

Monologue on the Breath

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The mind seems to be carrying on a conversation all the time. Sometimes it's a monologue, sometimes a dialogue, and sometimes it's a whole committee. When you're meditating, you're trying to bring it down to a monologue, one voice talking about one thing—in this case, the breath. The conversation in the monologue in Pali is called *vaci-sankhara*, which literally means verbal fabrication. There are two parts to it. One part is called directed thought, when you decide what you're going to talk about. The other part is evaluation, when you make comments on what you're thinking about, deciding whether you like it or not, or turning it into stories, or analyzing it.

So here we're trying to focus both the directed thought and evaluation on one thing: on the breath. Just keep thinking about breath, breath, breath, and then notice when it's coming in, notice when it's going out, notice where you feel it, and notice what the feeling feels like. Is it warm or cool? Comfortable or not? If it's not comfortable, what can you do to make it more comfortable? That's the kind of evaluation you're going to get involved in. That's all you have to talk about to yourself for the next hour. It's something subtle but it's not all that complex.

And it's a part of the mind that's going to rebel. It's going to want to talk about other things. Or it's going to comment on you as a meditator. The mind keeps wandering off and the commentator says, "There it goes again," and you can get involved in all sorts of useless conversations, useless diatribes. An important thing to remember is that there's only one voice that really has the right to speak right now. Other voices may make comments, but you don't have to listen to them.

So if you find the mind talking about something else, just turn the conversation back to the breath. It's easy to see when the topic is totally unrelated to what you're doing now. Just remind yourself that you've been through most of those conversations before. They're like old tapes playing through the mind. You have a pretty good idea where they're going to go.

A little bit more difficult are the conversations that comment on you as a meditator. These conversations can have different agendas. They may want to talk about how stupid you are or how incompetent you are, and this is one more instance of how you can't do anything right. Don't listen to those conversations. They've never helped anybody in the past and they certainly aren't going to help you right now. And even though they may seem relevant to the meditation,

they're an obstruction. They're trying to get you to stop meditating. Listen only to the helpful comments, the ones that help you stay here.

If you have trouble staying with the breath, think of ways of making it more interesting. One of the most interesting things you can do with the breath is finding out where it's comfortable, where it's not. Exactly where in the body do you feel the breath? How much of the body is involved in the feel of the breathing process? You find that everything you can feel in the body is involved in the breathing process. Not only is there the air coming in and out of the lungs, but there's also a flow of energy through the muscles that affects the breathing. And those muscles affect other muscles. They're all linked together by the nerves and blood vessels, and everybody gets involved in one way or another, either blatantly or subtly. Direct your thoughts to that topic, evaluate those feelings, those sensations.

In this way, you get the conversation on the right topic, which is: Where is there discomfort, suffering, stress—however you want to translate *dukkha*. There are different levels of *dukkha*, so you can think of it as spreading out among these words. Sometimes it's simply a little bit of stress or a little bit of discomfort, a sense of constriction or tightness. Doesn't feel like any great suffering. But it still qualifies as a disturbance. Sometimes the suffering and pain can be really strong.

The next question you want to direct your thoughts to is: What are you doing to create that disturbance, to create that discomfort or stress? And the next question is: Can you not do that?

This directs the conversation to the big topic that the Buddha said was the totality of his teachings: suffering and the end of suffering. You want to practice seeing it here in the breath first. Then you can move on to seeing it in the mind in subtler ways. But by focusing on the breath, you begin to call the committee to order, cleanup the discussion, learn how to keep it all on one topic. As for any comments that come from the committee, you want to listen only to the helpful ones. As for the discouraging words in the mind, well, here you are home on the breath, where you're not going to pay any attention to discouraging words.

One of the important things you find as you meditate is that stress, suffering, discomfort, all essentially come down to a sense of limitation—and you're creating your own limitations. You're imposing them on yourself, for one reason or another. Bit by bit, you're going to learn how to not impose those limitations. You're going to learn to recognize which voices in the mind are the ones that impose limitations and you'll begin to see through their agendas. Once you see through their agendas, they lose a lot of their power.

So on one level, you're limiting the discussion to one topic, but you're focusing the discussion on an area that really does make a difference, really does deal with the big problem in life, which is suffering that you impose on yourself, the limitations you impose on yourself. You're focusing on how to overcome those limitations, how not to place them on yourself, because it's a totally arbitrary process. We may think we have good reasons for imposing those limitations, but as you get to know them better and better—first by simply recognizing them and telling yourself not to listen to them, ultimately by seeing where they're wrong—you see that there's no good reason for those limitations. They pretend to be helping you, but sometimes our old survival tactics just don't work anymore, and they especially don't work when you're dealing with yourself inside.

So for the next hour, there's only one topic of conversation: just the breath. Keep directing your thoughts to the breath. Evaluate the breath as best you can. The evaluation is what takes a lot of time. As you get more and more familiar with the breath, your sensitivities will grow more and more precise. And as for the rest of the conversation, keep it directed toward helping you stay with the breath, helping you to be sensitive to the breath. Any other topic is out of place right now.

In this way, you take the part of the mind that tends to cause so much trouble—its constant chatter—and you train it to be a help, because the directed thought eventually turns into concentration, the evaluation turns into discernment. The two of them working together, focused on this one topic, get stronger and stronger, more and more sensitive, until they lead to release. That's where the conversations, the monologues, or the discussions all fall silent.