

2012-06-03 Mindfulness of Speech

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

This morning I wanted to talk about speech. And being mindful of speech paying attention to speech is an important part of Buddhist spiritual life. Sometimes, in meditation circles like ours, you can maybe think some people might get the idea that meditation is the be all and end all and beginning all of what we do and, and there's no speaking aloud. You know, we sit quietly. But in fact, being mindful of speech is very time on and very important part of Buddhist spiritual life to develop and growth of practice in individual. And there are two aspects of mindful speech or speech. One has to do with the mindfulness of speaking itself, which means paying attention to what happens when we speak, what goes on inside of us, what motivates us to speak? What are some of the emotions, reactions, feelings that go on with us What goes on around us as we speak. So just kind of mindfulness a heightened attention to what goes on with a relatively complex event of speaking, social interactions. The second aspect of speech is being concerned with the ethics of speaking. So this has a lot to do with the consequences of your speech, and being concerned with you know, that you how you speak doesn't cause harm, but rather does benefit for our society and for others. And, and these two, go ahead and end the guidelines. For right speech for ethical speech, speaking in Buddhism is a tremendous support for mindful mindfulness of speaking, because as you try to live by the guidelines of Right Speech, it really brings you back to yourself to look at what is it that motivated you what goes on with you, when you are about to not follow those guidelines. You have to be very attentive to yourself you can. It's not just a matter of not doing something, but it's really noticing what comes up for you. So, ethical guidelines support mindful mindfulness of speaking, mindfulness is speaking in return also supports ethical speaking, as you become more sensitive and aware of what motivates you what goes on inside of you what the consequences of your action are, even without any concern for the guidelines that Buddhism gives, the tendency is for people become more ethical, because it just why would you lie? Why would you use harmful speech when you can feel and sense very acutely how painful it is for you to do it? If you understand what motivates you, most people start becoming more ethical. I think one of the ways of looking at the ethics of speaking in this whole thing is to be mindful as you leave meditation practice, to the degree to which meant something Meditation helps you become calmer, more centered, more connected to yourself less driven by fear or anger or greed. And if you stay connected to yourself, how do you want to speak? And most people who come out of meditation, it's not like the first thing they think about his, like, how am I going to, you know, figure out a really good lie. And in fact, it just feels kind of it feels off, you know, it feels much more sensitive to how often it feels to lie. When you're coming out of meditation, or something like that. Then, if you're coming out of a really hairy, difficult time in your life, where you don't have enough time you're upset, you're frustrated, and then it's really easy, and you don't, because you're so agitated to begin with, you don't really feel the consequences of one more lie or one more mean thing as you say, because you're already worked up. But when you're not worked up, when you work down, do we have that thing? Then, you know, you can really feel the

consequences, much more And you're less likely to act these ways. So, two aspects of this speech one is the just basic mindfulness of it. And the other is the ethics of it. The mindfulness of it.

