

Learning Right Speech

August 23, 2022

There's a tendency to think of practicing the Dhamma as what you do when you sit here with your eyes closed: trying to get the mind in concentration, trying to develop discernment. But we have to remember that the path to awakening is not a one-fold path or a two-fold path. It's a noble eightfold path. And each of the factors in that path requires training.

Notice that when the Buddha completed his explanation of the two factors having to do with discernment, the very next factor was speech: how you talk to other people, how you talk to yourself. This is an important part of the training, because the way you talk to other people is the way you talk to yourself. And the way you talk to yourself as you're dealing with other people, thinking about the world around you, is going to have an impact on how you talk to yourself as you try to get the mind into concentration.

Think of those factors of directed thought and evaluation. They're the factors that precede speech. They lie at the basis of all our verbal actions, but they're also part of how you get the mind to settle down—if you talk to yourself in the right way. So this is something you have to train yourself in. You can't say, "Well, I'm just the way I am. I'm a straight-shooter. I just say what I think, and you're going to have to put up with that." That's like saying, "My mind is a mess; I can't get into concentration, and we'll just have to accept that fact."

We're here to *train*. We're here to learn new habits. Think about the Buddha's habits, because he's the ideal example of how to train. Some people write that off, saying, "Well, he's the Buddha, so he's got to be special." But he meant all of his actions—his words, his deeds, and his thoughts that he expressed to other people—to be examples to others: This is how you find happiness. This is how you live in the world finding happiness in a way that's totally harmless.

So think of his standards for speech: One, it had to be true; two, it had to be beneficial; and three, he had to know the right time to say things that were pleasing, and the right time to say things that were not pleasing. So he didn't have

just one style of speech. He tried to be very attuned to when it was necessary to say things that were displeasing. But he was very sparing in his displeasing words, which meant that they had more of an impact. He used them only when they were necessary, and as a result, people were open to listening to them.

I knew an ajaan in Thailand who tended to be pretty harsh all the time. I found that my own reaction to his criticism was that I just closed myself off, because whatever he said was going to be critical. It was very easy to write that off, “Well, that was just his way of speaking.”

Whereas Ajaan Fuang was very careful. If he was going to say something displeasing, he chose just the right time, the right place, and the right words. And they went straight to your heart. It was as if he slipped a knife in between your ribs without your expecting it. And that had an impact.

So, think about that: true, beneficial, and the right time to be pleasing, and the right time to be displeasing. The Buddha took the truth as a very important principle. Sometimes it seems, of all the precepts, the precept to say what is true was for him the most important. As he told Rahula: The very first lesson to the young boy was that you’ve got to be truthful. If you can tell a lie deliberately without any sense of shame, then whatever goodness you have as a contemplative, someone who’s devoted to a life of harmlessness, is totally thrown away, turned over, empty.

You know the story. He illustrated that message with a dipper of water. He washed his feet and left just a little bit of water in the dipper. Then he asked Rahula, “Do you see how little water there is here?” Rahula said, “Yes.” Then the Buddha said, “That’s how little goodness there is in someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame.” Then he tossed the water away. He said, “You see how that water is tossed away?” “Yes.” “That’s what happens to the goodness of someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame: It gets tossed away.” Then he said, “Now you see how empty the dipper is?” “Yes.” “The person who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame is empty of goodness in just the same way.” Then he turned the dipper upside down... you get the message.

Then he went on to say, “Train yourself so that you don’t say a falsehood even in jest.” In other words, even in cases where you don’t mean to deceive people, you

just want to say something funny: Even then, you should abstain from misrepresenting the truth as well.

But then the Buddha went on to point out in some of his other teachings that simply because something was true was not reason enough to say it: It also had to be beneficial. There are a lot of true things we could say that give rise to passion, aversion, or delusion, either in us or in the listener... and a truth like that should be left unsaid because it serves no genuine purpose.

Try to speak words that are true, that are harmonious, that are easy to listen to, and really serve a purpose. This means you have to be very careful about your words. And look at what the Buddha's asking you to do. He's asking you to set up several checkpoints before you speak.

If you take that seriously, it means you may not say that much in the course of the day, but then most of us speak too much anyhow. I think I've told you that story about Ajaan Fuang up in the mountains north of Chiangmai. He was staying with another monk, and he had a very lively sense that there were very strong spirits in the area who were watching the monks very carefully. One day he and the other monk were on alms round, and one of the lay people putting food in the other monk's bowl asked him a question. The monk answered, but Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, after having had time with Ajaan Lee and having learned about saying only what was absolutely necessary: "Gee, it wasn't really necessary to answer that question." Later that day that monk had a bad case of diarrhea. Ajaan Fuang attributed it to the spirits' strictness about how little you should speak if you're practicing.

We talk about the kind of idle chatter that's allowable, the kind of social grease that keeps things going, but there can be too much grease, just as an engine can get too much grease. It mucks up the workings of the engine. So you have to be really careful about what you say. Make sure it's necessary. If it's not necessary, leave it unsaid.

And if you do have critical things to say, do your best to show respect for the other person. The worst thing you can do in any community is to show contempt for one another, because that causes people to close up and not listen to one another. So, if you're going to criticize someone, show that you're doing it out of

goodwill. You have their best interest in mind, and you've really decided, okay, this has to be said. If there's a pleasing way to say it, say it in a pleasing way. Save your displeasing words for extreme circumstances. After all, we are living here as a group, and the group can be conducive to meditation if the way we live together gives rise to a sense of joy.

That's one of the conditions for getting the mind to settle down—a sense of joy. You can induce it in lots of different ways, but one of the best ways, if you're living as a group, is to make it a group where people are happy to be practicing together.

So make sure your speech is the kind of speech that would make people happy to be around you, happy to be practicing the Dhamma together with you. If this speech doesn't come naturally, well, it's the same as with concentration: If concentration doesn't come naturally, you have to *make* it happen, because this is a training. Those eight folds of the path come under the triple training. They're things you learn, things that you practice, and here "practice" means learning how to do it right.

Recognize a mistake as a mistake. Make up your mind you don't want to repeat that mistake, because that's the lesson the Buddha gave to Rahula after he taught him about truth. What you really want to look at is: Be truthful about your intentions; make sure you don't do anything harmful. If you see that you intend to do an act that will cause harm, don't do it. And while you're doing things you thought would be harmless, you're truthful about watching what you're actually accomplishing. What are the actual results that are coming about? Are you causing harm? If so, stop. If not, continue with the action. When it's done, you're truthful again: What are the actual results of what you did? When you see a mistake, you recognize it as a mistake and spread lots of goodwill: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the other people, so that you're less likely to repeat that mistake.

So training in right speech is just as much a part of the practice as training in right mindfulness and right concentration. When the Buddha taught the noble eightfold path he didn't teach any extra folds, any extra factors that were not necessary, so learn how to give each of the factors the attention it deserves.