

The Eightfold Path

The Third Factor: Right Speech

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 practices of the Path, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration

The virtue practices begin with Right Speech because what we say and how we say it has a direct link to the cultivation of the Path. When we choose whether or not to speak or what to say based on clinging or fear we lose an opportunity to cultivate the freedom that is supported by the Eightfold Path. Dishonest and harmful speech does not support the honesty and caring needed for walking the Path. However, paying attention to what underlies our speech and the contents of our speech present important opportunities for cultivating the path.

Reflecting on whether or not our speech expresses goodwill, friendliness or compassion can be the beginning of practicing Right Speech. If our speech does not have these qualities, then we have the important opportunity to find out why. What are the conditions, beliefs, and strategies that motivate our unkind speech? What does such speech show us about ourselves? If we truly care about ourselves, then reflecting on these questions can inspire our finding alternative ways of speaking. Rather than being discouraging, such self-knowledge can fuel our practice.

Right Speech is described by both abstaining from speech that is unskillful and speaking in ways that are skillful. Lying, slander, harsh, or pointless speech is defined as unskillful. Words that are honest, create social harmony, friendly, meaningful and timely are skillful.

When it is difficult to speak skillfully it may be possible to at least restrain oneself 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 hold our tongue.

However, abstaining from unskillful speech is not an end in itself 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 settle into our hearts, what would we say?

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.

Wise and skillful speech is honest, supportive, and friendly. When we consider what to say, it can be helpful to ask whether it is true, conducive to social harmony, expresses goodwill and respect, is beneficial and is timely. If it is not, is there something else we can say that is?

What we say has a powerful relationship to how we feel. One reason to avoid unskillful speech is to avoid the agitation of regret. A reason for skillful speech is to create conditions for happiness and peace. The uncomfortable inner states that give rise to unskillful speech is strengthened by such speech. Likewise, the inner wellbeing that supports skillful speech is, strengthened by skillful speech.

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

Additional readings:

- Chapter 4 in Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*.
- Chapter 3 in Bhante Gunaratana's *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*.

Reflections and Practices: Right Speech

December 7-13

Mindfulness of Speech

One of the most challenging but also rewarding areas of mindfulness is speech. Speaking can have a relationship to our bodies, our emotional lives, our beliefs and ideas, our preferences, and the ways our life experiences have conditioned us. Please spend this 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 those who you are talking to? How well do you notice your body as you speak?

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

December 14-20

Mindfulness of Truth

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 is like to be honest and what it is 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 easy? Or when the honesty is an important part of the communication? What does it feel like when you are avoiding honest communication? What motivates this avoidance? If you find yourself saying something that is not truthful, spend some time investigating why, how, and for what reason 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.

December 21- December 27
Mindfulness of Relationships

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.

December 28-January 3
Mindfulness of Intent

During this week notice why you say what you say. What motivations are behind what you say 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.

January 4-January 11
Mindfulness of Quality

The Buddha distinguished between harsh speech and gentle speech. Harsh speech expresses hostility and disrespect. Gentle speech expresses care, goodwill, and respect. At the end of each day this week, review the conversations you have had that day. If there existed a spectrum of speech ranging from hostile to kind, where in this range were some of your conversations? What were the conditions that contributed to the quality of your speech?

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

Also choose a period during this week to notice how much your speech is self-referential. How often do you use the words, 'I, me, myself, and mine'? Then reflect on your usage of these words.