

Right Speech, Inside & Out

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In the Buddha's description of the path, after he establishes the principles of right view and right resolve, he goes into right speech. Right view focuses you on the issue of suffering and what can be done to put an end to suffering. Right resolve deals with the ways that you make up your mind that you're going to follow the path: You'll try to put aside your sensual obsessions, put aside ill will, put aside thoughts of harmfulness. Then you've got to focus on your speech, because this is a primary place where you're going to be training the mind—because you're dealing both with their external chatter and your internal chatter.

In a lot of ways, it's easier to do a lot of harm with your mouth than it is with your body. With a few words you can give people wrong views, make them feel miserable, break people apart, and waste people's time. And a waste of time is a real shame. As the Buddha said, you can die at any time. Suppose you spent your last day dealing in frivolous chatter, and then the Big One came—the earthquake that's going to knock everything down—and your last thoughts will be what a total waste that last day was.

So you want to make sure that when you open your mouth, you're actually following the path. You're keeping your mouth on the path. The Buddha's own test for whether something was worth saying or not was, one, is it true? And if it's not true, forget about it. Two, if it's true, is it beneficial? Does this really help somebody? In other words, do you know what you're talking about? And do you know that this actually will be helpful for them?

There was one time when I was talking with another young monk in Thailand, and sounding forth on something. This was very early on in my career. I was saying, "I think it's like this, I think it's like that." And Ajaan Fuang happened to be walking past, and he said, "Well if all you do is think about it, you don't really know, so why are you talking about it? Why are you cluttering up other people's minds with your opinions?" So try to restrict your speech to what you know is true, and you know really will benefit the other person.

And even then, you have to ask a third question, which is: Is this the right time and place for this? Because sometimes things can be true and beneficial, but if it's the wrong time, the full benefits won't come. If the person's in a wrong mood, or you've got the wrong group of people, there are all kinds of things you've got to watch out for when you say something. Especially when you're a community of people practicing together, you want to make sure your speech is actually helping,

not only your path, but also theirs. Because sometimes things may be true and beneficial, but it's not the right time. Ajaan Lee once said that if the people you're talking to are not ready to hear what you have to say, even if it's great Dhamma, if it has nothing to do with what their actual practice is right here and now, then it's idle chatter. It's talk about the practice over there someplace else. It's not really focused on what people need to do right now.

So you have to be careful about that. We're here to protect one another's practice, to encourage one another's practice. It helps to have people sitting together here in the room. Sometimes when you're sitting alone, it's very easy to say, "Well, that's enough for now," and then you get up well before the time you'd originally determined. But if everybody's here for the hour, we're all here for the whole hour. There's a certain power that comes when we are practicing together. So you don't want to dissipate that power during the rest of the day. Because each time you open your mouth, you're disturbing someone else's quiet. So you want to make sure that when you do disturb their quiet, it's for a good purpose. Otherwise, we become enemies of one another's practice.

So keep the Buddha's three tests in mind each time you open your mouth. Ajaan Fuang's test was always: Is this necessary? And if it's not, you don't have to bother. We're afraid that if we're quiet, people will think bad things about us. But that's not always the case. I know a lot of people from my past who were very quiet, and I thought that because they were quiet, they were very observant and very circumspect. But then they opened their mouths and destroyed that impression. And particularly here, we're in a community where people are trying to practice. So when you're quiet, people will understand: This person's trying to be quiet. It's not that you're stuck up or unfriendly. You're here to meditate. If you feel pressure from other people that they want you to be friendly and chatty, well, remember that that's not what you're here for. You're here to work on your own mind.

