

# Speaking

## The Gift of Wise & Virtuous Speech

In his teachings, the Buddha emphasised the importance of how we employ our human capacity for speech and verbal interaction. Wise or Virtuous Speech, often called Right Speech, is communication that gives rise to peace and happiness in oneself and others. Virtuous Speech is one of the Five Precepts for ethical conduct, along with protecting life and not killing, taking only what is freely offered, using one's sexual energy in ways that do not harm oneself or others, and refraining from the use of intoxicants that cloud the mind.

Ethical conduct is the foundation of meditation practice, and is also the ground upon which our life and our spiritual journey rest. The Buddha called these precepts for ethical conduct "The Five Gifts," because by undertaking these trainings we offer a supreme gift to other beings and to ourselves: the gift of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression.

In addition to being one of the Five Precepts, Right Speech is also one of the components of the Noble Eightfold Path, along with Right View, Right Intention, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Here again the word "Right" is not a moral judgment to be contrasted with bad or wrong, but means "leading to happiness for oneself and others."

The Noble Eightfold Path is a path to liberation, which is described as happiness, inner peace, and freedom from suffering in this lifetime.

## In the Buddha's Words

Wise Speech, explained in negative terms, means avoiding four types of harmful speech: lies (words spoken with the intent of misrepresenting the truth); divisive speech (spoken with the intent of creating rifts between people); harsh speech (spoken with the intent of hurting another person's feelings); and idle chatter (spoken with no purposeful intent at all).

In positive terms, Wise Speech means speaking in ways that are trustworthy, harmonious, comforting, and worth taking to heart. When we make a practice of these positive forms of Virtuous Speech, our words become a gift to others. In response, other people will start listening more to what we say, and will be more likely to respond in kind. This gives us a sense of the power of our actions: the way we act in the present moment does shape the world of our experience. We don't need to be a victim of past events.

With a greater awareness on our intention the practice of Wise Speech intersects with the training of the mind. Before we speak, we can focus on why we want to speak. This helps get us in touch with all the machinations taking place in the committee of voices running our minds. If we see any unskillful motives lurking behind the committee's decisions, we veto them. As a result, we become more aware of ourselves, more honest with ourselves, more firm also. We can also save ourselves from saying things that we'll later regret. In this way we are strengthening qualities of mind that will be helpful in meditation, and at the same time avoid creating any potentially painful memories that would get in the way of being attentive to the present moment when the time comes to meditate.

## Wise & Virtuous Speech is a mindfulness practice

By undertaking this practice, we commit to greater awareness of our body, mind, and emotions. Mindfulness makes it possible to recognise what we are about to say before we say it, and thus offers us the freedom to choose when to speak, what to say, and how to say it. With mindfulness, we see that the heart is the ground from which our speech grows. We learn to restrain our speech in moments of anger, hostility, or confusion, and over time, to train the heart to more frequently incline towards wholesome states such as love, kindness and empathy. From these heart states Virtuous Speech naturally arises.

The teachings of Wise Speech assumes imperfection. Our “mistakes” are a vital part of our learning. We need to lie, exaggerate, embellish, use harsh and aggressive speech, engage in useless banter, and speak at inappropriate times, in order to experience how using speech in these ways creates tension in the body, agitation in the mind, and remorse in the heart. We will also uncover how unskillful speech degrades personal relationships and diminishes the possibility of peace in our world.

## Deep Listening

Effective listening means paying attention to more than just sound, and therefore requires that we use more than just our ears. As we are increasingly able to bring mindfulness to ordinary human interaction, we find that listening means attending to our physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions, as well as to the voice, facial expressions, gestures, pauses, underlying meanings, and rich nuances that accompany the spoken words of others. This type of listening is what Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh calls “deep listening.” Like any other mindfulness practice, Right Listening is both a skill and a way of being. “Listening is one of our greatest personal natural resources, yet it is by far one of our most undeveloped abilities.” - Rebecca Sharif