

# 2014-01-26 Ethics of Speaking

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## SPEAKERS

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On a mindful approach to ethics and ethical life. And there's one way of understanding Buddhism that it's all about ethics, and that it's all about how we live our lives and how we behave. One of the beautiful ways in which the Buddha described kind of the someone who attained the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, he described it as someone who doesn't, doesn't harm themselves and doesn't harm someone else doesn't harm either self or other. That's kind of nice, kind of, it's kind of understandable. It's kind of practical in our lives. And when we look around us and see how much harm is being caused in the world, how much harm people caused themselves. It would be a very radical different world if people learned how not to cause harm to themselves or To others the so that's an ethical life how not to do that. And the approach of these talks, the mindful approach to an ethical life is to use the criteria are used the reference point of our practice for how we live ethically, as opposed to using rules, commandments, guidelines from outside. So rather than having something from outside tell us how to behave. We listen to something inside in a sense, and what inside guides us in how we can live our lives. So our own heart becomes a reference point, rather than abstract ideas. And so I've given a series of talks now on not killing, not stealing and not being involved in sexual misconduct. And now we come to the next two in this series, which is And what's called the 10 skillful actions rather than the five precepts. And the 10 skillful actions are actions which are skillful for a particular purpose, or variety of purposes. And that's what makes it skillful. And so I like to call them sometimes it 10 helpful actions or 10, useful actions. And the first three, or four actually are same as the five lay precepts, but they go beyond that much more thoroughly into the world of our speech, and also into our minds. Because, and the purpose because in the mind or the heart, is to set it free. And to set it free. We have to, you know, require something of us. And so there are ways of living, skillful, useful, helpful ways of living, that guides us in that direction. And so the fourth and the fifth of these 10 skillful actions is not to lie, and not to slander or not to have divisive speech. So now we come into the realm of speech. And in my reading of the ancient teachings, teachings of the Buddha in terms of ethics, he talked more about the ethics of speaking than any of the other ethical kind of guidelines that he presented. He talked more about that, you know, much more about speech needed about don't kill much more about speech than don't steal, sexual misconduct and the others. And I think one of the reasons for that is that ethics of speech is the one that most human beings are challenged by much more than the others. I suspect that most of you here today are not people who you know are likely to kill other human beings, not likely going to steal from other human beings not, hopefully not likely, maybe a little bit less like the others, but to be involved in sexual misconduct. But speaking is something we do all the time, we were constantly in communication with other people, whether it's in person or now, you know, through our technology. And there's lots of room there for being challenged. Because it's difficult these communications we have, and a lot of our emotional life and fears and securities and desires come into play. And so it's not surprising that the Buddha would emphasize the ethics of speaking. And I think for us, this is probably the one that's most relevant, the most interesting for us to explore.

And so the reference point that I'd like to use for this is in fact, our practice, and in particular now, I think it'd be nice to use meditation practice as a reference point for right speech, it can seem kind of strange, since in meditation, you sit down and you can be quiet to not going to talk. So what, you know, how can that be a reference for speaking. And, but I think it's a powerful reference point. And it is a powerful, powerful reference point in my own life, my experiences of meditation and what I experienced there, what I feel how I sense myself in life, and coming out of meditation, bring that reference point into my life has changed my life and how I behave. So I'd like to give a little bit of a dramatic example to really make the point. I was, I don't know if was criticized recently yesterday, but I was pointed out that I like to use extreme examples. So that's true sometimes to make a better point that way. So the extreme example is Going on a meditation retreat. That's extreme. You go, you know, some people go for a week they go for 10 days, they go for a month, some people go for three months, some people go for longer. And it's quite something to go on a meditation retreat and to meet yourself. Some people don't really meet themselves in deep way until they go on a Silent Retreat. Because we keep ourselves distracted from ourselves. And we keep yourself busy. But we really stop like we do in retreat, and try to focus and be present. We encounter that there's a lot of things here that makes it difficult for us to be present. There's a lot of preoccupation, a lot of strong emotions and reactivity. There's a lot of emotions that are going on. There's a lot of resistance. There's a lot of fear. There's a lot of desire. There's a lot of things that kind of churning away and we can feel the churning when you feel the way we get, how we get swept up in them how they preoccupy us. Get us caught. And that's part of the function of these retreats is to see that to really wow, I had no idea that this much was going on in there. And then slowly over the course of a retreat, some of those things begin to quiet down. And some of the quiet down simply because we're away from our normal life, and so they're not being stimulated. And some of it because we're learning to let go, some of because we're learning to get concentrated and settled. And so the mental energy and mental effort doesn't go into those preoccupations as resistance, we learn to let go of right reattachment and resistances. And later, we're kind of caught up and contracted. And slowly the system begins to release to open up to be unquiet soft, and it's quite lovely, to have feet to feel the relief of not being contracted, not being caught up and preoccupied, not being afraid, not being filled with desire, hate or anger or all the things that keep us kind of And finally, you know, the mic and also Not getting not so preoccupied in thoughts, the mind gets quiet. And still, they're still there than usual. And so imagine, you know, you've been sitting for a week sitting for 10 days, finally the minds quiet down, it's still and it's time to go home, enter the retreat. And what we've learned to do on these retreats is to try to have these the transition from the stillness of the retreat be gradual, because once the story I've been told, before we had a graduate called integration, the decompression before we had that many years ago, the story was that they would just, you know, sit for sometimes three months back in Massachusetts, and they'd ring the bell last day and people would just get up and go home like nothing and realize it didn't work so well when they got a phone call from the local grocery store, saying there's a woman from your retreat here, walking around. Nearby genres. So, we think we need to kind of get people. So we've learned that it's good to do this integration through decompression, to slowly introduce the world of speech and social relationships, social contact. And so we'll do a little practice.

