

Liberating Speech: Uniting Those Who are Divided

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Well, what's on my mind for today's talk is to talk about particular teachings of the Buddha that have to do with avoiding divisive speech, and rather to speak words that unite those that are divided. To introduce this topic, there is a very important sutta where the Buddha talks about the truth. He, at some point in the text, talks about that. When you listen to someone, if you go looking for a Buddhist teacher, you should check the person out. And you check them out in three ways. You should see if in what they say, what they do, or even what they think, whether they express any of these three qualities: greed, hatred, and delusion.

Then he says, the reason why you want to check them out is that with the presence of greed, hatred, and delusion, people might not say what's true. They might say something different than what they know. But when they're free of these fires of greed, hate, and delusion, then you can know that they'll say what's true. They won't be motivated to say what's not true, because when you listen to Buddhist teachings, you're really trying to get to the truth and be with the truth. What this points to is the idea that when someone has become mature in Buddhist practice, how they act is certainly important for others. So how we act is so important that I'd like to say there are two major steps in the conclusion of Buddhist practice.

There is having insight, and then there's acting on that insight. There is having deep, transformative insight, and then acting from the way we've been transformed. Somehow, becoming spiritually mature, having some fruit of this practice that's deeply satisfying and freeing, it isn't that we then have some kind of spiritual retirement or enlightened retirement. We don't just sit on our couch and look out the window. Acting is important—what actions we do, how we live our lives is important. So there's two things there: seeing and acting.

That's true all along in Buddhist practice, that whenever we learn to see ourselves in a new way, see the world in a new way, discover ourselves in new capacities that are more healthy,

more wholesome, more freeing, more authentic, then the task is to express that, to live that in our lives. There are four areas—well, I'll say it this way: in one of the most important places for many of us, where we act in the world, where it makes a difference, where we can be the medicine for the world or we can be the illness for the world, has to do with our speech. I suspect that most of the people who come into Buddhist practice are not involved with killing and stealing and sexual misconduct causing harm, but that the area of speech is much more relevant. We do it all the time, all day long, many of us talking, or plenty of times, plenty enough, and if not to other people, to ourselves. That's the action where most of us could spend more time looking and being careful with what we do. It's one of the hardest places to really bring a lot of mindfulness to, because often in speaking we're absorbed or caught up in what we're talking about, and it's hard to really see what's going on in a deeper way.

But the Buddha talked about four different ways in which we can speak well or speak out of the practice. This idea of speaking out of the practice is such an important one, that as we settle, as we become more connected to ourselves, more aware of ourselves, more self-aware, and are touching into places of freedom, touching into places where we're not caught by our thoughts and our feelings and our motivations and our desires and aversions, where we get a felt sense of some deeper, freer place to be from, a calmer, more peaceful place. Then we want to be able to live from that place. So, if you are living from that place in relationship to speech, the Buddha has said there were four different ways of speaking, four skillful ways of speaking, or wholesome ways of speaking. Those are: to be true, to speak the truth; to speak that which unites those that are divided, to avoid divisive speech; to speak a pleasing, gentle, kind speech, things that people want to hear and remember, as opposed to harsh speech, malicious speech; and then to speak that which is good and useful and true, useful—that which is useful and good to say, as opposed to speaking that which is frivolous and chaff.

It seems to me that the word the Buddha used for this fourth one was a compound word. The first word was frivolous, and the other one was *palāla*, which literally means chaff, like chaff of the grain. The essence of the grain is the seed. That's where the life is and where the potential is. The chaff at one point was protecting the seed, but at some point the chaff is no longer needed, and it's kind of not so important. So you want to speak the seed. You want to speak the essence of things: what's useful, not what is not useful—so, frivolous or useless speech.

I'll talk a bit more about each of these, but I really wanted to focus on this speech which unites and connects those who are divided the most, so to speak. What's true? There is no Buddhism, no Buddhist practice, without it being a truth-discovering process. This text

that I referred to at the beginning about how to check out a Buddhist teacher—are they free of greed, hate, and delusion?—is called the *Caṅkī Sutta*. It's ninety-five in the Middle Length Discourses. It's one of my favourite texts in the suttas, and has there this idea of safeguarding the truth.