A similar principle applies to internal chatter. You find the mind chatting away about all kinds of things: attitudes about yourself, attitudes about the practice. You particularly have to be wary of attitudes that tear you down. We were talking earlier today about low self-esteem and how sometimes that's the mind's way of sabotaging itself. If you lower your expectations, you feel that less is going to be demanded of you; you don't have to put out so much effort. It's basically an excuse for laziness. And we may have picked up some ideas from other people, people who have looked down on us for one reason or another. But you have to ask yourself, why do you let yourself internalize that? Because you know some people who—even though the whole society dumps on them, or one large

segment of society dumps on them—don't let it get to them. They make it part of their determination: They're not going to allow that attitude to infect their own. But then there are other people who just allow other people's low opinion of them to weigh them down.

So it's not inevitable that if people are looking down on you you're going to have low self-esteem. If there's part of you that's willing to take on that low opinion for one reason or another, you have to look into why. This is particularly important for you as a meditator, because it's in meditation that you begin to realize more and more the choices you have. You're learning to step back from the different voices in your mind, and ask yourself: "Do I really believe that? Do I really believe that now? Maybe I believed that sometime in the past, but do I have to believe it now?" Well, no. This applies especially to the attitudes that make you feel you can't do the practice, or you're not up to it.

Or you allow yourself to get down. You have a bad day in the meditation, and all of a sudden that becomes the whole story of your life as a meditator. Well, stop and think. You've had good meditations and you've had bad meditations. It's a normal part of training the mind. The mind is a complex phenomenon. If we were to draw a chart of its progress, I don't know anybody whose progress would be just up, up, up, up, up, all the time. It has its peaks and its troughs. Part of your stamina is learning how to deal with the troughs so that you don't get discouraged. At the same time, you don't want to become heedless when things are peaking. Because you know the nature of a peak is, from there, where is it? You just go down. How do you turn that peak into a plateau, or a gentle rise that goes still further up? You don't do it by getting complacent.

So you have to look at the kind of chatter going on in your mind, to figure out when to come down hard on yourself and when to be more consoling. When something comes up in the mind, a good test is always: To what extent is the opposite true? And when would the fact of the opposite sometimes being true be a useful thing to think about? Because there are very few things that are true 100% across the board. As the Buddha said, there are only two things he saw as categorical truths. One was the distinction between what is skillful and unskillful behavior—that skillful behavior should be developed and unskillful behavior abandoned—and the other was the four noble truths. The truths about yourself as a meditator don't fall into those categories. In other words, the question of whether you're a good meditator or a bad meditator is never true across the board. You can be sitting here and creating all kinds of narratives about where you are in the chart of your progress, measuring it in different ways. And in some ways it might be part of a nice rise as you head into the future. In others, it might be a

horrible chasm facing you. Or you might be down in the dumps. It depends on which things you're going to focus on, and how you stitch them together to make a narrative. So learn how to make narratives that are actually helpful, that keep you heedful but don't let you get discouraged in the practice.

These principles of internal chatter are important, both while you're here at the monastery and when you leave. Because here, at least, there's a very strong set of values aimed at the practice. As you go someplace else, you'll find that the values are very different. You have to be careful about what you internalize, what attitudes you pick up. Remind yourself: You do have the choice. And be very careful not to take unskillful voices outside and make them your own voices inside. Try to keep that internal conversation true and beneficial and timely. If any members of the committee are out of order, let them know. Because this business of verbal fabrication inside the mind, as Ajaan Lee pointed out, is the most important issue on the path. It can do the most damage, but it can also be the most helpful. It can be helpful in the sense that it reminds you of what right view is, and in that way it's an essential part of mindfulness. As you're working on your concentration, it helps you to notice when things are going off course, and you can direct them back.

But be careful. Something that's useful like this, if you don't make sure that it stays skillful, can also be very harmful. So do your best to sort out this internal chatter, and keep it focused on issues that are really important and really beneficial to your quest for happiness. This is how right speech translates into the other factors of the path that follow on it. You talk yourself into doing the right things: You talk yourself into maintaining right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. It's an important function of the mind. You know what's right, you know what the path is, but there will be lots of different parts of the mind that will fight or pull off in other directions. The factor of right internal speech is what keeps everybody in line.