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As I Breath In I Listen, As I Breath Out I Speak:

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## I

There is a metaphor that links meditation and politics. Many forms of meditation emphasize mindful awareness of the breath. Through this awareness, we cultivate both concentration and insight. It is extremely difficult to focus exclusively on the breath before the mind begins to wander. When the mind wanders, we return to our focus on the breath. It is instructive to follow the chain of thoughts through which we have wandered.

The great beauty of this process is its simplicity and complexity. There is nothing more fundamental to human physiology than the breath. We breathe automatically; we rarely notice the process of breathing. Yet the variations of breath; its richness and complexity; its waves and patterns; its connectedness to consciousness: such understanding of the full significance and depth of our breath (or perhaps, our breadth) is the subject of the most profound meditation.

As breath is to meditation, listening and speaking are to politics. It is through ordinary discussion that our ideas, opinions, and interests are expressed. The discourse of everyday life reflects our most fundamental form of political expression. Speech interactions represent a complicated symbolic form of communication through which language is linked to consciousness. Throughout the day there are countless opportunities for political discourse in which different people speak and listen. These interactions may be mundane, but they frequently become extremely complex, having the potential to engender understanding or confusion, harmony or conflict.

Often conflicts emerge spontaneously, triggered by poor speaking or poor listening, resulting in a chain of misunderstandings, leading a conversation down a confusing path of distortions and allegations. This may be intentional, but typically it's not. Rather, stereotypes and preconceptions predispose us to hear what we wish to hear so that it conforms to whatever version of the truth we think we're carrying. This process occurs both in private conversations which are ostensibly non-political and in public discussions addressing contemporary issues.

Listening and speaking skills are fundamental to mutual, participatory, political interactions. We speak to make ourselves understood. We listen to understand others. Yet the complexity of our speech interactions, both the contextual and perceptual dynamics which inform discourse, make listening and speaking an extraordinary challenge. Similar to the breathing process, we speak and

listen automatically, habitually, and without reflection, not knowing where our words come from, where they go, how they lead to new words, and what kind of impact they will have. Interactive clarity is best achieved when we think, speak, and listen reflectively, linking intention to language, awareness to thought, and mindfulness to communication.

When we attach mindfulness to breathing, we realize that our breath connects us to all living beings. The molecules which pass through our body are continuously recycled in the Earth's biogeophysical circulatory systems. In effect, we all breathe each other. Similarly, our thoughts and actions move widely through cultural spaces. We may not have full awareness of where each thought or speech act goes. This is something that we can never know. Just as thoughts coalesce and dissolve in our own consciousness, so this process occurs in wider and deeper social and political layers. This is how we are linked to the streams of history. How can we bring this awareness to our everyday interactions? In what way might this awareness contribute to transformational politics?

Is it possible to use the meditative awareness of the breath to support mindful political awareness? If so, wouldn't it make sense to start with listening and speaking? As I breathe in I listen. As I breathe out I speak. I listen with full awareness, attentiveness, with an open, empty mind, unhindered by preconceptions, stereotypes, judgments, notions of right/wrong, separation, boundaries, etc. I speak with full awareness, clarity, reflectiveness, supported by an understanding of my volition, intention, and motivation, considering the impact of my words and thoughts, recognizing the dynamic, participatory, interaction that comprises our conversation.

Realistically, it is difficult to approach political conversations this way. We are caught in a complex network of power relationships, intentional manipulations, and ideological predispositions. These comprise a web of social and political relationships that is a seemingly unyielding context. How do we find the space to practice mindful speaking and listening? How can we empower the process of mindful communication?

Benjamin Barber, in his seminal book, *Strong Democracy* claims that the heart of participatory democracy is talk. He describes the mutualistic art of listening, reminding us that good listening means putting ourselves in another person's shoes, looking for common ground, seeking a true understanding of the other position, allowing us to generate compassion and establish a connection of heart and mind.

