

Voices in the Mind

July 21, 2004

We come to a place like this for solitude, but we find that physical solitude is not enough. Even when you're sitting alone under the trees, you've got your companions.

As the Buddha says, our primary companion is craving. This is why we have all those dialogues in the mind: desire for this, desire to gain something, to be something, not to be something. It's because of these desires that we take on all kinds of different identities in the mind, all the different voices. You can get involved in dialogues, taking on different parts, different roles, arguing back and forth—or one side of the mind encouraging another side of the mind, going back and forth that way as well. This really destroys any peace and quiet you're going to find in the mind, unless you train those voices.

Often we think that meditation means not having any voices in the mind at all, snuffing out thought entirely. You can't get to freedom from thinking without first learning how to think in more skillful ways, how to encourage more skillful voices in the mind, more skillful dialogues in the mind.

So that's one of the important skills in the meditation as well. We're not just here to focus on the breath. You find that being able to be with the breath helps pull you out of a lot of dialogues by creating a new dialogue focused around the breath. But then through the force of old habits you get pulled back into old dialogues—your parents, your old friends, all sorts of inner voices.

And so in addition to learning how to stay with the breath as a way of pulling you out of the dialogues from time to time, to give you some perspective, you've also got to learn how to deal with those voices, so that when a particular voice comes up arguing strongly for some particular thing, you have to look at it: Is this really skillful? Is this going to be a useful voice to identify with? If not, you've got to deal with it in other ways. Sidestep it, argue with it sometimes. Because the voice represents an attitude you've internalized someplace. Another voice is simply allowed to go on speaking from that perspective, from that attitude. Without being challenged, it's going to sneak in your thoughts in other ways as well.

One of the paradoxes of meditating is that as things grow more and more quiet in the mind, the greater the opportunity for old issues to come bubbling up. It happens more than it normally would, or at least you sense it more than you normally would. Actually, old issues are constantly bubbling up all the time,

whether you're meditating or not, it's just that outside of meditation they get distorted into the issues of your day-to-day life—so that an old issue, say, from childhood comes up and it gets warped into playing a role in a current day-to-day issue. You don't see it as the old issue coming back again.

But when you come out here and get some physical solitude, those old issues come bubbling up and you see them clearly for what they are: old things coming back. The question is, do you want yourself to be shaped by those old things? Well, no. You want to have some more freedom. Yes. Part of the freedom lies with staying with the breath and just not getting involved. Other times you do have to get involved if you're going to get free.

It's like dealing with people you don't like. As the Buddha said, there are five ways of dealing with people you don't like. One is to try to develop thoughts of goodwill. Another's to try to develop thoughts of compassion; thoughts of equanimity; paying them no mind and no attention. And then reflecting on the principle of karma, that if you get involved with them it's just going to be an endless round. Whatever they may have done to you can probably be traced back to some old karma of yours. So the reflection on the principle of karma pulls you out. Those are the five ways of dealing with people you don't like.

You can use the same approaches in dealing with voices in the mind you don't like. Sometimes you simply tell yourself it doesn't matter what the old voice is like, just let it chatter on. If you don't get involved, if you don't pay it any attention, it'll stop chattering after a while. That's one kind of voice. Other kinds of voice are more insistent, the ones you really have to take them apart, to analyze them to see what attitudes they're expressing. Then you try to replace those attitudes with goodwill, compassion, or equanimity. Another way of dealing with them is to realize that as long as you take on the identity of those voices, you're creating karma. Do you want to identify with them? Is that the kind of karma you want to create? If not, you have the choice not to identify with them, not to go running along with them.

So there are lots of different approaches for dealing with these internal voices, these internal roles. But it comes down to the question: Is that particular dialogue a useful one to get involved with right now? And if the answer is No, you've got to extract yourself from it. Sometimes simply reminding yourself of the breath is enough. Other times, you have to think about the drawbacks of the dialogue: Where is this particular conversation going to take you? Remember, it is a form of karma. Is that the kind of karma you want to take on? And remind yourself that you have the choice not to. All too often we think that because something comes up in the mind it's our responsibility, we've got to identify with it. But that's not

always the case. The nature of the mind, the nature of your old karma, is to keep stirring things up. And you have to choose to get involved or not.

