

2008-10-26 Mindfulness of Speaking Dangers and Opportunities ...

Sun, 8/2 12:29PM • 27:41

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, speak, opportunities, person, speech, dangers, feel, beneficial, angry, wise, feathers, ethical, talk, divisiveness, rabbi, communication, undermines, harm, consequences, important

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So, I'd like to continue today with the theme for this month of mindfulness of speaking. And first week, two weeks ago, I talked about speaking, mostly from the point of view of paying attention to oneself as one speaks, what happens when in one's body, what happens in one's energy? What happens emotionally, kind of learn how to be centered in oneself and present as one speaks? For all the information that's there. Last week, I talked some about the tremendous value that's found in noticing the motivations behind why we say we want what we want to say. So what prompts us to say we want to say when we tried to do when we speak, and it's quite awesome to realize that there are many agendas that we often try and fulfill in our speaking, that are not obvious to us when we speak often. So just to pay attention, that area of what motivates why we're saying what we're going to say, I think is a very powerful practice in its own right. And what I've tried to do is to avoid talking about the so called ethics of speaking often in Buddhist circles, they give people give talks on right speech. And so the rules or the guidelines for what makes up right speech, and we'll get to that at the end of this series of talks, but I wanted to avoid that because I think there's a lot more to speaking than the ethics of it to the guidelines of it. And so for today, the area I want to explore, trying to avoid the so called ethical and sense or moral or terms of guidelines or rules or whatever was brought whatever is the right speech is I wanted to talk about The dangers and opportunities found in speech in talking. And it's meant to be just to kind of laying out discussion about you know, some of the common dangers and opportunities so that for you so you can become more sensitive to what the dangers and opportunities are of speech, what the consequences are, what the consequences can be, when we speak. And without hopefully, without any judgment, too much judgement about that, oh, there's a danger. Oh, if you lie, there's particular dangers that come along with that. So, more like that. And, and my hope is to kind of present this little bit. Just enough, good enough, so that when you leave here today, you will you'll want to reflect and explore this Topic over the next week on your own, what are the dangers and opportunities that are found in speaking. And if you have a bigger sense a bigger understanding a wider range of danger, a wider range territory of opportunities in our communication, perhaps you're more likely to communicate differently because of that kind of more expanded understanding income. Some people know in terms of ethics, which I wasn't going to talk about so much. The some people would like to look for, like a first principle, the basic foundation from which we can have an ethical life. And sometimes a variety of things that people establish is first principles so that you can have some criteria by which to decide what is ethical and what is not. And I think one of the things that qualifies is the kind of first criteria and the teachings of the Buddha is found in the following statement, which the Buddha said repeatedly different forms different ways. With the simplest way maybe this way a wise person

avoids what is harmful to oneself and to others. A wise person engages in what is beneficial for oneself and for other people. So, as a first principle, does that sound profound? Maybe it sounds kind of like a little bit too simple. But the idea of benefit covers the gamut of what can be beneficial. And he didn't Buddha didn't mean it's beneficial for you to In the California Lottery, you know that demons, you know that, but rather what's ultimately beneficial, what is beneficial in some really significant way. And so someone who's wise that what defines wisdom in Buddhism is someone who has a very clear understanding between what is it that causes harm and what is it causes benefit? What other criteria for wisdom? Are there other criteria for wisdom that might be more useful? and useful is an important idea what is really useful for human beings, what's beneficial for human beings? what's helpful for human beings? So a wise person who sees what's helpful, sees what's beneficial, knows that so requires in Buddhism, the capacity to make certain kinds of discrimination, certain kind of distinctions, and be able to kind of tell the difference between what is beneficial and what is harmful. And I love it that the Buddha said didn't say wise person knows what's beneficial for oneself only, or wise person only knows what's beneficial for everybody else. But it's a it's a mutuality that we wise person considers both. We don't keep ourselves out of the picture. And we don't keep others out of the picture. There's a healthy way of understanding both. So in terms of speech or communication, what are the dangers and opportunities in speech in relationship to other people? And what's the dangerous event and opportunities in relationship to oneself? So in terms of other people, I think that very fascinating area of exploration around speech is, Does our speech divide us or bring us together? Or do we feel more connected to someone when we speak Are we feel more distant from them? This act that I'm about to say, what direction does that? What are the consequences of that act of speech? And, you know, it's can be very simple as someone's, you know, how you say, you know, how are you to someone, and someone says, oh, I've had a hard day. And a person might respond. That's too bad. At that very moment, you know, there was opportunity. Someone says, I had a hard, hard day, you know, there's an opportunity to connect or to feel, you know, somehow make a connection there and say, Oh, it's too bad. You know, it's too bad. It could be kind of Oh, then the person doesn't want to open up anymore. It doesn't want to share anymore. They closed down. So much for that person.

I remember when I was 14, I lived in a boarding school high up in the mountains, beautiful, beautiful place in the mountains. I was walking along the mountain road with her older friend of mine from school. And somehow I was just old enough just beginning to have some kind of reflections about how awesome or inspiring with a question mark behind it, of what is what it was like to be a human being. What is it like to be alive in this you know, your head, this immense city, this beautiful sky and this beautiful mountain and valley below and I said, You know what, what are we here for what's this life about? And my older friend turned to me and said

Don't be so silly.

