

## *Right Inner Speech*

*January 1, 2004*

There's a passage in the Canon where a prince comes to the Buddha with a trick question. The question is this: Would the Buddha ever saying anything that hurt somebody's feelings?

He's been set up by some Jains, who told the prince, "You know, if the Buddha answers, 'No,' then you catch him in a lie, because he actually said something to hurt Devadatta's feelings." (I think he actually called him a lick-spittle, which is pretty extreme.) But if the Buddha says, "Yes," that he would say something that hurt somebody's feelings, then the prince was supposed to say, "Well, in what way are you different from everybody else? Ordinary people do the same thing."

But when the prince actually asks the question of the Buddha, the Buddha says, "There's no straight Yes or No answer to that question." The prince immediately realizes at that point that the Jains had been foiled.

The Buddha went on to say that the question requires an analytical answer. Whenever you speak, there are three questions you should ask: One, is it true or not? If it's not true, don't say it. Two, is it beneficial or not? If it's not beneficial, again, don't say it.

The third is: Is this the right time and place? And that depends on your sensitivity. If you're going to say something pleasing to somebody, he says you have to look for the right time and place to say it. Because sometimes even something pleasing and true and beneficial may not be the right thing to say at that particular time. Either the person just gets carried away with how good he or she is; or else you say it in front of somebody else who gets jealous. So even with good, beneficial, and pleasing things, you have to be careful.

Even more so with true, beneficial, and displeasing things.

This is a good principle to use not only with your external speech but also with internal speech, the thoughts that come into your mind, the perceptions you use to label things. Just because a thought comes into your head doesn't mean that you should continue to think it. Look at it: One, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? Does it really help to think about this? And three, is right now the right time and place to do that, whether it's pleasing or displeasing?

This helps explain the seeming contradiction you see in a lot of the Buddha's teachings: on the one hand, talking about right views, and then on the other hand talking about not clinging to views. Not clinging means looking at your views in

precisely this way: Are they true? Are they beneficial? Is right now the right time and place to think those things?

Clinging means you hold on to a particular view no matter what. It may seem true—and in fact, a lot of the forest ajaans always say that true views are the really dangerous ones. When you're right, you can get yourself in a real mess. There's pride that comes with having the right idea, and then you start using it in the wrong ways at the wrong time. That's what they mean when they talk about clinging to views.

Not clinging to views doesn't mean that you're wishy-washy or that you don't care about what's true or false. You're very clear about what's true or false. You try to be very clear about what's beneficial or not. But also have a sense of when's the right time to think about certain things. For instance, you can take on really a advanced Dhamma question when it's not the right time yet.

Or you can look at your perceptions. Today we talked about the issue of lust, how you look at something and you could perceive it as beautiful—that's true—but it may not be beneficial to perceive it as beautiful. That's when you pull out the other side: Any beautiful object has its unbeautiful side. Learn how to use that when it's necessary. When lust is coming up in the mind, bring out those other perceptions.

Because perceptions are what we have to deal with. Concentration, as the Buddha points out, is a perception-attainment. For instance, you're labeling the breath right now: Well, exactly what are you labeling as the breath? What sensations? Look into it. Now is the time to work with breath perceptions. Can you perceive your whole sense of the body as an aspect of breath? What does that do to the way you relate to the different parts of the body? The parts that a moment ago you perceived as solid, allow yourself to think of them as just a part of an energy flow. That perception allows them to move around. They don't have to hold that solid shape. Think of your sense of the arm as an aspect of breath, your sense of the leg as an aspect of breath.

This way, you learn to use your perceptions in a way that helps the mind to settle down. In other words, it's a true perception, there is breath energy there. It's beneficial. And right now is the right time and place to think those things.

As for other true and beneficial things, the question is, are they beneficial right now? Are they what you really need? Because some thoughts can be beneficial in the abstract but they're not necessarily what you need right here right now. Thoughts that pull you away from the breath, even if they're true, you don't need them right now.

Just stay with this perception: the breath coming in, breath going out, the breath energy permeating the body. This is what we have to deal with, because how does the mind communicate with itself? It uses its perceptions. And how is it going to get rid of unskillful perceptions? By using skillful ones. You can't use nibbana in order to practice the path, because nibbana's not something you can use. It's something totally outside of cause and effect. So what does that leave? It leaves the five khandhas. So you learn how to make use of them. You take these khandhas, which ordinarily we cling to, and you turn them into a path. In other words, you see them as events. Your sense of self: Learn to see it as a pile of aggregates. There's some form in there, and there's some feeling and some perception and thought-constructs and consciousness. Learn how to perceive it in those terms.

