

2019-12-01 Mindful Speech For A Modern World

Wed, 8/12 11:19AM • 42:40

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

speak, people, kinds, speech, society, words, kitchen, person, leaders, support, read, divided, abandoning, speaking, ethics, treasured, fear, feel, conversation, thinking

SPEAKERS

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I would like to read a passage from the suttas his ancient discourses and in it, there's a passage that describes the ethics of the Buddha. And in that long passage, there's a description of the ethics of Buddha's speech, how he speaks. And I'd like to read this passage. Abandoning false speech, the Buddha refrains from false speech. That truth speaker, he can be relied on trustworthy, dependable, non deceptive, abandoning malicious speech, the Buddha refrains from repeating what he has heard that harms others, or reconsider reconciler of those who are divided He encourages those who are friends, rejoicing in peace, loving peace, the lighting and peace. He speaks words that make for peace. Abandoning harsh speech, the Buddha refrains from it. He speaks what is blameless, pleasing to the ear, agreeable, reaching the heart, or vain, pleasing and attractive to many abandoning idle chatter. He speaks at the right time, what is true and to the point of the Dharma and the discipline? The Buddha is a speaker whose words are to be treasured, seasonable, reasoned, well defined and connected with liberation. So this was you know, comes from maybe Well over 2000 years ago, 2500 years ago, a long time. And I suppose it was relevant to say this because the opposite was common enough that there were people who didn't speak the truth who spoke maliciously, who spoke in harmful ways to others, people who spoke in ways that created division in society and not peace and reconciliation. And I think this has been a a issue for probably all of humanity's history. There's a deep people who have studied such things as political falsehoods that are spoken. say there are records from 3300 years ago, of Pharaohs in Egypt, who were lying about how successful they were at fighting wars which which there are records that They didn't win. And, and so that's a long time, you know that there were 430 300 years ago today that people have been doing this kind of thing. And when I reflect on our current society, it seems that most publicly visible issue that's going on in our society is how people speak to each other. And the and, you know, it's quite aware that some people going to Thanksgiving is a difficult time because of how people speak about politics. And so, families are divided these days. They say that they're around politics. And some families have truces, where there's no politics are allowed over Thanksgiving. And because otherwise it's just too painful having to do with how people speak to each other. And the and then we have this kind of it's kind of the family level and we have, you know, going right up to

the person who's supposed to be the leader for the country who is well known now for lying, how, you know, seems to be a serial liar and, and is the producer of what he calls fake news, which is quite significant because for some people, that's how they get their news. And so what is said, whether it's through political leaders or whether it's by in the media or Facebook or different places, has a big impact on society. People don't have so much discernment around the source of what they read and

study so the 2016 election pointed out that the 20 most popular news items more popular than any news article from the 16 major national media outlets, the 20 most popular ones that had the most readership, were fake news. That was, you know, that was produced for all kinds of political reasons to whenever So, these, how people speak, what we write how we communicate to each other has a huge impact and what goes on and, and you might say that some of it has to do with divisions and what people believe. People, people believe what they're told, or people believe what they, you know, what's presented to them. And that's true probably for all sides of the political divide social divides of all kinds, that people have a preference to accept what kind of goes along with their beliefs, and in doing so they don't, not very discerning sometimes about the sources of it. I was I became aware of this myself when I was I guess I was about 2122 proverbs 2122 and I was a born again organic farmer and a person and, and so I had a lot of about I lived on farms, organic farms and farmed and read organic gardening magazines and books of all kinds back then and had very strong opinions of what was right having to do with the environmentally sound agriculture and how evil the people were who weren't doing that. And it was quite a division so that I went in and got a degree in agriculture from University of California Davis and one of the world's preeminent agricultural schools and where we have A lot of support for the students initiated all kinds of action for alternative recovery. Back then alternatives in agriculture, maybe nowadays maybe it's called sustainable agriculture. And we got lots of support including maker getting lots of money back then lots of money. But we managed to finagle \$100,000 the students the undergraduates did from this legislature, state legislature and a granting of 10 acres of land on the university California land to start an organic kind of research center so it wasn't like the we didn't get support for it. And And so then, but as I was doing my studies, and studying the science of soils in particular soils and pesticides, that pesticides but fertilizers, specifically, I didn't answer discover that what these hard and fast beliefs I had beliefs that I spoke and spoke, you know, somewhat forcefully to others and held them up as being true. As I looked into the science of it, it wasn't true, some of them and this was quite humbling for me quite kind of soul searching for me that I would have such strong, tightly held beliefs that add hope without having done the research or having been well informed by it. And so I think that a lot of these divisions we have in our society today because of house people speak to each other, whether it's politics or gender divides, our racial divides, or all kinds of devices in which people form tribes and form us versus them and, and speak in ways that our support division, partly by putting down the people who are not in their tribe or not in their side, have some kind of divide is hugely important for our society.

