

2020-06-28: Liberating Speech: Uniting Those Who are Divided

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SPEAKERS

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What's on my mind for today's talk is to talk about particular teachings of the Buddha. It has to do with avoiding divisive speech and rather to speak words that unite those that are divided. And to introduce this topic, one very important sutta where the Buddha talks about the truth. Some point in the text he talks about that when you listen to someone, if you go looking for a Buddhist teacher, that you should check the person out and you should check them out in three ways. You should see that if in what they say and what they do, or even what they think, whether if they express any of these three qualities, and that is greed, hatred and delusion. And then he says the reason why you want to check them out, is that with the presence of greed, hatred and delusion, people might not say what's true. They might say something different than what they know. But when they're free of these fires of greed, hate and delusion, then you can know that they'll say what's true or they're not going to be motivated to, you know, to say what's not true. Because when you listen to Buddhist teachings, you're really trying to get to the truth and be with the truth. And what this points to is the idea that when someone has become mature in Buddhist practice, that how they act is important, certainly important for others. How we act is so important that I'd like to say that there are two major steps in the conclusion of Buddhist practice. There is having insight. And then there's acting on that insight. There is having deep transformative insight, and then acting from the way we've been transformed. That somehow becoming spiritually mature, having some fruit of this practice that's deeply satisfying and freeing. that it isn't then we have some kind of, you know, spiritual retirement or enlightened retirement, we just kind of, then now can just sit on our couch and look out the window. That acting is important. The actions we do, how we live our lives is important. So there's two things: there's seeing and there's acting. And so that's true all along in Buddhist practice, that whenever we learn to see ourselves in a new way. See the world in a new way. Discover ourselves in new capacities that are more healthy, more wholesome, more freeing, more authentic. That then the task is to express that, to live that in our lives. And there are four areas, well I'll say it this way, that in one of the most important places for many of us, where we act in the

world where it makes a difference, where we can be the medicine for the world or we can be the illness for the world, has to do with our speech. I suspect that most of the people who come and do Buddhist practice are not involved with killing and stealing and sexual misconduct, causing harm. But the area of speech is, you know, much more we do it all the time all day long, many of us talking or plenty of times, plenty enough. And if not to other people to ourselves, and that's the action where we most of us could spend more time looking and being careful with what we do. And that it's one of the most hardest places to really bring a lot of mindfulness to because often is speaking, we're absorbed or caught up in what we're talking about, that it's hard to kind of really see what's going on in a deeper way. But the Buddha talks about four different ways in which we can speak well, or speak out of the practice. And this idea of speaking out of the practice is such an important one. That as we settle, as we become more connected to ourselves, more aware of ourselves, more self aware, and are touching into places of freedom, touch into places where we're not caught by our thoughts and our feelings and our motivations and our desires and aversions. Where we get a felt sense of some deeper, freer place to be from, calmer, more peaceful place. Then we want to be able to live from that place. And so if you're living from that place in relationship to speech, the Buddha said there are four different ways of speaking. Four skillful ways of speaking, or wholesome ways of speaking. And those are to be true, to speak the truth. To speak that which unites those that are divided, to avoid divisive speech. To speak, pleasing, gentle, kind speech, the things that people want to hear and remember, as opposed to harsh speech, malicious speech. And then to speak that which is good and useful and true, useful, that which is useful and good to say, as opposed to speaking that which is frivolous and chaff. It seems to be that the word that the Buddha used for this fourth one was, it was a compound word and the first word was frivolous, and the other one was palala, which means literally means chaff of like chaff of the grain. The essence of the grain is the seed that's where the life is and where the potential is. The chaff at one point was protecting the seed but at some point the chaff is no longer needed. And it's kind of not so important. And so you want to speak the seeds, you want to speak the essence of things, what's useful, not which is not useful. So frivolous or useless speech. And so I'll talk a bit more about each of these, but I really wanted to kind of focus on this speech which unites and connects those who are divided the most. So to speak what's true, there is no Buddhism, no Buddhist practice, without it being a truth discovering process. And this text that I refer to beginning about how to check out a Buddhist teacher, are they free of greed, hatred, and delusion? It's called the Canki sutta, it's 95 in the Middle Length Discourses. It's one of my favorite texts in the suttas and it has there its idea of safeguarding the truth. And to kind of be brief, not not tell you the whole story. A person comes to the Buddha and kind of asks how can you know what's true? And the Buddha says, how do you know what's true? And? And he says, Well, I it's true because I have faith in it, or because it's been told to me by my tradition. And the Buddha then points out well, there's five things that sometimes turn out to be true, and sometimes turn out not to be true. And he said, so those are the things that we take on faith. Let's see, I should remember them all. That things that we take on faith, on our approval, because we approve of it, without any more reasons than I like it. Because it's the tradition, because it is what people have believed for a long time and my people believe that, my religion. And the fourth is by reasoned analogy, by analogy, and I think in modern world, it's by what's it called when you have just one, one example of something and based on that one situation you

