Say Only What’s Necessary

January 19, 2020

Ever since we learned how to talk, we’ve been talking to ourselves, saying all kinds of things. Now, as we come to meditate, we want to learn to use that habit, which is often very distracting, for a different purpose—to get the mind to settle down. In technical terms, the Buddha calls this direct thought and evaluation. You choose a topic and then you comment on it. In this case, we’re going to choose one topic, the breath. And then you keep up a commentary for a while. But the purpose of the commentary is to get to the point where you don’t need the commentary anymore. That means stripping things away, saying only what’s necessary to yourself. And as for comments that are not necessary, not helpful, you’ve got to put them aside. You notice when the breath is long, when it’s short, and then ask yourself, “Which is better?” That’s the evaluation side. Then when you find something that’s better, you keep at it. When you find something that feels really good, then you think of that good sensation spreading through the body. The Buddha’s image is of a bathman working water through a lump of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn’t have soap. They would use bath powder. They’d make a kind of dough, in the same way we make bread dough. They’d roll it across your body. So the bathman had to get the water into the soap dough and knead it through. So think in the same way, that you’re going to knead that comfortable feeling of the breath through the different parts of the body. All this is useful and necessary, but it comes to a point where you find it’s less and less necessary as things get really good. You need only a perception to maintain it. That’s when you can drop all the thinking and just think breath. So the way you talk to yourself is a useful part of the meditation, but it has to be trained. And we don’t train it only when we’re sitting here with our eyes closed. This is why right speech is a part of the path. You gain some training in how to talk. You can learn here in the monastery where we don’t have a vow of silence, how to use your talking so it’s conducive to your own concentration and to the concentration of others. The basic principle in outside speech that the Buddha referenced was, one, that what you say is true. Two, it’s useful. Three, it’s at the right time and the right place. So in other words, it’s not just a matter of saying what you want or what you feel like saying. Because if you meditated saying what you want to yourself and what you felt like saying to yourself, you’d never get to settle down. So you start out with something that’s true. But even speaking your truth is not always the wise thing all the time. You have to think about the consequences. This applies both to your outside speech and to your inside speech. Things may be going slowly in the meditation, but don’t talk about how they’re going slow. That’s not going to help. That’s not beneficial. So the same with outside speech. Think about what’s true and what’s going to be beneficial, what will give good results. And is this the right time to get those good results, or do you have to wait? When you think about the consequences, then your speech becomes a lot more skillful and you find yourself saying less, which is perfectly fine. All too many of us live with our chatter, connect with our chatter. But there are other ways of connecting, especially in a community like this. You connect by respecting one another’s space. Respecting one another’s silence. That way you connect on a more useful level, where you can be a community of admirable friends for one another, helping one another along the way. And when you think of your speech as helpful in this way, then when the time comes to meditate, speech can also be helpful. As I would have said, ideal speech is speech that puts the mind at peace. So that applies both inside and outside, and in. So think about these things as you go through the day, because the context of the way we live together here is going to have a huge impact on what happens when we sit down and meditate. We want it to be a context that doesn’t destroy the meditation, that makes it easier for each person to maintain a sense of a comfortable center inside, where we can watch what’s going on in our minds. So keep your speech down to a minimum, because that’s the trick in concentration practices, speaking to yourself. Only when it’s necessary. So it’s good to get that practice outside as well. It’s like those old days in World War II. They would have signs posted all over train stations. “Is this trip necessary?” They’re trying to get people to cut back on idle travel as a way of saving resources. Well, in the same way, you can ask yourself, “Are these words necessary?” And get used to asking yourself that question. If they’re not really necessary, don’t say them. As Ajahn Fung used to say, “If you can’t control your mouth, there’s no way you’re going to control your mind, and particularly the speech inside your mind.” It’s by learning to say only what’s necessary that you give your mind space to be sensitive to the breath. Otherwise, you’re like that cartoon of the meditator. She’s sitting there, and all of a sudden the word “think” appears on her forehead. Then “think” appears on her arm, and “think” appears on her leg. And then “think, think, think, think, think.” And by the time the cartoon is over, you don’t see her anymore. You see just the word “think” all over the place. So try to use your internal chatter strategically. Keep paring it down, paring it down, just to the bare necessities. In that way, it really will be conducive to concentration, conducive to bringing the mind to peace.

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