So then we look at, you know, for those of us who are Buddhists might want to look at what Buddhism has for this and what might, how it might support this. And certainly Buddhism has a lot of teachings on right speech. I'd be careful for speech, and nothing might be nice to talk about. But what I thought was nice to do was to take this passage that just read to you and, adapt it.

So here it goes. Abandoning false speech, leaders, refrain from false speech. Truth speakers, leaders can be relied on trustworthy, dependable, non deceptive abandoning malicious speech. Leaders refrain from repeating what they have heard that harms others. reconcile those of those who are divided. Leaders encourage those who are friends, rejoicing and peace, loving peace, delighting in peace. Leaders speak words that make for peace and banning harsh speech leaders refrain from it. They speak what is blameless, pleasing to the ear, agreeable, touching the heart, urbane, pleasing and attractive to many abandoning idols chatter. They speak at the right time, what is true and to the point of the Dharma, or the truth, and ethics. Leaders are speakers whose words are to be treasured, seasonable, reasoned, well defined and connected with liberation. Nice. Once I was many years ago, many years ago down maybe I don't know. But dennis kucinich was running for president. A friend of mine was having him for dinner and said, Will you come to dinner with us? I'd been to the person's house. So it's been to add eaten a meal at the person's dinner table. So sure, it can't be that many

people. So, and so I said, Yes. Before we start meal, can you do a little prayer? Okay, well, I was the designated clergy, I guess. And it turned out that people had a big yard and the whole yard was set up with canopies and cables. And there was like, I don't know how many people were there. There was a big group of people. So suddenly, I had to do this, you know, reading a prayer. Dinner was not, you know, was not suddenly a big deal. So I read There's something called that 10 dharmas 10 Behaviors of a ruler. I don't remember them right now. So I just read them very slowly. And I don't know if it was just more, you know, searching for votes or what but the presidential candidate came over and love that he wants a copy of that. So that was nice. But I could imagine in a situation like that reading this one, I never get invited to do that again.

