Right Speech Inside

December 25, 2010

As we sit here meditating, on one level, we’re all engaged in right speech. In other words, we’re not saying anything. So we’re not lying or dealing in divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter. But that just refers to our mouths. It’s very easily the case that our mind is full of all kinds of wrong chatter, wrong speech. This is one of the things we have to learn how to pull ourselves out of as we meditate. Because the mind can be lying to itself, can be speaking divisively, harshly, or just engaged in all kinds of idle chatter. And in that case, we’re not really alone here. And we’re still suffering from those things. One of the purposes of meditation is to learn how to get yourself out of that kind of chatter. This is one of the reasons why a lot of meditation methods have you repeat a word or a phrase to change the course of the discussion. At the very least, as in the old days of radio-free Europe, when they were sending signals into Russia and the communist bloc, and the Russians were trying to jam the airwaves. You repeat a word like bhutto or you repeat a phrase in the mind. It’s like jamming the airwaves in the mind. It gets you out of the old conversations. Another way is to give yourself something better to talk about, to yourself, and talk about the breath. That’s what direct thought and evaluation are, the verbal fabrication. So you learn how to apply that verbal fabrication to what’s going on with the breath energy right now, what’s going on in the body right now. Any other chatter that’s going on in the mind, just remind yourself that’s not relevant right now. Learn to put a question mark next to it. This is one of the main lessons I learned my first years over in Thailand. I still had a lot of issues from childhood, teenage years, college years. They were still sloshing around in the mind. And sitting up alone on the mountain, you’d be surprised how much of this stuff can be coming up. Or maybe you wouldn’t be surprised, but there was a lot of it. If I hadn’t had the breath as an anchor, I don’t know where it would have blown me away to. But this is one of the advantages of going to a foreign country. You learn how to look at your old preoccupations, your old concerns, from a distance, from a new perspective. One of the real advantages of going abroad is not only to see the strange things that happen abroad, but also to learn to look back on your old ways and see that they’re pretty strange too. The concerns you had, the things you believed, the things you picked up from people who meant well, people who didn’t mean well. Somehow the mind fastens on them. And it’s good to be able to step out. And to figure out which of those thoughts are really useful and which are not. While you’re sitting here focused on the breath, everything gets called into question except for thoughts that concern the breath and help you to adjust the breath. And then even after a while, when the breath is really good, you don’t have to think that much about it anymore. Just be with it. This helps you get out of those old conversations. Because we can carry a lot of really detrimental stuff around with us, really harmful, wounding stuff around with us. The attitudes that question our ability to do the practice, the attitudes that question the value of the practice. You can train your mind. The attitudes that tell it, “No, you can’t do that,” for one reason or another. Those are especially damaging. So one of the things we’re trying to do here as we meditate is to free ourselves from a lot of those attitudes that we picked up and then we carry around as if they were our own, because we’ve made them our own. We’ve engaged in wrong speech. We’ve been listening to wrong speech for who knows how long, certainly more than in this lifetime. And it’s chained us down. It’s prevented us from using this verbal faculty we have in the mind to free ourselves. Because it’s not the case, as you’ve seen as you meditate, that you’re simply aware or you’re simply trying to get to a nonverbal state. You’re learning how to use words, use your thinking, use your evaluation. So it actually frees the mind. So you can step out of a lot of the old identities that have been tying you down. And while you’re meditating, you’re actually creating a new identity, an identity that can step out of your old one and look at it with a lot of compassion, a lot of equanimity, a lot of understanding, and a lot of insight. It’s when something unskillful comes up, you’re not all tied up, either believing it or arguing with it. You can just say, “Oh, this is something that’s really unskillful.” The whole conversation is an unskillful one to get involved in. I had an experience a couple weeks back. We were talking about topics that are totally irrelevant from the practice that you’re doing to get involved in. Someone brought up one of the topics. This was just a minute or two after we’d said that this was a useless topic. And someone else said, “Well, I don’t think that’s a really … I think I could disprove you on that one.” Whether it was true or not, the whole conversation was irrelevant. There’s part of that mind that wants to score points, and there’s part of the mind that wants to carry a conversation out to its end. One of the most important skills in the meditation is that the whole conversation is useless. As the Buddha said, when you’re speaking, it’s not just a matter of speaking things that are true. You also have to see if they’re useful and if it’s the right time. The same principle applies to your verbal fabrication right now. Is it true? Is it useful? And is this the right time to be thinking those things? That veers away from the breath. You can put it aside for the time being. If there’s some important issue in life, promise yourself, “As soon as the meditation is over, I’m going to sit here for a little extra while and contemplate that problem.” But in the meantime, you’ve got to get the mind sharpened. Allow the mind to heal. Because it’s been going around wounding itself with all sorts of unskillful conversations. When it’s wounded like that, it often can’t think things through clearly. As the Buddha said, the human tongue can often be like a sword. That applies not just to the tongue, but also to your verbal fabrication inside the mind. It can be very cutting. And not just when it’s insulting, but it can cut through all kinds of other good things in the mind. By doubting them, by doubting your ability to do the practice. Or it just cuts through your time, the time that you could spend here working with the breath, working to develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, all these other good qualities. It just chops up the time with other issues. So learn to step outside of this speech in the mind. Ask yourself, “How much is this right speech and how much is the wrong speech? Where is it true? Where is it beneficial? Where is it timely?” And if it doesn’t pass those tests, then you can say, “Well, I don’t need to get involved.” If a thought comes up, you can leave it unfinished. It’s that part of the mind that, as soon as the beginning of a sentence appears, you want to follow it. You have to say, “Nope, this is not worth getting involved in.” This is one of the Buddha’s skills as a teacher. There are times when he recognized that certain people were not worth talking to because they really weren’t interested in what was true and beneficial. Some people might not know what was timely, but he put that aside. But whether things were true or beneficial for him, those were the primary qualifications for someone who’s worth talking to. Conversations that were worth having. Remember, there are a lot of voices in your mind that are simply not worth listening to. You don’t want to engage in them or engage with them. You can pull yourself out of those unskillful conversations. You’ve made a lot of progress on the path. you

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