

Daily Life Practice Retreat Theme

September 2010

Theme for this week's retreat: Wise and Mindful Speech

Speech is one of the main ways we interact in the world, and it has a huge impact on our lives. I'm sure most of us, at one time or another, have said something that we immediately regretted, or wished we could take back. Bringing speech into our daily practice is a powerful way to sharpen our mindfulness. Thanissaro Bhikkhu says that his teacher liked to say, "If you can't control your mouth, there's no way you can hope to control your mind."

The practice of wise and mindful speech can be a very challenging practice. Much of the time, we speak automatically, without noticing first what we are going to say, or even that we are going to speak. And much less often do we take a moment to contemplate the effect our speech will have on the person we are talking to.

The Buddha provided us with some guidelines about how to cultivate wise speech. He suggested that we start with avoiding four types of speech that tend to create disharmony:

- false speech
- divisive speech: Speech that creates division between people
- abusive speech: unfriendly, harsh, hostile speech
- idle chatter: useless, meaningless speech

Our task is not to simply follow these as hard and fast rules, but rather to pay attention when these types of speech come up, see if we can notice the motivation or intention behind the speech. As we practice avoiding these kinds of speech, we are actually cultivating many beautiful qualities of mind. Avoiding false speech cultivates truthfulness and honesty. Avoiding divisive speech cultivates: kindness, harmony, and compassion. Avoiding harsh speech cultivates courtesy, friendliness, and compassion. Avoiding idle chatter cultivates clarity of mind, and settledness of mind.

Aside from these four types of speech to avoid, the Buddha also had some suggestions about how to decide whether to say something. These include:

- Is it beneficial to say? The Buddha does not say we should never say things that others might not want to hear. But he does want us to consider whether a painful and difficult topic is actually beneficial to their well being, or the well being of the community.
- Is it a proper time for speaking about this subject? I take this to mean that we should consider who is present, what the general mood of the gathering is, and also whether the person or people we are speaking to will be able to take in the meaning. For example, if we try to offer constructive criticism to someone who is angry, he or she probably won't be able to take the meaning of our words so constructively. Waiting until the other person has cooled off might be a more appropriate time.

Aside from practicing wise speech, it is also helpful to generally cultivate mindfulness while speaking, that is, to be aware and present while speaking. In our meditative mindfulness practice, we are usually taught to let go of the content of our thoughts and simply return to tangible present moment experience. In mindfulness of speech, we need to be aware of the content of speech, along with how the content of the conversation is impacting our inner life.

Practices for Wise and Mindful Speech

1. Reflect on the four types of speech the Buddha suggested that we avoid: false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech and idle chatter.
Do you have a tendency towards any of these as patterns in your speech? If so, are there specific situations in which you tend to engage with these patterns? Reflecting on our patterns can help us to bring more mindfulness to them.
2. Use the four types of wise speech as guidelines for your speech during the week.
This will probably mean that you notice yourself engaging in unwise speech from time to time! When this happens, we need to learn to be kind and compassionate towards ourselves. Gently remind yourself to keep trying. Make amends if that is called for. This is a difficult practice.
3. See if you can pause before speaking.
If you can pause before speaking, then you have caught the intention to speak, and you have a chance to be mindful for the next few moments of speaking.
Sometimes it can be difficult to do this in certain conversations (for example, work conversations where you won't get a chance to speak if you pause.) For that situation, one suggestion (from the practices of non-violent communication) is to rephrase what was last said, as a way to slow down the conversation -- for example, "As I understand what you just said..." If you remember to do this, you have also caught the intention to speak, and you again have a chance to be mindful in the next few moments of speech.
4. If you remember to pause, take a moment to recognize whether you know what you are about to say, and also what the motivation is behind it. If you can notice these two things, reflect on whether this is something that you actually do want to say! Use the Buddha's guidelines about whether it is beneficial and timely. You have a choice about whether or not to speak at this point.
5. Connect with your body
Connecting with your body, or some part of your body, will start to ground you in your inner experience while being aware of the content of speaking at the same time.
6. Try to track whether you are agitated or not agitated while you speak.
Rather than trying to keep track of the full range of emotional states while you speak, start with just tracking these two: whether you are agitated or not. Agitation will usually signal something to pay attention to.
7. Explore mindful listening.
See if you can notice how the content of what the other person is saying impacts your inner experience. Stay connected to both the content and your experience. When listening, we tend to start thinking about what we might say in response, rather than really being present while listening.
8. Explore silence!
We often don't think about silence as an option during a conversation. Gil makes the suggestion to reflect: "Does what I plan to say improve on the silence?"
9. Play with mindful speech. Explore what helps you remember to practice it. Explore what helps you while you are practicing it. Be creative!
10. If you find it nearly impossible to remember to do the above exercises throughout your day, see if you can find someone who is willing to practice mindful speech with you a few times during the week. Pick a time (say over a lunch-date) that you agree to speak with these considerations in mind.