Listening is a mutualistic art that by its very practice enhances equality. The empathetic listener becomes more like his interlocutor as the two bridge the differences between them by conversation and mutual understanding. Indeed, one measure of healthy political talk is the amount of silence it permits and encourages, for silence is the

precious medium in which reflection is nurtured and empathy can grow. Without it, there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries.

Barber explores this concept in depth. He shows how political talk should have both affective and cognitive modes, allowing us to explore the full range of our feelings, impressions, and intuitions about an issue. Talk links thought to action, by allowing us to creatively invent new ideas, to establish alternative visions for our common interests. As we speak, our ideas become real and tangible. Thus, speaking and listening are the core of political communication.

This approach to politics is compatible with socially engaged Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh in *Being Peace* explores the ethical foundations of mindful politics. Consider the eighth and ninth precepts of the Order of Interbeing. The discourses follow in bold print, and excerpts from Thay's interpretations follow.

**Eighth: Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.**

In order to help reconcile a conflict, we have to be in touch with both sides. We must transcend the conflict; if we are still in the conflict, it is difficult to reconcile. We have to have a non-dualistic viewpoint in order to listen to both sides and understand. The world needs persons like this for the work of reconciliation, persons with the capacity of understanding and compassion.

**Ninth: Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things that you are not sure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.**

“The words we speak can create love, trust, and happiness around us, or create a hell. We should be careful about what we say. If we tend to talk too much, we should become aware of it and learn to speak less. We must become aware of our speech and the results of our speaking.”

It is intriguing to see the compatibility between the approaches of a Western political philosopher (Barber) and a Vietnamese Buddhist (Hanh). Both understand the moral basis of political action, both emphasize that attentiveness to speaking and listening is the key to compassionate communication. True democratic participation is only possible under these circumstances.

Political situations may occur anywhere, anyhow, and any place. Whether we are resolving a family conflict, a local planning issue, a national budget deficit, or a transboundary environmental problem, the skills of mindful communication are crucial. The parallels between these processes should be clear. Communication breakdowns occur for the same reasons: stereotypes, allegations, selfishness, greed, stubbornness, intransigence, arrogance, pride, ethnic or gender chauvinism, thirst for power, etc. Harmonious resolutions, even those that are imperfect result from compassion, respect, selflessness, honesty, altruism, awareness, calm, and peace. In most situations, especially those that involve heterogeneous groupings, we experience a complex mixture of these emotions and feelings.

## II

Everyday life is a laboratory for mindful politics. We can cultivate self-awareness, build community, and become politically engaged, by becoming mindful of the political dimensions of our ordinary behaviors. This is exceedingly difficult. Conflicts often emerge out of nowhere. We don't always know when we have to take a public stand on an issue. As citizens in a market economy, we tend to interpret community politics from an individual perspective. It is a great challenge to contemplate the public good, to envision the commons, and to act accordingly. In fact, it requires the same discipline and insight that are necessary for meditation practice. We can sleep through our political lives, caught in the storms of powers out of our control, denying and avoiding politics, wishing it upon others, making excuses for ourselves. Or we can become engaged, by allowing the politics of ordinary situations to unfold as experiments in awareness.

I am intrigued when conflicts emerge among strangers in situations that are not ostensibly political. Circumstantial communities form because people share the same space, attend the same event, or become members of a temporary network. In these situations, there are inevitable rules of common courtesy that are derived from implicit social contracts. Nevertheless, the implicit quality of these contracts implies that common courtesy is imprecise. Some may yield when others will take; some may proceed when others will retreat; all may have different preconceptions of what it means to be a good neighbor.

I find these situations to be helpful for observing my political behavior. I am stripped of the power that is attached to my professional competence. I have not had the opportunity to build a reputation of trust and fairness; there is no community context or language. I have had only a limited time to observe the idiosyncratic behaviors of the other people in the situation. This is, in effect, an improvisational milieu. As conscious as I may be of the power I still bring to the situation (educated, articulate, white adult male, etc.), there is much that I cannot control, and a large measure of contextual uncertainty prevails.

Also, there may be written rules which formalize behavior, but there are usually important situations that are not covered by these rules.

