

Training Your Commentator

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When you meditate, you find yourself talking to yourself a lot. And there's not just one voice in there, there are many voices: there's the commentator and there's the commentator on the commentator. And that can go back for many levels.

One of our main problems as meditators is that we don't know how to talk to ourselves. We don't know how to manage the conversation in a way that's going to be actually helpful.

We think that the mind should be still and that there shouldn't be any thoughts at all. But then there's a voice here and a voice there and something inside you will say, "Okay, it shouldn't be this way." Well, maybe that voice doesn't know anything, either.

As the Buddha said, directed thought and evaluation are factors in the first jhana. Part of the training in meditation is learning how to talk to yourself—because directed thought and evaluation are basically your way of formulating ideas in the mind and talking to yourself. To get into the first jhana and stay there, you want to talk to yourself in a way that brings the mind to stillness and then helps keep it there.

So it's good to know a few ground rules. One is: Don't comment on yourself as a meditator. Comment on the actions, or comment on the comments. But don't comment on what kind of person would do those actions or make those comments. Particularly avoid comments that either get you really depressed and discouraged or that get you complacent. When you think you're pretty hot stuff, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

But even worse is the voice that says, "This is no good. I'm not getting anywhere." You especially have to watch out for this voice if the meditation has been going well and all of a sudden it's not going well at all. It seems like you're starting back at square one—although it's worse than square one because when you originally started with square one there was some hope. But now it seems hopeless. So watch out for that voice. Don't listen to it.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of when he was getting started in his meditation that he could see his mind progressing and getting more and more still, and then it would just all fall apart. Then it would start progressing again and fall apart again. He was really worried about its regressing so that once it started to progress, he would do everything he could to protect it—and it would still fall apart.

Then finally he decided to change the conversation. Instead of talking to himself about the progress and regress of the mind, he said, "I'll just stick with the meditation regardless of whether things go well or not. I'm going to stick with it, stick with it, stick with it." And he found that by not getting wound up in measuring his progress as a meditator, things actually got better.

So you need to have the attitude that regardless of the ups and downs, you're not going to

let your inner commentator get up or down. In other words, when things are going well, make sure you're not complacent. When things are not going well, don't get discouraged. Learn how to give yourself some encouragement.

And remember that ups and downs are a normal part of the meditation. The mind is a very complex phenomenon. As we all know about complex systems, they're like the weather. It's not the case that, as you move from winter to summer, every day just gets gradually a little bit warmer and warmer and warmer and then, as you move from summer to winter, it gets gradually just a little bit cooler and cooler in a smooth line. There are ups and downs. You have heat waves and cold spells. That's because the system is so complex.

Well, the mind is complex, too, so just take it in stride: that when things are not going well, this is just a temporary trough and you try to figure out what you can do to keep your morale up. That will often be exactly what you need to get out of the doldrums and to get your meditation sailing again.

But in particular, watch out for the voice that says, "I'm no good as a meditator. I'm hopeless." That's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And the voice that seems negative may often seem to be the most realistic, but remember the two kinds of truths that William James talked about. He didn't give terms to name them, but one of them could be called the truths of the observer: things that are true simply when you watch them. They have nothing to do with your wants. In fact, if your wants get involved, you can't really see the truth. Like figuring out the laws of science: You can't want the law to be a certain way. If you want it to be a certain way, then that's going to skew the results of your experiments. You have to design the experiment and say, "Okay, I just want to see what happens." That's one kind of truth.

There are truths of another kind, though, and those are truths of the will. These truths become true only when you want them to be true. If you want to be a good musician, if you want to be a good sportsman, if you want to be a good cook, it's not going to happen if you don't want it. Your desire is what makes it happen.

So remember: The path is largely a truth of the will. You have to learn how to keep encouraging yourself. Even though the present facts of your meditation look pretty dismal, those aren't the truths you're looking for. You're creating a truth of the will. As the Buddha says, you generate desire. That's part of right effort. You encourage the mind.

