

Right Speech, Inside & Out

July 12, 2019

To get the mind to settle down, you have to talk to it. Remind it of why it's a good thing to be here, a good thing to be with the breath, how you don't have to be responsible for anything else right now. Take some joy in that fact. Give it pep talks when it's discouraged, rein it in when it's getting a little bit too carried away, so that finally it can settle down and you can stop the talking. The trick, though, is to engage in right speech with yourself. Wrong speech would be, "Think about this other thing first for just a minute, it won't take up too much of your time." It's a lie. One thought leads to another, leads to another, and you end up who knows where in the middle of Siberia.

Other times, when the mind is settling down, there's a part of the mind that's afraid of concentration so it tries to break things up. That's divisive speech. Harsh speech, of course, is when you tell yourself you're a miserable meditator who can't even get the mind to settle down with one or two breaths. And then there's idle chatter: everything else that fills the mind that's not related to what you're doing right now, even though it's about the Dhamma.

Ajaan Lee has an interesting observation, which is that when you're talking to people who are not ready for really high level Dhamma yet, if you talk about high level Dhamma, it's idle chatter. It's not really relevant to what they're doing, what they need to do. So you've got to sort through all the voices in your mind and listen only to the voices of right speech. Let the wrong speech go. You don't have to stop it, but you don't have to engage in it.

This is one of the reasons we have to practice right speech outside, so that you get used to knowing what kind of speech is appropriate, what's not. Remember that sign we have at the old guest house, the three questions the Buddha asked himself about his speech: Is it true? Is it beneficial? And is this the right time and place for this comment? When you learn how to hold to those standards in your external speech, it's a lot easier to hold to them in your internal speech as well.

The big problem of course is idle chatter. You notice that even though it's part of the path to avoid idle chatter, there's no precept against it—because if there were such a precept, we'd be breaking it all the time. It's so easy to slip into it because it's so aimless. With lies, you have specific aim. With harsh speech, divisive speech, you have specific aims. But with idle chatter your aims can be pretty vague.

So you've got to learn how to be really strict with yourself, that you're not going to say anything unless you have a clear purpose for what you want to say. Think of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula: Before you say anything, ask

yourself, “What’s going to be accomplished by this?” All too often we don’t think before we speak. We open our mouths and think later. And as Ajaan Fuang used to say, when you have to think about what you’ve said after you said it, that’s usually a bad sign. Try to think first, and ask those questions. Is this true? Even true things are not always beneficial or timely. Your words have to pass all three tests because, after all, that’s the kind of speech you want on your mind when you meditate right now.

You start with making true observations about what’s coming up in the mind. Don’t hide things from yourself. This is one thing that the mind does really well. You’re sitting here with the breath, but there’s already a part of the mind that’s laid its plans: As soon as there’s the slightest lapse in your alertness, it’s going to take you someplace else. Part of you knows that and yet pretends that it doesn’t know.

So the first quality we’ve got to develop in our internal speech is truthfulness. What’s actually going on the mind? Are we all here? Are we all on board with being with the breath? If not, engage in some of those reflections that the Buddha recommends: reflections on not-self, on inconstancy, which we usually think are high level insights but he says it’s useful to think about them before you try to get the mind to settle down, so that you can apply them to all the things you could think about that would pull you away from the breath. They’re all going to pass away. They’re not really under your control. Why bother thinking about them?

Then, beneficial: There may be true things about what outside work needs to be planned for, but right now is not the time for that because you need something more than well-planned-out days. You need a mind that’s well-trained, that has a sense of well-being. You can close your eyes and just be content to be right here without having to think about very much. Just think about how you want the mind to be still with the breath, and how nice it is when there’s a comfortable breath, and how nicer it is when there’s a more comfortable breath. That’s beneficial.

In terms of the right time and the right place, when the Buddha’s talking about that, he’s talking about the times to be gentle and pleasant with yourself and the times to be a little bit more stern. After all, there are times when the mind really just needs some reassuring, like a child who’s been beaten up. We go through life and we get beaten up pretty badly—maybe not physically, but the mind can get beaten up pretty badly and it needs something to soothe it. So if you’re feeling discouraged, find some ways of soothing the mind. On the contrary, if it’s simply being ornery—and that happens a lot too—that’s when you’ve got to be stern. This is where the Buddha recommends recollection of death. Death could come at any time.

I’ve been told that, according to the Thai Wat Metta social media right

now, the sala we're in is apparently on the verge of collapsing with the slightest little tremor. Whether that's true or not, the fact is that our bodies are designed in such a way that when they decide to stop, they don't give any warning. Perhaps a little blood clot forms in your legs or in a lung, and then who knows where it's going to go, where it's going to get lodged. So you don't know how much time you've got. You do know, though, that you have right now. So you crack the whip and get to work.

So, work on your internal speech and work on your external speech as well.

One of the reasons why we don't have a vow of silence around here is that you do need to talk to yourself in the meditation, but you need to talk well. And hopefully, as we're working in the monastery, what we say to one another will count as right speech. It helps you to get an idea of what counts as the kind of things to talk about and what kinds of things not to talk about. If you go around being quiet all the time, you can get really obsessed about things. I've seen so many monks going to the forest in Thailand: They're off alone and they get obsessed about some tiny little thing because they don't have anybody to talk to, to give them a sanity check.

So we talk about the work that needs to be done around the monastery: That's our sanity check. Anything beyond that, even if it's true and it's not harsh and it's not divisive, counts as idle chatter, and there's a lot of that going on. If we can recognize it and put a stop to it before it comes out of our mouths, then we'll be able to recognize it and put a stop to it when it comes into our minds.

So try to develop right speech both inside and out. The life in the community will go better, and you'll find you're able to talk yourself more effectively into getting the mind to settle down. This is the speech that leads to stillness. It's skillful speech.