

Positive Right Speech

April 21, 2021

When I was first ordained, I was struck by the fact that no one was trying to teach me high level Dhamma, or impress me with high level Dhamma. The first order of business was getting the rules down—getting my behavior down—the principle being: If your behavior is in line, *then* we can talk about more advanced things. Only then are you ready for more advanced things.

You see the same principle in the way the texts are arranged. When they had the First Council after the Buddha's passing, there was the choice to discuss the Vinaya first or the suttas first. And the monks decided: Vinaya first, because the Vinaya—the training rules, the discipline for the monks—is the lifeblood of the religion. Everything is tested in behavior.

You also see this in the way the noble eightfold path is arranged. After you've got the factors for discernment, the very first factor is speech. That's the test for how well you've internalized the Buddha's message as to what's right view and what's right resolve.

Right view is seeing that the causes of your suffering are inside, not outside. And you want to reflect that in your speech. Right resolve is that, given how suffering is caused, you want to resolve on renunciation, resolve on non-ill will—in other words, goodwill or equanimity—and harmlessness—compassion. You want *that* to be reflected in your speech as well.

The Buddha says that these principles are reflected in four kinds of speech. Right speech is defined in negative terms: in terms of not telling lies, not speaking divisively, not speaking harshly, not engaging in idle chatter. But right speech has its positive side as well.

For example, with true speech, you don't speak whatever you think is truth and let the chips fall where they may. You put extra thought into your true speech. Is it beneficial? Is this the right time to speak in terms that are pleasing, or terms that are displeasing?

You're showing respect for your own speech. You want it to have a good effect. And you're showing respect for others. You don't want to waste their time with words that you think are true but may not be beneficial to them.

As for the right time and the right place to be pleasing or displeasing, it has nothing to do with your mood. It has everything to do with the other person's state of mind. Again, you go out of your way to pay attention to the other person; how they're receiving your words.

This connects with the next type of right speech, where you avoid divisive tale-bearing. The positive side is that you speak in ways that are harmonious, that help create harmony within the group.

We're so casual in the way that we destroy groups with our speech. You see this on the large scale in the society right now. We're going through a stress test, like those tests they give to people with heart disease, to see what happens to the organ as it's put under more stress. When they do this to heart patients, they've learned that they have to watch for the warning signs: when the heartbeat is getting too fast. If the warning signs look serious, they call off the test. We've got plenty of warning signs around us in society right now, but nobody's calling off the test. It's as if the society's being squeezed by the pandemic. Everybody's squeezed, and these noises come out as they get squeezed: the nasty things that people say about one another, to one another. And they think they're clever.

It's because of this sort of thing that society breaks down: society on the large scale, society on the small scale. So when you think about your speech being beneficial and timely, a large part of the benefit should be for the sake of harmony. Where people have fallen apart, you try to bring them back together again. Where they're already together, you try to make sure that their friendship and their sense of cooperation get cemented.

This then relates to the third type of right speech, which is where you avoid harsh speech. The positive side of this principle is that you speak in ways that are soothing to the ear—again, that show of respect for the other person.

It's good to have a strong sense of how much we depend on one another, and have some gratitude for the fact that we're here working together, creating a community where the Dhamma can be practiced. If you expect perfect people, and accept only perfect people into the community, you become part of the problem.

It's like expecting everybody in the hospital to be healthy. People come to the hospital because they're sick. In the same way, people come to the practice because they're causing suffering. So try to think of your words as medicine, that soothes the rashes of the heart.

And finally, there's avoiding idle chatter. Try to speak about things that are really useful. This again relates back to that principle of speaking in ways that are beneficial.

Ideally, we're here to keep the mind quiet. The Buddha says you want to observe the precepts in such a way that it's conducive to concentration. And one of the ways of doing that is to check on your speech. Ajaan Fuang's test always

was, “Is this necessary?” And he had some very stringent standards for what was necessary speech.

If you learn how to filter your speech in this way as you go through the day, you’re learning the principles of restraint, mindfulness, alertness, sensitivity, respect—all of which are qualities you should be bringing to the practice of concentration and discernment. You have to keep your mind in line, exercise some restraint over your thoughts; keep the topic of your meditation in mind—that’s mindfulness; and be alert to what you’re doing.

And when the mind does settle down, show some respect for it. It may not seem like much. But again, look at the people around you. They may be imperfect, but you still show them respect. When your concentration is still imperfect, you show it some respect. Only then can it grow.

It’s in this way that the way you speak as you go through the day will have a big impact on your meditation, on the training of the mind. This is how your activities in daily life become a useful part of the framework for the practice, a support for the practice.

So, as Ajaan Fuang said, “Always keep watch over your speech. If you can’t keep watch over your speech, how are you going to keep watch over your mind?” The two have to go together.