Some people say, like I've said it for myself, that it's the most difficult part of mindfulness practice. It's much easier to in some ways, just sit quietly and just follow your breath or be mindful in meditation. But there's something about social interactions, where we tend to lose ourselves pretty quickly. We get caught up, or the importance of the speaking is pretty is pretty big for people. It's really important to hear what you have to say, for example, and so we're kind of sometimes rushing ahead to speak, and we're the topics we're doing are so important, or what we're trying to convey is so important, or the debate or the argument or all kinds of things go on in conversation. Where the conversation what's being said, starts taking precedent over being mindful of how we speak, what's going on as we speak. And so if someone wants to bring mindfulness into daily life, there has to be somehow a pull of pulling back as the rest of the best word, but a willingness to not be so caught up in the conversation or caught up in your concerns in the conversation. But to bring more loving more energy and emphasis in being staying attentive during the conversation, be aware of what goes on in your body being embodied as you speak. Notice the impulses and reactions inside of you. Notice what happens just before you start speaking. Do you only notice that you're speaking after the fact? Or are you aware that you're about to speak because if you're aware that you're about to speak, there's this gap, a little pause that allows somehow even even kind of without intentional intention. It I believe, is also As a way in which the body, mind, heart, whatever. If you pause or be have a little gap before you speak, what you're about to say, and what's going on for you has a fuller possibility of being processed, you can take in more information and a heightened sense of information and what's going on will probably influence what you want to say. But if you're rushed to speech, then the chances are, that you're not taking in as much of the information within yourself and around you, that helps you become better informed about what to say. So some people find it's really hard, but it's probably one of the places where it's really, really, really useful to cultivate mindfulness. I believe that for some people, mindfulness of speaking might be more useful than for them, then mindfulness and meditation. And in fact, if you can't Meditate, practice mindfulness of speaking. And it mindful speaking is too hard for you just general mindfulness and being present, then I have one guideline for what to do. That might be more powerful than meditating. And that is, be aware of why you're going to say what you're going to say, before you say it. If you can take in why you're going to speak, what motivates you, and be really honest about that. You probably learn more about yourself quick more quickly than you would if you spend a lot of time meditating and just being mindful of yourself. I believe it's that powerful. But it's really hard to pause enough and to look at yourself enough. Why am I going to say what I'm going to say? So I'll give you one example. It's maybe example I've used too many times. But it had such a big impact on me many years ago, when when this happened. It was when I was teaching and I alto in a Monday night, back then. And an old old friend I hadn't seen for a long time showed up there. There she was, you know, in the entryway. So we said hello and but it was like 629 hours, you know, just like a minute, I just started at 7:30. So it wasn't really a time to talk with her much I think we could go in. So we greeted each other warmly. And we spoke and, and just briefly. And so we had to go in. And so I I just before going in the last thing I said before going into her was, Oh, I didn't prepare for this Dharma talk this evening. So that was the last thing I said. So I went in and sat down silent and that kind of was echoing in my ears. Why did I have to say that? Why was that the most significant thing to say before you know, you know, you know the last moment and I saw that what was going on? As I was protecting myself, here was an old friend whose opinion counter locked for me. And, and I wanted to be sure that if I gave a terrible talk that I was protected, that I was safe that he would not judge me negatively or, you know, whatever. And I saw that what motivated me to speak was not just helpful information for her isn't the key need to know, you know, but it was helpful information for me to convey because I was trying to, you know, manipulate or arrange the situation for myself my own sake.

So how often what motivates us to speak is something like that, you know, it's not just simply good public service announcement to our friends. You know, you should know this. But rather, we're trying to convey something we're trying to have an effect on the situation. Sometimes we want people to see us in a certain way. Sometimes we want people to behave in a certain way for us. And so what is it? What is going on? In the conversation? What motivates us? How often are we motivated by care and compassion for the person we're talking to? How often are we motivated by you know, wonderful spree of playfulness and joy just kind of give and take? How many times are we trying to manipulate, manage a situation in such a way that it's to our benefit? Even something as simple as saying, I went to this restaurant yesterday and it was the best restaurant, you know, is the best restaurant in Redwood City. And, you know, maybe you haven't been to all the restaurants in Redwood City, but you say it's the best. And is that just your enthusiasm for it? which you could be? Or is it somehow subtly saying, kind of one upmanship Look, I was able to eat at the best restaurant. You know, I was able to choose the best restaurant, you know, this kind of speaks well for me. Maybe, maybe not. I don't know. So this idea of paying attention to our speech and what motivates our speech, I think is very, very powerful. And, and I recommend it very strongly. One of the ways of doing that is to try is come back over and over again to your body, what's going on in your body as you're speaking, there's a strong tendency in speech, to lose touch with your body, to go up into your speech center, or whatever it is, or up into your head and, and get lost in the conversation. But to stay grounded in your body as you speak, is a powerful thing to do. There's a lot of information you'll take in if you stay in your body as you speak. If you're grounded and centered in your body, you're less likely to lose yourself in useful ways. If you get angry if you get upset if you get afraid in the conversation, tendency is people start leaving their body as they leave their body, you know, because they're going up in their head or staying in the concepts and all that Then we're not so in touch with ourselves. And we're much more likely to make a mistake in the speech and in the conversation say something later we regret regret. If you are staying grounded in your body, there's much more useful information there. And you might be much more protected from saying something later you regret what goes on in your stomach as you speak. Does it get tense and tight? What goes on with your posture? Do you lean forward, you lean back? Do you turn away? What goes on, you know, in your shoulders, what goes on in your heart. I think one of the advantages of this mindful speaking thing attention to our body is that some of the beautiful qualities that we have our care, compassion for others or attendant capacity for being honest and having integrity, are much more likely to come to the fore foreground when we are in touch with our body when we're embodied, because that's where it kind of comes out of It comes out of being connected to ourselves. So when we're disconnected with ourselves, not living in our body, but living in our head and our thoughts, it might still be possible to be connected to compassion and love and care and kindness and integrity. But I think that my kind of experiences but the quality of our connection to these good qualities is much stronger, when we're in our body and connected is much more likely to come forth and inform what we do.

