

## *How to Talk to Yourself*

*October 20, 2019*

Focus your attention on the breath. Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. And notice where you feel the sensation of breathing in the body. Focus your attention there.

And then ask yourself if it's comfortable. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Make it shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Or you can try in-long and out-short, or in-short and out-long. See what kind of breathing feels good. If you find something that feels good, stick with it for a while until it doesn't feel so good anymore, then you can change again. The needs of the body will change as your mind begins to settle down.

If your thoughts begin to wander off to something else, remind yourself that you're not there for that. You're here to develop some concentration. So you drop those thoughts and you're back at the breath. No matter how many times you wander off, you just keep coming back to the breath.

When you do come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially gratifying. When we talk of "breath" here, it's not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs through the nose. It's more the flow of energy in the body, which you can feel anywhere in the body at all.

Then, as the breath gets comfortable, think of that sense of ease beginning to spread through the different parts of the body, so that the energy flowing through the body feels good all the way in, all the way out. And just maintain this sense of being with comfortable breathing. You can make the range of your awareness as large as you can. You can fill the body with it if you want.

Some people, though, when they start out, find that being aware of the whole body is a little bit too distracting. So you can focus on one spot or one section of the body and make that your home for the hour. If you leave home, you want to have good reasons. Otherwise you just stay right here.

You notice that as you're doing this, you're talking to yourself. In Pali it's called *vitakka* and *vicara*: directed thought and evaluation. This can become a factor of jhāna, or mental absorption, when the mind gets really well-concentrated in the first stage. When we hear that it's a factor of jhana, it sounds kind of exotic, but it's actually simply a matter of learning how to talk to yourself well, in an effective way to get the mind to settle down.

So much of our suffering in life comes from the way we talk to ourselves in an unskillful way, which is why a lot of the Buddha's teachings are designed to help you talk to yourself in a more skillful way. He starts with right view. The basic principles of right view are that there is suffering in life and it's caused by the actions of your mind. That's not to place blame on you.

It's to point to you that there's an opportunity: If you change the actions of your mind, then you don't have to suffer.

Suffering *can* be put to an end; you *do* have that choice. Sometimes you hear people say that we have no freedom of choice, that everything is determined either by our past actions or simply by physical laws. But those ideas block the path. As the Buddha said, when you're not really sure about things like that, it's a good bet to adopt a view that makes you responsible, allows for you to be responsible, and opens possibilities for the range of the actions that you can choose from. So here he says it is possible to act in a way that puts an end to suffering. You may not know if that's true or not, but it's a good view to adopt because it encourages you to look more carefully at your actions and to have a higher sense of what can be accomplished in life. So right view gives you some good principles to hold in mind as you talk to yourself.

And then there's something the Buddha calls appropriate attention, when you apply those principles to what you're actually doing. The principles of right view are the four noble truths, and the four noble truths have duties: Suffering is something you want to comprehend, its cause is something you want to abandon, its cessation is something you want to realize, and the path is something you want to develop. So when something unskillful comes up in the mind, notice that it's something to be abandoned.

Then you learn various ways to abandon things like sensual desire, ill will, sleepiness, restlessness, uncertainty: There are ways of dealing with each of these. You recognize them as they come into the mind and you know which category they fall into: They're the causes for suffering. So you want to abandon them. Then there are good qualities that come up in the mind: mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind; alertness, your ability to watch what you're doing and to see the results that you're getting; and then ardency, your desire to do this well. Those things you want to encourage and develop.

So we remember the principles of right view. This is what right mindfulness is for. Mindfulness is not simply bare attention. It's a faculty of the active memory, where you remember things that are useful to apply to what you're doing. In this case, you take the principles and duties of right view and you remember to apply them. That way you learn how to talk to yourself in way that, instead of causing problems for the mind, actually helps to solve them.

Right now we're trying to develop concentration, so talk to yourself in a way that helps the mind to settle down. Any thoughts that would come in and tell you that you can't do this or that it's beyond you, you can put those aside. Any thoughts that come in and say that you're bored or that you're in pain in some part of the body, you can put those aside, too. When you're dealing with pains, the best principle is not to focus directly on them. Focus on the parts of the body that you *can* make comfortable so that you can have a place in the present moment where you feel at ease, where you feel that you belong here.