I'll be rather brief on—I won't tell you the whole story. A person comes to the Buddha and asks, "How can you know what's true?" The Buddha is asked, "How do you know what's true?" He says, "Well, it's true because I have faith in it," or "because it's been told to me by my tradition." The Buddha then points out, "Well, there are five things that sometimes turn out to be true and sometimes turn out not to be true." He says those are the things that we take on faith.

Let me see if I can remember them all: things that we take on faith, on our approval—because we approve of it without any more basis than that. I like it because it's the tradition, because that is what people have believed for a long time, and my people believe that, my religion. The fourth is by reasoned analogy, by analogy. I think in the modern world it's by—what's it called when you have just one example of something, and based on that one situation, you generalize and believe everything is true because of that? Now I'm going to use that one place, not as analogy, but as the evidence, and then a reasoned reflection, where we can think about things and then accept them because we think in a way that's accurate. So whether you remember those or get all those is not as important.

But then the Buddha says, if you want to safeguard the truth, you don't avoid those five ways of knowing. What you do is to state clearly the basis upon which you say something, where the authority or what the basis is for your statement. So if what you are saying is anecdotal evidence—thank you, Olivia—so sometimes it's based on anecdotal evidence. When you safeguard the truth, you're not necessarily avoiding those sources of understanding, but you clearly explain to people where you're getting your understanding. So if you have it on your own faith that "This is so," you say, "I have faith that this is so." If you have it based on just your liking, you say, "You know, what I like is this understanding. It's based on my liking. This is what I approve of, and there's no other basis for approving it than I approve of it." Or it's the tradition: "I read it in a book," or "This is what my elder said," or "This is what my religion says. I don't know if it's true, but this is the basis for it."

This idea of explaining to people, "This is how I know something," is very freeing, because one of the illnesses of our society is the use of declarative statements like, "This is true." It's phenomenal the degree to which people are opinionated these days, and have it on anecdotal evidence, have it because they like it, or there is a kind of authority that can come in a simple

declarative statement that people want—a kind of, some people want to gather around and believe and feel like they are right and justified, but there is never a questioning: Where did that belief come from? On what basis do we have that as being true? "Oh, because my friend told me, because I heard it on, you know, on an opinion, some opinion piece on the news or something." So the Buddha said, safeguard the truth by saying the basis upon which you know something.

That would change our society dramatically if we had that kind of care, and then other people can participate with us more clearly. We can be in dialogue with people in a wiser way if we don't make the declarative statement saying, "This is true," but instead we say, "On the basis of this, I read a news report. According to that news report, this is what I understand." Or, "I have this piece of evidence, and based on that evidence, this is the conclusion that I've come to through my reasoning." Then people can be in conversation with us, and it's easier for all of us to find our way to greater and greater truth, to greater and better understanding of what goes on.

Then somewhere in the sutta, someone asks the Buddha, "Well, how can we discover the truth?" The Buddha goes on from there and says, "Well, then you have to practice. Then you have to develop a higher degree of mindfulness to really see more clearly, in a deep way, what is true." Now, in this case, the Buddha is actually pointing towards the truth of personal liberation, not necessarily the truth of what's happening in the world, in politics. But the Buddha emphasizes that someone who is spiritually mature speaks the truth, and there's a wonderful reciprocity that goes on: if you are spiritually mature, you can measure that by how truthful you are. If you find out, then notice you're not being truthful, you're hedging the truth, the reciprocity is that can be a time to wake up and say, "Oh, here is some place for me to look at and practice with."

This is worthy of my attention—maybe in the moment, or maybe later—say, "What was going on for me? What honestly, truly was happening? Why did I feel like I had to lie here and not say the truth? What can I learn from this? How can I become a better person by learning from this?" So it isn't just bad news to know that we're lying. It's actually the very material with which we can go further in our Buddhist practice, if that's what you want, or further in the movement towards freedom from greed, hate, delusion. Then, so, truth.

The second form of speech for someone who is spiritually mature is to be interested in healing the divisions between people, between friends, between family, in society. That's the orientation, and that can be an orientation in all acts of speech. Is the way that I'm speaking now creating more distance or more connection? Is it creating more separation? Are peo-

ple shutting down, or turning off, or stepping away, or going away, or are we creating more connection here? That comes from understanding the value of not having division, not having a wall between people, not having silence between people, not having hostility between people.

