

True Freedom of Speech

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When the Buddha lists the factors of the noble eightfold path, right speech comes right after right resolve. In other words, you've understood what the big problem in life is—the problem of suffering—and that the problem comes from within. It comes from what you're choosing to do, starting with the thoughts of the mind. Then you realize that from the thoughts in the mind, it comes out in your mouth. This means that that's the first place you should see that you actually are on the path: through the things that you say, the type of speech you engage in.

The Buddha lists four kinds of speech to avoid. There's lying, when you misrepresent the truth intentionally. Divisive speech, when you try to split people apart. Harsh speech, when you speak in ways that are meant to hurt people's feelings. And then idle chatter, when you open your mouth and don't have any clear intention as to what's going to come out or why it's going to come out—speaking just to pass the day, speaking to get things off your chest, speaking to express your feelings.

These are all kinds of speech we have to avoid. Now, of those four, only one has a precept: the precept against lying, because that's clearly defined. Speech can either be true or false; meant to represent the truth as you see it or to misrepresent it. And the Buddha gives no place for any lies, at all. White lies, innocent lies, harmless lies: All of them, he says, are harmful. They're all to be avoided. That's why there's a precept.

But with divisive speech there are times when you have to warn someone. They seem to be getting into a relationship with someone you know is harmful. So you have to look honestly at your motivation and at the situation, but there is that exemption, which is why there's no precept.

The same with harsh speech: Sometimes there are occasions when you have to speak in ways that might sound hurtful, just to catch people's attention. Again, you have to be very clear about your intentions, and you have to be clear about your *reasons* for engaging in that kind of speech. So again, there's no precept.

Now, the fact that there's no precept against these two types of speech doesn't mean that they're not important. After all, these are the two types of speech that drive people apart. They

create dis-harmony in the group.

This is one of the more frustrating things about coming back to the States after having been in Thailand. Over there, people are more conscious of the fact that harmony in a group is something to be preserved, something to be valued. Realizing that groups can become disharmonious very easily, you have to be really careful about what you say.

Whereas over here, people seem to value harmony a lot less. They say, "If this person wants to leave the group, that's perfectly fine with me." But that's destructive and selfish. This is where we're holding to our culture's attitude toward freedom, and we don't really understand the Buddha's attitude toward freedom.

For us *freedom of speech* means saying whatever you want to say, without being forbidden. For the Buddha, *freedom of speech* means the freedom to say skillful things. In other words, you're free from the influence of your defilements: free from the influence of wrong view, free from the influence of wrong resolve. You're free to be wise in what you say. That's true freedom. And that's a freedom that has to be earned, not in the sense that someone else will say, "Now you're free to be wise." *You* have to develop the abilities to understand what is wise speech, how to read the results of your speech, and to realize that your speech has implications and will have consequences. You have to think about those consequences before you even open your mouth.

Ajaan Fuang had a nice comment. He said, "You've got to think before you speak. Don't be the sort of person who speaks and then has to think about it afterwards." Thinking afterwards usually comes with the realization, "Oh. I said something I shouldn't have said," but by that time it's too late. Those words have been released into the world.

You want to think first. And always ask yourself the Buddha's three questions: One, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? And three, is this the right time to say things that are pleasing, or the right time to say things that are displeasing? The times that are needed to say things displeasing are *very* rare.

It's a sign of a lot more skill, when you have difficulty with someone, that you can get your emotions under control and you can express your thoughts in ways that they will be happy to hear. Even when you're saying things that are unpleasant, you have to show respect for the other person. Don't show disdain; don't show contempt. Choose the right time, the right place, the right situation to say those things,

Even though it seems like you're hemming in your speech with lots of conditions, this is

the speech that's really free. It's free to be wise, free to be skillful.

So, as we deal with one another, we should keep this in mind all the time. We're a small group. For the monastery to succeed depends on the harmony of the group. So try to speak in ways that are conducive to harmony. Speak in ways that will help all of us be happy to be here as part of the group. Always keep the larger picture in mind before you open your mouth.

Of course, this is a way of training the mind. It's what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication: When you think about things and then you comment on them in the mind, it'll very quickly come out in your speech outside. So you're training your directed thoughts, you're training your acts of evaluation, in preparation for the practice of concentration.

Because as we sit here meditating, we have to talk to ourselves. And for the concentration to go well, we have to engage in right speech *inside*, too: telling ourselves things that are true, telling ourselves things that will not divide the mind as it's trying to gather together, not speaking in harsh ways that discourage ourselves, and not just engaging in random idle chatter. And of course, where do we get practice with that kind of speech? We practice with what we say to other people.

So recognize the training of the mouth as an important part of the training of the mind. And remember what true freedom of speech means: speech that's not a slave to your defilements, not a slave to your greed, to your anger, or your delusion. It's speech that's free to be harmonious and wise.