

Wise Speech

by Rebecca Dixon

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Welcome to the third talk in this monthly series on the Eightfold Path. It's about Wise Speech, and I want to start by clarifying what "speech" means. It's communication of all sorts: Morse code, semaphore flags or even the, uh, internet. OK, and facial expressions, including the one I just made, and body language, etc.

First, let's look at where Wise Speech fits on the Eightfold Path. This part begins the section of the Path about Ethics, and we come to it having spent a month each practicing with Wise Understanding, and Wise Intent. The entire Path guides us to where we can drop the *mental habits* that cause our lives to be pervaded with suffering. I'm talking about fears, doubts, dislikes, regrets, resentments – etc., etc. These mental habits arise from wrong views, from misunderstanding the truth of how things are and how they work. The Path leads us to WATCH what's WRONG, to study our suffering. Not with the intention of blaming ourselves, or changing it through our willpower, but really growing into deeply understanding the cause and effect or dukkha, as we watch our minds work. Our job is to experience the 3rd Noble Truth each time it arises, understanding more and more deeply that the cause of dukkha is clinging. Clinging comes in the form of either craving or aversion, and we study it causing dukkha so we can *feel the burn* of our clinging to this hot coal of suffering. Then, not through willpower, but the innate desire of our entire being, we'll just LET GO of that burning coal.

Now that may have sounded like fire and brimstone, but here's the reason why it doesn't need to be: kindness. The "intention to reduce suffering" is also called, simply, kindness. It is the cornerstone of our practice, the Wise Intention we just studied. Apply it first and foremost to yourself: this suffering lab specimen that you're studying. Then, of course, apply it to all other beings. In a nutshell, that's the Ethics section of the Eightfold Path. So many of us balk at the thought of being kind to ourselves, thinking it's selfish, like we should only be kind to others. But we and others are the same, and we can't truly be kind to either without being kind to both. Pragmatically, we have to put on our own "oxygen mask" first before we can help others. Without holding in mind that *all beings* suffer, and feeling compassion for *us all*, we can't open ourselves to this exploratory surgery that's needed to clearly understand the causes and nature of our suffering.

So, that about sums it up. Thank you. No, seriously, there is more to say, so much that I spent most of the last few days working on this talk trying to decide what to eliminate.

First, the relevant teachings, such as the sutta cited by Bikkhu Bodhi called Instructions to Rahula at Mango Stone, No. 61 of the Mahjima Nikkaya. Here Buddha tells his young son: "Whenever you want to do a verbal action, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal action I want to do — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful verbal action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would, ... then any verbal action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful verbal action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any verbal action of that sort is fit for you to do."

You may be able to see a problem with this approach, especially if you've ever tried to practice with wise speech. Reflecting this way, unless you've practiced *a lot*, is quite difficult in the rush that most of our communication involves. Also, how do we know in advance if it will cause affliction? Experience helps, but I still often find that no matter how careful I am, people still misunderstand what I've said. Maybe they didn't hear the "not" in a sentence, or their minds fuzzed out for parts of what I said. So it's good that there are guidelines for Wise Speech.

With all the parts on Ethics, remember that it's about the *Intention* not to harm, to be kind. But it also helps to have some signposts to follow. The Anguttara Nikaya # 5.198, called the Vaca Sutta says, "A statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, .. and blameless. Which five? It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth, ...politely, ...beneficially and ...with a mind of good-will." Various other suttas yield the four guidelines discussed by Bikkhu Bodhi: abstaining from speech that is false, slanderous, harsh and "idle chatter." Other teachers highlight suttas advising against discourse that's divisive among groups. I'll confess I'm attached to the 4 tests I was first taught, stated in positive language. Our communications are less likely to cause suffering if they're 1) truthful, 2) kind, 3) helpful and 4) appropriate.

Truth, obviously, is a big one. It's essential for seeing things as they truly are, the whole point of meditation. Gil Fronsdal says truthfulness is "mindfulness out loud." But how do we really know what's true? Maybe someone we trust said it, or there's evidence supporting it, or we're taking it on faith. Maybe we've really just believed it for so long that it seems like unassailable truth to us. So, however we got some bit of information, how do we communicate it *and* guard "truthfulness?" Well, in the Canki Sutta, MN 95, we're told, basically, to state our sources, like good journalists, lawyers, scholars or dharma teachers. We say, "I read in say, the New Yorker that XYZ." Or, "I've always thought XYZ." When I was preparing for law school I thought this insistence on citing sources of statements weakened my assertions, especially if the source was a bit squishy. But I realized when I developed this practice that it gave what I said a solidity, a trustworthiness. And that offers safety to everyone involved. Another part of the discipline is to just not say something if we don't know where we got the idea and definitely if we're aware it's not true.

