

Hearing voices

Like it or not, we all hear voices, and our sanity is defined by how we react to them. Some of us are fortunate enough to be diagnosed early and given prompt and effective treatment, and in due course lead normal lives. Most of us, however, are not so fortunate, as we fail to notice the gravity of our having to listen to so many voices in our heads. It only gets worse when we are untreated for such a chronic mental aberration. As a result, which is often very painful and unnecessary, these voices rule both our waking and sleeping lives.

Most of us, that is, those with all our five physical senses intact, are burdened with five kinds of voices. We hear voices from our eyes, our ears, our nose, our tongue, and our body. When we see something, we rarely, if ever, really look at it. We know there is some form or colour before us, but we hear voices in our heads, telling us how this is the same or different from what we have seen before.

Similarly, we hear voices from our hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Yet, we do not really listen to what is actually going on *now*, as we are mostly referring back to our past records of the present experiences. (You might just notice what your mind just told you about what you are reading here!) As a rule, such inner processes are so mechanical that we do not even know that we are merely reacting to the voices in our heads.

Our voices also tell us what to do when we are smelling, tasting or touching something. We do not just smell; the voices tell us whether we should like it or hate it. We rarely enjoy our food: we chomp through our meals, talking on the phone, chatting with someone, reading the papers, and looking around, too. Our voices tell us to “multitask” so that we do not lose out on things, but the proper word for this is “scatter-braining.” While trying to grasp all, we actually lose all, especially our health and mind.

Since we have not really enjoyed our meal, we tend to eat more, but at the rate we eat, wolfishly and tastelessly, we become bored with our food. So our inner voices command us to go in quest of new tastes and exotic foods. Eating well is neither in the food nor in the mouth (don't always blame the cook): good eating is in the mind. On the other hand, in the company of love, even the simplest dish tastes like ambrosia. This is called mindful eating.

Touch, as is universally acknowledged, is a touchy affair. The inner voices here are really loud and powerful. Notice how once you are able to gently touch a stray cat, she almost at once responds by purring and stroking us, too. Touch is the universal language of unconditional acceptance. Unfortunately, it is also easily misused and misunderstood, because our voices tell us to be biased and suspicious.

Our experience of touch becomes especially problematic when our inner voices put our hearts on reactive autopilot. Take social hugging for example. We might hug those we know well when we meet them, and we hug those in pain to comfort them. This is not often the case in Singapore or most Asian societies. The reason I think is the simplistic notion that touch evokes sensuality or sexuality.

This is of course true in the training of the monastics, renunciants who do not wish to convey the wrong message, or initiate socializing, that would distract them from their celibate and contemplative lives. But I'm writing with the average lay person in mind.

The biggest problem with these inner voices is that they flood us with the past. We are so drowned in the past that we are simply dead to the present. We then fail to see people as they really are, in their natural goodness. We “see” people as our voices dictate us. We, too, present ourselves and behave in ways that our voices whisper to us as to what others expect of us. So we live a life of inner voices and whispers: we live in the past, dead to the present.

Where do these voices come from? We have noted that they are our own constructions of the past, how we see ourselves as we have lived. These are “inner” voices: they arise in our own heads. They are very ancient voices that go back to our subhuman and prehistoric past. Our bodies may have evolved; even our brains have grown bigger. But these voices can hold us down in dark subhuman levels and prevent our human growth.

They are the ancient voices that have haunted us through the ages. They are what cause fear in us, make us invent demons and gods, wage wars. These are the voices that tell us we don’t have this, we don’t have that, we must be this or that. They tell us to see differences in others and hate them. They are the voices of greed and of hate; they are the voice of delusion that conjure fictions in our heads and con us into believing them. They are voices that push and pull us around like puppets on a string.

Fortunately, we can over-ride these voices, even silence them forever. The first step to mastering our inner voices is to *know* and accept that they exist. They grow rampant when unattended. Treat these six voices as six little children or siblings we have. They are called Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch and Thought. That’s all they really are: children of our own minds, *objects* of our senses.

Treat them with lovingkindness: accept them just as they are, and let them go. Just as we have to let our own children grow by letting them go in due course, so too we need to free our inner voices and thoughts. Let them come, let them go, but never hold on to them. They are rumblings of our past, constructed, mind-made.

One of the best ways of letting go of these six kinds of voices is to anchor our mind to the breath. Hold on to the life-giving breath by simply counting “One,” after each in-out breath. Keep counting this way up to “Ten,” and repeat this as many times as you feel good with it. You will know when to stop.

An alternative method is to simply note “In” at the end of each in-breath, and “Out” at the end of each out-breath, in the same way. Do not force your breath; keep it natural, and you will feel it becoming more peaceful, if you enjoy what you are doing.

In fact, this is the best way to tame our voices. Our joyful breathing and lovingkindness will refine the inner voices so that they, too, live and love with us. This is how we master these inner voices. If we do not master our voices, they will master us.

Piya Tan ©2011