

Right Resolve & Right Speech

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When the Buddha listed the factors of the path, right speech comes right after right resolve. Right resolve is resolve on renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. Right speech is defined as abstaining from lying, abstaining from divisive speech, abstaining from harsh speech, and abstaining from idle chatter.

So what's the connection? Part of it may have been because right resolve leads naturally into right concentration, but to get the mind ready to be concentrated you need to develop some skills, and one of the important skills is learning how to talk to yourself. A good way of getting practice in how to talk to yourself is looking at your speech outside: When you talk to others, how do you speak to them?

The way you talk to your mind and the way you talk to others is very closely related. Inside, it's called directed thought and evaluation. Then, as the Buddha said, once you've directed your thoughts to something and evaluated it, you break into speech.

So you want to be very careful about what you talk about to others and *how* you talk about it. If you're used to speaking in a divisive way or a harsh way, it's going to come into the mind and wreak havoc in your concentration. The ideal speech, the Buddha said, is truthful, leads to harmony and concord, is pleasing to the ear, and is timely.

That's another one of the analyses the Buddha gave of his own speech: that it was true and beneficial and timely. Just true was not enough. It had to go beyond that. Timely, there, meant that you know the times to speak in pleasant ways and times to speak in unpleasant ways.

In other words, there are times when harsh speech is useful. And what's actually classified as divisive speech can also be useful at times. If you see somebody's getting involved with someone who's going to be harmful to them, you want to give the first person a warning. Your intention is for that person's protection; it's not simply to break them apart.

And you're going to need these different kinds of skillful speech inside as you get the mind to settle down. First, of course, you have to give yourself a true report of what's going on. Watch the breath. If the mind is settling down with the breath, fine. Keep it going. Try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. But if the mind is not settling down, you have to look into why.

This is where you want to hear more truthful speech inside. What's the mind focused on? There will be times when it'll be embarrassed to admit to itself what it really wants to think about. But if you've gotten into the habit of speaking truthfully outside, it's going to be a lot easier to be truthful inside.

Part of this relates to the Buddha's instructions to Rahula at the very beginning of the practice: If you've done something wrong, you admit it to somebody else, and that way you can learn from them. This willingness to admit the truth, even when it doesn't reflect well on you—i.e., when the *truth* doesn't reflect well on you: The willingness to admit it *does* reflect well on you. It makes you willing to learn, puts you in a position where you *can* learn. So get used to telling the truth outside.

Also, get used to speaking in ways that are not divisive. You're trying to bring the mind together with its good friends inside: mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Craving is going to come in—*it* wants to be your friend—and it's going to try to separate you from them. It's going to tell you that meditation is selfish; you're wasting your time. Or, it'll tell you that you don't have any talent—you don't have any hope of becoming a good meditator. Craving can tell you all kinds of things to divide you from what will be your true friends inside—your mindfulness, your alertness, your ardency. So recognize divisive speech inside for what it is. And you do that, of course, by learning how to avoid divisive speech outside.

Divisive speech is basically true speech but you're pointing out the bad features of someone so that someone else will look down on them, or not want to become friends with them. We have to be very careful about that, both inside and out.

As for harsh speech, its motivation is basically to hurt somebody's feelings. And, again, the Buddha does admit that there are times when you have to speak in unpleasing ways, but you really have to be very careful about time and place: when it will be effective, when it will not be effective—"effective" here meaning that you want your listeners to become skillful; you want them to abandon unskillful behavior.

This is why parents have every right to speak harshly to their children when their children are really getting out of line, to let them know that the issue is serious. The Buddha didn't have any use for the idea that if you say something displeasing to someone, you're harming them, because so much of the path—so much of the teaching—is critical. After all, you have to learn how to be critical of your own mind states.

But still, you have to know the right time and the right place. When you learn the right times and right places outside, then it's easier to apply the same

principles inside: When are the times when you have to speak in a comforting way? An encouraging way? And when are the times when you have to lay down the line—to remind yourself that what you’re doing is out of line, and it would be good if you stopped right away. The mind needs both kinds of internal speech, but it’s most effective when it’s used at the right time.

I knew one ajaan in Thailand who yelled at his students almost all the time, and I found myself—when I was staying with him—just not listening after a while. Ajaan Fuang was much more effective. He’d be friendly, kind, and then, if something was deserving of coming down hard, he’d come down sharply. You knew the difference and you responded, because you were open to his influence.

You want your mind to be open to the influence of the voice inside that’s trying to train it, so give yourself encouragement—give yourself pep talks. But then, when the mind is misbehaving and it’s saying, “Well, this doesn’t matter; that doesn’t matter”—if you let the “it-doesn’t-matter” attitude take over, then it’s going to eat up everything. You have to remind yourself when it *does* matter that you put more effort into the practice, that you spend less time looking at screens, and spend more time looking at your breath.

Finally, there’s idle chatter. One of the nice things about being in a monastery is that the bottom line is that people here are practicing—they’re trying to keep their minds quiet—so it’s considered normal to be quiet. You want to respect other people’s quiet, and you want to break silence only when necessary. There’s that saying that silence is golden. So, if you’re going to break something golden, make sure you’ve got something of value to say.

As the Buddha said, the opposite of idle speech is speech that’s beneficial and timely; it’s right in season. When you get used to that kind of speech, then you can apply the same principles as you’re meditating. What way of talking to yourself will be beneficial right now? As for the idle chatter of your defilements—the idle chatter of your distractions, your hindrances—look at it that way: that it *is* just idle chatter in the mind, nothing of any real worth.

When sensual desire comes whispering—saying, “How about spending a little time with a little fantasy?”—or ill will comes and you start thinking about people who’ve wronged you in the past, and how it would be really good if they had their comeuppance; or when sleepiness comes on and says, “Don’t test me; just go to sleep right now”; or restlessness and anxiety come in and tell you, “You’ve really got to worry about this” or doubt comes in recommending that you doubt the practice or your own ability to do it: Recognize all of that as idle chatter.

Often it's ill-intentioned, which would be the opposite of right resolve. All the chatter in the mind that would destroy your concentration: Think of it as resolve on ill will—ill will for your true happiness, your true well-being. Wrong resolve.

So, when you think about the principles of right view—that suffering is something you do, and it's something caused by other things you're doing inside—right resolve builds on that insight, to get rid of the mind states that are going to lead to suffering, and to start developing the ones that will lead away.

Realize the importance of your speech in that context: how you talk to others; how you talk to yourself. How you talk to others creates the outside environment for the practice. The more harmony there is in the group, the easier it is to practice. Then you bring those principles inside as you talk to yourself to get the mind to settle down, to clear out its defilements, to clear out its hindrances, and to develop a really good relationship with the breath. In other words, engage in internal speech that aims at concord. It's true about where the problems still are, and it gives you encouragement that this is a good thing to do. It doesn't waste your time.

That kind of speech knows when to fall silent. It does its work and then it stays very still. That's how right speech then connects to right concentration, bringing all the factors of the path together.

So it's always good to think about what you're doing as you're sitting here focusing on the breath, and how it fits into this larger pattern of the path. That gives you some perspective, gives you some ideas, so that when issues come up inside, you can ask yourself, "How does this particular mind-state fit into the path? Or is it the opposite of the path? If it's the opposite of the path, how do I get rid of it?" It's in this way that your inner teacher gets informed, and becomes more and more skillful, day by day.