

## *Right Speech*

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You've probably noticed that, as you sit here meditating—thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath—you're talking to yourself. You're reminding yourself, "Now stay here," commenting on how the breath is, and trying to think up ways that the breath could be better, where to focus, what you find interesting, what you find useful. This inner conversation is actually an important part of the meditation. It's called verbal fabrication: the way the mind chatters to itself. What you're trying to do as you meditate is to learn how to make this chattering, which is often a problem, actually part of the path, an element of your concentration that helps the mind to settle down with a sense of interest, a sense of comfort, a sense of wellbeing.

Then as the wellbeing gets more and more firmly established and the mind gets more centered, you can drop a lot of the chatter, because it's served its purpose. It's served a real purpose. That's when the mind can really grow still.

One of the ways you learn how to be skillful in your internal chatter is to be skillful in your external chatter. This is why right speech is a factor of the path. The way we talk to ourselves has a lot to do with the way we've heard other people talk, and the way we've been talking to others.

So if most of the recordings in the mind are of unskillful speech, you're going to find yourself engaging in unskillful speech in your meditation as well. People are exposed to a lot of negativity. You may find yourself dealing in that negativity as you meditate, so you've got to learn new habits. And you don't learn new habits simply by stopping and not talking at all. You learn new habits by actually engaging with other people with right speech.

So it's good to think about how the Buddha defines right speech. There are four types of speech that you want to avoid: lying, harsh speech, divisive speech, and idle chatter. Each of these is defined by the intention behind it. Lying is speaking with the intention to misrepresent the truth. Harsh speech is what you say with the intention of hurting someone's feelings. Divisive speech is done with the intention of breaking up or preventing friendships. And idle chatter is basically speech without any real clear intention at all, just chattering away for the sake of having something to say. You want to learn how to avoid these forms of speech, and also learn some of the nuances of right speech, because in some cases, it's not very clear-cut.

Now what counts as lying is clear-cut. You don't want to misrepresent any truth to anybody, ever. That's why it's one of the precepts, i.e., a rule you lay down for yourself and then try to hold to in all situations. There of course will be tests of your ingenuity and your discernment in doing this, because there will be times when people ask questions and you know that answering those questions is going to give rise to problems. The Buddha himself said that he would not tell the truth in areas where it would give rise to greed, anger, and delusion. That doesn't mean he would lie, simply that he would avoid those topics.

So you've got to figure out skillful ways of avoiding issues without letting the other person know you're avoiding them. Suppose someone comes up and says, "Have you seen my husband

with another woman?” And you have, but you don’t want to get involved. You’ve got to figure out a way to change the topic. Turn the question on the woman and say, “Why? Do you suspect anything of your husband?” And get her to talk. That way you can avoid answering the question. That’s a special case, but still even with special cases, you can’t misrepresent the truth, which is why that principle is a precept.

One of the reasons the other forms of wrong speech are not expressed as precepts is because they’re not as absolute as the case of lying.

There are times, for instance, when harsh speech is necessary. The Buddha gives an analogy: It’s like having a child, a young baby who still doesn’t know what to eat and what not to eat, and she’s put a sharp piece of glass in her mouth. You’ve got to do everything you can to get the glass out, even if it means drawing blood, because if the baby swallows the glass, the damage will be even worse. In the Buddha’s case, he said harsh things about Devadatta, to his face: one, in hopes that Devadatta might come to his senses, and two, to warn all the other monks around that Devadatta had really gone off course.

Someone once called him on this, asking him, “Would the Buddha ever say anything harsh to anyone?” This was meant as a trick question, the idea being that if the Buddha said No, then they’d say, “What about what you said to Devadatta? That was harsh. It hurt Devadatta’s feelings.” And if the Buddha said Yes, he would say harsh things to other people, then the response would be, “Well, what’s the difference between you and other ordinary people?” So the Buddha’s enemies put the question to the Buddha, but he replied that the question didn’t deserve a categorical answer; it deserved an analytical answer instead. There are times when, in deciding what to say, he would ask, first, is it true? If it wasn’t true, he wouldn’t say it. Second, is it beneficial? And if it’s one of those rare cases when saying something harsh would be beneficial, then the next question is, is this the right time and place for that? Only if he could say Yes to all three questions would he say those things.

