

## *Improving Your Speech*

*July 9, 2017*

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Watch the breath coming in; watch the breath going out.

Make up your mind you're going to stay right here with the breathing. That's how this becomes meditation. In other words, it's not just the mind wandering around. You make up your mind you're going to do something and then you stick with it.

This is the beginning of the rains retreat. We may actually have some rain, which is unusual for this part of the world. The rains retreat is the time when the monks settle down for three months, and unless they have necessary business, nobody goes anywhere overnight. Everybody has to meet dawn here at the monastery. If they have necessary business, they can go away only for seven days at a time. And it really does have to be necessary, something connected with the religion or some emergency that comes up. Otherwise, they stay here. And it's usually a normal pattern among the monks that once they settle down like this, they make up their mind they're going to accelerate their practice during the three months. Because three months is a good time to try out something new, to put more demands on yourself and see how you can live with it. If it works out well, then you just continue with that practice after the end of the rains.

As Ajaan Mun used to say, you want to practice in the shape of a circle, all the way around the year. But it's good to have a time to get a running start to see if a particular practice really does work for you.

A lot of laypeople decide to make this the time that they're going to make some special determinations as well. During the three months, they're going to try to put more emphasis either on generosity or on virtue or on meditation. Any precepts that are a little bit shaky, a little bit weak, they may try to firm them up. Or ways of being generous that you haven't been generous before. You might decide you want to chant every day, or choose to learn a particular chant. And particularly with the meditation, you decide to meditate more than you normally would. See how it goes for three months. But give it a really good chance. If it works out, if you see benefits coming from the practice accelerated like that, then you can keep it up after the end of the rains.

So it's good to stop and think at the beginning of the rains: What kind of practice do you want to emphasize? This is going to be an individual matter. You have to look at your own life, to see: Where's the goodness in your life? Where is it weak? All too often when we make a tally of our lives, it's a tally of our bank accounts. How about your goodness account? What's your goodness account like? How's your virtue? How's your generosity? How's your meditation? What could be augmented? What could be supplemented? What could be raised to a higher level?

One good place to look always, of course, is at your speech. The easiest way to break the precepts is with your mouth, saying things that you realize afterwards that you shouldn't have said. There's one precept that governs speech and that's speech against lying. In other words, everything that comes out of your mouth is a truth. You don't fudge the facts. You may not have to reveal all the details of a situation. When someone asks you how you are, you don't have to tell everything about how you are. And if there's a situation where someone tries to get information from you that you know that they're going to abuse, you try to do everything you can to not to give the information. But at the same time you don't lie. That's the precept.

But there are other standards for right speech as well. There's a standard of right speech that you try not to speak in a divisive way. In other words, you try to speak in ways that create harmony in the group. You don't try to speak in ways that are harsh, in other words, meaning to hurt people's feelings. And you don't engage in idle chatter, in other words, speaking without any real reason at all, just opening your mouth and seeing what's going to come out. A lot of damage can be done in these forms of wrong speech. Now, it's impossible to have precepts against these, because there are times when, for example, with divisive speech, you know that somebody's harmful and you want to warn somebody else about this harmful person—which technically would be divisive speech, but in this particular case it's for the genuine good of the person you want to talk to. Sometimes strong speech is required for people to understand how serious an issue is. But you want to make sure you don't engage in divisive speech or harsh speech just for the fun of it, just because you feel like it.

The whole point of controlling your speech is that you want to think about the effects of what you're going to say, the long-term effects. You don't just open your mouth and say whatever you feel like saying. Speech is not necessarily there for you just to express yourself. You want to express thoughts that are actually going to be helpful, information that's actually going to be helpful, things that actually lead to harmony within the group.

We look around us and we see all the divisive speech being thrown around on the web and everywhere else in the media right now. This is the kind of thing that tears the country apart. You don't have to shoot at people, all you have to do is say untrue things, or say harsh things or divisive things, and society becomes a much less pleasant place to be. We can't control the media out there, but you can control your contribution to the general atmosphere in the way you speak.

So you might want to think about how, for the next three months, you want to take a lot more care in how you speak: what you're going to say, how you're going to say it, when you're going to say it, to whom you say it. All these aspects of speech are really important. Words are cheap, but you don't want to use a lot of cheap words to cheapen society. You want your words to be valuable. And if you can't think of anything true to say or harmonious to say or something kind to say or something with a purpose, then it's probably better not to say it. Just be quiet. Let people think that you're wise. Don't just open your mouth and say whatever you

feel like saying, because that way you damage yourself, you damage the people around you, you damage society.

So that's one suggestion for one thing you might want to do for the next three months: Tighten up your scrutiny on how you speak. Because after all, as Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has only one person—ourselves—that we're responsible for. And our mouth is one thing we've *really* got to be responsible for. So take this opportunity to get more skillful in your speaking, and see what benefit it has in your life and the situation around you.