June 9, 2024

The mind is always talking to itself, which makes you wonder, why is it talking to itself? What does it have to tell itself? Why does it have to tell itself things? You’d think that if the mind knew something, it would know it, without one part of the mind having to inform another part of the mind. There’s also the question of what language the mind is talking in. Even stream-of-consciousness novels, with all their strange wanderings around, can’t even begin to replicate what actually is going on in this conversation inside the mind. But they do point out something important, that it moves from level to level and language to language. From jargon to jargon, from one way of looking at things to another way of looking at things, all very quickly, sometimes in the space of a moment. You can see this clearly as you focus on the breath. You’re talking about the breath to yourself, and all of a sudden you’re talking about something else. From one topic to another can be based on all kinds of weird things, a kind of random association, or a total blanking out and finding yourself in another place entirely. Little bits and snatches of songs and phrases and all kinds of crazy stuff. One of the things we’re trying to do as we meditate is to bring the topic, bring the conversation to one topic, and bring it to one language. I’m not just saying keeping it in English, because even in English you realize that when you’re talking about things in terms of physics, it’s as if you have a separate language. When you talk about music, there’s a separate language. When you’re talking about the breath, right here in the present moment, there’s a particular language that you’re trying to learn here. A number of people have noticed how when they read a John Lee, in the beginning it seems kind of strange, but as they start focusing on the breath, his ways of analyzing the breath really do make sense. They really do correspond to what’s going on in their experience. That’s why we have separate languages, as you get particularly adept at looking at things in a particular way, the language makes sense, the jargon makes sense. Of course, there’s that other type of jargon which is meant to obfuscate and make things unclear and give you buzzwords. That can mean all things to all people, but that’s a different kind of issue. What you’re trying to do here is get very precise about what you actually experience as you’re staying here in the present moment. With this, your framework, the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself. Try to keep everything, all the discussions in the mind, on that one topic, in that one frame of reference. Not that you’re never going to move to other frames of reference, but it’s good to know when you move, why you’re moving. The best way to do that is to get really good at this one frame of reference, really intent on this one frame of reference, so that anything that wanders off, you notice. Anything that’s superfluous, you notice. In the beginning, it’s pretty frustrating. You’re here just talking about the breath to yourself, and all of a sudden you’re commenting on the comments or pulling outside and watching outside. You don’t want to do that yet, but that doesn’t mean you have to get frustrated when it happens. Just learn how to drop it and come back. If it happens again, notice it, drop it, come back. The noticing doesn’t have to be very formal. Just enough to realize you’ve wandered off and you can come back. Don’t deal in a lot of recriminations. Don’t get flustered or frustrated. Just develop this habit of being able to come back, come back, come back, in a very matter-of-fact way. That’s what strengthens your frame of reference, so that you can experience the body just as breath sensations. Try to read every sensation in the body as a variation on breath. Learn to talk to yourself about the sensation of the body as breath. There’s a down-flowing breath, there’s the up-flowing breath, there’s the breath that spreads through all the nerves and all the blood vessels. Learn to relate to the sensations you experience as variations on the breath property, the wind property. It’s like learning another language. You find yourself slipping into your old terms and your old language, but recognize that fact and try to extend your vocabulary about the breath to cover more and more areas in the body, more and more types of sensations in the body. Why do we learn these languages? Because they’re useful. All of our concepts have a purpose. They’re meant to be used as tools for an end. Here, the tool is exploring the present moment, exploring your experience of the present moment, so you can understand where the suffering is, where the cause of suffering is, what you can do to bring about the end of suffering, and what the end of suffering is actually like. That last one is the real purpose. It’s when you can focus all your concepts on one purpose. That’s when they begin to fit together. Here we’re working on a whole vocabulary of concepts to deal with the breath as a way of anchoring us in the present moment so we can watch it, feel at home here, feel comfortable here, and also begin to understand what’s going on, especially in terms of this issue of intention and attention and the results of your intention. That’s the vocabulary we’re learning. That’s the pattern of concepts we’re learning here. This is why we need to learn this language. This is why we need to keep our frame of reference solid so we don’t go slipping off into other weird areas. Once your frame of reference is solid, then when you do need to switch off to another frame of reference, say when you’re dealing with other people, you can do it consciously and you can know why you’re doing it. Because that series of concepts has its purpose in that context. It’s like switching from one language to another. If you’re talking to a Thai person, you’re talking Thai. If you’re talking to an American person, you’re talking English. Because those languages work in those contexts. When you’re talking to yourself about the breath, you want to stay within this language of the breath because that language works in this context. It’s not that you’re trying to cut off your other mental functions. It’s just learning how to keep your mental conversation directed in a way that’s really useful, stays on topic, and is relevant to the issue at hand. So when the time comes to switch languages, you know why you’re doing it. It’s not random and arbitrary. It’s the way most of our mental chatter is. In this way, this habit we have of forming concepts, the Buddha says, direct to thought and evaluation, our verbal sankharas, instead of being the problem, actually become part of the solution. So when you find the mind wandering off, chattering about other things, just realize that’s not the issue right now. It’s not that you’ll never be allowed to think about those things. It’s just that it’s not the appropriate context. It’s not the right time and place for that kind of chatter. And as you get more and more sensitive to getting the mind to settle down, you realize how much that unnecessary chatter really is a big burden on the mind. And you can do without it. So for the rest of the hour, I invite you to take this conversation about the mind, the breath, and the body right here in the present moment. The more you keep on topic, the more you keep in the right frame of reference, the right language, the more you find that the hour is well spent.

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