A lot of that understanding can come from recognizing how painful it is to live inside of ourselves if we're creating division between people. And how freeing it is to not have division, not have a divisiveness between people, not to be part of that divisive world, because then it's easier for our mind, our hearts, our life, our way, orientation to the world to be open, to be receptive, to be willing to step forward, to be kind and supportive, to live in a way that's free. As soon as there's a divisiveness and we're living in that world of divisiveness, we're not really free. Even if divisiveness mostly comes from another person, it makes it difficult for us to be on the receiving end of that. So if we're being mindful and if that's what we want to do and learn to be free, then it's pointing—start tuning into the impact our speech has. Is the speech we have creating separation or creating connection?

In this politicized world that we live in now, there's plenty of people who'd rather be right than create harmony or unite people, connect people. They'd rather criticize people righteously and point out how they are wrong and try to somehow, with a hammer of their words, insist that they have to be different, they're wrong. They're bad that way. They have to do something differently. Maybe in some ways they might be right in their point of view, but is there a different way of doing it? Is there a different way of participating in our world that doesn't attack people, doesn't make people wrong or bad, but rather enters in a very honest and clear way, intentional way, to make the world a better place, to engage in dialogue, to try to correct people if they understand things wrong in a false way or not accurate? But can it be done without creating division? How can we do that?

So there's friendship, there is mutual support, that people feel they can trust us, that people can feel that as we engage in the conversation that we have their best interest in mind. Even though we might feel that they are wrong, we have their best interests in mind. For many years, I served on our ethics committees, working with ethical conflicts people had with each other. One of the approaches I had to be in the middle of that was to try to consider what was the best for each person involved. As for the people, everyone who was involved really felt that I was thinking—even if some really strong judgments need to come down—that it was, everyone understood it was for the welfare of everyone involved, as opposed to punishment or punitive. So this idea of its movement towards healing the divisions in family, healing divisions in society, that's an expression of awakening.

The third form of speech that the Buddha emphasized is speech which is not malicious. So the speech is not trying to cause harm, not trying to be hostile, not trying to goad people, not trying to irritate people, not trying to get back at people, exact revenge on people through what we say, that the speech doesn't come out of hostility. One of the reasons to avoid that is not because it's the ethical thing to do, but rather, it is a way of harming ourselves as well. As soon as we're malicious in our speech, the maliciousness might even be harming ourselves more than the person we're trying to have hostile words to. There's a kind of twisting and contracting and a wounding of our own self that if we pay really careful attention, we feel the alienation from what is most deep and good inside of us, most satisfying inside of us. That's not easy to discover, because sometimes hostile speech does have a pleasure to it, does have something that kind of feels good—to be right, it feels good to be doing something, it feels good to somehow get revenge, or it can feel effective, "I'm protecting myself or trying to create good."

Something important is happening here in doing this. So if that's the momentum of the action, and we're not really paying attention inside, then we don't really feel the impact it has on us personally. Also, we probably don't pay much attention to the impact we have socially. Harsh speech can be effective in the short term, but it's not effective in the long term. It creates division. It creates people who are hostile towards us or afraid of us. It's more and more difficult to create friendly, harmonious, supportive, and mutually beneficial relationships in this world.

Then the fourth kind of speech is useless speech and chaff, frivolous speech. Now, this takes some care to consider, because sometimes a speech that seems very trivial and maybe even useless in itself does have use when it's creating a sense of connection, a rapport with people—you know, talking about the weather. We don't, you know, I don't need to talk about the weather, and it doesn't do me any good or the other person any good, but it's just a way of developing rapport and connection and warmth between us, having some kind of way of bridge to human connectedness. So that, I wouldn't say, is not useless. But there are ways of speaking which have no benefit. Maybe it doesn't connect any deeper human connectivity between people. It's just kind of filling the space. Or it's a way of distracting ourselves from things. Or it's a way of staying busy so we don't have to really face and deal with what's really important to deal with. It's an avoidance mechanism.