So I think that how we speak is one of the big eight important issues of our society and this public issues, visible issues. And I think how we speak is one of the hardest areas to be mindful. There's something about the way that we get pulled in to the world of communication of talking of our stories, our beliefs, what we're trying to get from the communication, how we're trying to relate to people, that lends itself to being so involved with what we're saying that we're not actually sometimes paying attention to, actually what we say, or the impact of what we say. And, and we're not paying very much attention to the impact to ourselves, how we speak and independent of what we speak. How we speak is actually quite important. Some of these descriptions here have to do with how we speak not to speak harshly. The tone of voice carries certain things that that the forcefulness of the voice has certain impact. The speed in which we speak the repetitive in which we step in to speak the way we physically into the conversation, even what we do with our hands and our posture, all these things are part of what we communicate. And so, one interesting place to start practicing mindfulness of speaking, is just mindfulness of how we are as we speak. Try to train yourself, to stay connected to your body as you speak, to feel what it's like to be in your body, what's being the energy is going through your body, the sensations, the emotions, that they're here, what's here in your body as you speak. If you want extra credit, then you would also do the same as you're listening to people, that you would actually be listening to what's happening inside of you as you listen. Because if you just listen to the words, and are debating the words or considering, you know, your verbal response, then you're missing a lot of the cues inside of you about how You feel what's going on what motivates you? How you're tightening up, how you're starting to get wanting to be forceful, how you're closing down? How are you getting irritated or sad or discouraged? All these kinds of things start going on. And to know that those are happening, makes you a wiser speaker. If you don't know what they're what's going on what posts are happening, they're kind of in the background or subconscious. Then they spill out in what we say. People who are frustrated could easily spill out with words there. I mean, people that are feeling discouraged or sad, speak things that are self deprecating in such a way that it kind of push us back you know, to be more closed or more feeling sad or not, you know, good good about ourselves. But if we can track and see how we feel, and then be careful how we speak. I think we can speak much more carefully. If we're careful how we Are, I think we're also get, sometimes get the cues, that of how we've how we're feeling about the person we're speaking to, if we have a cue that we don't like the person or pose to the person or, you know, against their politics and against their gender, against their sexual orientation, against their ethnicity against their race, that somehow that that all gets very complicated for us because we start getting tense. So we start getting tight or we start getting hot or I start getting fixated or there's all kinds of kind of reactions that go on then or maybe subtle that that happened before. People start saying something. They've done kind of studies on implicit bias, where they watch people's, they can track people's eye movements. When they look at photographs, I guess, of different people of different backgrounds, racial and gender and different things. And apparently even though the how eyes work, indicate differences bending on all these categories of bias we have, in the eyes get fixated, the eyes turn inward, the eyes shut down the eyes to all kinds of things, and pointing to how much information there is in our physical body. And to start training oneself to be in one's body feel and connected and

know what's going on here. You'll get all kinds of early warning signals, both for what's dangerous, but maybe it's not warning signals, but not Oh, you get the early, early notifications

for what's good, what's really good, you know, feelings of warmth and kindness and love and generosity that you might feel they might begin deeper than your conscious mind and what you say to yourself. So to train myself to be aware of how one is in state so communication is different. thing to do, because how quickly we get pulled into the words pulled into the ideas pulled into the communication that's going back and forth. But it's a worthwhile training to give yourself for me, I did it, I've done it still do it. I still find it difficult at times. So I'm not saying it's easy at all. But I've been doing it now for 30 years. And slowly and steadily. I've watched it my ability to be mindful body full in terms of communication has increased. And you know, so it's better now than it was 30 years ago. If I said to myself, Gil, you know, start training now so you're better 30 years from now. I probably wouldn't have been written probably wouldn't have been motivating for me with now that I've done it for 30 years. I'm really glad. So this is really good. That I'd done this and I probably saved myself and others a lot of problems are difficult. Because of the ability to track what's going on to present work of mine when I say when I say it, as I'm speaking and all that. And then and then I think there's a different reference point for looking at the ethics of who we speak. If we're only looking at the judgments, ethical judgments, we have what's right and wrong or terms of speaking. I think that there, it's too easy for ethics to be another divisive element in our society. Ethics can divide us self and others. And, but something about really being in touch with him knowing what's going on in here with ourselves, will show us is, is what we're saying is we're going to say something that is going to create distance between me and the other person, or is it going to connect some kind of sense of we're in it together some kind of connection and unity. Do you want distance you want separate You weren't pulling away you when people kind of close down? Or do you want to feel more friendship and more familiarity, more contact, more support more mutual support for each other? Which what what is the, what's happening in the communication? what's motivating it? So that's another thing that could be useful for mindful of speaking, is in your free time, sitting, having a cup of tea or going for a walk or something to really reflect, consciously contemplate, actively contemplate, talk to your friends, think about this in some deep way that you have is what purpose do you want your speech to be to have? Why do you Why do you want to speak? What are the purposes you use now for speaking What are you trying to accomplish when you speak? Is it just simply the fact that you're giving people information they're asking you for and you're Just a conveyor of information you know this you might be interested in knowing that you go on and saying you might be interested in knowing that I ate at the best diner. It was the worst you know, probably a best diner in the peninsula yesterday it was really good. And I thought for them for you to have this information you know, it's not information it's self aggrandizement. It's look at me and how a great experience I had and you know, I had this special thing happen now it could be celebrate story and so maybe people can celebrate together. But is it bringing people together? Is it Salvatore's? It's sharing something? Or is it does it kind of subtly make some this difference in distinction? You know, separation. That look at me, you know how special I am. I bet you didn't eat the good diner yesterday. You know? Maybe little bit there under under motivation to kind of like really create a sense of I'm special and in relationship to other people. So why do we speak? And I think one of them very mature things to do for anybody interested in Buddhist practice is to actively spend time thinking about researching for them send themselves why they say what they say. And don't be satisfied with the first answer.

