

Random Word Generators

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Ever since we learned how to talk, we've been talking to ourselves. In fact, that's where most of our conversations take place: inside. The amount of talking we do with other people is nothing compared with all the conversations going on in the mind. You'd think that by now we'd be fairly tired of the whole process. But there's a part of the mind that's always fascinated by what's being churned out. In fact, it's our fascination with all our conversations that can get in the way of our getting the mind to settle down. So you have to work on that: Learn how to not be fascinated by everything you say to yourself.

It's not that we totally rule out thinking when we meditate. But we're trying to learn how to sort through things. We're learning how to be a good editor, for one thing, to decide which of our comments, say, on our mind, or on our breath, or on our ability to keep the mind with the breath are actually helpful; which ones are not. And this applies to all our activities. The mind has a habit of learning how to say unhelpful things, and often those are the ones that sting and stay with us the most. So we have to learn how to pull ourselves out of that.

The Buddha said that one of the ways of learning how to gain some control over your thought processes is learning how to ignore thoughts. There are times when you see a thought come up and you can simply direct your attention back to the breath, no problem. Other times that doesn't work. You've got to start thinking about the drawbacks of all that discursive thinking. And sometimes that won't work. You'll see that a lot of that thinking is nothing but old movies, bad ones at that: the type that used to star Jane Russell or Ronald Reagan. And sometimes learning to regard your thoughts as bad movies will help get you out of those thoughts. But other times, they'll just keep coming up. The mind keeps churning them up. Sometimes it's because you're tired and sometimes it's simply out of force of habit. So you have learn how to pull yourself out.

Two analogies come to mind. One is that these thoughts are like stray dogs. They come around and if you feed them, they'll come around more. If you stop feeding them, they'll still come around for a while, but when they finally get the message that they're not wanted, they'll go away. When they keep coming back during that period, they'll whine and they'll scratch and whatever, but you have to be firm in paying them no attention.

If that analogy seems too harsh, think about a crazy person coming to talk to you. The crazy person wants your attention, but you realize that even if you give the crazy person enough attention just to try to drive the crazy person away, he's got you. It's hard to extract yourself. But if you pretend that he's not there and just go about your business, after a while, the person goes away. Again though, when he sees that you're ignoring him, he'll start saying crazier and crazier things to see what he can do to catch you. You've just got to be really determined that you're not going to fall for any of that—because you've got the breath here, you've got your work to do. You have to remind yourself that just because this thinking's going on in the mind, that doesn't mean that you can't experience the breath. The breath is there. So hold on to that sensation. Try to make it as continuous as possible, because it's all too easy when there's a gap—say, between the in-breath and the out-breath—that the mind will slip over to that thinking to check out what the crazy person is saying now. So say No. Keep the breath as smooth and continuous and without any gaps at all.

There is a part of the body where, regardless of whether the breath is coming in or going out, there's a sensation that's fairly steady. That's the steady breath. If you can get in touch with that and realize that it is breath energy—it's not just a solid sensation, but it's solid breath energy—then you start getting interested in the body again. There's a new level of breath, a new level of breath energy movement in the body. It's a different kind of movement. In fact, that's the level of energy that can get you into deeper concentration. That's one way

of dealing with these other thoughts. You just get really interested in what's going on in the body and changing your perceptions of what's going on with the breath.

But if you find it really hard to pull yourself out of all that thinking and that chatter, there are two other ways you can do it. One is try to identify whose voice it is: that particular way of scolding yourself, that particular way of commenting on things: Who did you pick that up from? Then you ask yourself, "What did that person know?" You have to be careful with this because sometimes you run across somebody and there's a long back story. But the point is that you learn how to not see the voice as *your* voice. This is just a habit you picked up from somebody else. The person probably didn't have any ill will toward you. You just simply latched on to that way of thinking, that way of talking. It became part of your inner conversation.

Or you could think about Ajaan Lee's image that not every thought that comes into your head is *your* thought. There are all the worms and germs inside your body, things that go through your bloodstream and through the blood vessels in your brain. They might leave a few thoughts behind. And there are hungry ghosts hanging around and who knows what other kind of spirits are hanging around. Maybe sometimes their thoughts get put into your head. So learn how to see these things as not-self. You don't know where they came from.

It's just like a random word generator, one of those programs you can find online where they can generate post-modern sentences that are totally ridiculous. They sound like good post-modern scholarship, which may be ridiculous to begin with, but then they just put everything into the blender and it comes out with new sentences in the post-modern style: pure nonsense. A lot of that's going on in the mind as well.

In fact, the more you can see the sentences as meaningless and pull yourself out of language altogether, the more clearly you'll see that you've developed a really useful skill. There's a section of the Canon, the Atthaka Vagga, that contains a whole series of poems on the topic of clinging and how to go beyond clinging. And one of the features of the poems is that there's a lot of word play. The purpose of that, of course, is to make you stop and think: that words are slippery things. We give them meanings, but then the meanings we give them can slip around. You can't totally trust them. That way, anything that's expressed in words gets called into question as well. So if you can see this your thinking as nonsense sounds, so much the better.

When I was in Thailand during my first year was at Wat Asokaram, and they had a whole series of monks on a rotating roster to get up and give the Dhamma talks. And out of the fourteen monks who were giving Dhamma talks, maybe two could actually give good ones. The rest were more of a background irritation in the meditation than anything else. I found one of the ways of dealing with that was to consciously not understand what they were saying. Perhaps it was easier because it was in a second language. But I would consciously say, "Okay whatever that word was just now, I'm not going to consciously connect it to the next word. I'm not going to connect that to the next word." And I found it a lot easier to keep all that stuff in the background.

Apply the same technique to your own thoughts and you find that it's really useful. You'll be left with just random sounds, random impulses in the mind, and they don't have to pull you away. But for this to work with your thoughts, you have to learn how not to get interested in them. Remind yourself that the mind does have this random word generator, this random impulse generator, that just keeps churning things out, but just because it's churning this stuff out doesn't mean you have to pay it any attention.

And, of course, in treating this problem, you begin to realize, as the Buddha said, how qualities like feelings and perceptions and fabrications really do depend both on contact and on attention. If you give attention to these things, they're going to grow. If you don't give attention, they don't grow. But they may have some momentum from all the past acts of attention that you've given them, so you have to allow for that. Often we've been so good at learning how to conduct these inner conversations that it's hard to get the momentum to stop. At the very least, though, you can pull out of the conversation. It can go on and on and on, but you've got your attention someplace else. And after a while, it'll begin to dissolve. And the result is that

you've not only learned how get the mind to settle down more fully, but you've also learned a lot about this process of fabrication in the mind and how useful the Buddha's teachings on not-self can be.

You've learned about fabrication—the tendency we have to churn things out—together with perception. Perception is the act of the mind that gives meanings to things. This is the real instigator. The process of fabrication just churns up stuff. It's the generator of these random sentences, while perception is what gives them meaning. Once you've given them meaning, as Ajahn Maha Boowa said, it creates a bridge into the mind. So when you can cut through the meanings, then you can cut through the bridge. This is one of the ways in which getting the mind into concentration also develops your discernment. The two go hand in hand.