

The Art of Right Speech

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Ajaan Fuang often said, when we're practicing the Dhamma, we're working on a skill. We're not just memorizing words or ideas; we're learning how to deal skillfully with issues in the mind. And the first principle in that skill, he would say, is how we relate to the breath, because there are many layers in the mind. Some are more conscious than others, and one of the ways we get in touch with some of the more unconscious ones and can deal effectively with the problems that lie in those layers, is to work with the breath.

You notice when you're feeling irritated, your breath changes. What happens? Sometimes your breath will change before you're even conscious of the irritation. There's a little catch in your heart or catch in your stomach, and your breathing gets labored. That's a sign that something's got to be done. Well, you can do something about it, not working directly with the mind at that point but working with the breath. Learn how to breathe through that sense of irritation, because the defilement is taking over the breath energy. And the part of the mind that wants to develop a skill suddenly finds itself without any friends, without any support. So you make this your support.

Always relate everything to your breath. Notice how it's going, notice what you can do to breathe through any knots of tension, any irregularities. When the breathing gets labored, try to calm it down, smooth it out.

The stages of the breath meditation that the Buddha taught start first with noticing when the breath is long, when it's short—in other words, observing what's going on. And you can expand that in many directions to include noticing when it's heavy, when it's light, when it's comfortable or not. And then the next step is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. That's to get in touch with how the rhythm and texture of your breathing are either being affected by some other part of the body or having an effect on another part of the body.

Then as the Buddha says, you try to calm the bodily fabrication. In other words, you try to calm the way you're breathing, so that it has a soothing effect throughout the body. If you find yourself coming up against a pain and the pain feels like a wall, just think of the breath penetrating right through. Wherever there's a blockage of any kind, think of the breath penetrating right through. That way you get to reclaim your body. And that can help you as you deal with other issues that come up.

But remember when you're dealing with those other issues, don't leave this sense of the body, because if you suddenly find that your awareness is way outside the body or that your body is being blotted out, who knows what's going on inside the body that can undermine your other efforts?

For example, you notice that when the Buddha teaches the noble eightfold path, he starts out with right view and right resolve, which are the factors of discernment. And then putting that discernment into practice, he starts first with right speech. Now right speech also is a skill, it's an art. All too often our attitude is that we want to say something just to get it out of our system, or we bottle it up, either out of fear or a sense of we shouldn't say it. And if those are our only two options, we blow up. Either we blow up by getting it out—the explosion is outside—or we blow up inside. Well, part of the blowing up inside comes from the sense of the breath suddenly getting uncomfortable, which affects the rest of the energies in the body. You begin to panic. So you've got to realize that you've got this other alternative. You don't have to bottle it up and you don't have to let it out. You can breathe through the disturbed energies and dissolve them away.

This puts you in a better position to look carefully at what you're going to say. As the Buddha says, when you speak, one, you want to make sure that it's true, but then two, you want to make sure it's beneficial. Will this really have a good effect?—both on yourself and on other people. And three, is this the right time to say something pleasant or is this the right time to say something unpleasant? One of the major misconceptions about right speech is that you never say anything harmful—as in that old saying, “If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.” That's not the Buddha's approach. He recognized that there are times when you have to say unpleasant things to help other people realize that they're doing something seriously mistaken.

Look at his teachings to the monks, especially in the Vinaya. Someone does something wrong and he calls him a “worthless person,” which is harsh, and then he gives that person a real dressing down. And in all of those cases, we notice, when the Buddha asked him, did you actually do this? The person will fess up and say, “Yes, that's something I did.” So the fact that they're willing to tell the truth means that that they're ready to hear something.

So when you're looking at right speech, remember that you have to try to think strategically: What will be the impact of your words? When's the best time to say them? How can you speak to make sure that that impact really is effective and beneficial?

There are four kinds of right speech. The first one is truthful. You avoid telling lies. In other words, you don't intentionally misrepresent the truth. Two, you don't say anything divisive, you don't try to separate friends from one another or prevent a friendship from happening. Three, you don't say anything coarse or harsh, i.e., just for the sake of intentionally hurting somebody's feelings. And four, you don't engage in idle chatter.

Now, each of these four types of right speech is not just a matter of things to avoid. Each has its positive side as well. And in every case, the positive side requires that you use your discernment. For example, in telling the truth, it's not the case that you tell everything. The Buddha said that if certain things, when you say them, give rise to greed, aversion, delusion in you or in the person you're speaking to, or if your intention is to give rise to greed, aversion,

delusion, you shouldn't say them. Of course, you can't be totally responsible for the other person's response. But if you're anticipating that your speech would give rise to those things, then you don't say it, no matter how true it is.