I am particularly irritated when I encounter individuals who do not respect what I happen to perceive as common courtesy. I think the source of this irritation is my expectation that these situations are a laboratory for larger communities, that I expect strangers to act with a degree of moral dignity, and that I want everyone to like each other, or at least to tolerate those who are different from themselves. Much of this is derived from my desire to have other people like and respect me. Hence when any of these expectations are not fulfilled, I am disturbed.

When I am driving in traffic, and someone cuts in front of me, I get annoyed, if not downright angry. I don't mind being behind the person. I do mind the violation of common courtesy. I was driving with a Czech colleague in Prague who was cut off by another driver. He also got very upset. He proceeded to drive in front of the other motorist and to continually block him from getting ahead. I don't go to that extreme, but I have responded with obscene gestures, often to the shock of my family who don't often see me respond that way.

These are not trivial problems. We can observe our behavior in these situations. What is it that really provokes us? Why do some people get angry? Why do others let these situations pass?

I'd like to describe a more complex incident which provides a good example of conflict in circumstantial communities. I choose this particular situation because of its simplicity and complexity, and its remarkable ubiquity.

My family was backpacking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We decided to stay in an Appalachian Mountain Club "backcountry" campsite which consists of a shelter and a half dozen tent platforms. After a long climb, we arrived and were fortunate to get what we considered the best campsite (remote, spacious, with a beautiful view). There was another campsite relatively close to ours. It was occupied by a quiet, friendly person. This was an exquisite situation, very peaceful and relaxing, a wonderful opportunity to practice mindful awareness, and quiet contemplation.

The next day we went for a long day hike along a mountain ridge. We returned to our campsite and faced what we perceived immediately as a potentially aggravating situation. Some new backpackers arrived at the neighboring campsite. They had packed in a Walkman radio with Walkman speakers and were playing loud hard rock. They were speaking very loudly and using abusive language. There were two men and one woman, all in their late 20's. One of the men was speaking to the woman (they were presumably a couple) in a derogatory manner, speaking negatively about women generally, and speaking with a great deal of harshness and anger.

So we were annoyed on several fronts. They had disturbed our privacy and tranquillity. From our perspective, blaring rock music at a backcountry campsite prevented us from enjoying our pseudo-wilderness experience. The abusive language was inappropriate for our children. The macho, woman bashing language offended our political beliefs. On all these levels, our sense of common courtesy was amply violated.

For an hour we decided to tolerate the situation. We'd try to ignore or enjoy the music. The abusive language was really not such a big deal. We'd use the derogatory language as a chance to talk to our kids about gender issues, power, and other related questions. After this hour, the situation remained the same. Having visions of a long evening of this behavior, we became increasingly annoyed. Trying to be mindful of the politics of the situation, we contemplated strategies, but yielding to our emotional anger, we ignored most of them and instead became more belligerent.

Finally, I sarcastically yelled over to them.

"Would you please turn the radio down?"

"What's that?"

"I said, would you please turn the radio down?"

We received a sarcastic response.

"All you have to do is ask."

"That's what we did."

The radio was lowered, but the war had begun. Our belligerent neighbors did not appreciate an infringement on their rights. They loudly discussed the situation, presumably aware that we could hear everything they were saying. They projected all kinds of stereotypes onto us, deciding who we were and what we stood for. "Folks who give their \$100 to the AMC and assume they can buy their peace and quiet....Some guy who has an uptight job and an uptight wife and is trying to get away from it all." We found these stereotypes aggravating.

Of course, we had similar stereotypes, talking about how angry they were, how abusive they were of the woman, the environment, other people, etc. Later we had gone to a public area of the campsite to enjoy a view and relative quiet. Other campers there had remarked how upset they were that there was a loud radio at the campsite. In effect, we became the frontlines for the entire community of campers. They had suggested that we speak to the caretaker. I was hesitant to do this, only wanting to use the legitimate authority of the caretaker if we couldn't solve the problem by ourselves.

We returned to our campsite. We sat several yards away from the tent platform. Our neighbors came over to our site, not knowing that we were just a short distance away, making more disparaging remarks about us. We continued to struggle with our emotional anger and our desire to find a way to deal with this situation in a more detached, mindful way.

