

Stop the Chatter

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The mind spends a lot of its time talking to itself and it can't seem to get enough of the conversation. As the Buddha said, we have our cravings as our companions, and so we're talking with those companions all the time. Our desire for this pleasure, our desire to get away from that pain, our desire to comment on this, comment on that: We see it as part of our freedom, and it is, to some extent. Our ability to shape our experience is an expression of our freedom, our freedom of choice. But what do we do with that freedom? Sometimes we do skillful things and sometimes we do some very unskillful things. We think we're dressing things up so they taste really good. We've got all our favorite condiments, but we can ruin the food of experience. We may have found that life tends to throw a lot of really bland things at us, and we like salt and ketchup. So we end up putting salt and ketchup on everything, even when there are things that would taste better without the salt, without the ketchup.

You see this especially clearly when you come out to a place like this where things are really very quiet and just about perfect—not too many people here right now, the weather is ideal—and yet the mind still doesn't want to settle down. It wants to comment on this, comment on that, and so you need to learn how to turn off the comments.

We talk a lot about directed thought and evaluation as being an important part of the meditation, and that's because so many people think that meditation means not thinking at all. You need your directed thought and evaluation to get the mind to settle down, to arrange things in the body so that it's a good place to stay, to arrange things in the mind so that the mind's willing to settle down. Put a little salt and pepper on things if they need it. But there comes a point where there's already too much salt and pepper, but you just keep pouring it on, pouring it on, without any sense of enough.

The Buddha says there is a pleasure, there is a sense of rapture, that comes without directed thought, without evaluation. It comes from letting these things go, being willing to put them aside. In other words, you're not commenting on things anymore. You're just willing to plunge right in. Yet part of the mind resists. It feels it's going to lose control, the freedom it wants to step back and be critical. But you miss out on some important things in the meditation: the really refreshing, really stable, solid states of concentration that can provide a lot of good food for the mind, a lot of good nourishment for the body. These states require just stopping the commentator, learning when enough is enough.

When you're working with the breath, getting things to go well, on the one hand you do want to be a connoisseur of the breath so that you have a sense of how you can make it more flavorful. When the breath isn't good enough, what can you do with it, how can you fix it, so that it is? But, we're not here to master perfect breathing. We're here to get the breath good enough so that the mind can settle down and stay with a sense of wellbeing. As Ajaan Fuang would say, "It's like putting water in a jar. There comes a point when you can't put any more water in the jar. No matter how much more water you add, it flows right out. The jar is going to keep only that much, so at that point you stop pouring in the water." Just let things sit. And as for the part of the mind that says, "This is stupid. Nothing's happening, nothing's being analyzed, nothing's being learned," just say, "Well, I'm learning how to stay still, and stay, stay, stay." There are times when the mind really does need to rest and it can't get the full benefit of concentration unless it learns how to turn off that commentator.

You've looked all around the breath. You've worked through the patterns of tension in the different parts of the body. Okay, good enough. Plunge into the breath and leave the thinking behind. Just focus right in, focus, focus, focus. It's not that you're going to block out other things or that you'll be unable to hear things happening outside. It's just that you're not paying attention to them. This is the point where the Buddha says the mind attains internal assurance. You know it's okay just to focus in. You don't have to hold anything back.

Tell yourself: You've listened to yourself talk for who knows how long. It's time to stop for a bit and get a taste of the pleasure and rapture, the sense of fullness and refreshment that can come when you're willing to stop the chatter. As you do this, of course, part of the mind will rebel, and you've got to learn how to resist that, learn how to stand up to it, the part that likes to comment on things. It's a good time to learn how not to identify with it.

This is going to be a very important skill as you get deeper and deeper into the meditation: learning how not to identify with the part that always insists on being in charge. Because it's only in this way that you're going to learn anything new.