generalize and believe everything is true because of that. And going to use that one place not as analogy, but as the evidence. And then reason reflection, where we kind of can think about things and we can then accept them because we think in a way that's accurate. We think it's so. So whether you remember those, we'll get to all those it's not as important. But then the Buddha says if you want to safeguard the truth, you don't avoid those five ways of knowing. But what you do is you state clearly the basis upon why you say something, where the authority or what the basis is for your statement? So if what you're saying, Yeah, anecdotal evidence, thank you, Olivia. So sometimes based on anecdotal evidence. So when you safeguard the truth, you're not necessarily avoiding those sources of understanding. But you clearly explained to people where you're getting your understanding. So if you have it on your own faith that this is so you say, I have faith that this is so. If you have it based on just you just like it, you just say, you know, what I like is this understanding, is based on my liking. This is what I approve of. And there's no other basis for approving it than I approve of it. Or it's the tradition. I read it in a book or this is what my elder said, or this is what my religion says. I don't know if it's true, but this is the basis for it. And the city of explaining to people this is how I know something is very freeing. Because one of the illnesses of our society is the use of declarative statements. Like this is true. And it's phenomenal the degree to which people are opinionated these days and have it on total evidence, have it because they like it. Or there's a kind of authority that can come in a simple declarative statement that people want to kind of, some people want to gather around and believe and feel like they're right. And justified. And but there's never questioning, where did that belief come from? On what basis do we have that as being true? Oh, because my friend told me, because I heard it on a on a you know, in a opinion some opinion piece on the on the news or something. But so the Buddha said, safeguard the truth by saying, on the basis upon which you know something. So that would change our society dramatically if we were that had that kind of care. And then other people can participate with us more clearly. We can be in dialogue with people in a wiser way, if we don't make declarative statements saying this is true, when, but instead, we say, on the basis of this, I read a news report, according to that news report. This is what I understand. Or I have this piece of evidence and based on that evidence, this is the conclusion that I've come to through my reasoning. Then the people can be in conversation with us and it's easier for all of us to find our way to greater and greater truth or greater and better understanding what goes on. And then someone in the sutta was asked the Buddha Well, how can we discover the truth. And then the Buddha goes on from there and says, well, then you have to practice, then you have to develop a higher degree of mindfulness to really see more clearly in a deep, deep way, what is true. And now in this case, the Buddha is actually pointing towards the truth of personal liberation, not necessarily the truth of what's happening in the world and politics. But the Buddha emphasizes that someone who is spiritually mature speaks the truth. And there's a wonderful reciprocity that goes on that if you are spiritually mature, you can measure that by how truthful you are. If you notice you're not being truthful. You're hedging the truth. The reciprocity is that can be a time to wake up and say, oh, here is someplace for me to look at and practice with. This is worthy of my attention. Maybe in the moment or maybe later say what what was going on for me? What honestly truly was happening? Why did I feel like I had to lie here or not say the truth? What can I learn from this? How can I become a better person by learning from this? So it isn't like a just a bad news to know that we're lying. It's actually the very material with which we can go further in our