Very careful when people sit in groups of two or three or four something and sit quietly and sit near each other. And then slowly begin a simple conversation. Just who are you? What's your name? Simple things about the retreat? What do you think of the food on the retreat, something safe, you know, relatively safe, not you know, what's your deepest, darkest, you know, you know, challenge of the retreat or something just very simple to just get to find out to get used to what it's like to speak and listen, and to get used. The idea was like to do it mindfully to pay attention, because it's a very important area of mindfulness practice. Be mindful As you speak, so they've been quiet, maybe still finally all this kind of stuff of their life is settled away. And part of a settled way of preoccupations and

thoughts is that is that the usual habits of mind are no longer operating. So then we start speaking and things change very quickly. Suzuki Roshi was supposed to have said to Zen master here in San Francisco many years ago, he said of his students, he said, when I look at you, I think you're all enlightened. until you start speaking. So the, the, and so what people find in that transition where they start talking, is the old habits rush back in. Some people find it quite disturbing because they race ahead and their fears and concerns and preoccupations and wanting to be liked and wanting to be present themselves in certain way or to not be seen certain ways or to resist or you know, obviously it gets very complicated. And all the work of opening up and relaxing sometimes not all but some of it begins to be lost and kind of the, the mind speeds up and gets activated. And some people find it quite challenging that transition to back to speaking this way. But this is one of the reasons why we do it slowly because it's all at once. It's just too much sometimes for people. So there's a quite a contrast between how people normally are and how they are after a week of being on retreat. And in that contrast, there's a lot of lessons to be learned that are difficult to learn in, if we just go around or an ordinary life going around, busy caught up preoccupied, and not really Slowing down and not getting calm and settled, then we don't necessarily, you know, we just, it's kind of like we get habituated to being tense, and we don't realize we're tense. When we finally relax, then we have a chance to recognize when we get tense is, oh, I don't have to live this way. Maybe I can relax. And so the same thing with speech, we don't realize that what's going on when we speak all the different dynamics, emotions, attachments, fears resistances going on. And so we can have bitchu eight to it until we have something radically different. That gives us a different perspective, how we can be in this kind of situation. And then so this is the reference point. So whether it's daily meditation practice to get your little quiet and calm or open lists, or whether it's on retreat, it's longer, or maybe it's going for a nice walk in nature or something that makes you kind of quiet settles away their concerns, it becomes a different reference point than for ours. Speaking. So imagine again, the end of the week on the retreat, you finally let go of self preoccupation. And then you start speaking to someone. And you notice that as soon as you start speaking, you're exaggerating. That was the best retreat ever. That was like the best could you believe how great it was? You know, maybe it was good. But you know, there's kind of like, you know, start to exaggeration starts going on, if you pay attention and feel, what is it like to be exaggerating? chances are there's a loss of touch, loss of being in touch with oneself. Or perhaps, you know, you're basically there was kind of a little hiccup in the middle of the retreat and you went through it kind of relatively easily. Social hiccups you know, maybe the oatmeal was burned one morning. And so you start speaking, and it occurs to you. Well, you know, we're going to talk about something inconsequential in the retreat. And he said, Well, you know, it's kind of interesting when the oatmeal burned. And, you know, and I think they need to do something about the cooks and those cooks, you know, they don't know if they really train properly. And, you know, I should write a letter and I can't, you know, what do you know, they don't really know how to take care of us properly here. And you know, there's other issues I had. And our retreat center, I'm the meal cook.

