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 it’s a dialogue, and sometimes it’s a whole committee. When you’re meditating, you’re trying to bring it down to a monologue, talking about one thing, one voice, talking about one thing. In this case, it’s the breath. The conversation or the monologue in Pali is called vajisankara, which literally means verbal fabrication. There are two parts. One part is called directed thought, when you decide what you’re going to talk about, and the other part is evaluation, when you make comments. Whether you decide whether you like it or not, or turn it into stories, or analyze it. Again, we’re trying to focus both the directed thought and the evaluation on one thing, on the breath. Just keep thinking about breath, breath, breath, and then notice what it’s coming to. Notice whether it’s coming in. Notice whether it’s going out. Notice where you feel it. And notice what the feeling feels like. Is it warm or cool? Comfortable or not? And if it’s not comfortable, what can you do to make it more comfortable? That’s the kind of evaluation you can 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. It’s going to be 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. You say, “There it goes again.” You can get involved in all sorts of useless conversations, useless diatribes. And the 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 most of those conversations you’ve been through before seem like old tapes playing through the mind. And you have a pretty good idea of where they’re going to go. But more difficult are the conversations that comment on you as a meditator. And these conversations have different agendas. They may want to talk about how stupid you are or how incompetent you are. 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. They’re certainly not going to help you right now. And even though they may seem relevant to the meditation, they’re an obstruction. Listen only to the helpful comments. 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 breathing process? You find that all the body that’s feeling is involved in the breathing process. Because not only is there the air coming in and out of the lungs, but there’s the flow of energy through the muscles that affect the breathing. And then those muscles affect other muscles. They’re all linked together by the nerves and the 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 that 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. It doesn’t feel like any great suffering, but it still qualifies as a disturbance. The next question you want to direct your thoughts to is, what are you doing to create that disturbance, create that discomfort or stress? The question is, can you not do that? This is directing the conversation to a question. The big topic, the Buddha said, was the totality of his teaching, suffering and the end of suffering. You want to practice seeing it here in the breath first, and then you can move on to seeing it in the mind in more subtle ways. But by focusing on the breath, you begin to clean up the committee, clean up the discomfort, and clean up the discussion. Learn how to keep it all on one topic. Any comments that come from the committee, you want to listen only to the helpful comments. 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 the discouraging words. One of the important things you’ll find as you meditate is that stress, suffering, discomfort—these 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 the limitations. Then you begin to see through their agendas. Once you see through their agendas, you lose a lot of their power. So on one level, you’re limiting the discussion, but you’re focusing the discussion on an area that really does make a difference, really does deal with the big problem in life—the suffering that you impose on yourself, the limitations you impose on yourself. And you’re focusing on how to overcome those limitations, how to learn how not to place them on yourself, because it is a totally arbitrary process. We may think that we have good reasons for imposing those limitations, but as you get to know them better and better, you start by simply recognizing them and telling yourself not to listen to them. Ultimately, you see where they’re wrong. They pretend to be helping you. Sometimes there are old survival tactics that just don’t work anymore, and 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 and evaluate it as best you can. The evaluation is the part that takes a lot of time as you get more and more familiar with the breath. Your sensitivities are going to grow more and more precise. 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. And the other topic is out of place right now. In this way, you take the part of the mind which tends to cause so much trouble. It’s constant chatter. And you train it to be a help. Because the directed thought eventually turns into concentration, the evaluation turns into discernment. And the two of them working together, focused on this one topic, as they get stronger and stronger, more and more sensitive, lead to release. And that’s where the conversation, the monologue, or the discussion all fall silent.

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