Finally I went over to their campsite. I introduced myself, saying that I wasn't there to hassle them, but I had heard them talking about us, and there was no reason for any of us to remain upset when none of us knew each other. I remarked that I didn't know who they were, that they didn't know who we were and it seemed silly for all of these discussions to take place when we were all in the mountains to enjoy ourselves. So we introduced each other. The most belligerent of the three remained relatively belligerent (backing down somewhat) saying that he lugged those speakers all the way up the mountain and he wanted to use them. That they were tired and would be out of our way real soon. The other two were willing to engage in several moments of superficial mountain chit-chat. I returned to our campsite. They lowered their radio and the incident was over. They did go to sleep shortly thereafter and they awoke and departed early.

The next day, we spent a lot of time discussing the incident. What happened? How did we behave? Could we have acted differently? How did we exercise power? Was the problem successfully resolved? What would we have done had the noise lasted until late in the evening?

On the one hand, the incident seems trivial. Nothing really important was at stake. How can we compare the politics of this incident to the "serious" politics of civil wars, global poverty, and important elections? Who cares about the community politics of backcountry campsites?

At the time, the incident seemed very important. It dominated our consciousness for several hours. We knew that it had deep moral and symbolic significance. We watched ourselves become angry, develop stereotypes, become stereotyped, and take a strong position based on our values and expectations. These values were attached to a moral position of right and wrong, therefore we cared a lot about the outcome from several perspectives. First we wanted our beliefs to be respected, that is, wilderness campsites should be places to experience peace and solitude. Second, we wanted to resolve the conflict based on a mutual understanding of each position.

This is exactly the process that leads to difficult political confrontations. Different parties have contrasting moral perspectives on issues of common concern. Public issues may involve many more people, and the lines of power may be considerably more complex. But this small incident was important to us. We wanted to overcome our emotional impulse to exercise power for private interest. We also placed a high stake in achieving an outcome that was mutual and based on face to face discussion. We watched our tempers subvert this prospect. We watched our judgments fuel our tempers. This is a common loop in both private and public confrontations. It is a loop that often leads to suffering and violence.

But as we become more aware, more mindful of how we behave in these situations, we can contribute to a community process for solving political problems,



however they may occur. When I shouted to our neighbors and asked them to turn down the radio, I acted spontaneously. It was as if a wave of energy suddenly overcame and implored me to act. It was not deliberate. I acted spontaneously, out of habit, out of emotion. When I walked to their campsite to initiate a discussion, I also acted spontaneously, a microcosm of larger and more complex political questions.

I am not trying to convey a loose moral relativism, the attitude that everyone has a right to their own moral space. When difficult conflicts emerge, it is not acceptable to resolve the problem by resorting to a laissez-faire, humanistic, therapeutic individualism, the “I’m OK, you’re OK” syndrome. Rather it is important to try to get to the root of the conflict, to explore that source and to thoroughly understand what we bring to the conflict. This may not always work. There are intractable opponents who may not value the same approach to conflict and may use various means of manipulation, including some that are downright sinister. Our neighbors may have been far less reasonable. They may have been White Supremacists out on a survival trip. I cannot say for sure how I would have acted in those circumstances.

I try as best as I can to follow ethical codes of behavior. My ethical system is derived from ecology, Buddhism, Judaism, and participatory democracy. Every experience is a laboratory for those beliefs. They are not just texts; they are principles for living. We cannot predict when confrontations may emerge. We can fortify ourselves through mindful awareness and use our ethical codes to guide our actions. This is fundamental to transformational politics. As we transform ourselves, we transform society.

Meditation practice strengthens concentration, awareness, insight, and discipline. It can help us understand the roots of conflict by letting us see what we bring to conflict, by helping us understand what our motives are in a political situation. We can do this by attending carefully to what we hear and what we say. A clear mind helps us listen, a clear mind purifies speech. Let us practice a gatha of mindful politics...As I breathe in I listen, as I breathe out I speak....

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