

It's Good to Talk to Yourself

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We often hear that in meditation there's no thinking. Everything is very quiet. So when we sit down to focus on the breath, we get frustrated when we see that the mind is still talking to itself about the breath. Then it wanders off and talks to itself about something else. Then it comes back and talks about the breath.

It's important to realize that talking to yourself is a necessary part of getting the mind to settle down. The Buddha calls it directed thought and evaluation, two of the factors of jhana, strong concentration. Then even when the questions and answers settle down, there are still perceptions—the images you hold in your mind—and those carry you all the way through many of the even very refined levels of concentration. So the trick is not so much stopping your thinking, but learning how to think properly in a way that helps you settle down.

What are you saying to yourself about the breath right now? You can ask yourself if the breath feels good. Where do you feel the breath? What concept of breath are you using? There's the breath of the air coming in and out through the nose. There's also the breath of the energy movements in the body. Some of those movements are fairly obvious; others are not so obvious. Which ones are you going to pay attention to? Which ones *can* you pay attention to? That's a useful question. Which ones are clear enough so that you can maintain your focus all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, for many, many breaths?

Search around in the body and find some breathing sensations that look like they're easy to follow, and give them a try. Try to stick with them as much as you can. Then after a while, you can question yourself and evaluate what you've done: Did that work? If it didn't, there can be different reasons for why it didn't. Either you had other issues that were gnawing away at the mind, or you're having trouble keeping track of the breath as it gets more subtle. So you move around and find something else. Or you can focus on the issues that are eating away at your mind.

Ajaan Maha Boowa had a very useful analogy for different ways of getting the mind to settle down. In some cases, he said, your mind is like a tree standing out in the middle of a meadow. If you want to cut the tree down, you can cut it down in any direction, and you don't have to think too much about which direction is possible and which one is not because they're all possible. Nothing is interfering with the fall of the tree in any direction at all. In other cases, though, you're trying to cut down a tree in the middle of a forest. Here you have to look at where there are spaces between the other trees. In which direction can you cut the tree so that

it's not going to be stuck leaning on other trees? And before you cut the trunk, do you have to cut some of the branches? If they're entangled with the branches of other trees, even though you cut the trunk, the tree's not going to come down. So sometimes your mind is like the tree out in the middle of the meadow, and sometimes it's like the tree in the forest. It's got some entanglements, and you've got to learn how to cut them away.

This is what many of the different contemplations are for: contemplation of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to deal with times when you're feeling discouraged in the practice, and contemplation of death for when you're feeling lazy. You realize that death could come at any time, and you've got work to do in your mind if you want to be ready to die and not suffer from it. Contemplation of the body helps with all kinds of issues. If you have issues around lust, you can think about the different parts of the body and realize there's nothing there that's really worthy of lust. You take off the skin, and you wouldn't want to look at it. If you have issues of vanity around the body, again you look at your body, look at other people's bodies, and they're all made of this stuff.

So if you find that there are issues entangling you, you try to think in ways that help you step back and say, "That's really not worth getting involved in." You start out with some of the standard contemplations, and if they don't work, you can adjust them so that they do work for your particular case. What is your particular set of entangling branches, and what saw is going to work on those branches? That's where you have to use your ingenuity. Some of the basic patterns are there, and they are very helpful. Usually what you end up doing is taking the basic patterns and then adjusting them a little bit.

Then you can get back to the breath. Here you can start trying some of the various ways of perceiving the breath that help you to settle in, seep into the body, so that you really do feel solidly placed here, solidly rooted. Think of the breath as the energy going through the blood vessels. And where are your blood vessels right now? They're all over the place, and as they branch out, they get smaller and smaller and smaller, more and more refined. Can you make your awareness more refined in the same way? Or you can think of the body as basically an energy field. Even the solid parts of the body are made of atoms that are mostly space, and the matter in the atoms is basically energy. The energy of the breath can pass through that space. Try holding that perception in mind. See if that helps.

All of this thinking is necessary to get the mind to settle down. You reach a point where things are nice enough, the body feels open enough, everything is at ease, and you can settle down. There may be little spots here and there where there are some patterns of tension that you can't undo just yet. But you can tell yourself,

“Well, I’ll learn to live with those for the time being,” and get your nourishment from the areas that you *can* make comfortable. That’s when you can let go of some of the grosser aspects of the thinking that got you to settle down.

But the thinking is important, and learning to observe your thinking is one of the ways in which you gain some insight. You can watch yourself create a question and then decide, “No, I don’t think that question’s going to work,” and you can put the question aside. That ability to drop a question is really, really important. It’s one of the hallmarks of wisdom, knowing which questions are worth pursuing and which ones are not. Just because a question has grabbed your attention doesn’t mean it’s really worthwhile.

As you’re working with the breath, you begin to get a sense of which questions are helpful in getting the mind to settle down, which ones are not, which ways of thinking are helpful, which ways of perceiving are helpful, which ones are not. You begin to realize that you’ve got choices here. Just because a thought comes into your mind doesn’t mean you have to pursue it. A question can come into your mind, but you don’t have to follow it through.

Now, the Buddha’s not telling you *not* to ask questions at all. He wasn’t the sort of person who said, “Well, just follow my instructions. Don’t think. We’ll guarantee you enlightenment in x number of days or x number of months.” That’s turning the mind into a factory. You think you can put it through the process, and you’ll end up with processed mind. The way you actually gain insight into things is by asking the right questions, and then trying to figure out the right way to answer them. That requires you to exercise your own ingenuity. Insight isn’t something that can be processed like cheese. Or if it is processed, it *is* like processed cheese: It’s not all that good for you.

You want exercise in learning how to ask yourself the right questions and then figure out how to approach them so that you can get useful answers. You start by conversing with yourself about the breath, and then stepping back and watching the process of the conversation. You learn an awful lot about the mind right there. Then when you’re ready to settle down, that’s what all the conversation was for, right now at least, so you can be with the breath with a minimum amount of signaling to yourself: “This is the breath. Here, we’re staying with the breath, and the breath feels good.” When it feels like it’s saturating the body, the signals it become just, “breath, breath, breath.”

When the mind can settle down like that, that’s one of the signs that your questioning has worked. Your ability to step back from the questions and watch the process leads to a different kind of calm—the calm that comes when you realize that just because a question pops into your mind doesn’t mean you *have* to

find an answer to it. You can then look at the desire behind some of those questions.

That's when you really get to see a lot of the motivations going on in the mind: where your greed is, where your aversion is, where your delusion is, where your lust is, where your fears are. You get to the point where you're not driven by those things because you *can* step back. That's an even greater level of calm.

So we're pursuing both calm and insight because you find them together. The important thing is that you keep your conversation focused right here.