Conversations

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The Buddha said there are three ways we fabricate our experience. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. There’s verbal fabrication, which is basically the way you talk to yourself. You direct your thoughts to certain things and you start evaluating and making comments on them. And then there’s mental fabrication, the physical feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and your perceptions, the words, images, concepts that underline what you say to yourself, how you picture things to yourself. And all these come to bear on all our experience. As Ajaan Lee once said, the verbal fabrication is the big troublemaker. This is your inner conversation, the running commentary you make about things. And sometimes there are several commentaries going on all at once. And we can create a lot of suffering for ourselves if that inner commentary is not skillful. One of the reasons we try to get the mind into concentration and focus it on the breath is so we can get out of those conversations for a bit and step back from them. So you don’t have to be taking them so seriously all the time. Otherwise, you can get yourself into a thought world, and if you can’t get out, you can make yourself go crazy. And at the very least, you add a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering. You get into experiences that don’t have to be so bad. For instance, you’re engaged in a conversation with somebody else. There are the words that you’re saying, there are the words the other person is saying, then there are the words that you’re saying to yourself as a commentary on what the other person is saying, and the other person is making a commentary on what you’re saying and doing. And it starts getting exponential. Lots and lots of conversations, lots and lots of opportunities for misunderstanding. The Buddha offers two ways of dealing with this. One is new ways of talking to yourself. In other words, it’s learning how not to talk to yourself. The new ways of talking to yourself, for instance, when you’re hearing something unpleasant. The Buddha says to remind yourself that you’ve got ears that are composed of physical elements. These ears can hear the sounds that other human beings say. And the sounds they say are not going to kill you. We’ve heard of cases, of course, when someone hears something and they have a heart attack and die. It’s not because of the words. It’s the commentary they made on the words that killed them. So he says, when something unpleasant comes, remind yourself that you’ve got ears, and there are nice sounds and sounds that are not so nice. So just make a comment. An unpleasant sound is made contact at the ear, and leave it at that. Of course, that leaves you hanging in comparison to the commentaries you ordinarily would make around things. But it’s a very useful skill and it’s a very useful tool. Just an unpleasant comment is made contact at the ear. That’s as far as it goes. It’s just at the ear. Then you begin to realize the reason you suffer from it is because you pull it inside. You let that contact reverberate. One of the Buddha’s images for a person who’s gained awakening is a broken gong. In other words, other people can hit it, but it doesn’t reverberate. The same way contact can come at the ear and it doesn’t reverberate. It doesn’t go humming into the mind. And if you find that it does go further into the mind, this is where the Buddha says to develop what he calls renunciate grief. In other words, here I am, there’s so much work still to be done in my mind. So the focus is not so much on what the other person said, or what the other person meant, or how inconsiderate they are, or how unreceptive they are, or whatever. The issue is, I’ve got more work to do. That’s how you talk to yourself to pull yourself out of a lot of the difficulties that otherwise would come if your commentary went its normal way. Another image he has you keep in mind is the story of the person who’s caught by a group of bandits. The bandits have a two-handled saw, and they start sawing off that person’s limbs. First an arm, then another arm, then another leg, then another leg, and probably the head. He said if that person, being sawed up like that, had any ill will for those people, he would not be following the Buddhist teachings. It’s an extreme image, and it’s meant to be extreme. So you remember it and you compare it. If someone says something nasty to you, you can remind yourself, “At least I’m not sawing off my head or sawing off my limbs.” It helps put things into perspective. It helps pull you out of a normal conversation and give you another conversation. It’s like that story of the monk who’s going off to a rough part of India. He went to say goodbye to the Buddha and pay his respects before he left. The Buddha said, “You know, those people are supposed to be pretty rough and uncivilized. What if they yell at you?” The monk said, “At least they’re not hitting me.” The Buddha said, “What if they hit you?” The monk said, “At least they’re not hitting me with stones.” The Buddha said, “What if they hit you with stones?” The monk said, “At least they’re not stabbing me.” The Buddha said, “What if they stab you?” The monk said, “At least they’re not killing me.” The Buddha said, “What if they kill you?” The monk said, “At least my death wasn’t a suicide.” So those are some ways of having a conversation with yourself that can help clear out a lot of unskillful conversations. The important thing is to remind yourself that if the unskillful conversations are still going on, the real thing you’ve got to work on is not straightening out the other person, but straightening out your own mind. Focus your energy in here. This is where you can concentrate on the breath, concentrate on getting the mind to be able to settle down in whatever conversation you need in order to bring it to the breath, help the mind get at ease with the breath. Those are useful conversations. Meditation is not just trying to stop your thoughts. There is that aspect of the concentration. You ultimately do want to be able to get to the point where you’re not chatting to yourself all the time. There’s just a strong sense of real stillness. Last night we were talking about some of the ways you can get into that really fast if the mind is in the right mood. Just think of the energy channels throughout your body, the nerves in the nervous system, and think of good breath energy flowing, flowing, flowing through all those areas. One of the most effective areas, just think of it, is to flow out your eyes, because so much breathing involves the muscles around the eyes. So think of the energy cleaning out the eye channels and going out both with the in-breath and with the out-breath. So it’s this big flow that’s cleaning things out. If you notice there are other parts in your head or in other parts of your body that seem to be associated with certain thoughts, think of the breath energy flowing through those, not allowing any little thoughts to form. It’s a pretty quick way of getting the mind to settle down. Another is to think of two spots in the body at once, say, the middle of the head and the base of the spine. Think of a line connecting the two, and you’re in that line. The breath comes into that line and goes out of that line. Because you’ve got two spots that you’re focusing on, you don’t have much time to think about anything else. It’s like having both of your hands filled with things and you have no other hands to pick things up. So sometimes you need to adjust your inner conversation to get the mind to settle down, and sometimes you can just stop the conversation. So use whichever tool is useful. Whichever tool works with this particular time you’re sitting, or this particular time you’re doing meditation, or this particular time that you’re dealing with somebody else. Remember, these tools that we use when we meditate are not meant to be used only while we’re sitting here with our eyes closed. They’re useful for dealing with all kinds of situations, to help keep things in perspective. And don’t create mountains where there aren’t even any molehills. Even if there is a molehill, even if there is a mountain, you don’t have to have that mountain weighing down on your chest, weighing down on your heart. Remember, you’re the one who pulls the mountain in. Other people’s words are just their words. They’re waves going through the air. They strike the air. And that’s as far as their words go. Their words are their karma. What you do with those words is your karma. And you want to make sure that that’s skillful, because otherwise you’re creating a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering for yourself. One of the purposes of the Buddha’s teachings is to remind yourself that you don’t have to do that.

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