

Learning Right Speech

August 23, 2022

There's a tendency to think of practicing the Dhamma as meaning what you do when you sit here with your eyes closed, trying to get the mind into concentration, trying to develop discernment. But we have to remember that the path to awakening is not a one-fold path or a two-fold path. It's a noble eightfold path. And each of the factors in that path requires training.

Notice that when the Buddha completed his explanation of the two factors that have to do with discernment, the very next factor was speech: how you talk to other people, how you talk to yourself. This is an important part of the training, because the way you talk to other people is the way you talk to yourself. And the way you talk to yourself as you're dealing with other people, thinking about the world around you, is going to have an impact on how you talk to yourself as you get the mind into concentration.

Think of those factors of directed thought and evaluation. Those are the factors that precede speech. They lie at the basis of all our verbal actions, but they're also part of how you get the mind to settle down. You have to talk to yourself in the right way. So this is something you do train yourself in. You can't say, "Well, I'm just the way I am. I'm a straight shooter. I just say what I think, and you're going to have to put up with that." That's like saying, "My mind is a mess. I can't get into concentration, and we'll just have to accept that fact."

We're here to *train*. We're here to learn new habits. So think about the Buddha's habits, because he's the ideal example of how to train. Some people write that off, saying, "Well, he's the Buddha, so he's got to be special." But he meant all of his actions—his words, his deeds, his thoughts that he expressed to other people—to be examples to others: This is how you find happiness. This is how you live in the world finding happiness in a way that's totally harmless.

So think of his standards for speech: One, it had to be true; two, it had to be beneficial; and three, he had to know the right time to say things that were pleasing, and the right time to say things that were not pleasing. So he didn't have just one style of speech. He tried to be very attuned to when it was necessary to say things that were displeasing—and he was very sparing in his displeasing words, which meant that they had more of an impact. He used them only when they were necessary, and as a result, people were open to listening to them.

I knew an ajaan in Thailand who tended to be pretty harsh all the time. I found that my

own reaction to his criticism was that I just closed myself off, because whatever he said was going to be critical. It was very easy to write that off, “Well, that was just his way of speaking.”

Whereas with Ajaan Fuang, he was very careful. If he was going to say something displeasing, he chose just the right time, the right place, and the right words. And they went straight to your heart. It was as if he had slipped a knife in between your ribs without your expecting it. And that had an impact.

So, let's think about that: true, beneficial, and the right time to be pleasing, and the right time to be displeasing. The Buddha took the truth as a very important principle. Sometimes it seems, of all the precepts, that the precept to say what is true was for him the most important. When he taught his son, Rahula, the very first lesson to the young boy was that you've got to be truthful. If you can tell a deliberate lie without any sense of shame, then whatever goodness you have as a contemplative—someone who's devoted to a life of harmlessness—is totally thrown away, overturned, empty.

You know the story: He illustrated his points with a dipper of water. He washed his feet and left just a little bit of water in the dipper, then he asked Rahula, “Do you see how little water there is here?” And Rahula said, “Yes.” Then the Buddha said, “That's how little goodness there is in someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame.” Then he tossed the water away. He said, “You see that water that's tossed away?” “Yes.” “That's what happens to the goodness of someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame: It gets tossed away.” Then he showed Rahula the empty dipper: “Do you see how empty the dipper is?” “Yes.” “The person who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame is empty of goodness in just the same way.” Then he turned the dipper upside down... you get the message.

Then he went on to say, train yourself that you don't say a falsehood even in jest. In other words, even in cases where you don't mean to deceive people, you just want to say something funny: The Buddha said to abstain from that kind of speech as well.

But, then he went on to point out in some of his other teachings, that simply because something was true was not reason enough to say it: It has to be beneficial, too. There are a lot of things we could be saying that either give rise to passion, aversion, and delusion, in us or in the listener. With a truth like that, you leave it unsaid because it serves no purpose.

Try to speak words that are true, that are harmonious, that are easy to listen to, and that really serve a purpose. So you have to be very careful about your words. And look at what the Buddha's asking you to do. He's asking you to set up several checkpoints before you speak. Just

because you feel like saying something is not reason enough to say it. It has to pass the Buddha's three tests.

If you take that seriously, it means that you don't say that much in the course of the day, but then, most of us speak too much anyhow. I think I've told you that story about Ajaan Fuang up in the mountains north of Chiangmai. He was staying with another monk, and he had a very strong sense that there were very strong spirits in the area, and that they were watching the monks very carefully.

One day he and the other monk were on almsround, and one of the lay people putting food in the other monk's bowl asked him a question. The monk answered. Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, after having had time with Ajaan Lee and having learned about saying only what was absolutely necessary, "Gee, that wasn't really necessary to answer that question." Later that day, the monk had a bad case of diarrhea. Ajaan Fuang attributed it to the spirits' strictness about how little you should speak if you're practicing.

We talk about the kind of idle chatter that's allowable, the kind of social grease that keeps things going, but there can be too much grease, just as an engine can get too much grease. It mucks up the workings of the engine. So you have to be really careful about what you say. Make sure it's necessary. If it's not necessary, just leave it unsaid.

And if you do have critical things to say, try to show respect for the other person. The worst thing you can do in any community is to show contempt for one another because that makes people close up their minds. So, if you're going to criticize someone, show that you're doing it out of goodwill. You have their best interests in mind, and you've really decided that this has to be said. If there's a pleasing way to say it, say it in a pleasing way. Save your displeasing words for extreme circumstances. After all, we're living here as a group, and the group can be conducive to meditation if they give rise to a sense of joy that we're happy to be here together.

That's one of the conditions for getting the mind to settle down—a sense of joy. You can induce it in lots of different ways, but one of the best ways, if you're living as a group, is to make it a group where people are happy to be practicing together.

So make sure your speech is the kind of speech that would make people happy to be around you, happy to be practicing the Dhamma together with you. If this speech doesn't come naturally, well, it's the same as with concentration: If concentration doesn't come naturally, you have to *make* it happen, because this is a training. Those eight folds of the path come under the triple training. They're things you learn, things that you practice, and here

“practice” means learning how to do it right.

Recognize a mistake as a mistake. Make up your mind you don't want to repeat that mistake, because that's the lesson the Buddha gave to Rahula after he taught him about truth. What you really want to focus on is being truthful about your intentions, making sure you don't do anything harmful. If you see that you intend to do an act that will cause harm, you don't do it. Then, while you're doing it, you're truthful about watching it: What are the actual results coming from what you're doing? When it's done, you're truthful again: What are the actual results of what you did? When you see a mistake, you recognize it as a mistake and spread lots of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the other people—so that you're less likely to repeat that mistake.

So training in right speech is just as much a part of the practice as training in right mindfulness and right concentration. When the Buddha taught the noble eightfold path, he didn't teach any extraneous folds, any extra factors that were unnecessary, so learn how to give each of the factors the attention it deserves.