We often have multiple reasons why we say what we say. And so you kind of maybe go through but what are the different what are the different reasons I just said what I wanted to say, how much of it is information to be given how much it is to make an impression How much is it to keep people together and if people want to like me, I spent a lot of time when I was younger, trying to get people to like me. And one of the great places where that for me where it was impossible was I was the kitchen Form

kitchen manager for the monastery kitchen. So I was in charge of a group sometimes go fetches 15 people cooking food, and monastery kitchens are kind of the tourists for being explosive in a place where there's a lot of tension and you know, and the person who's the kitchen manager at the monastery kitchen is at the heart of the center of it. And, and so if you want an exciting life be you know, be the manager at a monastery kitchen. And, and, and that's where I just I discovered how exhausted I was by constantly trying to do the social gymnastics of getting everyone in the kitchen to like me. It turned out it was an impossible task. And so at some point, because I was meditating A lot in the monastery, I started to see the contrast between trying to get everyone to like me and sitting in meditation and feeling completely content and at peace with myself as I was, and then get out of meditation go to the kitchen and there was back to that effort. And going back and forth between those two started put a question mark, after my efforts to get everyone to like me, I got to see it more and more acutely. And then because meditation was so good for me, too healthy, to healthy way of being that that's it wasn't so much that I decided not to try to get people to like me, just like it's kind of just kind of started I started to relax around it, because I had this healthy alternative that I kept touching into coming to meditate and then I go to the kitchen. So slowly, you know, I learned that you know, to give up this impossible task. So what is the what are the reasons why you say what you say and then how thoughtful, are you about the purposes you want to have for what you speak? If you look at this way the Buddha spoke, are these some of the ways that you would like to speak? Would you like it? Are you motivated by this? Enough motivated enough that you want to kind of infuse yourself with this motivation? So you would go through that your world really reflecting and thinking, can I live? Can I talk this way, abandoning false speech, being a truth speaker abandoning malicious speech, not repeating what one has heard that harms others? I don't think it has to be only not repeating but others superkey have heard, don't make up things that harm others. speech which is reconciling, so we can styles those who are divided and keeps together those who are friends. Are they words that Rejoice in peace, love peace, the light and peace. speak words that make for peace. Avoiding harsh free speech, instead of harsh speech, speech, speak when it's pleasing to the ear. Words that reach the heart and are pleasing to many and then abandoning idle speech. So being motivated to speak at the right time, I think it's a hugely important thing. I noticed that myself when I was first looking at all this, this sense of being in a hurry to speak, like I had something to say I had to say it soon and quickly or had to get or if there was pressure to say it or if there was social tension going on with people. They needed to kind of get it out there and explain to say or do something about it. You have to do something here. I feel frustrated. I feel uncomfortable. I Have to do something.

And, and then to learn there's a right time to speak something. Some things are better spoken at other times and now and is it okay not to say when you feel like it needs to be said, just because you feel like it, you feel the pressure. If the reason you're speaking is not to relieve pressure, but to try to do some good for everyone involved, the timings may be quite important. And so wait until it seems like the right time. Sometimes it could just be minutes, sometimes days, sometimes longer. If you times my life. I've waited four years for the time when it was the right time to speak. And I knew that if I the times that were available to me before that, by spoke it wouldn't work. It was simply wasn't going to work even though it felt like I had my cause was good. I had a really good cause and I was justified. To speak, but haven't good cause and be justified. If it has no impact, if it has no good consequence. You know, why waste your words? Why bother? One reason why not to bother is that maybe you don't have that many opportunities to make a difference. And so you might want to try to save it to a time when you can really maybe can make a difference. So the right time, and sometimes the right time has been when I'm really ready, and waiting for myself to be ready. Because even though I'm right, I have a good cause or everything. I'm angry. And I've learned that I've made mistakes in communicating with people when I've been angry. And it's been hard sometimes to hold my tongue when I'm angry because there's also pressure to speak. If on top of that, as I said, I feel right the causes right. You know, feel like this is you