So to keep coming back to the body, and in a conversation, you know, listening is important. But what I try to do when I'm listening to you, other person is also trying to enter if this makes sense to, you know, exactly some of you, but I try to listen through my body, not through my ears. So like, you know, I'm trying to feel or sense with my body, the whole thing that's going on. And the advantage of that is that then I'm in touch with what's going on in my body, the tensions that might arise the different Feelings of stuff that goes on in my body. As I'm, as I'm, you know, there. I tried to do that when I'm speaking as well. And the, with a little bit harder for me and I think many people to be mindful, stay connected and grounded while we speak. One of the things I think that has helped me a lot to be more of my body as I speak, what's trained me a lot is giving these talks. You know, for me, they're giving Dharma talks is a practice that I do. So you know, it's a mindfulness practice in itself. And I've done so many of them. And

so I get to, you know, slowly, slowly, slowly, I'm a slow learner. But slowly because it gives them many of them, you know, I've learned to come back check in with myself be present as I speak, and, and it's become kind of a second habit, to stay with myself stay connected to some degree as I give these talks, and that's translated to being able to do better, I think in daily life as well. So the other whole aspect of mindfulness of speaking, of speaking, and Buddhism has to do with the ethics of speaking. And the basic idea of ethics in Buddhism is don't cause harm. So don't speak in such ways that cause harm. So being sensitive to what causes harm, and to evaluate what you're going to say, based on that criteria, is this going to cause harm or not? to cause harm. To help us understand this kind of help the mindfulness and exploration evaluation of our choices and speaking. There are a number of guidelines that Buddhism gives, and one of the guidelines has four elements to it. And what so to evaluate is what I'm going to say truthful. That's truthful. The second is, is it kind is it friendly. The third is, is it useful? Is it beneficial? And the fourth is, does it promote social harmony, Concord? So, you know, in certain circumstances, maybe just talking fast and just having a conversation, but there are certainly times in your life where you're considering what are you going to say? What are you going to say to that person, you have difficulty with a person, something has to be said. And so then you can spend a little bit of time thinking, now, is it true what I'm going to say? Last night at the memorial for shaunti. A number of people spoke about her good qualities and one of the things people said was she was really honest, over and over again, that was a common quality. She was honest. Some people said she was not an easy person. And they would sometimes difficulties and she was sometimes you know, was angry and Some of her oldest friends talked about the challenges of being with her. But then they would say but she was always honest. He was you know, there was like a quality that inspired her it was people was really meaningful. So devalue it is what I'm going to say honest, is a truthful. There is no it's it said in Buddhism that there's no Buddhist path. There's no Buddhist practice, without being honest. Without and in some ways, mindfulness itself mindfulness practice, is, is being is silent, silent honesty. It's being honest to yourself when you sit and meditate what's really going on recognizing it. Or to say it the other way, that honesty is mindfulness out loud. Being willing to be honest, but what's happening to recognize it. So is it honest what we're going to say? The second is, is it friendly, is it coming? are we speaking out of malice, are we speaking out of harshness? And we speak in such a way that people feel threatened or irritated or troubled? What's the impact of our speech? And if it's not friendly or not the kind? Is it useful to say? Yes, maybe another way of saying it?

