

Only Natural

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One of the main reasons why we suffer is because of the way the mind talks to itself. Now, the solution is not to just stop talking. You have to understand this process of what's going on as the mind talks to itself. Who's talking? Where does it come from? Where does it lead? And the first part of the training is to learn how to talk to yourself in new ways.

When the Buddha talks about directed thought and evaluation as one of the factors of right concentration, if you're not familiar with what he's talking about, it sounds like you're going to have to do something new you've never done before. But directed thought and evaluation is simply another name for talking to yourself. So now, as you meditate, you're going to talk to yourself about the breath, and you're going to talk to yourself about getting the mind to stay with the breath, and *wanting* to stay with the breath—a new topic of conversation, a new way of talking.

So talk to yourself about the breath. How is the breath right now? Is it coming in? Is it going out? How does it feel? It is possible to breathe in a way that feels really, really good, really satisfying. Try to notice which parts of the body are especially sensitive to how the breath feels. Those are the ones that will be especially gratified when the breath goes well. So pay attention to them. They're your barometer.

And as for any other conversations coming into the mind right now, regard them as not-self. You have that choice, you know. When things that come up in the mind, there's no need to say, "Well, this must be me or mine because it's in my mind." Who knows where it comes from? Even if it does come from your old habits, you don't have to be defined by your old habits. So you can say, "Right now I don't want to identify with that." You're trying to sort out the voices inside, and learn how to step back from them.

Having the breath as a focal point allows you to get out of the conversations and to look at them from the side. It's like going into a movie theater. If you sit and simply look straight at the screen, you get sucked in. It's just a play of light across a very reflective screen, but you can see it as people, you can see it as locations of all kinds, and get pulled into the drama. You can laugh and you can cry, all over just a play of light. But if you go and you sit on the side of the theater and look across, you'll see people sitting in the chairs, and a beam of light going over their heads, flickering. They're laughing and crying, and you can see clearly,

“This is just a beam of light.” That’s the perspective you want to get on the thoughts and voices that come into the mind. These are just fabrications, and you begin to see that, like the people laughing and crying, some of the fabrications provide a lot of emotional juice. Anger comes along with them. Fear, greed, envy, all kinds of things. But if you can see it simply as a play of light, then you realize, “Why get involved?” Well, part of the reason to get involved is that there’s more than just a conversation going on inside.

Some of the thoughts that come up in the mind hijack your breath, hijack the breath energy in the body, and squeeze it in all kinds of ways to make you feel that you’ve got to act on these things. They’re like politicians who say, “You’ve got to choose the lesser of two evils.” There was that great anti-two-party ad years back when they went around asking kids, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” And one kid said, “I want to vote for the lesser of two evils.” I mean, nobody consciously likes to think in those terms, but that’s often what our emotions present us with—either you give in to the emotion and you act on it, and then you’re going to have bad karma, or you fight it off and bottle it up and it turns into cancer. Those are the options they give us. So you’ve got to question those options.

There must be some other way. This is one of the reasons why it’s useful to be able to work with the breath, to consciously work with the breath, because you’ve let your emotions play with the breath, hijack the breath for who knows how long. The breath has been their tool for squeezing your nerves. So now you take it back and you unsqueeze things. Learn to breathe in a way that feels spacious inside. Learn how to get quick at that.

A good meditative exercise as you’re going through the day, when you find yourself doing a chore and you’ve forgotten the breath, is to stop. Say, “I’m going to stop doing the chore right now. I’m going to focus on the breath for five minutes and I really want to settle down.” That way, you learn pretty quickly where your spots are in the body, the spots where you’re most sensitive. And as you get good at settling down right there, right then, then you have the tool you need when emotions come up, because they come up very quickly and they’ve become old habits we’ve learned and mastered for who knows how long, how many lifetimes, to the point where it’s natural.

We have that phrase in English where we say, “Well, it’s only natural.” That’s just an excuse for saying, “Well, that’s just the way it’s got to be.” But think of it another way: “Only natural” can mean that that’s all it is, nothing more than natural. Aging is natural, illness is natural, death is natural, the desire for more becoming—all these things are natural. Suffering is natural. But we’re here to go

beyond natural. We want something better than natural. So when you say something is “only natural,” think of it more as a put-down, rather than an excuse. When someone says something irritating, or is acting in an irritating way, it’s only natural to be angry. But can’t you make your mind do something *better* than natural?