know that they deserve, they deserve it now. And that pressure and that's, you know, those ideas are not necessarily the ones that should carry the day. And so they have the ability to track this to see this and to ask yourself, Is this the right time to speak? To be a speaker whose words are to be treasured? That's a pretty high bar. These words are to be treasured. I was thinking about this and there is a saying that goes, maybe some of you know it better than I. But it goes something like if it's not beneficial, don't say it. The idea of not speaking is sometimes a really wise thing. And maybe what you should be treasured is not brilliant words or beautiful words. But what's to be treasured? Is not causing harm, not causing difficulties, not stirring the pot of social pot. Maybe what should be treasured is not speaking. If what you're saying is not beneficial, why speak if what you're gonna say, hurt hurts anyone. Why? Why say it? And so, I think you know, for someone who's a meditator there's sometimes this reference point of learning to be still and silent, not just silent with our mouths, but much more deeply quiet and silent with the mind as stillness, softness, gentleness, a warmth of just being still within They can feel so wonderful and so rich, so good. That it's a reference point for and stay close to that in social situations, not to be shut down and not speak. But to be able to ride that interface. So that edge between not saying what is harmful and staying close to what is beneficial. If it is not beneficial, maybe don't say it is not beneficial. Look at it. Take a deep look at it. What's really going on for you? And perhaps what is beneficial is not to say it the way you're going to say it. But what's beneficial is to find a different way of saying what you're about to say that brings everyone together so that can be a conversation

So for example, if the if your roommate has left the dishes piled up in the kitchen in the kitchen for the thousandth time. And so you know, you're clearly have an agreement by keeping the dishes clean. And so you have a good cause you're justified in being angry and the pretty roommate deserves to hear your wrath. How could you be such a lousy dishwasher? How could you be so thoughtless, you just really lay it out and I thought maybe that's not going to help anything. Maybe that really is not going to create the right conditions to go forward. So don't say it. But simply being silent is not healthy either sometimes. So then we take time for the right figure out the right time to and the right way to say dear roommate When I come home and find all the dishes in the sink, I get frightened. It really, really frightens me. Because I value our sharing as home, I value our relationship. And I feel so much sadness and sometimes anger and hurt when I see the dishes one more time, I wonder if you know because because of how frightened I have around this issue, I wonder if we can have a talk about this. You'll probably get a radically different answer. If you stand tall, look the person in the eye and say, You know what, this frightens me with all your strength, not not that diminished. Actually more strength is needed for that conversation. Then is needed to be angry. But, you know, so it isn't that not suggesting being silent. But if it's not beneficial, maybe you don't say what you're about to say. And maybe there's another way you can find. So in this way, I hope that our care, with speech in the democracy of the United States, where everyone in a certain way is supposed to be a leader, that this this passage that I read, is an instructions to you, to the degree to which you every individual, is a kind of a leader is a kind of a contributor to the welfare of our society as a whole. No one is not capable of somehow supporting our society, and it can spread out from how we speak so to speak. Use whenever mindfulness you're developing and growing and to turn it into a turn towards the whole world of communication, how you speak, what you speak, what motivates you to speak, what you try to accomplish when you speak? And can you buy this care? Be a leader to create a better society, a society in which we care for each other, as the betrayed respect each other, and every society which we feel like we're here to support each other, in this large human family that we are. So those are my those are my thoughts for today. We have about you know, seven, eight minutes if someone would like to ask questions, comments, testimonials, amount wise speaking

Hi, my name is Beth. And

this may be off topic, but my concern is it's the right time to speak. The other person perhaps has asked me to speak, and they don't have the courage to speak, and it causes a problem.