And so the, and so then again, this anger comes up. And in the course of the anger, if you pay attention again, you lose the loss of touch with oneself, kind of almost an alienation from this deeper, more intimate connection. What was going on that you felt on the retreat? We get, we kind of leave ourselves in the, in the in the caught godness. Or perhaps there's a diminishing of ourselves and minimizing someone says to you, oh, you know, you did walking meditation. So you It was really user poised and, and very attentive and present it was very inspiring to watch you do your walking meditation. And so the movement is feeling embarrassed feeling, you know, what can I say I'm not supposed to be proud of anything and I don't have to take this kind of praise. And so we go, there was nothing, you know, was nothing, you know, just had to do with my shoes. They hurt or something, you know, and, and so, and so again, it's a closing down. There's this beautiful movement of generosity from someone of gratitude, and so minimizing kind of deflects it and so some kind of loss of connection, loss of contact there. One

of the great ethical moments on retreats for me as a teacher is when students, you know, participants will come in, participants will come and have meetings with teachers and talk about their practice and every few years There's someone who after the meeting leaves a note or says that please, can I meet with you again? And I'm sure you know. And it turns out that they feel really bad. Because they said something in the meeting with the teacher that was a little bit off wasn't quite true. And they realized after the fact, it wasn't quite true. You know, usually it's pretty small. Usually, it's like what? Really, you feel like you want to tell that to me. And the, but I'm so inspired by this because in the context of being settled, connected, mindful, attentive, open, at ease, it really hurts to feel that you've misled someone, it really hurts in some ways to feel like you've lied. And so people want to make amends. They want to apologize. Wouldn't be a great world if we lived in if everyone did that. If we were if we're all angry. If we're like on retreat, and we entered the world and had that kind of care and sensitivity for who do, we really felt viscerally, we felt in our hearts, the consequences of lying, and it doesn't feel good. Even white lies lies of omission. So the first of the speech precepts in Buddhism is not to lie. It's considered to be extremely important to avoid lying. And one of the reasons for people practicing the path of Buddhism practicing mindfulness meditation concentration, is that these the path of practice is a practice of connecting with the truth, overseeing what's true. And if you're lying, you can't see what's true there. You got to kind of going in metric you know, in opposite directions. The I'd like to think of honesty as mindfulness out loud And so if we're out loud, practicing lying, I think we're training ourselves a bit shooting ourselves in the opposite direction with this path is all about. If you want to kind of harmonize with the path and harmonize with your heart's capacity to be relaxed and open and, and, and free, then we practice not lying. We practice saying the truth. And that takes some care. How do we say the truth in a useful way? So the guideline the Buddha gave is certainly when you're going to speak speak the truth, but only do so if it's the right time to speak it. And if it's, you can do with kindly in a friendly way, caring way and if it's useful, I liked the last one useful because I've sometimes you know, you know, which Just kind of made all kinds of extra effort to explain something, say something that was true and necessary to work things out. But the person just wasn't going to change it and nothing was going to happen. And so, you know, it's there's no point. So don't you know, if it's not useful, then don't say it can't be It can't be. But is it true? Is it useful? True, kind, useful? I guess I can keep I'm confused. timely, that's okay. So, true, timely, kindly, and useful. Thank you.

And then how do we know what's true? It's an interesting question. How do we know what's true and Again, now we come back to the reference point of meditation again, there were this state of kind of being sensitive and open attentive that arises from a meditative way of being mindful way. And that is one of the reference points for knowing what's true is knowing what's true for yourself. Is this true for me? What's my state? What's my true state? What's my experience right now? And so we have a whole custom now practice in the West called making eye statements. I think that's quite powerful. To begin with a reference point here with oneself. It's my experience. This is what's happening to me right now. I'm a little bit I'm quite alarmed by how often people want to say my truth. This is my truth and you have your truth. Because that's the kind of way of just ending the conversation. It's kind of a way of kind of saying, you know, that there's no discussion here about something but to say This is my experience. And then you then it's possible to have a, a conversation, it's possible to explore it, it's possible to go further. And it's possible to be amended, possible to learn something new. And so to start here, this is my experience. When not when we were together last time, you could say, for example, and I've done this with people, we had this conversation and you said something, and when you said that, I felt really hurt. The fact that I was hurt, that's a true statement. If I had instead said, when we're together and you said something, and you're, you know, a lousy bastard you know, is that a true statement? Or if you say, you know, we were together and you said something to me, and, and well, I wouldn't be example of and when you said it you completely you completely misunderstood me you completely misunderstood the situation? I don't know. I've sometimes thought people misunderstood and turned out they were right.

