

## *Best Friends*

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When you read the Buddha's descriptions of right concentration, you notice that the two activities that help the mind to settle down are directed thought and evaluation. In order to clear away unskillful thoughts in the mind, you have to direct your thoughts in the right direction, toward the breath. And you *keep* directing them there, Keep reminding yourself: "Stay with the breath, stay with the breath. Just be with the body here, in and of itself." You can let any thought of the world drop away.

But thoughts about the breath you encourage. And not just thoughts *about* breath. You also want to evaluate the breath as well. Does it feel good? Does it feel not good? Try to sensitize yourself as much as possible to the breathing energy in the body. Focus on any areas of the body where you can feel the breath coming in, the breath going out. Watch the breath there for a while, to see how it feels, to evaluate whether it feels pleasant or not. If you're not sure, you can try adjusting the rhythm a little bit, and then make comparisons. Which rhythm feels better? That's also part of the evaluation.

You can make the breath deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter—lots of ways you can adjust the breath. After a while, as you begin to see the range of possibilities, you can also begin to see which of the possibilities feels best right now.

This is where your inner dialogue should focus, reminding you to stay with the breath and to acquaint yourself with the breath, getting more and more familiar with it.

It's interesting to note that these two activities—directed thought and evaluation—are also the qualities that make up our internal dialogue. When the mind talks to itself about something, first you direct your thoughts to a particular topic, and then you evaluate the topic. You make comments on it, ask questions about it.

What's really interesting about this is that a lot of that internal dialogue is a big problem. There are all kinds of voices in there, all kinds of ways of conducting this dialogue inside. Some them are fair, gentle, and kind; some of them are not. Some of them are harsh, destructive. We've picked up voices from who knows where—family, friends, teachers, the media. And a lot of us come to the meditation hoping that we can snuff out those voices because we're tired of them.

But trying to snuff them out sometimes simply gets you involving in a worse dialogue.

So what the Buddha has you do is to learn how to talk about new things in a new way. In other words, take these activities that can be often problematic, and train them so they're actually useful. After all, keeping your thoughts on the breath helps to keep other thoughts at bay. Evaluating the breath makes the breath more and more attractive, more and more satisfying. And when the breath is satisfying, you're less inclined to go wandering off and getting yourself into trouble. The inner irritation that often makes the internal dialogue a nasty one doesn't have any place to stay. When the breath feels really good coming in, feels really good going out, why would you want to get involved in a lot of unpleasant dialogues, a lot of unpleasant conversations?

In this way, you can take these inner voices and make them your friends—true friends, friends who are helpful, who share in your sorrows and joys, as in that passage we chanted just now. They point you to worthwhile things like the breath, and they're sympathetic. "Sympathetic" doesn't necessarily mean that they say only nice things. They can also tell you at times when you're doing something wrong, but they do it in a way that's helpful.

After a while, as the mind settles down, you reach a point where you don't need to do all this internal chatter. The breath gets as good as it can, given your physical situation right now, given your powers of concentration. Then you can let go of the chatter and just stay embedded in the breath.

In other words, you're trying to develop, as Ajaan Lee says, a sense of full-body awareness. When you think of spreading breath energy all throughout the body, make sure first that it's good breath energy. Don't go spreading things when they don't feel good. Wait until you've got something good, then you can spread it. That makes the breath even more attractive, even more gratifying, so that when the internal chatter dies down, it's not because you've stomped on it, or tried to kill it, but simply because it doesn't have much more to say.

It's like dealing with a hungry and irritable child. Give the child something good to eat, and it's going to be a lot less irritable. The irritable mind is irritable because it's staying in an unpleasant place. The things it focuses on, the things it's feeding on, are unpleasant. So you give it better food and you train the voices in your mind to be voices of genuine friends, so that this internal dialogue becomes something that's really beneficial. Once it's beneficial and delivered you to stillness, then you can let it go.

Often we come to the meditation wanting to snuff ourselves out. The self that we're trying to snuff out is this internal dialogue. But the Buddha says you first

have to train yourself. Don't drop your sense of self too quickly. In other words, develop the voices in the mind that are mature, that know how to evaluate what's a short-term happiness and what's a long-term happiness, and know how to be responsible about how you look for happiness. These are all signs of a mature sense of self.

Once that mature sense of self has done what it can, then you can let it go. If you try to get rid of your immature self, that's usually just an expression of aversion, and you've got another very unskillful sense of self hiding behind that.

This is a common pattern throughout the practice: You take the things in your mind that are problematic, and you learn to train them—directed thought, evaluation, your sense of self. You train them in the direction of a better happiness. Then, as these things have become more and more skilled at bringing happiness about, when they've performed their functions, they begin to get milder. They drop away, drop away, not because you've stomped on them, but simply because their duty is done.

So it's a simple exercise we have here, just focusing on the breath, but it does a lot of good for the mind. It's a very immediate way of showing goodwill for yourself, a very immediate way of giving rise to a sense of well-being. Once you have that sense of well-being within the mind and you're acting from it, you find that your actions are less harmful to yourself, less harmful to others. You really do become your own best friend. Being a friend yourself in this way doesn't mean that you're selfish and uncaring toward other people, because the qualities you develop to be your own best friend are also good qualities to use in your relationships with others.

So as you train the mind, it's good back up and start with the real basics. Once the basics are in good order, everything that builds from them is in good order as well