So do you have any thoughts? So, sometimes it's useful to turn that around to really understand some things so turning around for you is you don't have the courage. What do you have?

Fear, compassion. Oh, that's nice. they've they've asked me for a reason probably because they're in pain.

So, but I suspect that if you were to say you don't have courage, means something like you have fear. So if you if you if you identify this fear, does that change the world You want it what you want to look at or how you want to consider it, or

it doesn't recognize the fear. And I'm, I'm just stuck, I'm just afraid, and I just don't return their call or email.

So if fear is a regular part of a person's life, then it deserves a deep look. And sometimes with the help of someone you can talk to about it regularly, which in our society, often as a therapist, but it could be a friend or your journal and really try to begin understanding fear and working with it. It's a whole interesting and valuable, worthwhile, noble thing to do is to really spend time with it. And it might be that you're not ready to have a conversation until you've come a little bit wider and more to terms with your fear. If you really need to have that conversation with persons or friend, sometimes it might person's asked for, as to who to speak to about something explained to your friend Yes, thank you. No, thank you for asking. But I'm actually afraid. Or maybe if that's too scary to say, it's actually kind of awkward for me to speak. I don't, I don't have you know, maybe this kind of situations, I find it very awkward and I don't have a background or the skill or the, you know, you No wonder we can we before I talk to him, I tell it before we do the conversation you're asking for, I think I need some support or some understanding of what's going on here. And if it's the right friend, they might then think, okay, we have to, to kind of figure out, find a way together, and be prepared for that conversation.

So those, that's great. I have a Dharma buddy, who's very wise, and I just never brought it up with her. So I think yeah, I think if I have a conversation or two or three, right about this, I can

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I say that out of respect these things are very can be very deep inside of us and things like fear, social fear, and I think we need to have a lot of respect for and care for it and, and, and give it a to do. Thank you. Thank you.

So this is a related question.

I'm just thinking about the role of courage and speech in public life right now and how there seem to be there seems to be a dearth of that among our public leaders. And what you've said about looking at our own fears seems really helpful. But I'm wondering if you

in your own practice or in the Buddhist texts you've had have encountered anything that might speak to speaking to power?

Speaking where's that been speaking to power?

It means saying what's uncomfortable on the public stage saying what's uncomfortable in a room where the person who is leading is not leading in the ways that you've described?

Yeah, I think that what comes to mind is to know oneself well, so that we know why we're afraid to speak. You know, what makes it difficult for us. Because there's a whole whole lot of things that can make it difficult. One can be have a lot to do with ideas of who we are. And we're protecting in terms of our self concept and how we want people to see us this idea of we want everyone to like us, you know that you know, that's overrated. And so, but if we're constantly, you know, operating on that and trying to operate on that we're supposed to be liked or we're supposed to be seen a certain way or we want to show ourselves as being a certain kind of person. So the whole kind of complex around self is something that's very important in Buddhist practice to look at. I think that probably would cover a lot of different areas. The other is to be comfortable learn to be comfortable with discomfort. Because you know if you say something if you're saying truth to power if you're saying what you think is true, what people need to be said, and everyone in the audience now hates you. I think normally that would be uncomfortable. But if you've learned to be comfortable with discomfort within reason, then it can be easier said but this is this is unfortunate. I didn't plan to have this happen. This is really uncomfortable. But I know what I'm uncomfortable I just could just feel my body and ground myself my feet and, and not kind of spin out in my, my my thoughts that predict the future because my prediction of the future in this kind of situation just makes me more more anxious. And so I think this is not the time to do a lot of thinking, except I think I'm going to try to kind of figure out where the closest exit is. That might be reasonable. Okay, so we should stop maybe, and I think we should. I'm sorry. But if you want to ask me a direct afterwards, I'm happy, very happy to stay. But it's just that I don't want to keep people beyond our designated time. So thank you very much, and may your speech be a gift to the world.