

Standards for Thinking

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Right view and right resolve are filters on how you talk to yourself. The mind churns up all kinds of voices in the course of the day, and you want some standards for judging what's true, what's beneficial and what's timely.

So you think about right view: The basic message is that whatever suffering weighs down the mind is comes from within, comes from your craving; and the way to put an end to it comes down to training your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. That cuts through a *lot* of garbage right there. All too often, you tell yourself you're suffering because of this person or that event, laying all the blame on things outside. But instead of laying blame, right view has you simply ask yourself, "What am I doing that's piling suffering on top of the mind? How can I stop?" Those kinds of thoughts are useful, they're true, they're beneficial, and the Buddha says they're always timely.

Then, based on your thoughts, you ask yourself, "What am I going to do?" Because a huge part of the mind's inner conversation is what to do next: A thought comes into the mind and the question is, "Should I follow this thought or should I drop it?" Something happens outside: "Should I pay attention to this or should I ignore it?" "What to do? What to do? What to do?" This is always there in the background.

So here again, you want some filters. Resolve not to indulge in sensuality, which means thinking about how nice it would be to have *this* sensual pleasure or how nice it would be to have *that* sensual pleasure, spending all your time dressing up your sensual pleasures in your mind. Resolve not to follow any thoughts of ill will and or any thoughts of harmfulness.

Anything that doesn't fall in with those standards is not beneficial. And from there: What's the best thing to do with your mind? If you're going to be avoiding sensuality, well, you've got to find pleasure someplace else.

So you turn and talk to yourself about getting the mind to settle down with the breath. Here again, you want to think in ways that are true, beneficial, and timely. What's the breath doing right now? What impact does it have on the way you feel your body? And how are you perceiving things right now? Because our perception of the breath, the way we imagine the breath to ourselves, is going to have a huge impact on how we breathe, how we experience the breath in the body and what we can do with it.

If you perceive the breath simply as the air coming in and out through the nose, going into the lungs and then out again, it places some restrictions on what you can do with the sensation of breathing. But if you notice that there are also movements through the body, and take those as a form of breath, an energy that goes through the body, you realize they can be felt anywhere. The little muscles in your blood vessels tense up, relax, tense up, relax, and this goes

in waves through the body. Can you feel that as you breathe in, as you breathe out? And can you relax that? Think of the breath as a whole-body process involving all the blood vessels, all the nerves, all the muscles, and then ask yourself: What kind of breathing would feel good in all those parts of the body?

Here it's good to have some extra vocabulary, because there's the breath and then there are what the Buddha calls the different properties or elements—*dhātu* is the word in Pali—that relate to the breath as well. We in the West tend to dismiss them as primitive chemistry, but they're actually a very good vocabulary for noticing how you feel the body from within, and they give you some handles on what to *do* with what you feel. If you're breathing in a way that makes you feel light-headed or dizzy, it's a sign there's too much breath and not enough earth. So, think of the solidity of the body: the bones, the muscles. If you're feeling too hot or too cold, you can think of the opposite element: water or fire. In that way, you make the body a much more pleasant place to be inhabiting right here in the present moment.

Again, it all has to do with how you talk to yourself. This is one of the reasons why it's good to study what the Buddha had to teach. He gives you a vocabulary, he gives you a series of standards for judging your internal conversation. And above all, he has you remind yourself that if the mind is engaged in some unskillful conversation, you don't have to stay engaged. There will be part of the mind that says, "This is what I really feel right now." But you have to remember: Your feelings, your thoughts, are all fabricated. They're all habits. And although old habits may be hard to change, it's worth changing them if they're making you miserable.

That's the message of the Buddha's teachings: Skillful habits *can* be developed, unskillful habits *can* be abandoned. If this weren't true, the Buddha said he wouldn't have bothered to teach. But we do have that choice and that ability. So watch out specifically for the wrong-view voices in the mind that say you don't have a choice, that you simply have to put up with whatever, or that this is simply the way you are, you can't help it, that it's futile to change. Those are all wrong-view voices.

Sometimes they hijack your breath, especially where there's a strong emotion associated with them: a lot of fear, a lot of anger, a lot of regret. You start breathing in ways that aggravate the emotion. So you've got to take the breath back. Reclaim it. And as you get the breath more and more on your side, you're in a better position to question a lot of those voices.

This is one of the reasons why we stick with the breath, make the breath our home base as we meditate, so that we can get more and more familiar with it, and get it more and more on our side. So learn to talk to yourself about the breath in a way that's helpful, so that you can breathe in a way that feels refreshing, that releases a lot of the tension, that can gladden the mind when it's depressed, can steady the mind when it's all over the place, can release the mind from its burdens. These are things we can do with the simple abilities we have right here.

As the Buddha said, based on ignorance there's fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. Bodily is the way you breathe; verbal is the way you talk to yourself; and mental is the combination of

perceptions and feelings. These are the things we use to create our emotions as we go through the day, often in ignorance, which is why we suffer. But now we're bringing some knowledge to these same processes and we turn them into the path.

Think of the Buddha's image of a raft. You're going to go across the river to get to the safety of the other side. Now the Buddha's not going to send a nirvana-yacht over to pick you up. You look around on the shore on this side and you don't see any yachts on this side either. But, there are twigs and branches and leaves and vines. You can tie them all together and make a raft. And it's going to be good enough to get you across.

In the same way, you're taking all these types of fabrication and you're turning them into concentration. You're turning them into right view, right resolve, all the factors of the path. And you say: Where are you going to get those factors? Well, you take what you've got and you trim it, in the same way you would trim a branch. You take the good parts—after all, you don't want logs that will weigh your raft down, and you don't want any branches that won't help you float. You have to be a little bit particular about which trees you cut things from and how you cut them, how you tie them together.

In other words, you work with what you've got, but you work with skill. Bring some knowledge to these processes and they can form a path away from the suffering that they've been causing up to now.

So much of the path depends on how you talk to yourself: giving yourself encouragement when you need it, coming down hard when you need that. But realizing that you can shape your inner speech, so that instead of causing you trouble, it can actually help get you out of trouble. That's a lot of the practice right there.