This is why we have the breath to give you a place to step out so that you don't have to be involved. Just be with the physical side of your field of awareness, the side that you can identify as breath energy or the solid parts of the body or any of the other elements.

This range of awareness we have here is kind of like light, which sometimes light behaves like particles and other times it seems to behave like waves. The old joke is that light is particles on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; it's waves on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; and it takes a day off on Sunday. And your field of awareness though is like that. Not Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but you can choose to focus on events in your awareness as physical sensations or as mental acts. Every event has both sides. And one good way of simply clearing the air in the mind is to get into the physical side as much as you can.

That's why, when the Buddha's talking about ways of dealing with distractions, the ultimate one—where you can't extract your way from a particular distraction through discernment, so you just force yourself out of it—gets very physical: Place the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth and clench your teeth. Re-establish the physicality of your present awareness. And from there you get into the breath. Then you can begin to relax the clenching, relax the force. But think of the breath as something viscous. It's not going to turn back into thoughts again. This range of your awareness stays physical. Identify clearly: These are your hands, these are your feet, these are your legs. Stay with the physical side of your range of awareness. In that way, you can step out of the dialogues. You don't have to get involved.

So there are lots of tools for dealing with these dialogues. But the primary one is convincing yourself that you really don't *want* to get involved in them. Some dialogues that you've had with your parents going on for years and years and years, or voices you've picked up from other people from your childhood: They're still in there and they've managed to become part of your identity or part of the many identities inside you. It's the same old stuff over and over and over again. See that these are just old movies and you know how they're going to turn out. You've seen them many, many times. And where do they go? They go nowhere. And in some bad cases they cause you to create new karma. Is that what you want? Well, no.

Once you realize you don't want to get involved in those voices, you don't want to identify with them, then you're ready to find the way out. And that's when the Buddha offers you his next line of defense, which are the various tools we've talked about. So the first part of the trick to pulling out of these voices is the

determination not to keep falling back into those old roles. The second part, once you've got that determination, consists of the Buddha's tools for prying yourself loose.

So you have the choice while sitting here: You can either play with all these companions or you can have the singularity of just being with the breath, your whole body just "breath," just different aspects of breath energy. Always keep in mind that that choice is always there. Then once you're established in the breath, you can turn around to look and see, "Which of these voices is actually useful?" Or you can start analyzing the process of how you take on their identity. But that requires subtlety. Otherwise, it's all too easy when you start looking at these voices and looking at the dialogues to get sucked back into them all over again. If you find that happening, go back to the breath.

But over the course of time you find as you get more firmly established with the breath and more skilled at pulling out when you get sucked into things, then you're ready to start analyzing them, taking them apart, seeing where acts of craving and clinging and becoming create these dialogues in the mind so that you're carrying around your companions all the time. Then you can start taking them apart and you won't need to have the companions. Your frame of reference is right here.

In this way, you can pull yourself out of all those punishing dialogues you've had: the dialogues that make you miserable and then, when you're miserable, the misery spills out to the people around you. Now you're creating less suffering for yourself, and the people around you suffer less as well.

So have a sense of the range of tools available to you. And remind yourself of the possibility of not having to identify with these voices. For a lot of people just that possibility, the possibility of choice, is revolutionary. Then after realizing you have the choice, you develop the skills to implement that choice to free yourself.

That way, you come to real solitude: free not only of the chatter of people outside but also free from chatter of people inside. And once you learn not to identify with the chatter inside, then the chatter outside doesn't get to you at all. As long as we keep falling into this habit we have of identifying with these inner voices, we tend to identify with other people outside when we hear them talking as well. We start talking along with them. But when you stop chattering along with the voices inside, then the voices outside don't really bother you.

This is why the Buddha ultimately said that mental solitude is something you can have anywhere once you've really developed it, when you're free of those companions of clinging and craving and becoming, even if just temporarily. If you know the skill of how to get there, that enables you to be free and unencumbered

wherever you are, to have solitude wherever you are, no matter how many people are around you.

So this is where the work has to be done for lifting off our burdens and sorting out the clutter we find in our lives.