"Well," almost every student asks me, "what about white lies?" They're also known as social fibbing. Well, ask yourself why you want to say anything other than what you really believe to be true. Fear of social consequences is a big one – it'll make someone mad, or hurt their feelings. In a dharma talk, Gil Fronsdal gave a hypothetical example of the bride before her wedding who asks if you like her dress, and you happen to think it's hideous. Gill suggests you might say, "You look lovely in it." She probably does look lovely even despite the fact that she's in that dress. I often officiate at weddings and I've seen a lot of dresses I would never buy, but I've always felt fine simply telling the bride she looks radiant, because they all have. There are ways to avoid being *brutally honest*, but please don't feel you always need to rise to the occasion so creatively. We can look for ways to speak the truth kindly without saying something that seems untrue to us. And if we can't think fast enough to be suave, then we can that stick with saying as little as possible, maybe just a big smile and a nod.

When we find ourselves in a group that's gossiping, we don't really need to take part. I tend to stay silent or wander away. But how do we know what's gossip and what's needed information about someone? Check

your feelings, your motivations before talking about someone who's not there. Mentally double check if saying this really will be helpful. To whom? Will it strengthen a group's cohesion, or damage it and the person being discussed? Are you sure you've picked the right audience? If it's at work, are you following the protocols for "tattling" on someone? You can test if it's Wise Speech by asking yourself how you'd feel if the person you're talking about overheard what you say. Chris Clifford tells a story of someone who asked a group gossiping about the habits of an absent man, "I wonder why he does that?" That took the negative energy right out of the group's chatter. This is a complex and challenging issue that's worth mindful investigation.

I think the best way to know if our words are motivated by kindness or a desire to help is to be in touch with the physical feelings of our emotions. Kindness for most of us has an expansive, positive feeling. If our words are coming from our own ego needs, or from animosity, we're probably feeling tense, maybe burning or jagged sensations. The way to get to know how we feel is to practice mindfully watching. Once we can watch our physical feelings, we can learn what mindstates are associated with those various sensations. The real trick is getting in touch with them, and besides during conversations, the other really good opportunity to do that is during meditation. In the moment when we realize thoughts have distracted us from mindfulness there are traces of feeling associated with those thoughts. Practice looking for them. They may be much fainter than during heated conversations, but during meditation you have the time and mindfulness to investigate more closely.

Many teachings about Wise Speech deal with "idle talk." All societies have their ways of greeting people. I knew ahead of time what the usual greeting was in Thailand, but I was still thrown when the first person asked me if I had eaten. That's like our asking each other how we are. We have no special desire to know the details. It's just a way to express good will, a quick bonding exchange. But imagine a long conversation at that level. Chris Clifford points out that, "It can be really exhausting to stay superficial." Also, it's an environment that supports the development of gossip or harsh speech. Like email and social media.

Clearly, harsh speech isn't kind or helpful, and it's very rarely appropriate. It may feel good for a quick moment to "vent," or insult or criticize someone, but it most likely feels unpleasant to the recipient. How have you felt when being yelled at, or insulted, or criticized? Even when I know harsh words are due to misunderstanding, it's upsetting to have them aimed at me. It takes skill not to retaliate at the speaker's level. Also, body language, tone of voice or facial expressions are very powerful forms of communication even when we display them unintentionally. They can convey ill will and become the entire content of what is "heard."

Knowing *when* to say something, however true, kind or helpful is important, too. We can't ever know with certainty how our message will be received, but there are times when we can know it's not appropriate. Maybe some event is looming that will change the circumstances around what we mean to say. We may want to add more criticism after someone's already apologized, or provide important information at a time when our listeners are clearly too upset to take in our meaning. Humor can also be a minefield, frequently leading to inappropriate speech because what makes most jokes funny is that they aren't completely true. Jokes are usually aimed at people, the butts of the joke. And when the jokes are flying, they can devolve into gratuitous sarcasm or profanity.

Besides what we say, there are other very important kinds of speech. As I've probably already indicated, a very important aspect of Wise Speech is *listening*, honoring others with our attention as they reveal themselves and share information with us. If we spend the time when others are talking with unrelated thoughts swirling through our heads, we may never absorb what they're trying to communicate. Just FYI, I gave a talk called "Wise Listening, and Then..." on April 23, 2017.

We also need to listen to our internal speech. It can torment us without our realizing it. Our mental chatter can drag us repeatedly through past traumas, or criticize us harshly for small or innocent mistakes. We can demand things of ourselves that we'd never ask of others. I've heard people say, "If anyone else talked to me the way I talk to myself, I'd never speak to them again." We need to use Wise Speech with ourselves; we are not "fair game" just because no one else can hear. If we practice really listening to ourselves as well as others, then whether or not we like what we hear, we'll learn a lot that can make our lives better.

I have tried to craft practice guides that will lead you through seeing these many aspects of Wise Speech. They're on the handout over by the dana basket. They'll be emailed weekly to those registered for the course, and I'm pretty sure there are enough for anyone who wants one to take it home. I realize there are only three weeks for this practice before we go on to Wise Action, but the practice of Wise Speech will continue for the rest of your life. These exercises are designed to develop mindfulness *skills* that will help you with that life-long practice and make your speech more beneficial to you and others.

Thank you.