Once you start taking things apart this way, then you can put them back together in more useful ways. Your sense of the form here can become a basis for concentration. The feeling that comes when you learn how to play with the breath so that it feels more and more comfortable, more and more satisfying: *That* becomes an element of your concentration. The perception that stays with the breath: That's an element of concentration. Any acts of directed thought and evaluation, which are thought-fabrications, become part of your concentration as well.

Everything is right here. These things that before were a cause of suffering when you clung to them, now can become the path.

In this way, we learn how to *use* our perceptions. If we have the intention to drop them, that means that the new intention becomes the new thing we cling to. So we run around, run around, run around in these khandhas and can't get out. But if you learn how to use them skillfully, they do open up.

That's the skill we're working on right now: taking the raw materials we've got right here and learning to use them as tools, getting a sense of which perceptions are true, which ones are beneficial, and having a sense of time and place for using them. This sense of time and place, of all the skills in the practice, is probably the most difficult one to develop because it requires time and sensitivity. Even though the thoughts may be true, even though they may seem beneficial, you've *got* to get a sense of time and place, because that's what helps to undo the clinging.

This principle applies to *all* the elements of the practice. Exactly how much renunciation is involved? Where is that Middle Way right now? That takes experience to see. You experiment and then see what results you get. Everybody wants to hear the quick and easy formula for figuring out how much is enough. Well, there is no quick and easy formula. You have to experiment; you have to be

willing to try different approaches to see what works. It's only in this way that you gain an intuitive sense of proper time and place.

One of the advantages of getting the mind still like this is that it helps you to see, it helps you to pull yourself out of those mental conversations that go on in the mind all the time, between all the different factions in there. If you're in the thick of it, it's hard to gain perspective. But when you step out a little bit and say, "Well, I'll just be here with the sensation of breathing for a while," you can step out of those issues.

It's like going abroad. When we stay here in America, we stay surrounded by the way people discuss things, the issues that get Americans all divided and get them all worked up. Leave America for ten years and come back, and you'll see how bizarre this country is. Getting away helps give you a new perspective on it. You can step back, see which thoughts are true, which ones are beneficial, a lot more easily.

It's the same with your own mind. Step out into the breath for a while. Stay right here. Whatever issues animate you, let them go for the time being. Work on this one issue, which is very simple, just learning how to be as close as possible to the physical sensation of your body—what it feels like to have a body right here right now, to be in the body right here right now. Then, when the time comes to go back to your thinking, often issues that had you all worked up, all tied up in knots, you can see right through them.

This is one way of getting perspective on those issues of what's true, what's beneficial, and whether this is the right time and place for a particular type of thinking, a particular way of perceiving things. Whether you're dealing with pains in the body, whether you're dealing with lust, anger, whatever: It's always this issue of perception, the labels you put on things. What we're trying to do is get a better and better sense of which of those labels are true—and not just true, which ones are beneficial, and when is the right time and place for them. Always keep those questions in the back of your mind.

Whenever an issue comes up in life, even just the issue of relating to your body: You're sitting here and all of a sudden there's a bad pain in your hip. Ask yourself, "What's the label? Where is the label? How is that label happening?" Try to get the mind *really* still until you see the act of labeling very clearly. It's a repeated act, over and over and over again. And what is this label you've latched on to? Learn how to de-think it. In other words, switch the label around.

Where there's pain, there's bound to be pleasure someplace in there. Look for it. Or if a pain feels solid, label it as inconstant. The Buddha says that label is a very useful one. See the inconstancy of the pain, that it comes and goes and moves

around. If you allow yourself to imagine that label, you start changing your experience of the pain, and all of a sudden the amount of suffering you've built up around it becomes less. This way, you not only gain perceptions that are more precisely true to the actual situation but you also gain perceptions that are more beneficial. Then you try to see which ones work at which time.

Ajaan Maha Boowa notes that the questions you should ask about pain have to change from pain to pain. Sometimes a particular line of questioning gets you someplace, sometimes it doesn't. This you chalk up to experience—and also to the fact that the issues that the mind creates around pain are not always the same every time. The perceptions that led to the pain are not necessarily all the same every time. So the perceptions that will pry those perceptions away, giving you a new perspective, will have to be new perceptions, too.

But the process always comes down to this: Is it true? Is it beneficial? And is this the right time and place for that particular perception, that particular thought? Don't just go barging in with your ideas of right or wrong. Look. Watch. Try things out. Then look again.

This is how you learn how to become skillful with your thinking, skillful with your aggregates. We're born with these aggregates and we've been making a mess out of them. Now's the time to sort them out and try some new ways of approaching them so that you can handle them in line with their truth, in a way that's beneficial and at the right time and place.