Someone who is spiritually mature, at least in the Buddhist world, sometimes has a lot of silence or knows how to pause because they don't have to fill the conversation with empty conversation. They're willing to feel the connection they have with people regardless of whether

they're talking or not. There's a profound connection we can feel with each other when we're not talking, and to be with people, have that ability to be silent together and feel connected. I think it's one of the great pleasures of life to be, to stop talking and just be and be present. So these four things, and then a few more words about avoiding divisive speech and promoting, bringing together the people who are, you know, divided. I'll read to you how the Buddha says it.

Such a person does not divide people from each other, but rather he unites. The person reunites those who are divided, and is a promoter of friendships. He who enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, and a speaker of words that promote concord. So how do we become a person who supports reuniting those who are divided? One of the areas where that's happening in our society right now is the basic fabric of the, you know, I think, one of the central fabrics of the American family. It's remarkable that so many of the Black people in this country are descendants of slaves who have white fathers back in their ancestry, that they share the same bloodline as white people, that we're family to a great extent. White people and Black people in this country are kind of family, and they were divided. Some of them back in slave times were divided at birth, and they were kept divided through Jim Crow, and kept divided down through the ages.

How do we take this mere fabric of American family and bring it together to end less destructiveness that has existed for so long? That is where the other elements of Right Speech the Buddha talked about are so important. The idea of truth is not just important for us personally, but as we learn about the truth, then it's only through the truth that sometimes there can really be a reuniting, a reconciliation. It's no accident in South Africa they had the Truth and Reconciliation Council, the committee that really needed the truth to come out. It's really, to me, it just continues to be a kind of a shock, actually, how much of American history I never learned, and how much it's still coming out about the horrific aspects of what happened to African Americans and indigenous people in this country. To hear, to really learn about that challenge and what, you know, I think we have to know—I feel we have to know about that history, a kind of truth-telling, to really be able to go further as a society and begin to do the reconciliation, the uniting, the people there who are divided, and then to be devoted to non-malicious speech, and to learn how to have the conversations that are not divisive.

I don't think that's easy. But for those of us who are doing Buddhist practice, I hope we get a lot of practice in our ordinary everyday life at using our mindfulness, understanding that part of this path of liberation is to find ways to speak that do not create division, do not create walls

between people, even between spouses, even between family members. How do we learn to speak? How do we learn to speak honestly, truthfully, say what we need to say, and what's necessary? But how do we do it in such a way that we don't alienate people from ourselves or make them angry and shut down? How do we find a way to speak that is supportive for everyone, including ourselves? That is a powerful skill. That's a skill that's really well worth learning. We can learn a lot of it through mindfulness, just a lot of care and attention to what motivates us to speak, what's really going on inside of ourselves, so we don't do things which are unskillful.

It's possible to learn and study all kinds of modalities or all kinds of exercises for learning how to speak more wisely. Nonviolent communication is one of them, but there's many—you know, take it. It doesn't take that much to learn, and then to practise it, and now, and to become good at it slowly over time. It's to develop our abilities through the practice of it, and to practise with our friends. If we have really good friends, you can say, "You know, I'm trying to learn to speak in a different way and experiment, and it's ok. Maybe you'll be patient with me as I try to find a different way of speaking."

So what I've tried to say today is, one of the things is that this concern and care around how we speak is really a powerful place for mindfulness practice to live, and that it's a way of learning to express the good, the benefits, the ways we're growing through the practice. Because as we grow and develop, become freer, it's really important to express it, to live it. Freedom which is not expressed is a kind of not freedom, and so this is the way to live it. And then, to the degree to which we can't do it, we don't know how to unite those who are divided, to create a deeper and deeper connection with each other. That itself is a mirror to help us further with our own inner life, to develop. This is where our mindfulness can go, to work out the kinks inside, the unresolved places, the challenges we have. It's not easy to do this, to learn mindful speaking and come. But boy, is it worth a while. It's a great thing to do, and I'm confident that if we as a community of practitioners can give care and attention to speech, that it'll be for the benefit of many people, and certainly for yourself as well. It's something our society needs these days, and I hope that your Buddhist practice can be of benefit to the world around you. Thank you.