What is the kind of thing? So just the very question, what's the kind thing here to say? What's the friendly thing to say? I think is a powerful evaluation. Maybe not all situations call for kindness, maybe? I don't know. I don't want to say, but we can least ask the question. And I'm inspired by people who at least ask the question, you know, what's the friendly thing to say here? The so the third has to do with is it useful? and Buddhism gives a number of criteria for deciding whether it's useful. One of them is is it timely? Is it the right time to say something? Time Time? You know, the right time is really important issue. Maybe it's true. Maybe it's a kind. But maybe it's not the right time to say something. And so maybe you need a bit better to wait until the situation improves, or until someone's ready to hear something. You know, someone, if someone, you know, comes to work, and he hasn't really important, you need to tell them maybe difficult conversation. But perhaps they just had a tragedy at home. And so maybe you better give them give them some space for a while. Maybe it's not the time to say it so they can hear it. So there's many ways of evaluating considering what's the right time to say something. So is it useful? Is it the right time? One One interesting criteria for Buddhism is that if speaking to someone you're having difficulty with is not going to make any difference, then it's not useful. And so sometimes people try to see thinks that people way beyond. And anytime that's been hopeful to make any change. So some people are just impervious, they're not going to listen, they're not going to change, nothing's going to happen. And if you keep bringing it up and keep bringing it up, it just makes the whole situation worse. And so there is sometimes the appropriateness of knots not speaking, because it has no

usefulness to say it, why waste your energy on something that's not going to make any change? And how would you know, that was an interesting question. But you get a sense that sometimes, you know, and then, you know, an extension, if it's not being used, you know, is it useful? Is this thing is it useful for the search for the sake of social harmony for Concord? And this, I think, is a powerful evaluation, to ask yourself when you're going to speak, is what I'm about to say, is it create division, separation, or does it bring us together? Does it make us feel more connected, and it's very easy to say things With our devices, it's easy to say that in conversations with others where it feels divisive in them, and they kind of feel, you know, threatened or pulled back or don't feel closer. It's also possible in our culture, for people to say things to each other, that actually perpetuate some of the very painful divisions that exist in our culture, between different groups in our culture, different races, different classes, different all kinds of things. And so, you know, it is what we say divisive is a cause separation. Or, you know, it's neither, it's not divisive, but it doesn't heal the divides, it doesn't bring people together. So what are the ways of speaking, that help people feel connected to each other? So one of the examples I think that is when you're angry with someone, if you say, I'm angry with you You know, that has a different effect than saying to them when you said x, I felt really hurt, or I feel really afraid. Which is also maybe a true statement both it is both true that you got angry and it's true that you felt hurt. But which statement helps create a little bit more connection. If you say that you feel hurt, there's probably a better chance to the person who will willing to understand you listen to you, feel connected to you. If you say you're angry, they're more likely to step back and close the close down. Which is more useful in the conversation. If you want to have a conversation and unpacked what happened. It might if you want to unpack and understand what happened and reach some kind of more mutually beneficial situation. It's probably more useful to start off by saying something that helps bridge the divide between you rather than say something that's more likely to increase the divide. What kind of speech helps with so harmony or Concord, one of the things that does is to begin to is to appreciate people to speak in ways that are kind, appreciative. And happy people like to be appreciated.

They feel seen they feel appreciated, they feel more willing to kind of be connected to you, when they feel like they're seen in a good and useful way. If and how often do you express your appreciation for other people, not only to them directly, but do you do it to, you know, to third party, speak behind their back about their good qualities. Don't speak behind their back maliciously, or as gossip in terms of right speech in Buddhism, and a little bit different criteria kind of ethically, Buddhism. Again, it's important to not lie. That's part of right speech. But that also says don't don't have malicious speech. Don't speak in ways that are, you know, you know, malicious or mean causing harm to people, third parties or other people. Can you believe what they did? Let me tell you, you know, why do you need to say it even? And then also that Buddhism says don't speak harshly. They could be true. But maybe it's the whole tone and language is harsh. Like maybe you need to know about all the potholes on the road in Redwood City. And so you can say, oh, by the way, you know, we noticed that somebody potholes and you know, probably we should write to City Hall and ask them to do something about the potholes. Or you can say, you know, you know, much worse ways and so you can go or shoot. These are those no good, lousy people you can't believe you know, what they city how they overlook their roads and potholes. You know, so you can, you can probably get the idea. You know, you can it can kind of be harsh the way it said about, you know, the lack of asphalt, you know? Why, you know? So is the language harsh? And then it also the thing is no gossip. So gossip has, is there's a whole a whole controversy now about the value of gossip in society, anthropologists and psychologists and beginning thinking that gossip has a role in social harmony. But it could create a lot of harm and a lot of pain to perpetuate gossip to people around. And there's probably an ancient saying, because from the Roman days, but there's a there's a saying that says, a slender can speak in Rome, and kill in Syria. I mean, back in the old Roman Empire days, very careful what you're saying. the harm that can cause