My track record is not hundred percent. So but to say, you know, you completely misunderstood me is that do we really know? But if you say I felt hurt, that's true. But then hopefully you can have a conversation and explore that further and it gives the person the chance to say, Well, I'm sorry that you had hurt, but let me tell you what I was doing. Let me tell you what I was trying to say. And then you find out then you find out whether the person understood or that doesn't didn't understand or whether further clarification is needed. So I think one of the advantages of meditation practice is we become very sensitive to what's going on here. We become sensitive to the movements of tension, the movements are preoccupation, the movements of contraction, the movements of opening up the movements of softening the movements of being receptive. And to be sensitive these movements here within us. And then taking responsibility or caring for it becomes a very important reference point for staying in our ease for staying in our freedom. And if we're using that as a reference point, then I think we'll have much more care about how we speak, because our speaking can have a big impact on this inner world here. So not to lie is one of the really important ones. The second of the or the speech, precepts or guidelines is not to have harmful speech or divisive speech or sometimes it's called slander. I love the idea of, you know, not having divisive speech, not to speak in ways that are harm and create divisions, separate people. Divide people. Here's the though The Buddha talked about it abandoning malicious speech, when abstains from malicious speech, one does not repeat elsewhere. What when is heard here in order to divide those people, from these people? What does not to repeat to these people what has one heard what what one has heard elsewhere in order to divide these people from those people. So that's kind of the negative side of it. You abstain from doing divisive speech that creates you know, bad feelings between people so that their harmony in their friendships are challenged.

But rather, one reunites, those who are divided. One promotes friendships, one enjoys Concord, rejoices in Concord, delights in Concord, and as a speaker of words that promote Concord so isn't that nice. So it's not just a matter of avoiding divisive speech. But the ethics of the path is to actually be a person who rejoices has the feels happiness and joy in the idea of people being connected to each other, being friendly and friendships, being in harmony with each other. That's a higher standard. And again, the reference point in meditation, rather than saying, you know, it's, um, you know, authoritative way, thou shalt rejoice in Concord, go forth. You know, and bring everyone together. If you can't, if you're not if you don't, but rather, with that, as we kind of settled in and open up in a really connected in a deep way here, let go of conceit. Let go of self negative self preoccupation or contraction and available and sensitive to what's going on today. to others and connected to others in a heartfelt way that it makes it's a happy thing to see people friendly and connected. It's a happy thing to feel friendly relationship to other people. It's happy thing to smile and share and delight with other people. It just, it makes the heart sing. So, to be settled and relaxed, and have the heart sing, I think lends itself to wanting to have conquered wanting to have friendship, wanting to bring people together, to want to heal the broken relationships that we see in our society. heal the broken relationships, see in our friendships, and the people around us. So to avoid language, which is malicious speech, which divides people and rather speak words that connect and one of the There was a period in my life where I was practicing Right Speech, this kind of speech thing in a particular way. And that as I practiced it with, with the with it, I was exploring the things that I say now. They create more distance between me and the person I'm talking to, or less distance. And it was kind of eye opening, to watch my speech and kind of let the people step away from me, physically, but you can kind of feel, you know, whether the connection was kind of weakened, or strengthened, depending on what was said. And it's, you know, so I'd encourage you to try that for a day for a week for the next week. Review your speech, your speech, pay attention, when you speak, review it afterwards, right away and end of the day, look back over it. And consider the things that you said the conversations, your when, and how you participated. Where the words you say, Did they help create a good connection or more separation And if you create a connection, what was the quality of that connection? Because as you probably know, some people can feel very connected to

each other, when they're all sharing how terrible the third party person is. Can you believe that person IKEA? And suddenly they're like, you know, it's kind of like this energy there. But is that the kind of connection that you want? Again, reference point of meditation to kind of start talking that way can you believe what's that person did? I think something inside of us contracts. Something we lose touch with ourselves and some deep, relaxed way. So what is the key what connects us and keeps the heart open what connects us and keeps the body open? what connects us and keeps the mind open? What connect you know, and what creates the world creates distance. So these two guidelines not to lie, and not to speak malicious speech are very important.