As for divisive speech, there are times when you have to warn someone about someone dangerous. But at the same time, you also have to learn how to speak in ways that bring people into harmony.

So it's not just a matter of the negative kinds of speech that you avoid. There are also positive ones that you want to develop. This is where it's really helpful to have good examples, because often on your own it's very difficult to think of how to say something that would lead to more harmony in the community if you haven't seen anybody speak effectively in those ways. And this is where you have to do some mental exercise. Sometimes you can devote a meditation to just this topic.

Not all meditation is about simply being with the present moment. Sometimes you have to anticipate future difficulties and how you might deal with them. In terms of the path, this is a part of right effort: trying to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. And you do it by thinking, "Okay, I'm going into this situation and there tends to be this problem in this sort of situation. What can I say that would defuse it?" One of my favorite examples of this was of a man who came here one day. He works in an office where everybody else is an evangelical Christian and he's a Buddhist. They were having an office party and he knew that they were going to sit him down at some point and give him a good heart-to-heart talk on the state of his soul and the need for him to take Jesus Christ as his personal lord and savior. So the question was, how was he going to deal with that? And his approach was, after the office volleyball game, before the heart-to-heart talk, he noticed he had everybody's attention, and so he said, "I want to comment on what fine Christians you are in not giving me a hard time about my being a Buddhist." There was no heart-to-heart talk.

So when you anticipate a problem, give it some thought: What would be the most effective thing to say? If you try it out and it doesn't work, well, go back to the drawing board. This is the Buddha's basic teaching to Rahula. You make a mistake, well, you think it through: What could have been done differently? Learn to take your mistakes in stride. That way you really do learn.

The same principle applies to harsh speech. There are times when you have to speak strongly, but you need to be careful, because sometimes people will take it in the wrong way. So you have to know, okay, this is a serious issue and sometimes you really have to show that it is a serious issue by using strong language.

As for idle chatter, the positive correlative to idle chatter is talk that's worthwhile: in the Buddha's terms, "reasonable, seasonable, connected with actual benefit." In other words, you don't just run off at the mouth with whatever you want to say. You ask yourself, "What will be the impact of these words?" When you're working with a group, how much friendly chatter is

necessary to keep things running smoothly and how much gets in the way of the work? This is something you have to be very sensitive about.

What all this reflection does is that it focuses your attention on your intentions. When you speak, are you intending to misrepresent the truth? Are you intending to break a friendship? Are you intending to hurt someone's feelings? Or do you have no real clear intention at all? Okay, be careful. None of that's going to be right speech.

It's in this way that mastering right speech focuses attention on the mind. And of course, your habits of speech in the world outside are going to affect the chatter that goes on in your mind. The things you tend to say to other people, you also tend to say to yourself. So as you're sitting here meditating with the verbal fabrications going on in your mind, telling yourself this, telling yourself that, if you have some careful practice in learning how to speak, with clear intentions, speaking strategically, speaking with goodwill, even when the message happens to be harsh, then you find yourself an easier person to live with as you meditate and as you go through the day.

So this is one of the reasons why the Buddha put right speech before right mindfulness and right concentration. It gives you practice in how to talk to others and how to talk to yourself. That way, when you're talking to yourself about the breath, it's the same sort of thing. Is the breath going well? Is your mind settling down with the breath? If it's not, how do you think strategically in a way that gets it to settle down—and is willing to settle down, is happy to settle down? And then you can keep it there. That way, your speech gets in touch with your breath and your breath will put you in touch with layers in the mind you might not have suspected were there, things going on inside. So it's all connected.

The forest ajans talk about this many times, about how the path comes together. You focus on one aspect of the path and it starts connecting with another aspect—this factor, that factor, the factors all become one. And that's when the path can yield its full results—which go beyond the path. When you think about what might go beyond the path, you're opening your mind to other possibilities that you might normally have thought were impossible.

This is one of the things I've noticed again and again reading books on Western Buddhism, is that people don't really seem to have any room in their imagination for something that goes beyond what they've already attained or what they've already seen. And they cut themselves off from some really great benefits as a result. It is possible to reach a happiness that goes beyond fabrication, that goes beyond intentions, where all the dimensions of space and time fall away. But to get there, you've got to look very carefully at your intentions. You can't know what is truly unintended until you're thoroughly familiar with all the levels of fabrication and intention going on in the mind. So start with your speech, start with your breath, and work inward. Give the Buddha's teachings a chance.