This principle applies to harsh speech, and it also applies to divisive speech, because there are times when you see one of your friends suddenly developing a friendship with someone you know is abusive, you know is corrupt, you know is going to harm your friend, and you’ve got to find the right way to protect your friend. So again you may end up saying something that may sound divisive, but it’s with compassionate intent.

As for idle chatter, there are times when simple social-grease conversation is necessary, to get a particular situation lubricated—as at work, when you want everyone to work smoothly together. But you’ve got to be very clear that this is your motivation, which means that it’s no longer purely idle chatter. You’ve got to be clear about the point at which it starts to become totally pointless, purposeless, where the grease is mucking up the works. You have to develop a sense of how much you should say to make people feel at ease, and then when to stop. This requires real discernment, which is why there’s no precept with this particular type of wrong speech. It requires you to be sensitive to the needs of the situation.

Once you understand the nuances of right speech, you can start applying the same principles in your mind. One, you never lie yourself. Now, you may find yourself, as you’re meditating, lying to yourself in subtle ways. You’ve got to catch that, throw the light of your awareness on it, highlight it to yourself. Say to yourself, “Look, this is simply not true.” The

mind tends to put up all sorts of walls of denial. This is one of the reasons why people find it hard to see their intentions: because they're used to lying to themselves about their intentions. Very few people would like to admit that they're operating on corrupt intentions. Or even if they know that what they're doing is not quite right, they try to justify it in one way or another. And as a meditator you can't engage in that sort of justification at all, because that's precisely the ignorance that's going to keep you suffering.

As for harsh speech, you don't want to yell at yourself in a way that gets you discouraged on the path, but there are other times you have to come down hard on yourself. You see yourself giving in to unskillful habits again and again and again, and there comes a time when you've got to say, "Hey, look, this is foolish; this is stupid." Use whatever language you find is effective to get the message across.

The same with divisive speech: If you're becoming friends with your defilements, you've got to point out their bad qualities. Remind yourself of what greed has done for you to past; what lust has done for you in the past; anger, delusion: all the unskillful mental qualities. You want to divide yourself from them.

And as for idle chatter, you try to turn it into purposeful chatter. In other words, you have to encourage yourself, say nice things about yourself, remind yourself of all the good things you've done in the past. This turns from idle chatter to what is actually a purposeful kind of meditation. *Silanussati*, remembering all the times when you've avoided doing harmful things; *caganussati*, remembering all the times when you were generous, not only with things but also with your goodwill, your compassion, your forgiveness. In other words, there are times when you've got to learn how to put yourself in a good mood. Otherwise the meditation gets dry. It freezes up, like an engine that has run out of oil.

What this means is that you apply the same three questions to your thoughts that you do to your speech. One, is it true? If it's not true, don't think it. Two, is it beneficial? If not, don't think it. And if it is beneficial, then three, is this right time for this kind of thinking? Is this the time to come down hard on the mind, or is this the time to encourage and console the mind? Is this the time to pry it away from its friendship with greed, anger, and delusion? What's the most effective way of doing that? Because sometimes, if you do it in an ineffective way, the mind gets more defensive. There is a rule Ajaan Fuang once gave, which is that if somebody has gotten really deluded in their meditation, and you're not that person's teacher, you don't talk to them about it. Don't try to criticize them or point out the fallacies in their meditation, because that would just make them even more defensive. A lot of conceit can build up around this.

So there are those areas you just leave alone. But with yourself, you should be a lot more frank about where your friendship with your various ideas and attachments really is leading you. But learn how to do it in a way that shows that you're operating with the mind's best interest at heart.

So there's a skill to right speech, both inside and out. There are nuances. When you learn the nuances, then the verbal fabrication of your directed thought and evaluation really does become part of the concentration. As they say in the sutta on mindfulness of breathing, there are times when you need to gladden the mind. There are times when you need to release the mind from its attachments. Learn how to breathe in such way that helps you do that. And learn

how to talk to the mind in such way that helps you do that, too—to the point where you've said what needs to be said, and then you can fall silent.

In this way internal right speech and external right speech all become part of the path.