

# Wise Speech (1 of 5) Is it True?

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It's Monday morning, and we are starting a new theme for the next five days. This theme is mindfulness of speaking – paying attention and using the five criteria the Buddha gave for how to consider what to say, how to say it, and when to speak.

Wise speech is an extension of what we experience ideally in meditation. Meditation is a vehicle to begin experiencing ourselves without being in conflict with anything. It's the experience in the moment of releasing our resistance, our guardedness, our bracing, and the push and drive of our desires to have, want, and get, and our fear. Meditation is a vehicle for us to begin to experience ourselves in a more peaceful, easeful way.

That experience of more calm, ease, and intimacy with ourselves is not meant to be only for meditation. It's really how we want to live our lives. We don't necessarily want to live bracing ourselves against life, being afraid and caught in the grip of desire and craving. We want to be able to live our lives with ease and a degree of freedom. That's the Buddhist idea. If we begin to taste freedom and ease in meditation, then we have a foundation and a reference point for what they might be like in daily life as well.

We want to go into our lives and begin exploring how we lose that ease and how we might find it in daily life. One of the more significant places where this can be explored is in speech.

There's a Tibetan Buddhist saying: "When in meditation, watch your mind. When in public, watch your speech." That's partly because speech – what we say and how we say it – is a window to understand what motivates us. What's the background within us for what we're going to say? It isn't that we watch our speech because it's the ethical thing to do. We watch what we want to say and how we say it so that we can begin exploring the questions of how we get stressed, how we get caught, and how we lose our freedom.

A lot of our social interactions happen through speech. If we want to find how to be free socially, speech is a fantastic place to bring mindfulness and to study what's going on for us. Speech is also an ethical place, in the sense that our interactions with a wide range of people happen through speech, through what we say or write, or what we sign if we use sign language.

If we want to have beneficial effects on others and not cause harm, being careful and mindful with our speech is also very important. It is important for the inner life and for the outer life.

And the wonderful coincidence is that the care we take to not harm ourselves through speech involves the same care we take to not harm others. The two go together. We harm ourselves when we speak inappropriately; we harm others when we speak inappropriately. So we care for both in watching our speech.

There are five criteria that Buddha gave for how to study our speech – what to look for, and what can guide us in speaking. Each day I will talk about one of these criteria. Today I want to talk about the first one, which is to speak the truth.

We can ask ourselves, is what we're about to say true? If it's not true, then perhaps we shouldn't say it. If it is true, then the other criteria come into play to help us know if we should say it, because not all truth should be spoken. Some truths are actually hurtful to people and cause a lot of harm. So we begin with the question of truth.

It's interesting that we use the reference point of truth as a guideline for speaking. In the five ethical precepts of Buddhism, the precept around right speech is not a dedication to truth, but a dedication to not lying or speaking false words. I think there's an important distinction between these two. False speech is intentionally misleading; we're trying to say something that is not true. That's the precept. It's easier to notice when we're intentionally going to mislead someone, speak untruths, or manipulate the situation than it is to recognize what is true.

The precepts have a clearer standard for what we are intentionally doing that causes harm – intentionally misleading people in such a way that they may later feel manipulated, hurt, or even betrayed. That is a serious complication in our social interactions. People can't trust us because we're clearly misleading them.

The dedication to speaking the truth is more complicated because it's not always clear what the truth is. Different people have different philosophies of what it is that we call the truth. Some people say, "I'm going to speak my truth," as if what they say is the truth when it's really an interpretation. Or it's a statement based on strong, deep preferences we have. To call a statement "my truth" when it's an interpretation or a preference is not accurate for the Buddha's idea of truth.

When the Buddha talked about not lying, misleading, or making false statements, the reference point he used is what today would be spoken in a court of law. We would not misspeak or say false things in a court of law because of the huge impact it would have. The idea of what's false and what's not false doesn't often fall into philosophical questions about what's true.

But when we start making statements about reality, about life, then what is actually true and how we know what's true is often more complicated. Here's where the Buddha had some very interesting ideas about truth.

One of them is a wonderful teaching called "preserving the truth" or "safeguarding the truth." If you are dedicated to truth, how do you safeguard the truth? He says you safeguard it by stating to people the basis upon which you make a statement, like a propositional statement. The basis of it means the ground, the reason, or where this point of view comes from.

For example, if we say something is true, but it's a belief or article of faith, then we would preface our statement, "I believe X." Or, "It is my faith, I have faith that X is true." Now that is a true statement because we don't know if X is true or false, but we do know that we can reliably say, "This is my belief, this is my faith." For the Buddha, we can preserve the truth that way. We're allowed to say what we believe but we should preserve the truth so other people have a clearer sense of what's going on and can respond to us, understand us, cooperate with us, and communicate effectively with us.

We say, "It's my faith that this is true," as opposed to making a declarative statement, "X is so." With the latter, there's no room for conversation; it's hard for people to be in dialogue. Sometimes declarative statements are even statements of aggression. But saying, "It's my faith," or "This is my assumption" is what we call "the basis" for what we believe or what we're going to say.

The Buddha gave five criteria for how to safeguard the truth when making statements (MN 95, the Caṅkī sutta). These have more to do with spiritual or philosophical truths than with truths in everyday life.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says that the first two are more emotional. One is based on faith and the other is based on our simple gut approval – it just feels right. We think it's right. There's no reflection or analysis of the situation. So then we might say, "It's my assumption that's true," or, "I think that this is the case," or, "I just know". Again, we safeguard the truth by saying it comes out of us. We haven't thought about it or reflected on it. We haven't analyzed it, but this is where we take a stand because we believe in this. There is more room for conversation because it's not a declarative statement, which makes it hard to engage in a conversation.

The next criterion is reasoning based on analogy or anecdotes. I think that we have an epidemic of anecdotal claims of truth, meaning that there's one instance or one example of something happening, and then that becomes proof that something is true. But saying, "I've come to the conclusion based on this one example" is closer to being a statement of truth, as opposed to saying, "This is true." This way, there's a humility to our statements of truth. There's a willingness to not make declarative statements of authority. Instead, we can say, "I take this to be true based on this anecdote or this analogy."

The fourth way to safeguard the truth is to rationally and logically work something out. Then you can say, "My logic tells me that this is true." If you say it that way, then you can lay out the logic for other people, and they can participate in coming to that conclusion. But again, if you just make a declarative statement, they can't participate. They can't figure out what's going on.

The fifth way is based on tradition. In the ancient language when there was no written text, the literal expression was "oral tradition." "Based on tradition," we could say, "This is what I've been told" – this is what my religion believes, this is the tradition of my elders, this is what my culture believes, this is a traditional thing to believe. If you say it that way, then there's a context for people to understand where this belief comes from, as opposed to just making a declarative statement.

When the Buddha was giving this teaching, someone asked, "How do we discover the truth?" The Buddha taught that we discover it through our body. He literally uses the word "body" here. We witness it through our bodies. The spiritual truth that he's pointing to is discovered through our direct experience. To be able to know and say, "Through my direct experience, this is what I know" is also safeguarding the truth because direct experience is a particular reference point for understanding what's going on.

Taking care around truth and the statements we make is very important in our current society. There's a lot of willingness to spout opinions or make declarative statements that don't really allow for harmony, communication, or real dialogue.

So be careful when you speak. First, don't mislead, don't speak falsehoods. Ask yourself if this is true, and then additionally ask yourself, "On what basis do I believe this to be true?" Then share that basis with others. This is a way of safeguarding the truth.

Thank you for today, and I look forward to our next presentation.