So that's one of the first ground rules: Don't focus your comments on you as a meditator or a commentator. Focus them on actions and results. And don't let yourself get overcome by negative comments about your own abilities. Try to speak to yourself in more positive ways that are more encouraging. And remember that ups and downs are normal. Don't get complacent about the ups. Don't let yourself get discouraged by the downs. When things aren't going well, focus back on the causes. What are the causes? You watch the breath and you learn how to be in not too great a hurry to get the results. Patience is required.

Another ground rule is that you have to know when *not* to talk to yourself. One of the times is when you try different things with the breath and nothing seems to work. The mind doesn't want to settle down. Nothing seems to work at all. That's a time to be quiet. Just say, "Okay, I'm just going to watch," and whatever conversation goes on, just say, "Okay, watch, watch." Don't jump to conclusions, just watch what happens: what's going on with the breath, what's going on with the mind.

If you're constantly commenting, it gets in the way of seeing what else is happening in the mind on a deeper level. There may be an issue left over from the day that you have to deal with first before the mind will be willing to settle down. And you're not going to see it if you're constantly commenting. So when nothing seems to make sense, nothing seems to work in the meditation, just say, "Okay, be very still and watch." That can be your conversation: "Just watch, watch."

The other time to be still is when the mind *does* settle down. There's a tendency to ask, "Well, what's next, what's next?" and you have to say, "Nothing. This is what's next: staying here, learning how to develop this as a skill." Because there does come a point where you've adjusted the breath until it's good enough for the mind to settle down, and that's all you need.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is of a putting water in a water jar. You keep adding water, adding water, adding water, and finally the jar is full. But then if you continue adding water, whatever you add is just going to spill out.

Things are just right as they are. So now you allow yourself to stay with "just right." This point is where the conversation gets a lot simpler. You don't have to do so much adjusting; you don't have to try to figure things out. You just try to stay right here, stay right here. This little conversation is very simple: "Are we here?" "Yes, fine." "Are we here?" "Yes, fine." That's it.

It's like the harmoniums in *The Sirens of Titan*. Those are the inhabitants of Mercury that feed off the vibrations of Mercury, which in that novel is like a large honeycombed crystal, set humming by the contrast of the heat on the side facing the sun, and the cold on the side facing away. And the harmoniums can live off the hum. And because they don't have to feed off one another, they live a very peaceful, friendly life together. As they feed off the vibrations of the crystal, they send out two messages to one another. One is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am," and the other is, "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are."

When the mind finally settles down, that's the level of conversation you have. It's very minimal. You don't even have full sentences, just the perception of, "Breath, breath, breath." Occasionally you check to see if it's going well. If it's going well, okay, good, then back to, "Breath, breath, breath." That's it.

But before you get there, there has to be a certain amount of conversation. So learn how to speak to yourself in a way that's encouraging. Try to listen to the voices that help with your ingenuity, that help with your powers of observation, that help make you content to stay here. Even when things aren't going well, try to find ways of making yourself content to be on the

path.

There's that story they tell of the Englishman who went across the wastes of the Northwest Territories in the early 19th century because he wanted to check out a copper source he'd heard of. And he couldn't find any way to get there except to go with a band of Dene, which are the relatives of the Navahos up in Canada.

And he noticed that on the days when food was scarce, the hunting was not going well, and they had to cinch their belts a little tighter: Those were the days when they joked the most among themselves. In other words, they did what they could to keep their spirits up.

So learn how to keep your spirits up as you're meditating. Even when things don't seem to be going well—especially when they're not going well—don't let the temporary setbacks get you down. Remember that these are temporary: There's no such thing as a permanent setback. Even when death sets you back, if you've got the momentum for your practice, you can keep on going.

And here we are. We haven't even died. You're still alive, you're still meditating, there's hope. So learn how to talk to yourself in a way that's really productive, that's really conducive to getting the mind in shape.

This is one of the most important skills you need to develop as a meditator: training the commentator—or the “commentator class” you may call them. All those levels of commenting that are going on in the mind: Remember that they're an important part of the meditation, too.