As for the voices in the mind that say “I can’t stand the pain, it’s too much for me, I can’t do this,” think of them as committee members in your mind who are not being very helpful, so why pay them any attention? Try to point the conversation in the committee in a better direction. Talk to yourself about the parts of the body that *are* comfortable, and then think of that sense of ease, the breath energy from the easeful parts spreading to go through the parts that are pained. In other words, you can approach pain with more confidence because you have some tools to deal with it. All too often, we’re bewildered by our pain and have no idea how to get past it, and we get afraid of it.

I was part of a psych experiment when I was a student. I’d been meditating before that. And the experiment was to put your hand in a bucket full of ice-water, lots of ice cubes. I was told to think of the warmth in my other hand coming into the hand in the pail, and the coolness of the hand in the pail going to the other hand. So I did that for quite a few minutes, and they finally said, “Okay, you can stop. You’re breaking the curve.”

It turned out the experiment was designed to see how different approaches to pain would affect the extent to which people could stand pain. There was one group of people who were told, “Put your hand in the ice-water and when it gets uncomfortable, pull it out.” The second group was told, “Put your hand in the ice-water and just see how long you can keep it there,” but they weren’t given any technique for dealing with the sense of discomfort. The third group was told what I was told. And they found, of course, that the third group could keep their hands in the ice-water a lot longer than the other two groups.

So learn to talk to yourself in a way in which you can convince yourself that, yes, you can stand pain, you can stand boredom, you can stand all kinds of other unpleasant things. In that way, the way you talk to yourself actually strengthens you. All too often, we weaken ourselves by the way we talk to ourselves, but we can change the conversation.

If you’ve been meditating for a long time and you get discouraged about your meditation, okay, don’t let *that* voice get in the way. Some people simply take longer to develop some skill at this practice than others do. It’s not the case that if it takes a while that you have no hope. It’s simply that you’ve got more work to do than other people do. But this is a skill that anyone can develop. This is one of the things the Buddha has you tell yourself: If skillful qualities were impossible to develop, he wouldn’t have taught it. If unskillful qualities were impossible to abandon, he wouldn’t have taught that, either. This is something human beings can do. You’re a human being. You can do it. Talk to yourself in that way.

As for the voices that threaten you and say, “You try to give me up and I’m going to cause trouble,” again, that’s a way of talking to yourself that’s not really helpful. You’re placing obstacles in your way, you’re limiting the possibilities of what you can do simply by the way you talk to yourself. So why talk that way? You have the choice. Talk to yourself in a way that’s encouraging.

There is a potential, the Buddha says, for rapture in the body, a potential for a sense of fullness, well-being, and ease, here in the present moment. Focus on *those* potentials. When you're feeling sleepy, you remind yourself there is a potential for energy someplace in the body. When you're feeling restless, there is a potential for calm someplace in the body and the mind. Find it.

One of the reasons we sit here for an hour is that it places some limitations on us. And you have the question: Are you going to sit here and talk to yourself in a way that makes yourself miserable? Or are you going to sit here and talk to yourself in way that actually gets the mind to settle down? The choice is yours. You're putting the mind on the spot. If you rise to the challenge, you develop a lot of good skills. You get more confident in how you can approach the present moment.

A lot of people are afraid of the present moment. They do everything they can to fill it up with other things rather than simply be with their minds in the present. I've visited people in the hospital, and they spend the last weeks of their lives watching television rather than looking at their own minds. It's sad. It's an important part of your life: How are you going to leave this life and go on to the next? Make sure to be spending the time developing the skills you're going to need. Yet there are so many people who run away from what's really important in life, which is how they relate to their own minds. It's because they don't have any skills, they don't have any advice on how to do it properly.

So the Buddha's providing us with good advice on how to relate to our minds here in the present moment, how to talk to ourselves in a way that opens more possibilities for genuine happiness. Because even though the Buddha's talking a *lot* about suffering in those four noble truths, the purpose is to find happiness, a happiness that's not dependent on conditions. That's what that third noble truth is: the cessation of suffering. It's possible to put a total end to suffering. It's something human beings can do. Human action is capable of doing this. You're a human being. Take it as a challenge.

Then, at the very least, you realize that it's better than contenting yourself with what little pleasures the rest of the world has to offer, the things they can sell you, the things they can provide you with, the shows they put on TV. When they make you dependent on them for the pleasures, then those are the things they can control you with. Whereas if you can provide your own inner happiness, you're free.

That's one of the meanings of the word *nibbana*: freedom. That's what we're here for, and it is possible. So talk to yourself in a way that helps make that possible. Don't talk to yourself in a way that gets in the way.