

Inner Voice Lessons

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August, 2002

One of the first things you notice as you try to quiet the mind is the lack of quiet – all the chattering going on, all the discussions, the dialogs, the committee discussions going on up in your head, and sometimes all over your body. There seems to be never-ending chatter.

Often our first thought as we start to meditate is, “How can I stop the chatter? How can I just quiet all those voices so things can be perfectly quiet inside?” But as you practice, you begin to realize that you just can’t put a stop to things that way. It requires a more gradual process, learning to bring that conversation under control. When you start out there are lots unskillful voices in there, and frequently the discussion is not being run according to Robert’s Rules of Order. This voice comes barging in, that voice yells at you, this voice whispers in your ear. And all the subterfuge and techniques of a political meeting are nothing compared with what goes on in the mind – all the tricks the mind plays on itself, how the different voices try to get their way – because many of them are not just aimless voices saying random things. They have a purpose in saying their thing. There’s an urging on to action in one direction or another, so they try all kinds of tricks to get their way. The mind has countless ways of getting a particular idea or a particular motion through the committee. So to begin with, when we work with the mind, we want to make that discussion more skillful.

As you start meditating, try to gain some detachment from the voices, so that you’re watching them from outside, instead of joining in with the conversation, taking on the voices as your own. This is one of the lessons of the teaching on not-self: It’s not *you* talking in there. There are voices in there, and you’ve tended to identify with them, but you can begin to dis-identify with them as well. Tell yourself, “I’m not necessarily responsible for things that come bursting into the mind. I don’t have to act on the firing of every nerve end. I don’t have to get involved.” If a voice comes and urges action, just let it urge, urge, urge, and then it’ll stop after a while. You can just keep on watching.

Just the act of wanting to make that conversation more skillful: That in and of itself begins to distance you from it. Practice concentrating on the breath as a way of giving you a good firm basis on which to stand so that you can stay outside of the discussion. But simply watching the discussion isn’t going to make it go away on its own. You’ve also got to learn how to make it more skillful. Sometimes that means introducing new voices – like the meditating voice that says, “Hey, stay with the breath, stay with the breath, make the breath comfortable, allow the breath to be comfortable. Give us some *room* here.”

This is why the Buddha didn't encourage his monks to take a vow of silence. There's a story in the Vinaya of a group of monks who began the Rains retreat with a vow: "Okay, we're not going to talk to each other. Each person just maintain silence throughout the Rains." At the end of the retreat they went to see the Buddha, very proud of the fact that they had succeeded in not talking to each other for the entire three months. But he didn't praise them. Instead he said, "You've been living like sheep, like dumb animals." This inner conversation doesn't become more skillful just by stopping your talking. To improve your inner conversation, you get a lot of help by learning good examples of outer conversation.

The first thing to learn as you live together is how to talk to each other in skillful ways – which may mean talking less than you might normally do. But it also means that when something has to be said, you figure out the best way to say it: the best time, the best place, the best words to couch your comments. As you get more skillful with the use of your mouth, it forces the mind to get more skillful in the way it thinks, and you begin to notice the effects of your words. If there's something negative you have to talk about, when's the best time to bring it up? What's the most effective way of saying it? What way of saying it does the least damage to the group? As you get more skilled in using your mouth this way, you find the conversation in your mind will begin to mature as well.

On top of that, there are Dhamma tapes you can listen to, Dhamma books you can read, to introduce new and better voices into the conversation. This is also why we have the chanting. Some of the phrases of the chant keep coming back into your head at odd hours of the day, and they're designed to be skillful additions to that conversation.

You'll notice, as you try pulling out of your inner conversations, that some conversations are easier to pull out of than others. The ones filled with recriminations and negative thoughts, harmful thoughts: Those are the hardest to extract yourself from. But the conversations in your mind dealing with issues of true happiness, issues of being skillful, issues of reflecting on what's really important in life: Those are a lot easier to pull out of because they tend toward quietude, they tend toward concentration.

So as we're training the mind, it's not just an issue of immediately stopping the thinking. It's learning how to think more skillfully, and that starts with learning how to use your mouth more skillfully. As Ajaan Lee once said, "You should bow down to your mouth every day." You have a human mouth, and the human mouth has a lot of power. It's not like the mouths of dogs and cats with very limited vocabularies, just barks and meows. We can say all kinds of things, and these things can have an enormous effect on our lives. If you start paying attention to what you say in the course of the day and try to make it more skillful, you begin to see that it does have an effect on how you relate to other people, how other people relate to you. The whole context of your life is strongly affected by your speech.