So these four things, to speak the truth, to speak kindly, are friendly, to consider whether it's useful and promote social harmony. So now I want to ask you some questions. Now's your turn for the Dharma talk. Why? What motivates people to lie? What are some of the reasons people might lie?

self aggrandizement?

When you're not feeling good about yourself or you feel like you're trying to protect yourself or you're, you're afraid, fear

so fear. Thank you.

Avoiding confrontation.

Avoiding confrontation. To be honest, can be threatening, can be frightening, can add conflict.

Yes. And very similar to that. I see

it as people pleasing. I want to.

I don't want to tell them a truth that might upset them because that would make me uncomfortable. I think it make would make them uncomfortable. So people pleasing

is a little bit different than conflict. It's just not to make people feel uncomfortable. And if people feel uncomfortable, then you'll be uncomfortable.

As a young person, I think managing your fear of punishment.

I didn't do it.

My brother did it. I didn't get that baby.

I sometimes feel tempted to downplay my own happiness or success because I don't want someone who's lost. fortunate to feel bad. And that's not really honest.

It's a variation of not making people uncomfortable. But being honest about yourself and where you are, can make other people feel bad. So maybe a couple of more maybe a couple of hands over.

greed and desire,

greed and desire cause people to lie. For example. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular. Right. Okay, so maybe that passively.

I've known people that seem to actually get a buzz out of line, compulsive liars.

And well, how does that work? You can I think it's related to

remember Eric Byrne used to divide people like in gambling into the winners and the losers. The winners were ran the casinos the losers, had excitement, and just couldn't keep away from that excitement. And sometimes I think it's that way with

interesting some of the people I've known. Thank you, back behind you, but right behind you.

I think there are certain people who lie in order to manipulate the situation and just basically to achieve whatever goal they're interested in. It's a form of creed.

I think to get what you want, I'm thinking about job interviewing, where they ask you questions like, are you passionate about the iPhone platform or whatever? And

there's only one answer.

Because if you can tell the truth you, you will get the job

or getting a job getting what you want. And something is so important as a job. People sometimes will say what they think they want to hear. Right? So I have another I want to see if we can maybe score which we can do the two thing. So interesting. Let's get going back to author

some people Because they don't know what the truth is they don't even know they're lying.

Yeah, that is especially true about

who they are

it with their peers about what they do and that sort of thing.

Give an example.

Some somebody that says, you know,

I'd love to swim because there

and I'd love to

exercise and the

outdoors. Wow. Because that's part of their personality and who they spend time with, but they might actually haven't watched TV

or, or something else. Oh, great.

Good. Thank you.

I grew up in a house full of lies, lies of all sorts. And it was I didn't fit in because I didn't like it. But I wasn't, I didn't have enough awareness to know what it was that I didn't like. So, as I grew up, I found that sometimes I would tell stupid lies. You know, like, I like the Rolling Stones as much as I like to

Beatles. You know, just because that was what I needed to say, so that people would like me. And over the years, I've tried and tried and tried to be more honest. The most difficult thing is being honest with myself. And it's, uh, one of the things I think somebody mentioned earlier, that I have trouble with, is walking that line where, if you tell the truth, it might actually be something cruel. And I don't want to be cruel. I would prefer to be kind. I think that's a better place to be taken a year. To get around to like, Oh, I don't have to be like that done. So, I just want to know about if there are people who have experiences where because it comes up for me sometimes. I'm not even sure I'm being truthful with myself.

