

Right Speech

The Third Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

*A statement endowed with five factors is
well-spoken, not ill-spoken, blameless and not faulted by wise people.
Which five?
It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken politely.
It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will.*

—The Buddha (AN 5:198)

Right Intention, the second factor of the Eightfold Path, sets the stage for the next three factors, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Grouped together as practices of virtue, these three factors are concerned with how the intentions of wise renunciation, goodwill, and compassion are expressed in our daily lives. These virtue factors also lay the foundation for the last three practices of the path—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

In starting with Right Speech, the three virtue practices begin with the activity through which we interact most with others and with which we most frequently impact others directly. What we say and how we say it also have a direct link to our own cultivation of the path of liberation. When we mindlessly speak or remain silent we lose an opportunity to include our speech as part of the Eightfold Path.

Right Speech is described as both speaking what is skillful and abstaining from speech that is unskillful. Lying, slandering, and engaging in harsh or pointless speech are defined as unskillful. Words that are honest, timely, useful, friendly, and create social harmony are considered wise and skillful.

Practicing Right Speech requires a dedication to mindfulness, especially to being aware of the impulse to speak before we actually speak. One approach for doing this is to develop the custom of pausing before speaking, perhaps a pause short enough to go unnoticed by others. This pause may give enough time to realize what we are intending to say. Knowing this may be enough for us to refrain from saying something we would later regret.

When we are uncertain of what is skillful to say, it can be useful to consider the Buddha's guidelines for speech:

- To speak at the appropriate time,
- To speak honestly,
- To speak politely,
- To speak what is beneficial,
- To speak with good will.

It is best to avoid speaking at a time when it can not be understood or when it is not useful for the person to whom we are speaking. Even if it is something true and important, it is best to wait for the appropriate situation to say it.

Dishonesty takes us in the opposite direction than a path to liberation. Because the goal is to become truthful and authentic in all we do, dishonesty blocks the path to the goal. Honesty, in contrast, is mindfulness out loud. When done together with the other five guidelines, honesty creates trust and ease in everyone.

Politeness is respectful speech that expresses respect for others. Instead of demeaning or belittling others, polite speech enhances the dignity of both the person spoken to and the speaker.

Speaking only what is beneficial saves a lot of time and effort. Not only does it free us from having to say things that have no value or useful purpose, it also frees us from having to make amends for speech that is not beneficial or brings pain.

Speaking with goodwill means to speak in ways that are kind and concerned with the welfare of others. Without goodwill, the heart will remain closed or numb. With goodwill, our speech supports the continuing opening of our hearts.

What we say has a powerful relationship with how we feel. One reason to avoid unskillful speech is to avoid the agitation that comes with regret. And a reason to engage in skillful speech is to create conditions for happiness and peace. The uncomfortable inner states that give rise to unskillful speech are strengthened by such speech. Likewise, the inner well-being that supports skillful speech is, strengthened by skillful speech.

When it is difficult to speak skillfully it may be possible to at least restrain ourselves from saying things that will cause harm. Avoiding unhelpful speech prevents a great amount of social discord and injury. At times, one of the most powerful, challenging, and wise practices we can do is to simply hold our tongue.

Abstaining from unskillful speech is not an end in itself, however. If we want to cultivate the freedom of the Eightfold Path it can be useful to investigate the inner conditions that motivate such speech. What does it teach us about ourselves? Are we overly stressed? Are we being unduly influenced by desire, aversion, or fear? What are we trying to accomplish through such speech? If we could settle deeply into our hearts, what would we say?

And even if we succumb to our unskillful impulses and engage in unwise speech, we can still gain valuable insight into ourselves. Considering whether or not our speech expresses goodwill, friendliness, or compassion can be the beginning of practicing Right Speech. If we find that our speech doesn't have these qualities, then we have a golden opportunity to find out why. What does such speech show us about ourselves? If we truly care about ourselves, then reflecting on these questions can inspire us to find alternate ways of speaking. Rather than being discouraging or providing occasions to beat ourselves up, such self-knowledge can fuel our practice.

Such reflections are useful so that we don't practice Right Speech simply as a set of rules, but as a way to support our practice on the path. These investigations help us get in touch with our inner life and the inner wellsprings of wisdom and caring from which we can better consider what to say. It is good to remember that our speech arises out of the ecology of our inner life. If the inner life is well cared for it is much easier to speak wisely.

By practicing Right Speech we are not only cultivating the Eightfold Path, but we are also taking care of both others and ourselves. Right Speech benefits the world and strengthens our path of liberation.

Additional reading:

- Chapter 4 in Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path*
- Chapter 3 in Bhante Gunaratana's *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*

Reflections and Practices for Right Speech

1-The Experience of Speaking (Week 1)

One of the most challenging but also rewarding areas of mindfulness practice is mindful speech. If we tune in to ourselves, we can experience the relationship speaking has to our bodies, our emotional lives, our beliefs and ideas, our preferences, and the ways our life experiences have conditioned us. Please spend a week being mindful of these areas when you speak. It might be helpful to keep a journal recording what you notice. You might find the following sequence helpful:

Day one: Focus on noticing what is happening in your body as you speak.

Day two: Focus on how you feel emotionally when you speak.

Day three: Focus on noticing what motivates you to speak. Why do you say what you do?

Day four: Be mindful of what you are paying attention to when you speak. Are you focused on your words? Do you pay attention to the people you're talking to? How aware of your body are you as you speak?

Day five: Keep your attention anchored in your body as you speak. Notice how this affects what you say.

Day six and seven: Repeat some of the practices from the first five days.

2-Honesty (Week 2)

This week's exploration of truthful speech has two parts, listening well and speaking honestly.

Spend the first few days of this week devoted to listening to others more carefully than you usually do. How does this affect what you say?

Spend the rest of the week noticing what it's like to be honest and what it's like when you are anything less than honest. Perhaps in most conversations this is not a particularly important issue because honesty is easy. However, what does it feel like when honesty is not so easy? Or when the honesty is an important part of the communication? What does it feel like when you are avoiding honest communi-

cation? What motivates this avoidance? If you find yourself saying something that is not truthful, spend some time investigating why and how you did this.

Find a person you can talk to about the role of honesty in conversation. You might ask them what they have learned in their life about speaking truthfully.

3–Social Harmony and Speech (Week 3)

When the Buddha advised us to avoid slanderous speech, he also encouraged us to speak so we can unite those who are divided and encourage those who are united. During this week, give special attention to saying things that create social harmony and concord. Avoid speaking badly about anyone. Instead look for natural and appropriate opportunities to speak well about others, including the people you are with. Notice how you are affected by speaking in such ways.

4–Motivations to Speak (Week 4)

During this week notice why you say what you say. What motivations are behind what you do and don't say? Notice the strength of your impulses to speak. What affects the strength of this impulse? When you are mindful of your motivation and impulses to speak, how does this affect what you say?

When you know you will be speaking to someone, prepare yourself by reflecting on what intentions you might want for the conversation. How does a conversation unfold if you have reflected and set an intention beforehand?

During some of your conversations this week practice “pausing and relaxing” before you speak. Don't rush in to contribute to a conversation. Take a moment to pause and relax before you speak. Notice how this affects what you say and how you say it.

Choose some conversations during this week in which you can emphasize saying things that are pleasing, heart-warming, and meaningful for the people you are speaking with. Notice how this affects you.