

## *The Gift of Speech*

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As Ajaan Fuang once said, an important part of training your mind lies in training your mouth. What you say has a very strong connection with what's going on in your mind. And the training of the mind is very close to the training of the mouth.

Look at the factors in the noble eightfold path: Right after right resolve, which is the type of thinking that leads you to right concentration, comes right speech. And of course, the first level of right concentration starts with directed thought and evaluation, the way you talk to yourself. The way you talk to yourself will have a big impact on how you talk to others, and vice versa.

When we sit down to meditate, often the words we've said in the course of the day come reverberating through the mind. Even if they don't, just the simple fact that there are certain things you tend to talk about when you're talking to others means that you probably talk about them to yourself. That's the kind of speech you've got to watch out for, because it can really get in the way of getting the mind to settle down.

Ajaan Lee once said that you should bow down to your mouth every day. Think about all the trouble you went to in order to become a human being who has a human mouth. So what do you do with this human mouth? Animal mouths can express only very limited ideas. Your human mouth can express all kinds of things. Given that you've got this wide variety of things you can talk about, do you want to squander it? What would be the best use of that capability?

You have to think about the fact that your words have consequences. We often don't think about that, but it's so basic to the practice. We tend simply to have something pop into our heads and then pop out our mouths. That was Ajaan Suwat's description of someone who is totally untrained, totally unrestrained. You have an idea and you just can't keep it inside. From his point of view, you have to learn how to put those ideas through a filter. The Buddha provides that filter: Is it true? Is it beneficial? Is it timely? Running your words through the filter may take a little bit of time, as you think about each word you say, but it can save you a lot of grief.

Even in his instructions to Rahula, the Buddha said that before you say anything, you should ask yourself: "What do you expect will be accomplished by this?" Think about the fact that your words have consequences. Don't just blurt out whatever you feel like saying.

Remember the Buddha's definition of someone who has the discernment connected with right effort: i.e., there are things you know will lead to suffering down the line, but you like to say them—and so you learn how not to say them. There are things that will lead to good things down the line, happiness down the line, but they may be things that you don't feel like saying—but still you talk yourself into wanting to say them. The measure of what should come out of your mouth should not be what you feel like saying, but what will have a good long-term impact.

You give your words away freely, so think of them as a gift—and remember, the gifts you give have karmic consequences—instead of just throwing out words as if they have no value. If you spread words that really are not helpful at all, you're not taking advantage of the goodness that can come from fact that you can make a gift of your speech.

Think about the qualities that the Buddha said apply to a good gift: One, it doesn't harm the giver and it doesn't harm the recipient. Now, this doesn't mean you don't say critical things. But you don't say harmful things, things that will destroy the relationship, things that will give rise to passion, aversion, or delusion, either in you or in the listener—*that's* what harms. There's a big misunderstanding about this, especially in modern society. I read a book one time where someone said, "Well, the Buddha himself engaged in harmful speech." What the author meant was that the Buddha would say things that would hurt people's feelings.

But we know that story about the prince who was put up to the trick question: "Would the Buddha say anything displeasing?" It was a trick question in the sense that if the Buddha said No, he wouldn't, well, he was on record for having said some things that Devadatta didn't like to hear about Devadatta's future course. But if the Buddha said Yes, he would say things that were displeasing, then the prince would say, "Then what's the difference between you and ordinary people out on the street?"

When the Buddha was asked the question, though, he said, "There's no categorical answer to that." The prince knew right then and there that the Buddha had slipped through the trick question. The Buddha went on to explain. First, he noted that there was a baby son on the prince's lap. So he said, "Suppose your baby son got something sharp in its mouth. What would you do?" The prince said, "With one hand, I would hold his head. With the other hand, I'd crick my finger and then get that object out of the mouth, even if it meant drawing blood, out of compassion for the child." The Buddha said that, in the same way, he would say things that were true and beneficial, and he would know the right time to say

pleasing things and the right time to say displeasing things—out of compassion for his listeners.

So think about that. We say pleasing things and displeasing things usually because we just feel like it. We've got to stop and think: Our words will have consequences, so what would be the best time to say something pleasing? What would be the best time to say something displeasing? And how do you say it in such a way that the person will receive it and actually benefit from it?

After all, you want to give a gift that your recipient will benefit from. This covers two things: The gift is something that doesn't do harm and actually is beneficial. And two, it's timely.

The other part of giving a gift is your attitude. The Buddha says you should give your gifts attentively, with the attitude that something good will come of this. In terms of material gifts, he's thinking about people who would give their gifts not showing respect for their recipient, and not really thinking that anything much would come of it. They'd just go through the motions.

All too often, that's the way we speak. We say something without any thought of what the long-term consequences will be. And we're not especially attentive to the other person. So we've got to change that attitude. If our speech is going to be a gift, remind yourself: "Something will come of this." So look at your words. What will come from those words you're about to say?

Try to say things that will be beneficial in the long term, and give them attentively. Notice what the other person's state of mind is right now. Is that person receptive? Are there times when you have to say critical things? And if you want your criticism to have an effect, not just hurt people's feelings—you want them to benefit—you want to speak in such a way that will help that person see that they are maybe doing something wrong, and then be willing to correct their mistake.

What this shows is that you've got to think before you speak. Another statement of Ajaan Fuang: He said, "Try to be the sort of person who thinks before you speak, not the person who speaks and then has to think about it afterwards." If you speak and have to think about it afterwards, it's usually a matter of regretting what you said. So think first. This may mean that there will be a little time gap between what someone else says and how you respond. But you don't have to be quick on the response. Show that you value your own words, because if you don't value your own words, how will other people value them? If you just throw them out, scatter them around, it's as if they're not worth anything at all.

But if you dole them out carefully, people will sense that these are words worth listening to. They're words that will create harmony, create peace in the community—peace either through saying things that are pleasing, or saying things that are displeasing but knowing the right time and place. When you can create peace and harmony outside, then when you sit down, the words that go through your mind are words that will create peace and harmony there as well.

So treat your speech as a gift, a valuable gift, both in terms of what you say—making sure that it's actually helpful and timely—and the attitude with which you say it. Speak attentively and with the sense that something positive will come of it. When you give a good gift like this, other people will be happy to receive it. It actually will accomplish something good, both for them and as part of training your mind.