I

that's that's what I guess that's where I was going with all of that. Good, good, good.

So how do you know if you're being truthful with yourself? If

I asked you first I

mean, that's that's the question. And I had two things come to mind. I think I think mindfulness developing developed capacity for mindfulness helps a lot. Because if you as you get to know yourself better, you'll see yourself you understand yourself better. I mean, it's and so you'll know when you're lying. You'll know what the truth is about yourself. That's one thing and the other is get your friends to help you Find find people that you trust, who and ask for feedback, ask to explore things about yourself said, I don't quite understand myself or I'm trouble. This is how I this is how I understand myself. What do you think? And can we talk about this and explore it or does it make sense to you? You've known me for a while. It makes curious people you trust.

I teach high school, a lot of creative lying goes on there. When you collect an essay, or something, it there's all kinds of it used to be my dog ate my homework, but now it's like, the computer crashed the printers not working. I emailed it to you. I don't know what happened I and all that, but I always I say this to the kids. I always remember you talking about Buddha and his son Rahula. And his mother said he was their stepmother said that he was lying and talk to him. Talk to your son. And you said Buddhists The worst lie you can say is lying to yourself. So sometimes I say that the kids I say, really important matter here is not whether I believe you, but whether you believe you and

that make an impact on them.

I think it does, it does. It doesn't mean that they're not willing to engage in situational integrity. I mean, I type I use that term with him. I say, you can't turn it on and off like a switch. But they're all Well, I have to in this situation, you know.

Okay, so maybe two more, they will stop It's time. So you have the mic over here.

What about lies of? Well, if you don't want to trigger someone, you know that something that you say will unnecessarily trigger someone it won't be useful at all. They'll find out the truth eventually anyhow. So either admitting it sidestepping it or even a small lie.

Yeah, what comes to mind? I don't know the answer to that question, except, I don't know how I can handle the answer. But perhaps if the truth is going to hurt someone, but the truth needs to come out, maybe that's where a lot of care goes into how you say it. The friendly thing, the kind thing is really important to be useful things are useful, how do you how to say it in such a way that it's useful? You

know, you don't just kind of walk up to the person and say, you know, do you realize something, you know, you say, you know, you talk with him a little bit, you get to know them a little bit better. You maybe ask permission, I feel like I need to tell you something to be useful for you to know. Is this a good time for me to tell you, you know, be careful, be careful with it. And maybe then it's possible to say something and that mitigates they say it in such a way that they're willing to hear it, they're not going to get upset. They feel supported rather than unsupported.

So, last one here,

something I've been thinking about and it falls under, not being honest, is exaggerating, saying, come from Irish background of storytellers. So when I tell a story, something, the truth is there, but I exaggerate because for entertainment purposes, and I think it's much better than, you know, I need to tweak it a little bit. And know for instance, has anyone read Angela? Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt? Okay, so my cousin knew the people who lived in that town. And she said that those people from Limerick were very pissed off because that's not exactly what happened. Because but I said it's a memoir, and of course, yes, exaggerate. So I'm struggling with this part of my personality. So it's a huge part that I exaggerate, but that's really not

proper speech.

Yeah.

But, but, so this is what occurs to me is if it's part of your family cultural background in a way that adds certain kind of spice to life, maybe there's a way of doing both, which is, generally stay really don't exaggerate, stay honest with the general conversations, but at certain times around the fireplace and make tea hang out in the evening, say, I'm going to tell you a story. And tell this story is going to be exaggerated. Because I really want to get into the you know, the fun of this and you listen as you listen. Be aware that I'm really fiction what I'm telling you and but but you know, we have I have this, you know, we have this long legacy of, you know, embellishing and I'm just going to get really into it. So please listen to this as not being necessarily the truth, but it's a story. Maybe then you know if you're if you really make a clear, that's what you're doing, then you can have fun.

I think I'm gonna take some of what you said. Because I think when I talk to the doctor, I'm not gonna exaggerate. I'm gonna be times when I don't want to say that because I think that takes away from the stories.

They're gonna have to know that now. It's story time. Just

tell them a story time.

Okay, great. So

thank you for participating in this