

Wise Speech (3 of 5) Is It Nourishing?

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Gil Fronsdal

Good morning and thank you for being here. The topic for this week is five questions we can ask ourselves about speech. Asking questions is an interesting approach to a spiritual life – a life that asks questions. When I was studying Zen, rather than asking what they want, the question the Zen students carry with them is, “What’s being requested of us in any given situation?” What’s the request of the thing that we’re doing, the people we’re with, the activities that are happening around us? That’s a very different orientation than asking “What’s in it for me, myself, and mine? What do I want here? What are my preferences?”

To turn that around, “What’s the request?” A request does not mean a demand. It means, “What is the opportunity that’s being requested of me and asked of me?” That’s an example of using a question. What is the request?

With speech, we have these questions we ask ourselves so that maybe we can free ourselves from ways in which we’re caught in the grip of me, myself, and mine, where we’re being selfish and the orientation is excessively, “What do I want? What are my preferences?”

The question that I started off with this week is, “What is true?” If you’re going to speak, what is true? Yesterday the question was, “Is it timely?” Is this the time for something?

Today the question is, “Is it supportive, soothing, gentle, or heartwarming?” Exactly what the original Pali word is, is not so clear, but it is clear that it is the opposite of harsh speech. Some people translate it as “gentle,” some people as “polite.” Today I’m thinking about it in terms of the idea in modern psychology that we are wired sometimes to either fight or flight. However, more recently people have said we are also wired for something very different. We’re wired for “approach and soothe.”

If there’s a child who is in distress, we approach, comfort, and reassure the child. Instead of fight or flight, we ask, “What is it that needs to be reassured?” When there is conflict between people, we sometimes speak of smoothing things out. The word “smoothing” is close to the meaning of the Pali word. Some people translate it as “soft.”

But I’d like to point to something deeper: the principle that we are learning through meditation how to not harm ourselves. Regarding the idea of speaking either harshly or soothingly, some of the descriptions in the text are to speak words that are “gentle, pleasing to the ear, lovable, and go to the heart, are courteous, desired by the many” (so other people would like to hear them), “and agreeable.” The text is pointing to a way of speaking that is the opposite of harsh, painful, uncomfortable, or rude speech, which somehow leaves people feeling uncomfortable.

In meditation, we’re learning to do that for ourselves. We’re learning to talk to ourselves in ways that are not harsh. We’re learning to talk to ourselves in ways that are reassuring, inspiring, or go to the heart. In meditation, we are learning how to relate to ourselves in a deeper way. We can ask ourselves, “What is being requested of us by our own heart? What is our inner life requesting of us? What needs our care, our reassurance, or our support?”

I know some people who report that they are harsher and more critical of themselves than they would ever dream to be of anyone else. Some people only discover this when they sit down to meditate – how hard they are towards themselves, and how the tone of the inner voice that’s talking, if that’s the way they think, is quite harsh and maybe sometimes even angry or cruel.

In meditation, we're learning to shift the relationship we have with ourselves, often not by doing it differently, but by letting go of how we are doing it. We soften, relax, and quiet the mind. I like to think of the harsh, critical, and angry mind as a surface mind that actually requires a lot more activity. It begins to quiet down as we meditate. And the quieter we are, the more thinking can come from a deeper place inside. Then thinking can come from places where there's a tendency to care, approach, soothe, and be kind.

It is quite powerful to learn the different impacts on us of how we speak to ourselves – what the inner voice is like. Because then we can also learn what that impact is on us when we are speaking to people in harsh ways in the world. We start feeling within ourselves the difference between harsh speech and soothing speech, smoothing speech, soft, gentle speech, or speech that goes right to the heart. This goes to a Dharma principle: we're looking to live a life that is inwardly nourishing for us and inwardly nourishing for others.

Those two effects are not that separate. If we are harsh towards others– if we speak in words that are frightening or discomforting for other people – we are doing the same to ourselves. We partake in the impact of harsh speech. It's actually painful for us to speak that way, even though we don't realize it. Sometimes we are motivated by the purpose for which we speak – for example, to push people away, to get revenge, to attack someone, to vent our anger. We're focused on our purpose and it seems righteous, or we seem more important that way, or it feels good to be able to say someone else is wrong. We're so focused on our purpose that we don't really feel the impact within us. But harsh speech towards others is harsh for us.

We partake in the quality of our acts of speech. So if our acts of speech are – as the Buddha describes – gentle, pleasing to the ear, lovable, courteous, going to the heart, and many people would like to hear them, then we are nourished by that. And we hope that others are nourished. We can live a life that is willing to approach and soothe.

I've encountered people who are very angry – not necessarily towards me – and I found the important thing to do was to step towards them, soothe them, and quiet them. I've done that with small children who are angry. I step towards them, approach them, and reassure them. To be angry or harsh with a child who is upset just makes it worse for the child. It also makes it worse for us.

Speech has an impact in both directions: on ourselves inside and on the world outside. If we speak in harsh words, it has one impact. If we speak in gentle, courteous, soothing, smooth, soft, inspiring, and heartfelt words, it has a very different impact on self and others. As we go deeper and deeper in meditation, we realize that it's simply not worth it to do anything with our speech that is not nourishing or is harmful to us. It's simply not worth it. It goes against what's really valuable and supportive for ourselves and the world.

This is not an ethical issue or a moral principle, but rather, it's as simple as not putting your hand on a hot stove. Meditation makes us so sensitive to the impact of how we live that of course, we're going to live in a kind way. Of course, we're going to live in a non-harsh, non-aggressive way. So we ask: Is our speech gentle? Is it soothing, soft, inspiring, and reassuring? These are the questions for this fourth criterion that the Buddha gave. Are the words we're speaking nourishing? (This is my favorite way of saying it right now.) Then the follow-up question is, "If they're not nourishing, is it really worth it?"

Thank you very much.