As you work on that fact, the act of working on your external speech connects with the issue of working on your own mind. The care you use in framing what you say, the thought and circumspection you use as you notice the right time to say it, deciding what's worth saying, what's not worth saying: These things develop mindfulness; they develop alertness – all the good qualities you need in the meditation. You learn how to gauge what's worth thinking, what's the right time to think, what's the wrong time to think. Your inner speech turns into Right Speech, another factor of the path.

At the same time, as you've got these better voices in your head, it's a lot easier to pull out of them and watch them so that you can see: When a thought forms, how does it form? Beneficial thoughts are a lot easier to take apart in this way. Thoughts filled with self-recrimination and regret are very hard to take apart because it's so easy to get caught up in their stories. The more skillful the thinking, the easier it is to take apart. You can simply watch the thought calmly as it comes and goes because it doesn't hold any poison for the mind. As you work with the meditation, you get quicker and quicker in seeing how the thought forms, how it disbands, how it can deceive you, and how you don't have to be deceived.

When we talk about making progress in the meditation, many of us think that it means very strong experiences of, say, rapture, oneness, or light. And these things are not to be sneered at. They're important. They give a sense of lubrication, a sense of refreshment to the practice. But the real progress is measured in how quickly you notice what's going on in the mind. For example, when the mind begins to slip off, the faster you catch it and can bring it back: That's a sign of progress.

As you get quicker and quicker this way, you begin to see the process of thought formation in and of itself – exactly what's happening in there. When do you start participating in a thought? All too often we're aware of a thought only when it's fully formed, but how did it get formed that way? Did it just happen on its own or was there some subliminal participation on your part? As you watch more and more carefully, you begin to find answers to these questions, for you can catch the process in action.

Each thought starts out as just a little stirring, and it's hard to say whether it's a stirring in the body or a stirring in the mind. It's on the borderline between the two. Then there's the act of getting interested, paying attention to it, followed by the question, "What's this thought about?" Then the mind labels, "Oh, this is a thought about x , this is a thought about y ." And that turns it into a full fledged thought. So the question is: Can you watch the stirring that would normally lead to a thought and then not participate in labeling it, not participate in trying to figure it out? When you can do this, you see that these stirrings come and – if you don't participate in them – they go. They come again and, if you still don't participate, they go.

This way you begin to realize the extent to which thought formation is really an intentional process on your part. The desire to figure out a thought, the desire to get into the thought: What's the basis of that desire? Is it boredom? Are you tired of just being very still? Do you want some entertainment? It's dangerous, you know. Some of those thoughts, once they get formed, take over the mind and turn into nightmares.

So you try to get quicker and quicker in seeing these voices as they form—where they're coming from, exactly how much you're putting into them right now, how much of this activity is just the result of past karma bubbling up in the mind. You gain more and more control over the conversations so that when you need to talk about things to yourself, you can. When you don't need to, you can keep things quiet, and the only conversation that goes on at that time is the part of the mind in control of the concentration saying, "Stay here, stay here, spread the awareness here." That's the skillful conversation you want to place in charge. Once the concentration gets really solid, then you can start turning your spotlight on those voices, the control center for your concentration. But don't be in too great a hurry to do that. You want the concentration really solid before you take those voices apart.

So the training of the mind is not a process of stamping out all the mental chatter in the mind. It's learning first how to make the chatter more skillful—starting from the outside, being more skillful in what you say. This is why Right Speech is such an important part of the practice. Because where does speech come from? The Buddha says it comes from directed thought and evaluation, which—when well trained—will turn into factors in your concentration. You direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate the breath. That helps get you into the first jhana. But to get to the point where you can really be effective in using directed thought and evaluation with the breath, you have to be more skillful in the way you direct your thoughts and evaluate what you want to say to other people, the way you use those powers of directed thought and evaluation to create words: both the words you address to other people and the conversation in your own mind.

Then, when that inner conversation gets more skillful, you can start taking it apart in even more refined ways. Finally, when all other conversation is stilled, you can turn to question the more subtle voice of the perception in charge of your concentration: "Who's talking here? Who's it labeling *for*?" That's when things really open up in the mind. Of course we all want to jump to that spot, where you find the transcendent, but to get there it takes skill, it takes time, it takes perseverance. That's the way it is with any good thing in life. Things of lasting value take time to master.

So right now we've got an hour. Do what you can within the hour. At the very least bring some control into the on-going committee conversation to make it easier and easier for the chatter to settle down. Once it can settle down, you can see it more clearly. That's why the Buddha said that concentration and

discernment go together. You can't do just insight practice or just concentration practice. The two of them go hand in hand. And it's right here at this issue – these mental voices and how skillful you are in relating to them – that's where the real meat of the practice lies.