Right Speech, Inside & Out

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Take a few deep, long, in-and-out breaths, and then ask yourself how that feels. If you’re not sure, keep it up for a while until you get a sense that it could be more comfortable shorter or shallower or faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels really good right now. You can consciously experiment. Try short breathing for a while, see how that feels, then longer breathing. Mix up the various ways of breathing to see how that feels until you find something that feels good, something that feels nourishing down through the torso. And keep that up as long as it feels good. Now, the needs of the body will change. After all, I may discover that what felt good a few breaths ago doesn’t feel quite so good now. Well, you can change that, too. We’re developing mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind. You’re keeping in mind the fact that you’re going to stay with the breath for the hour. We’re doing this so we can gain some control over the mind. You want it to be the sort of mind that, when you focus on a topic, stays on that topic and doesn’t go wandering off, leaving its work behind. So you want to be mindful and alert, watching what’s actually going on so you can catch the mind when it’s beginning to waver. And alert to the breath, because we’re trying to bring the mind to a sense of well-being here in the present moment. So the breath is an important way of doing that. If your breathing doesn’t feel comfortable, then nothing in the body feels comfortable, and the mind isn’t going to want to stay. So you’re reminding yourself to stay here, and you’re asking yourself questions about what’s going on. Does the fit between the mind and the breath feel good? If not, what can you do to change it? If it does feel good, how do you keep it going? So you’re talking to yourself. There’s a technical term for this, and it’s called “directed thought and evaluation.” In other words, you direct your attention to something, and then you make comments on it. So the questioning is what directs you, and then the evaluation is what makes the comment, gives the answer. There’s kind of a back and forth here. As long as you’re not talking to yourself about anything else, you’re fine. After a while, the mind gets so snug with the breath, you don’t need to talk to yourself so much. And that’s just a little reminder. Breath, breath. When the breath feels comfortable, it’s important that you start being aware of the whole body. Make the range for your awareness all the way out to the skin in all directions. And you begin to notice that when you’re breathing, it’s not just a sensation in one spot. There are lots of parts of the body where you feel the sensation of breathing. And see if you can make all of them feel good. If your awareness is too small, you’re likely to drift off. So you’re trying to find the right balance here. Not so much frenetic energy that you’re wandering all over the place, but not so little energy that you’re falling asleep. It’s got to be the right balance. That requires, again, that you comment on things and ask yourself questions. Is this just right? What could be done to change? And again, as long as this conversation stays with the breath and is helpful in keeping you with the breath and making the breath more comfortable, it’s fine. We sometimes think that there’s no thinking at all in meditation, but that’s not the case. You have to think yourself to stillness. It comes from working from the outside, working on in. Because after all, the mind that’s talking to itself right now is the same mind that’s been making comments to itself all day long about what you want to do. What you want to think about. What’s worth thinking about. What’s not worth thinking about. And this, of course, spills out into your speech with other people. This is one of the reasons why the Noble Path includes right speech as one of its factors. Because the way you speak in the course of the day is going to have an impact on the way you meditate. Here in the monastery, of course, there are lots of people right now, at least lots of people by our standards. So we have to be especially careful that our speech doesn’t disturb our own stillness and doesn’t disturb the stillness of others. The Buddha set himself three tests for deciding what was right speech and what was not. The first one is, is it true? If it’s not true, he wouldn’t say it. If it was true, then he would go to the next test, which is, is it beneficial? In other words, does it serve a genuine purpose? This is where you have to be especially careful, because sometimes there is a genuine purpose in keeping everybody happy in the group, working together. It’s a kind of social grease speech. But then, of course, too much grease can gum up the work. So you have to be very careful that it doesn’t spill out into idle chatter. What too often happens is when you’re trying to be pleasant in the group, you’re trying to think of something to say, and just whatever pops into your mind goes right out without passing any of the filters. And you end up saying things that are either not quite true or actually divisive, splitting people against one another. Or something that hurts people’s feelings. You have to be especially careful about beneficial speech to make sure that it really does serve a purpose. Our purpose right here is to practice, to train the mind. So whatever speech