Speech, Inside & Out

February 17, 2017

It’s a dark and stormy night. A good time to stay inside where it’s warm and dry and work on your own mind. It says, “It’s raining outside, but my hut is well-thatched.” So go ahead and rain as much as you want. The hut that’s well-thatched stands for the mind that’s well-trained. In other words, it’s not affected by things outside. It can have its own source of happiness inside that’s not touched by things outside. While we’re meditating, it’s to thatch our huts. Bring your attention into the breath. Ask for anything else outside that you’re concerned about for the time being. Let it go. Give the mind some time to be itself on its own terms, be with itself, work on itself. Because it spends so much time looking after things outside, starting from the body and on out. You’ve got to make sure the body is fed, clothed, sheltered, medicine when it’s sick, and all the other issues around that. The mind has very little time for itself, so it doesn’t really know itself. This is why, as the Buddha said, even though we want happiness in all our actions, we end up doing and saying and thinking things that lead to suffering. So bring some knowledge inside. This is one of the reasons why we stay with the breath, because the breath is right here, right next to the mind, and it’s in the present moment. And as long as you’re with the breath, you’re right next to the mind. So you can observe it. Try to make the breath as comfortable as you can so you’re happy to stay here, which means experimenting for a while. You’re going to be talking to yourself about the breath. Make sure you don’t talk about other things right now, but as much as you talk about the breath to make the breath more comfortable. And then when there is a sense of ease with the breathing, you’ve decided whether short breathing feels better or longer breathing feels better, or in-short, out-long, in-long, out-short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Once you’ve decided what’s comfortable, then you’ll think of that sense of comfort spreading. Say, for instance, you’re focusing on your chest. Think of it spreading out from the chest, going out the arms, down through the torso, down through the legs, up the front of the neck, down the back of the neck, throughout the head. And allow yourself to enjoy that sense of pleasure. It’s a harmless pleasure. You don’t have to take anything away from anyone else in order to do it. You don’t have to do anything unskillful to gain it. And when you have it, it doesn’t cloud the mind. So many pleasures cloud the mind. But this doesn’t. It actually enables you to see things more clearly inside. It makes you even firmer in your resolve to stay right here with the mind and not go wandering off into thoughts about other things. The problem is, when you’re meditating, you start talking to yourself about the breath, then you start talking to yourself about other things. You have to learn to have some control over your conversation. And it helps to have some control over your mouth ahead of time. This is why right speech is part of the practice, and it’s listed as one of the factors that helps with right concentration. Because when you’re talking to other people, it’s the same mind, and it’ll speak in the same ways. Speech is all over the place. When you’re speaking to people outside, then it’s going to be all over the place when you sit down and meditate. A lot of our problem is that we think of something and it immediately goes out the mouth. In other words, whatever comes into our minds, whatever we feel or whatever we think, it just goes right out. We want to express ourselves. We don’t really stop and think. Sometimes expressing our opinions or expressing our feelings will lead to some problems down the line. This is the first principle in right speech. You’ve got to think about what your speech is going to do, what it’s going to accomplish, before you open your mouth. As the Buddha said, “Ask yourself.” Is this going to harm anybody? If not, go ahead and say it. But if it is going to harm somebody, don’t say it. No matter how much you may want to say it or how much you really believe or think it, if it’s not the right time and place and not the right person, then it’s better left unsaid. You can say it some other time. That’s one of the principles the Buddha has you look at. Is this the right time and place for this? You can apply it to speech outside and speech inside as well. Outside, the first question is, “Is it true?” If we held by only this much, the world would be such a more peaceful place. We could agree on what’s true because the facts are the facts. We’d have some trust for one another. You can’t force other people to be truthful in their speech, but you can set a good example and you can have a good impact on the world around you by telling yourself, “If something is not true, I’m not going to say it.” Then the next question is, “Even if it’s true, is it beneficial? Does it really accomplish something?” This is to prevent a lot of the idle chatter that goes wandering around with that irrelevant purpose. You want to make sure that it does help somebody in the right direction. And the third is, “Is this the right time and place?” Because sometimes you’ll say things that are pleasant, and sometimes you’re going to have to say things that are unpleasant. There’s a huge misconception that right speech means that you don’t say anything that other people won’t like. Or anything critical. That’s not right speech. Right speech sometimes has to point out, “This is wrong. What you’re doing is wrong. What you’re saying is wrong when you say this to other people.” And there are going to be some unpleasant things you’ll have to say. So you want to figure out, “Is this the right time and place for that?” At the same time, with pleasant speech, because sometimes people deserve some harsh speech, or else they don’t realize what’s going on. And you just speak pleasantly to them. That doesn’t accomplish anything either. The Buddha’s example is of a little child that has a sharp object in its mouth. You’ve got to do everything you can to get that