How to Talk to Yourself (outdoors)

October 2, 2018

One of the reasons we ask people to be quiet during the retreat, not to be talking to one another, is so you can hear yourself talk to yourself more clearly. We spend so much of our lives listening to other people talk, deciding what we like, what we don’t like. Sometimes we see that what they’re saying is abnormal, but we tend to assume that everything that goes through our own minds is normal. It makes sense. After all, it’s our thinking. But when you have an opportunity to be quiet like this, and you realize that the only voice you’re hearing at all now is the voice in your own mind, and you can stay with the breath so you can step back from that voice, you begin to see there are many different voices in there. You can start ferreting out which ones you can put your trust in and which ones you can’t. You begin to see, you begin to recognize. You say something in your mind, you ask yourself, “Where did I get that thought?” Sometimes these thoughts come from your parents, sometimes they come from your teachers, sometimes from your friends. A lot of them nowadays come from the media. When the media goes crazy, then the whole country goes crazy. So it’s good to step out like this, both stepping out of the world of the media and the world of your friends, the world of your family, and also to step out of the worlds of the different voices in your head so you can actually look at them. Where do they come from? Where do they go? Where would they lead you? And if you don’t like the way you’re talking to yourself or if you see that there’s something wrong with it, this is one of the places where the Buddhist teachings are really good because it gives you alternative things to say to yourself. For example, if you find yourself comparing yourself to other people, there are two ways that are skillful, lots of ways that are unskillful. The unskillful ways are when you see that you’re better off than somebody else, you feel pride and conceit. Or if you see that you’re worse off than other people, then you feel an inferiority complex, neither of which are helpful. What he says is, one, you see somebody else who’s really rich or powerful or intelligent or good-looking or whatever. Remind yourself that you’ve been there, too, thinking about all the many past lifetimes you’ve had. We’ve all been in that position at one point. And you realize it’s not a position you can hold on to. The worth of that position is what you do with those qualities. And all too many people do unskillful things. But at any rate, it’s not a position where you should feel that when you’re no longer in that position, you should be jealous of people who still are in that position. They’re going to fall at some point, too. You’ve had your chance, they’re having their chance, you may have your chance again. It goes back and forth like this. So instead of feeling jealous, you realize we’re all in this together. And it reminds you, well, the next time good fortune comes your way, you want to use it well, because that’s the only thing of essence you can take out of good fortune like that, the good things you do with your power, the good things you do with your wealth. Similarly, when you see someone who’s really poor or sick, the Buddha’s example is a leper by the side of the road. Remind yourself you’ve been there, too, at some point in the many lifetimes in the past. And it’s highly possible you might be back there again sometime. This means you don’t look down on the people who are worse than you are. Again, realizing that we’re all in this together. If there’s any way you can help them, you can help them without condescending. You don’t feel any disdain for them. Because you recognize yourself in them. Another way that’s useful to compare yourself with others is when you think about people who can practice. Practicing meditation and practicing the Dhamma. And they’ve done it with a lot of success. Instead of feeling jealous or feeling inferior to them, remind yourself they’re human beings. They can do this. I’m a human being. I can do this, too. This is a kind of conceit, but it’s a conceit with a good purpose. Years back, when I was a young monk, the very first time I went Dhammasattva in Riong, there was another young man from Bangkok who had just ordained. Every day we’d go up and sit in the little old wooden sala they had on the side of the hill there. And I’d be sitting there and my legs were getting sore. My back was hurting. Mosquitoes were biting. I’d feel ready to give up. I’d open my eyes and look at him. He’d sit there perfectly still. As if nothing were bothering him at all. So I said to myself, “If I give up now, I’ll be creating a bad name for America. Americans are weak.” So I sat there and I could put up with the pain and put up with the mosquitoes. I found out later that he was sitting there in pain, being bitten by the mosquitoes, ready to give up. He’d look over and see this American sitting there perfectly still. He thought to himself, “There’s no way I can lose out to a Westerner.” So he sat there for a longer time, too. So that way we both encouraged each other to practice. It was conceit, but it was a skillful use of conceit. So sometimes even your defilements can have their uses. So when you find yourself comparing yourself to other people in a way that’s unskillful, remind yourself there are ways of talking to yourself that are more skillful, that you can get some use out of the comparison. So instead of feeling jealousy for those who are better off, or feeling inferior to those who are better off, remind yourself you’ve been there. You can have a feeling of fellow-feeling for them, and even some empathetic joy if you see that they’re using their wealth well, using their power well, using their abilities well. For people who are less well-off than you are, you don’t feel any sense of condescension, you feel a sense of fellow-feeling. You give them help if you can, you do it with respect. And as for any envy you may have of people who seem to be practicing better than you do, remind yourself they’re human beings, they can do it, you can do it, too. That’s a skillful way of talking to yourself. The Buddha also recommends ways of talking to yourself when you’re feeling ready to give up. It’s called putting yourself first, putting the Dhamma first, and putting the world first. Let’s take putting the world. There are times when you feel ready to give up. You remind yourself there are people in the world who can read minds. What would they think if they read your mind right now? Here you are practicing, and you’re going to be giving up a really good practice. You’d feel ashamed. In this way you use shame in order to keep you on the practice. This is a healthy sense of shame. It’s not the shame that’s the opposite of pride, it’s the shame that’s the opposite of shamelessness. It actually goes together with pride. In other words, you want to have a good opinion of yourself, so act in a way that makes you have that good opinion. That’s putting the world first. Putting yourself first, you reflect that you started this path because you saw that you were suffering, and this was a way to get out of suffering. It’s because you had compassion for yourself, you had goodwill for yourself. If you give up, what happens to your compassion and goodwill? Don’t you love yourself anymore? When you think in this way, it gives you motivation to stick with the path. This way you’re using your own compassion as your motivation, because it’s got to be good, not only for you, but also for other people if you get your mind under control. You’ve got a handle on your own greed, aversion, and delusion. You’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time. You’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time, and you’ve been doing this for a long time. 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Remind yourself that there are better ways. We meditate to get the mind quiet so that you can see your mental chatter for what it is. Separate yourself out from it. It’s only when you can separate yourself out from things like this that you’ve previously assumed to be you or yours, that you can actually see them with some objectivity. And John Lee says it’s like going into a kitchen and seeing that the kitchen walls are just filled with soot. This is a big problem because a lot of the stoves used to be wood stoves. He says you see the soot in other people’s kitchens and it looks awful. You see the same soot in your own kitchen, it’s just the way things are. It’s because you haven’t separated yourself out. In the same way with the old bad habits in your mind, you just take them as normal. If you saw those same bad habits in other people’s minds, you’d be disgusted. So use this opportunity to step out in the conversations of the world. You can be quiet, the people around you can be quiet, and you can be quiet in your own mind. So you get a clearer idea of what kind of chatter is going on in your mind. Use the Buddha’s recommendations to make it better chatter. Chatter that’s actually part of the path.

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