goes beyond that is not helpful, is not beneficial. You have to be very careful about time and place. And don’t just say things because you feel like saying them. Some people haven’t been assertive enough in their lives, and it’s finally time to be more assertive. Well, that’s not the issue. The issue is, what is the impact of your speech going to be? Where is it coming from? Where is it going? What kind of mind-state gives rise to that speech? You want to look at that. And then when it’s said, what impact is it going to have on yourself, on the people around you? As the Buddha once said, if something is true, but if it’s going to give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion, either in you or the people you’re talking to, then you better not say that. It’s not the case that when something is true, you’ve got a free pass. So this test for being beneficial is one that requires a lot of care and a lot of balance, a fair amount of reflection. You might say, “Well, I don’t have time to reflect on my speech.” What is it that’s pushing you so hard that you can’t look at your own actions? After all, our actions are our gift to ourselves. It’s what we pass on to our future. So what are you passing on to your future? What sort of inheritance are you passing on? What sort of legacy are you giving to yourself? There was that dumb billboard I saw on the highway the other day, which shows a person standing next to his tombstone. That’s not your legacy. Your legacy is in your actions. You want to be very careful about them, because that’s what you give to the world, give to yourself. So make sure that what you say is true and beneficial. And then finally, there’s the issue of whether it’s going to be pleasing to other people or not. There are times when what you’re going to say is not pleasing, but it’s got to be said. People are misbehaving, people are doing something that’s hurtful or harmful, and you want to let them know clearly that it’s got to stop. How do you say that in a way that is true and beneficial and timely? You have to look at the right time and place for these things. The same goes for pleasant things. Sometimes it’s not the time to say something pleasant. It’s not the time to be friendly and nice. You’ve got to be strong and clear. So those are the three tests. Whether it’s true, whether it’s beneficial, and whether it’s the right time to be pleasant or the right time to be unpleasant. Obviously, a lot of thought should go into your speech. And it’s important to notice that when the Buddha lists the factors of the path, right speech is up there toward the beginning. After you develop the right view and have the right resolve that you want to put an end to suffering and don’t want to do anything harmful, he immediately brings up the topic of your speech. You’ve got to be extra, extra careful about what you say. Sharp, cutting remarks that are just meant to hurt, that’s not beneficial for anybody. You may feel like saying it, and it might feel good to say it, but it’s not really good in the long term, not even good in the short term. And if those are the kinds of remarks that are going around in your head, then they’re going to be going around your head while you’re meditating and getting in the way of your trying to get the voices in your mind focused on the breath. So when you pick up the meditation topic and evaluate it, what you say to yourself is true, beneficial, and timely. In other words, you generally notice, “Is the mind with the breath or is it not?” You’re not pretending that things are fine when they’re not. And then you learn to ask the questions about the breath that are actually beneficial. Questions about how the mind has certain needs and what needs to be met. What are the needs of the mind right now? Does it need to be energized? Does it need to be relaxed? Does it need to be soothed? And then when it’s misbehaving, you’ve got to learn how to tell yourself, “Okay, this is the right time to be harsh with it.” If it’s spending all of its time fantasizing about sex, or who you’re angry at, or who you’re feeling mistreated by, or how you’re feeling mistreated by the world as a whole, you’ve got to come down hard on those thoughts. Know when you’re defying what needs to be treated with gentle hands and when they need to be given a karate chop. So you’ve got to develop those same three questions, those same three tests for what you’re talking to yourself about right now as you’re meditating. Are you truly observant of what’s actually going on? Are the comments you’re making about the breath, the comments you’re making about the mind, are they beneficial? And how do you know when your mind is winding off, when to be gentle with it and just kind of gently bring it back to the breath, and when you have to cut it short? Do you have good practice with right speech outside? It’s a lot easier to develop right speech inside, which becomes a factor for your concentration. So keep in mind the fact that the path is an all-around path. It’s not just for when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s the way you conduct yourself all the time, because it’s the same mind all the time. The habits you develop inside are going to come out, and the habits you develop outside are going to come in and mess up your meditation if you’re not careful. This is where the training of the mouth and the training of the mind go together.

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