sharp object out, even if it means drawing blood. Because if the child swallows the object, it’s going to be even worse. So in the same way, out of compassion, there are times when you have to be critical. But you’ve got to figure out what’s the right time and the right place. Those are the three tests. They’re for speech outside, and they apply here, right now. One is what you’re saying to yourself about the breath, true. To back up a little bit, are you really sitting here meditating? You tell yourself you’re meditating, but if your mind is wandering around with other things, then it’s lying. To meditate means that you’re developing good qualities in the mind. So make sure that your mind is in line with the posture of the body right now. It really is meditating. You’re not just sitting in a meditation posture, but the mind is actually accomplishing something. And then you’re true to yourself of what’s happening. If the mind is wandering off, notice that. Admit it to yourself and come right back. Then the next question, of course, is your speech beneficial? If it has to do with the breath right now, with improving the breath, improving the mind, mind’s focus on the breath, then that’s right speech and it’s beneficial. It helps you to settle down. We like to think that we don’t have to speak to ourselves too much when we meditate. A lot of times we have the idea that we can just sit here and be totally thoughtless. And there are stages of meditation where there’s extremely little thinking. There’s just a lot of stillness. But to get there, at first you have to think your way through. A lot of the obstacles. The Buddha’s image is of someone working water through dough. We’ve got a little bit of pleasure here with the breath. We’ve got to work it through the body. That’s a beneficial way of talking to yourself. Figure out how you can let the pleasure spread. Sometimes if you push it too hard, it turns into something other than pleasure. So how can you let it spread at the same time, having a sense that it really is pleasant as it goes through? The question of the right time and right place. There are times when you need to say pleasant things to yourself about how important it is to meditate, how it’s a good thing you’re meditating, so you feel good about the meditation. And you feel good enough about yourself so that you’re realizing, “Yes, this is something I can accomplish.” As it says in the suttas, “The belief that other people can do this, I can do it too.” Even though that is a kind of conceit, it’s useful in the practice. So that kind of talk that encourages you to meditate, encourages you to believe in yourself that you can do this, there are times for that. There are other times, though, when you have to point out to yourself that you’re indulging in lust, indulging in greed, indulging in anger, indulging in delusion, fear, whatever. And you have to be a little harsh with yourself. You have to say, “Look, there’s work that needs to be done.” The Buddha has you think about death at times like that. He said, “Death could come at any time. It doesn’t come with any warnings ahead of time. There are no trigger warnings for death.” And so the Buddha says, “Each of us has to be a little harsh with ourselves.” So each time you breathe in, remind yourself, “This might be my last breath. Is there something that needs to be done in the mind? Well, do that right now.” The Buddha talks about being in the present moment. It’s not just to hang out in a pleasant place in the present moment. You’re in the present moment because there’s work to be done. And now is the time to do it. And if you don’t work on your mindfulness and concentration now, when is it going to happen? So even though that kind of thinking is a little harsh, a little bit unpleasant, because it reminds you you’ve got work you’ve got to do and you’re not where you want to be, still there are times when you need to talk to yourself in those ways. So what this means is you say things that are true, beneficial, and timely, both outside and in. Notice in the categories the Buddha gives, there’s never the possibility that something untrue could be beneficial. In his teachings on Right Speech, there’s no place for misrepresenting the truth at all, because you can do a lot of damage that will last for a long, long time. In fact, of all the precepts, that’s the one that he holds to be the most important, the precept against lying. Because from misinformation comes all kinds of trouble. So make sure that you always hold by the truth. When you hold by the truth, life is a lot easier. You don’t have to cover up any lies. You don’t have to remember who you lied to or which lie it was. You stay by the truth, state the truth, and everything is very straightforward and easy. This means, of course, that when you’ve made a mistake, you can’t be too embarrassed to talk about it. From the Buddha’s point of view, it’s a lot worse to hide a mistake than it is to talk about it. You talk about it with people who can help figure out a way to not repeat that mistake. Then, even though something may be true, the next question is, is it beneficial? What will be the impact of these words? As I said earlier, you can’t just go on the idea, “Well, I want to express my feelings,” or “I want to express my thoughts or opinions.” You have to think, “How will this person take this?” What will be the impact? Is this the right time and place to say these things? When you develop these qualities in your speech outside, then it can’t help but have an effect on your speech inside as you sit down to meditate. You find that the conversation in your mind gets a lot more reasonable and a lot more useful. And if you’re going to meditate, it really is a lot more helpful in getting the mind settled down. If you’re dealing with other issues outside, learning how to talk to yourself this way clears up a lot of problems. So as you’re sitting here talking to yourself about the breath, make sure that what you say is true, beneficial, and timely. Try to use these principles inside and out. Results can’t help but be good.

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