I just closed that part of me down. That's the response I get. Then, you know, not only was I going to not share anymore, my questioning my was feeling my friend. But it took me probably four or five years before I was willing to open that part of myself up to someone again. So, you know, what impact do we have? Did we feed we feel will be closer? Do we feel more separate? As a result? are we interested? Do we care whether we feel more connected more or more distant for the people to communicate with? And that's a very interesting topic itself. Because if we're so much on our own agenda, so much caught up in our own inner drama and world, it was important for us what we're trying to accomplish. We might not be at all this last thing, we'd be Interested in his house someone else's? Because they're just in the way people just get in the way of what I'm trying to do what I'm trying to accomplish? So, is that wise? It's from the Buddhist point of view, it's not wise, if you're not concerned with the welfare of everyone in the picture. Is there some way that we can be motivated to be concerned welfare of others in a way that

seems appropriate doesn't feel like it diminishes us. And I think this is where I think mindfulness or meditation is very important. Because meditation is a softening or relaxing, of the compulsions that drive us. And if we're not driven by compulsion, compulsive feelings and attitudes and ideas, then I think it's more almost natural, it's more likely that we're going to be sensitive. Take in the experience of someone else. With the interest rate to be naturally concerned, in number of Buddhist teachers when they teach about right speech, one of the common instructions is to pass not what you say. Not not listening, but pausing because in the past, there's a chance to check in and notice what's going on in the other person yourself, what's happening in the relationship. So one of the consequences of communication is it can either connect us to people, they can separate us. Sometimes connection is frightening. Sometimes it can feel oppressive to be more connected. Sometimes with us The last thing we want is more people in our lives Please spend a day around people all day a friend of yours as you know Keno can we share You know, way more person sharing. And you know, but that doesn't necessarily express your deepest wish or whatever it just expresses the exhaustion of the of the moment of the day, you know, you just need some space and time.

Speech and communication cannot only separate and divide people who talk to each other. It can also divide communities, people from each other. And so, you know, gossip for example, or if there's about divisive speech. There's a beautiful story of a man who went around the village slandering the rabbi and at some point, he felt some remorse. For having done all this slander. So you went to the rabbi and apologized and said, How can I make amends? And the rabbi said, Oh, go get a feather pillow, pillow filled with feathers and cut it open and walk around the village, and kind of scatter those feathers all over. So he did and the wind picked up the feathers and scattered them around. And then the men went back to the rabbi and said, Well, I scattered all those feathers, and I made amends yet. And the rabbi said, Well, now you need to go back and collect all those feathers. And then said, well, it's impossible to go and collect all those feathers. Now they're scattered in all directions in the wind. On the same way, you can't really make amends. When you've been slandering someone. It goes out and all who knows how far it goes out, spreads out into the wider community, and it's very hard to go out and collect them. Those, you know, that chain of communication that goes on out there. So you can apologize, you can get forgiven perhaps. But can you really? Can you really stop the harm that's been set in motion. Sometimes it's very hard. But especially if you talk to a lot of people.

I've known people who have sent out emails to just a spur of the moment they decided to tell everyone in the email list about something it turned out not to be true. And then what do you do then? I guess you can send a second email to everyone. But who knows where those emails went. They get forwarded and forwarded so they do have divisiveness in the You know can create disharmony and a community disharmony between friends and even things which are not intentionally creating divisiveness can separate and create harm that way we can harm in that sense we can it's possible to harm people's reputation remember, Steve gastner once gave me a beautiful book on remember that book he gave me coming words that he'll words that were the heels beautiful book that I very idea of words that he'll and words that hurt their words, some words can heal, some can hurt. And there's a story in there of a man who prevented the assassination of President Ford here in San Francisco. And somehow he was there in the crowd and I guess he pushed down the gun and it's President Ford wasn't assassinating. And the reporters Of course, were very interested in this man who stopped the assassination. The guy said, Please don't don't write anything about me. Well, that got the journalists curiosity. Look Don't Don't laugh. Don't laugh. The so they looked into you know, what was going on with him. And they found out this is 1975 or so, they found out that he was gay. So then a journalist went to his mother in Chicago or someplace and not turn door and said, What do you think about your son being gay? The first you heard of it within a few years the man committed suicide. So, what is it you know? You know the act of

speech, publicizing something, okay things now what is that? What are the consequences of how we speak It's can seem very innocent or similar, appropriate, dig up the news, right?

The and then there's opportunities, right? There's opportunities of bringing people together creating harmony. And so when we, I'm very, I tried to be conscious, I'm not as good as hard, very hard this mindfulness of speaking, but I try to be conscious of talking well about other people. You know, I will try to lie about it. But if there's something I appreciate about people, I like to try to say it to others. If we're talking about that person, now, you know, all kinds of things you could say. Because it just a gig. I think it's good for the heart. It's good for the people. It's good for communication is good for You know, I'm just so impressed by people. I think you I think it's so hard to be a person.