Buddhist practice, if that's what you want, or further in the movement towards freedom from greed, hate and delusion. So truth. The second one conforms to speech for someone who's spiritually mature, is to be interested in healing the divisions between people, between friends, between families, in society. That that's the orientation. And that could be an orientation in all acts of speech. Is the way this speaking now, is that creating more distance? Or more connection? Is it creating more separation? Is people shutting down? Are they turning off? Are they stepping away? Are they going away? are we creating more connection here? And that comes from understanding the value of not having division. Not having a wall between people. Not having silence between people. Not having hostility between people. And a lot of that understanding can come from recognizing how painful it is to live inside of ourselves. If we're creating division between people, and how freeing it is to not have division, not have a divisiveness between people, not to be part of that divisive world. Because then it's easier for our mind, our hearts, our life, our way, orientation to the world, to be open, to be receptive, to be willing to step forward, to be kind and supportive, to live in a way that's free. As soon as there's a divisiveness and we're living in that world of divisiveness, we're not really free. Even if divisiveness mostly comes from the other person, it makes it difficult for to be on the receiving end of that. So, if we're being mindful, and if that's what we want to do, and learn to be free, then at some point when you start tuning into the impact our speech has. Is the speech we have creating separation, or creating connection? And in this politicized world that we live in now, there's plenty of people who'd rather be right than create harmony or unite people, connect people. They'd rather criticize people righteously and point out how they're wrong, and try to somehow with a hammer of their words, insist that they have to be different. They're wrong. They're bad that way, they have to do something differently. And maybe in some ways there might be a right to their point of view. But is there a different way of doing it? Is there a different way of participating in our world that doesn't attack people? Doesn't make people wrong or bad, but rather, enters in a very honest and clear way, intentional way, to make the world a better place, to engage in dialogue, to try to correct people if they understand things wrong in a false way or not accurate. But can it be done without creating division? How can we do that so there's friendship, there's mutual support? That people feel they can trust us, that people can feel that as we engage in the conversation, that we have their best interest in mind. Even though we might feel that they're wrong, we have their best interests in mind. For many years, I served on ethics committees, working with ethical conflicts people had with each other. And one of the approaches I had to be in the middle of that was to try to consider what was the best for each person involved. And so that people, everyone who was involved really feel that I was thinking, even if there's some really strong judgments need to come down, that it was everyone who understood it was for the welfare of everyone involved, and as opposed to punishment or punitive. So this idea of its movement towards healing the divisions in family, healing divisions in society, that that's an expression of awakening. The third form of speech at the Buddha emphasized is speech which is not malicious. So the speech is not trying to cause harm, not trying to be hostile, not trying to goad people not trying to irritate people, not trying to get back at people, exact revenge on people that what we say. That this speech doesn't come out of hostility. And now all these things, one of the reasons to avoid that is not because it's the ethical thing to do. But rather, it is a way of harming ourselves as well. That as soon as we're malicious in our speech, the maliciousness might even be harming ourselves more than the

person we're trying to have hostile words to. That there's a kind of twisting and contracting and wounding of our own self, that if we pay really careful attention, we feel the alienation from what is most deep and good inside of us, the most satisfying inside of us. And that's not easy to discover because sometimes hostile speech does have a pleasure to it, does have something that's kind of feels good to be right. It feels good to be doing something, it feels good to somehow get revenge or it can feel like we're or it can feel effective because I'm protecting myself and trying to create good, you know, something important is happening here in doing this. And so if that's the momentum of the action, and we're not really paying attention inside, then we don't really feel the impact it has on us personally. And also, we probably don't pay much attention to impact has socially. And harsh speech can be effective in the short term, but it's not effective in the long term. It creates division, it creates people hostile towards us or afraid of us. And it's more and more difficult to create friendly, harmonious, supportive, and mutually beneficial relationships in this world. And then the fourth kind of speech is useless speech and chaff, frivolous speech. And now this takes some care to consider, because sometimes speech that seems very trivial and maybe even useless, in and of itself, it does have use when it's creating a sense of connection or rapport with people. You know, talking about the weather, we don't you know, I don't need to talk about the weather and it's doesn't do me any good or the other person any good, but it's just a way of creating rapport and connection and warmth between us, having some kind of way of bridge to human connectedness. So that I would say is not useless. But there are ways of speaking, which has no benefit. And maybe it does connect any deeper human connectivity between people. It's just kind of filling the space or it's a way of distracting ourselves from things or it's a way of staying busy so we don't have to really face and deal with what's really important to deal with. It's an avoidance mechanism. So someone who is spiritually mature, at least in the Buddhist world, sometimes has a lot of silence, or knows how to pause because they don't have to fill the conversation with empty conversation. That they're willing to feel the connection to have with people, regardless of whether they're talking or not. And there's a profound connection we can feel with each other when we're not talking. And to be with people have that ability to be silent together and feel connected, I think is one of the great pleasures of life to be to stop talking and just be and be present. So these these four things, and then a few more words about avoiding divisive speech, and promoting, bringing together the people who are, you know, divided. Here I'll read to what how the Buddha says it. "Such a person does not divide people from each other. But rather he unites the person reunites those who are divided, and is a promoter of friendships. Who enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, and a speaker of words that promote concord." And so, how do we become a person who supports reuniting those who are divided? And one of the areas where that's happening in our society right now is the basic fabric of the, you know, I think one of the central fabrics of the American family. It's remarkable that so many of the black people in this country are descendants of slaves who have and have white fathers back then, the ancestors, that they share the same bloodline as white people. That we're family to a great extent, white people and black people in this country are kin, our family. And they were divided, some of them back in slave times, were divided at birth. And they were kept divided through Jim Crow and kept divided down through the ages. And how do we take this mare fabric of American family and bring it together to end this divisiveness that has existed for so long? And this is where the other elements of right speech that the Buddha talked