That’s what we’re here for: something better than natural. This is why the Buddha talks about a lot of the states of mind we find natural as we go through the day as being defilements. He’s not trying to say that you’re a bad person for thinking in those ways, simply that your mind deserves better. Your mind should be brighter than this. You’re darkening the mind when you engage in these things. You have a better potential. That’s what he’s saying.

That image he has of the defilements being like clouds that obscure the sun—a lot of ink has been spilled over that image, trying to say that your mind is innately pure, innately clean. Ajaan Maha Boowa has a good response to that, “If the mind were innately pure, then how could anything defile it? And if something could defile it, that means that if you got it back to purity again, then it could be defiled again.” The brightness is not purity. It’s simply the mind’s capacity to know, to know itself clearly, to be aware all around, as in a state of concentration, and then from there, to see things even more clearly. But if you give in to your only-natural desires and only-natural defilements, you’re obscuring the mind’s ability to see itself, to understand itself.

For the mind to step back, it’s not really natural. For it to see itself as something separate, the voices as something separate: That’s not really natural. That’s a skill. During my first time with Ajaan Fuang, I asked him one day about the needs of the body. I said, “How can you follow the celibate life? The body has its needs.” And he said, “The body doesn’t have any needs. The body would be perfectly content to die. We’re the ones who have the needs. We’re the ones who make the body get up, move around, do this, do that.” So whatever comes up, you can’t blame the body. The problem is in the mind, because the mind has just been only natural when it could be better.

This is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he found that there was something that was beyond only natural. This is what the noble search is all about. What’s natural is going for aging, illness, and death, or things that age, grow ill, and die, trying to solve the problem of suffering with a little bit of temporary pleasure. But then more suffering follows on that.

Samsara is natural. Coming back and suffering again: That’s what’s natural. The Buddha looked for something better than natural. And he found it. So the path he teaches means going against a lot of old, ingrained habits. Remember that

the defilements are just that. They're habits. They're ways we've been acting in the past. Anger is an old habit. It doesn't necessarily have to be you. You don't have to say, "I'm angry." Just know that there's anger there. There may have times in the past where anger was effective and got you what you wanted, which is why you've kept it around. It's like a snarling little dog—not the friendliest of dogs, and it's not your favorite dog, but it has been useful for some things in the past, so you keep it on as part of your pack. But that dog turns on you. It bites you. You have to realize that there are better ways of dealing with difficult situations than getting angry. That's one of those dogs you want to leave outside the pack. So remember, you've got other alternatives.

When the mind says, "It's either X or Y," the Buddha was the sort of person who says, "No, there must be other alternatives." And you want to look for those alternatives in yourself. He gives you new ways of thinking, new ways of talking to yourself, new ways of breathing, new images to hold in mind—all the different kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. He gives recommendations on how to do these things in a new way, in a way that becomes a path, not back to more aging, illness, and death, but a path to the deathless. So remember that that option is a real option, too.

When you find yourself caught in the claws of a particularly bad emotion, and it's telling you it's going to be either X or Y, or sometimes it says "It's only going to be me, me, me, me, me." You have to say, "No, there is another alternative. There is something better."

This is why we listen to the Buddha's teachings: because they expand our imagination. We're addicted to suffering. As the Buddha said, when we're suffering, it's the five clinging aggregates. And how do we identify ourselves? We identify ourselves with the five clinging-aggregates. We're identifying ourselves with suffering. But there's an alternative. Our problem is that we identify with suffering and we don't imagine any other way. The Buddha's allowing us to imagine something else.

As with most addictions, a huge part of the problem is a failure of the imagination, a way of talking to ourselves that closes off opportunities—and that phrase "only natural" is one of them. So learn how to say it with a new meaning, one that, instead of just serving as an excuse and trying to end the conversation, says, "Okay there must be something better, something better than natural."

And take delight in the path of trying to find that. That's what the customs or the traditions of the noble ones are all about—to take delight in things that we don't ordinarily take delight in: stepping back from our anger, stepping back from our disappointments, the way the mind likes to feed on its sense of being abused

or victimized, or treated unfairly. Learn to step back from those habits and say, “There must be something better, and I really would like to find that something better. And I’ll enjoy mastering the skills that get me out of this.” If you learn how to talk to yourself in that way, that’s where you’ve taken directed thought and evaluation, and even though it may not be getting you into jhana, it’ll be a part of right effort, right resolve. And those are factors of the path, too.