And I think people are all you know, my impression is everyone's trying so hard. And I just think it's we should all give us give ourselves lots of credit and support for that.

So we can hurt people. with how we speak we can create divisiveness, disharmony and community in the monastic tradition. There's a lot of rules from minute Buddhist monastics for what they produce on speech, what they shouldn't shouldn't say. And one of the interesting motivations for right speech for the monastics is so it doesn't undermine the faith of the wider community. And this is actually held up very, very important. Because if you say something that undermines people's faith in their practice, they might leave their practice. If it undermines their faith in the possibility of tapping into and living from a good heart, then they might turn away from that. And so you want to, you want to sign up so that one of the part of the consequences in a Dharma circle is how you speak, can effects you know, someone's very deepest intentions. It's like I was shut down when the guy said, Don't be silly. If we're not careful with how we speak, that someone might feel well feel well. This community this community is not for me or this practice is not for me. And I've had people come to me and say, you know, I was listening to such such and such a person speak some Buddhist teacher, or you know, I spend more time with that person and

How could that person say these things, after so many years of practice? And you know, what is this practice really, you know, what's a good for? If a person, you know speaks that way to that kind of breaks my heart the practice has been so meaningful for me, and to hear that people have had doubts in it because they hear other people speaking poorly. You know, kind of feels very unfortunate. So then that's, you know, some but some of the dangers and there's a whole slew of other dangers for others. And there's also dangerous for oneself. There's dangerous for your reputation. what other people think of you and how they relate to you. If you're known as someone who lies or causes harm, and your speech

So then there's also benefits. You know this. There's opportunities. And what are the range of opportunities in any given situation when you meet someone and talking with them? Is their opportunity to feel closer is an opportunity to say something that gladdens their heart to warms them, there's an opportunity to say something that helps them relax and feel safer. Is there an opportunity to be supportive in some way? Is there an opportunity to help a community of people and network of friends feel more connected are more harmonious or more friendly with each other? Is there an opportunity to warm our own hearts to soften our own hearts as we speak is an opportunity to feel good to feel be able to relax ourselves and how we speak I think affects how we feel about ourselves.

So that has kind of ethical side of course, that if you know if you slander someone and you become aware of that you feel kind of lousy. If you said something that made someone else feel good or help help someone heal in some way, then perhaps you can feel good. At least I can be relaxed, to be soft, I

can. No one's going to blame me. Feels good. But it gets more interesting, I think around speech. And again, not not getting avoiding the ethical side what we say has an impact on us as well. So, what I have in mind this way, if I say that I am angry when I'm when that when I'm angry, it might seem like an honest thing to say the right thing to say. But I want to say that suggests there's a world of difference between saying, I am angry, versus saying I'm experiencing anger, or there's some anger here. Not really good English go around saying, I'm experiencing anger. I'm experiencing hunger. There's hunger here or something. But put things in a kind of it's just intransitive or this passive voice is very interesting to highlight how easy it is when you say I am angry. For that reify or solidify an identity. I am angry and you better treat me that you As if I'm angry, as opposed to saying, There's anger here. Anger is bubbling up inside, there's a part of what's happening for me right now as I'm angry. Then it gives a person an opportunity perhaps, to meet you. Or hold that you as not just an angry person, but as a person who has anger and then maybe hold and relate to the anger differently. They can relate to the anger not to you. So for example, people like a lot to say. There are no bad people, they're just bad actions. And there's a lot of wisdom to that that difference, because then we relate to the actions and don't generalize about who the person is. Because no one is one way. Everyone's made up of a mixed bag, a lot of different motivations and feelings and attitudes and stuff. And if we relate to people reify ourselves or verify others, this is how they are Then it makes it very difficult to see the full range of who that person is. So how we speak, can either limit or open up our capacity to see who a person is in the fullness and the full range. urinate an angry person, you're a jerk. And, you know, that's pretty limiting. But if you say it's kind of hard for me when you left all the dishes and dirty dishes in the sink. That doesn't create separation system, and that's it, you know, and then the person can participate. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize I had an impact on you. Let me go do the dishes. You said you're a jerk. Then the person is going to that might, you know, either run away or the person might? Well, let me tell you about When you left, whatever. So that's all I wanted to say and doesn't feel like a very comprehensive talk on the topic. So, I apologize for that. I could have maybe been better prepared and all that, but what I was all my goal was modest. So, my goal was to just suggest the I decided this topic is area of exploration. What are the advantages? What what are the what are the opportunities? And what are the potential dangers are the opportunities and dangers in your communication with other people? And can you stretch yourself and expand yourself to begin seeing danger And opportunities that normally you wouldn't have seen. They're there, but normally you wouldn't have noticed. So in one way you can do this is you can find some friends and strangers things next week. And ask them, ask them if they can have a conversation with you around, you know, explore with you

the dangers and opportunities that are possible in speech. So thank you. And some of you might want to start at the potluck. Thanks. Thank you.