about, they're so important. The idea of truth is not just important for us personally. But as we learn about the truth, then it's only through the truth that sometimes that can really be a reuniting or reconciliation. It's no accident in South Africa ,they had the Truth and Reconciliation Council. The committee that really needed to get the truth needed to come out. And it's really, to me, it's just continues to be kind of kind of a shock, actually, how much of American history I never learned and how much is still coming out about the horrific aspects of what happened to African Americans and indigenous people in this country, and to hear to really learn about that challenge and what, you know, we I think we have to know we have to I feel we have to know about that history. Kind of a truth telling to really be able to go further as a society and begin to do the reconciliation, uniting the people that who are divided. And then to be devoted to non malicious speech and to learn how to have the conversations that are not divisive. I don't think that's easy. But for those of us who are doing Buddhist practice, I hope we get a lot of practice in our ordinary, everyday life at using our mindfulness. Understanding the part of this path of liberation, is to find ways to speak that does not create division, does not create walls between people, even between spouses, even between family members. How do we learn to speak, how do we learn to speak honestly, truthfully, say what we need to say and what's what's necessary. But how do we do it in such a way that we don't alienate people from ourselves or make them angry and shut down? How do we find a way to speak that is supportive for everyone, including ourselves? And that is a powerful skill. That's a skill that's really well worth learning. We can learn a lot of it through mindfulness, just a lot of care and attention to what motivates us to speak, what's really going on inside of ourselves. So we don't do things which are unskillful. It's possible to learn and study. All kinds of modalities. All kinds of exercises for learning how to speak more wisely. And nonviolent communication is one of them. There's many you know, to take it doesn't take that much to learn, and then to practice it. And to become good at it slowly over time. It says it's, we develop our abilities through the practice of it. And to practice with our friends. And if you have really good friends, you can say, you know, I'm trying to learn to speak in a different way and I'm going to an experiment and is that okay? That may be that you're patient with me as I try to find a different way of speaking. So what I've tried to say today is one of the things is that this concern and care around how we speak, is really a powerful place for mindfulness practice to live. And that it's a way of learning to express the good, the benefits, the ways we're growing through the practice. Because as we grow and develop, become freer, it's really important to express it, to live it. Freedom which is not expressed is the kind of not freedom. And so this is the ways to live it. And then to the degree to which we can do it. We don't know how to do to unite those who are divided to create connects deeper and deeper connection with each other. That itself is a mirror to help us further with our own inner life to develop and this is where their mindfulness can go, to work out the kinks inside, the unresolved places, the challenges we have. And it's not easy to do this, to learn mindfulness speaking, but boy, is it worthwhile. It's a great thing to do. And I'm confident that if we as a community of practitioners can give care and attention to speech, that it'll be for the benefit of many, many people, and certainly for yourself as well. And that's something our society needs these days. And I hope that your Buddhist practice can be a benefit to the world around you. Thank you