

## *On Idle Chatter*

*May 28, 2019*

Of all the forms of wrong speech, idle chatter is the hardest to get past. But it also seems the most innocent to most people. That's one of the reasons why it's hard to get past. After all, a little social grease is not bad, right? But as with grease in an engine, if you get too much it mucks up the engine, gets so that the engine can't run. And the very nature of idle chatter is that you open your mouth and only then do you find out what's going to come out. You don't think very carefully about your intention, about why you're saying this, what it's going to accomplish. And that's a bad habit to develop if you're trying to become a meditator, both in terms of trying to get the mind into concentration and just learning how to watch your own mind.

If you're used to just talking all day, then when the time comes to sit and meditate, the mind says, "Hey, I've been churning out thoughts all day. Why stop now?" It's in the habit of thinking mindlessly. And if you don't look carefully at your intentions, you miss one of the main aspects of social life as a Dhamma practitioner: being very careful about what you are going to say and what you're going to do. Think things through and *then* open your mouth or go into action.

After all, this is part of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. Before you say anything, ask yourself: What's going to happen as a result of this? Am I going to be harmed? Is someone else going to be harmed? Are we both going to be harmed? Only when it passes that test—that you don't expect any harm for anyone—can you open your mouth and say what you wanted to say.

What makes the test a little more specific is in another sutta, when the Buddha's talking to a prince. The prince had been set up to ask the Buddha a trick question: Would the Buddha ever say anything unpleasant? The idea being that if the Buddha said, Yes, he would say something unpleasant, then the prince could say, "Well, what's the difference between you and ordinary people out there in the world?" And if the Buddha said he wouldn't say anything unpleasant, he was on record for having said things critical of Devadatta that Devadatta didn't like.

So the prince asked the question, and the Buddha said, "That's not the sort of question that deserves a categorical answer. It deserves an analytical answer." The prince realized that the Buddha had slipped out of the trap. And the analytical answer was this: If something was true and beneficial and timely—in terms of the right time to say something pleasant, the right time to say something harsh—then the Buddha would say it. If it's true but not beneficial, or true but not timely, or true and beneficial but not timely, he wouldn't say it. That gives you three checkpoints you have to go past if you want your speech to be in line with the Dhamma.

It's not the case that simply talking about Dhamma is dhammic. Conversation or discussion of the Dhamma, as we chanted just now, is a blessing, but there are a lot of ignorant things being said about the Dhamma. And do you want to mess up with people's mind with your ignorance?

One time, when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, he overheard me saying something to another monk where I was trying to explain a point of Dhamma. I said, "I think it's like this." And Ajaan Fuang said, "If you don't really know then don't say anything." And in Ajaan Lee's analysis, if you're talking about a level of Dhamma that's over the heads of your listeners, that, too, counts as idle chatter.

So you've got to be very careful before you open your mouth. Especially here, we have a lot of people here right now—a lot of mouths. We want to make sure that we don't get in one another's way of finding a sense of seclusion, a sense of peace inside. So it's a good lesson in being a good friend as a meditator, being very careful about when you open your mouth. There's that old expression that "Silence is golden." So if you're going to open your mouth, you want to have something to say that's more valuable than gold. That way, we can live here with a lot of people and still everybody has a good chance to find the right atmosphere to practice. And we ourselves benefit by being careful about our speech.

Remember that one of the elements of concentration practice is verbal fabrication—the things we talk to ourselves about. That's one of the elements of the first jhana. So, if you can get some good control over the way you talk to yourself as you go through the day, then it's a lot easier to talk to yourself about the right things as the mind settles down. In fact, this is the whole reason why we have precepts and why we live together as we practice. You notice in the way the monk's life is set up: The monks can't go off to be hermits, growing their own food, fixing their own meals. If they're going to eat, they need to have contact at least once a day with somebody. And both sides are supposed to benefit.

The Canon has a passage where the Buddha has been staying with a group of monks who've been getting into arguments. He decides to get out and have some peace and quiet. First he visits a group of three monks. They talk about their life together. They're living in the forest together and every five days they have a Dhamma discussion. Aside from that, they try to keep their speech to an absolute minimum.

Now, the Buddha did say that observing a vow of no speaking at all is living like dumb sheep and dumb cattle. Because, of course, what happens when you're not talking to anybody is that you're in your own little world where you can start saying some pretty crazy things to yourself. So it's good to have a certain amount of talking to maintain your bearings. But you have to keep it under wraps, within bounds. And if you're going to say something, either it has to be something that's necessary in the work of the day, or something that's actually helpful to say to somebody else. But again, even here, you have to be careful. Hold on to the principle that the less said, the better.

Think of the ajaans in Thailand. They tended to be people of few words, but not because they didn't have much to say. There were times when I was with Ajaan Fuang and a question would come up and he could talk for a whole hour about it. But that was rare. Most of the times, if a question came up, he'd have a quick answer because he had to learn how to be quick with his own mind. When the defilements come up, they don't sit and listen to long lectures. You have to get right to the heart of the matter for them to hear you.

So learning how to be a person of few words is a good habit to develop as a Dhamma practitioner. It's good for you; it's good for the people around you. It's a good exercise for developing appropriate attention. In other words, you ask yourself, "When I'm going to do this, when I'm going to say this, is it really worthwhile, is it really going to be helpful or harmful?" And make sure that in what you say, you're acting as an admirable friend to other people. Those two qualities—appropriate attention and admirable friendship—the Buddha said, are the most important internal and external qualities for getting your first taste of awakening.

So we try to make our life here the kind of life that is helpful for one another's awakening. We don't want to have the kamma being an obstacle. This means: Practice right speech both inside and out. The more you practice it outside, in other words, being very careful about what you say—thinking about the consequences, thinking about where your speech is coming from—the easier it'll be to practice it inside. As you develop this habit of seeing when something comes up in the mind—where's it coming from, where's it going—that's when you begin to see things in line with the Dhamma.