In Buddhist practice, they're guidelines meant to be taken seriously to live by, if you explore them and study how this works in your life, you'll be practicing mindfulness. You'll be practicing mindfulness in a useful, useful area where you can begin kind of refining, adjusting, changing some of your behavior. Maybe you don't have to say speak the way that you you've spoken in the past. Maybe you can find different ways of speaking. Maybe your hearts will sing more, will rejoice more. When you find yourself wanting to speak well about people. One of the great practices is speak well about people behind their back. Honestly, of course, but it's a nice practice to kind of praise people saying, Oh, that's a good Things About people when other than, you know, it's not so good to speak badly about people behind their back. But to help kept spread kind of a good feeling and the community, recognize appreciation of the person is a great i think is a great thing to do. So these, these, these two things, these guidelines, for those of you who have a regular meditation practice, or even a regular one, when you come out of meditation, at the end, start your day. Watch yourself carefully for the first speech act of the day after meditation. So if you're living with someone, it might be really fast. If you're not living with someone it might be, you know, later in the day, but use the first act of speech after meditation as a time to practice mindfulness to really kind of stay connected and see what's going on. Try not to speak habitually or not. automatic pilot for the first speech act after meditation. Study yourself what goes on there? And how does the speech act that you do? How does it affect your ease your calm your openness, the stillness, that you have your sensitivity? Does it help facilitate more of it, you lose it, you get caught up in social concerns and you lose your mindfulness in the process of it. It's very difficult to practice mindfulness and speech. But maybe you could practice mindfulness for your first speech act after meditation. Get up with that intention. If you know maybe, you know cross your fingers and then don't cross them until you've something something to remember. So, that's probably enough. We have a few minutes if anyone would like to make any comments, questions or testimonials.

I'm trying to deal more skillfully with a person in his in my life. And I've realized that when they're agitated, angry, rushed or hurried. They'll say things, which end up not actually happening. And I'm starting to see them as being true in the sense that they do express what the person feels like doing at that moment. I mean, it's not like they're trying to lie to me. But they're still saying things that don't happen to me. You mean it's about the future? Yeah. So you know, we're gonna go out for lunch tomorrow. Or I'm going to clean my room.

Well, more often in anger canceling something or threatening something or and I'm realizing over time that once they calmed down a little bit, these things don't happen. But I'm still a little apprehensive about should I be reinterpreting what they're saying? And how do I gather from what they're saying in agitation, somehow? What the real meeting is under that, and I'm not very good at this yet,

I say, No, thank you, I think that we get good at it with experience. So for if we have someone with regular contact with, we learn after a while, what their patterns are and how they operate, so we get wiser about it. So after a while, we realize that, you know, when they're agitated or angry, what they say we have to take with a grain of salt and maybe check out with him later and say, oh, by the way, and

you know, are you still thinking of doing that? thing that you talked about yesterday. And so you check it out. Or perhaps you if you realize that they're angry or upset or agitated. What's maybe important in the conversation is not what they say literally. But rather, they're trying to do something else. They're giving off steam, they're trying to make a connection. They're trying to make themselves safe, they're trying to do something. And so as your as the friend is, they don't need you to pull out their calendar and put it down in the calendar. You know, tomorrow you're going to write an angry letter about the oatmeal but what then what then what you as a friend, you need to just hear you know, just be there maybe and listen to them and very gingerly if it seems appropriate, say, you know, you know you seem a bit agitated right now. Would you like a cup of tea, sometimes it's simply recognizing annex and being accepting of them and being a mirror a little Bit and offer kind presence can be helpful in those kinds of circumstances. But if there's a pattern of someone saying something that there's no follow through, but the future, it's not exactly a lie, if you're talking to me, if you're not planning to do it is a lie. But if the person is planning if it's within change their mind, it's not quite a lie. But if you but you know, part of your job is to be wise about it not expected. Okay. Maybe one more,

um, I have thought about write email,

which might be a form of this, in the sense that I wish the computer had something before you could push the send button, that it had a pause that said, Are you sure you want to send? Yeah, that might eliminate a lot of more wars. This understanding it

wouldn't be too difficult for someone to, you know, for these people to make a, you know, email program that actually you have the option you can set the settings to prompt you after you've sent it. Are you sure they have that?

Brilliant that's a mindfulness gives you that with the speech. It doesn't have 30 seconds but you know, you have enough to fill a gap or pause. So I think that's great so many years ago, I think Cheryl Hilton was part of this. Many years ago, we kind of put together a document on write emailing, and somewhere that exists I guess. And I think it's a good thing to consider, because it's a very important form of communication and for some variety reasons. Emails tend to cause or can cause a lot of hurt. Because they either get misunderstood or because the lack of, of personal contact people seem to be willing to say things much more freely over email that they wouldn't say in person. And so I think it's requires a lot more care, attention this whole area. One more Yeah.

In that regard, a mindful way of doing that is don't put the recipients into the message, draft the message and then save it but without a recipient so there's no chance to send it right. So don't type in the recipient, leave that blank and then add that later once you're sure that you want to do it. Right. walk around the block the good one.

So So, thank you