voices the Buddha mentions in the Canon is the voice of vanity, concerned with what other people might think about you. If you’re concerned with what other people might think about you, you’re placing them in a position of power over you. They’re the ones who are deciding what your life should be, what’s important, what’s not important. But you’re not doing this for anyone else.

This is one of the reasons the forest ajaans are very sparing in their praise when their students do well. If you’re really doing well, you should realize, “Okay, this is good. I don’t need anybody else to praise this or to admire this. This is good in and of itself.” In fact, Ajaan Lee once said that when you reach the noble attainments, one of the special things about them is that nobody else knows. The things that other people know about are dangerous. They could try to take them from you, or to use you for their aims. As the Buddha said in that passage we chant again and again: This is something to be experienced by the observant for themselves. In other words, each person who attains this attains it in a way that nobody else can know. That’s what the really good things in life are like.

So if you find that someone else's voice is coming in, and you're trying to impress that voice or impress what you think of that person, Ajaan Fuang had a nice image. One time, I was getting ready to give my very first Dhamma talk. And even though it wasn't going to be my own Dhamma talk—I was going to be reading Ajaan Lee—I still felt a little nervous about it. He said, "Imagine you have a sword in your hand, and if there's anybody in the room who doesn't like what you're saying, you can cut off his head." So if you find that there's anybody you're trying to please or trying to impress, visualize that your sword can cut off the head. Then you can turn around and cut off your own head to make it fair, because the real problem, of course, is not with that person. The problem is with your perception of that person, your desire to impress the person.

This is what the Buddha calls conceit. You're comparing yourself with other people. At the moment, other people's suffering is not your issue. Other people's happiness, other people's abilities or lack of abilities: These are not the issues right now. The issues are your own ability or lack of ability, the way you place suffering and stress on your own mind, and your ability to relieve some of that even if it's just, as one of the forest ajaans once said, a little fleck of bark off a tree. If you get that much of a defilement off your mind, your mind is that much lighter.

So meditation is your business and nobody else's. It's one of the few things in life for which that observation is totally true. For many of us, that's disorienting. Everything we've done in our lives is because someone else has set down a schedule, set down the agenda. This is your agenda, and sometimes that's a little overwhelming. But if you find yourself trying to make up excuses for why you can't do this or why you can't deal with the training, ask yourself: Okay, what would you have if you didn't train? What would there be for you to fall back on? This is all there is. Give it your all, and you won't be disappointed.