

# Wise Speech (4 of 5) Is it Beneficial?

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This morning we come to the fourth question we can ask ourselves when we want to speak wisely and effectively: is it beneficial? Is it for the welfare of self and others?

A statement might be true. A statement that we're going to say might be timely; it's the right time. The way we say a comment might be gentle and appropriate. It might be done kindly, supportively, and in a nourishing way. However, with the person we're talking to or the situation we're in, what we're going to say has no benefit. This may be because people are not going to listen to it; they are closed off from hearing it and are too distracted. Then it's not beneficial to say something because it has no impact and no onward-leading purpose. There is no purpose in saying it if it's not going to be received.

Rather than exhausting ourselves by insisting we have to say something because it's true or because we're struggling to solve a problem and make things better – ideally, we would have a conversation if that's the case – but if our words aren't going to go anywhere, if there's no benefit from saying them, and no receptivity to what we're saying, why tire ourselves out? Why exhaust ourselves? Maybe we need to wait until the time is beneficial. It comes back to the idea of timeliness. It might be timely for you; it might be the only time you have. But, if it's not beneficial to others to say it, or there is no purpose in saying it because it will not be received, then maybe it's not the time to say it or not the thing to say.

If we ask ourselves the question, "Is it beneficial?" then we might see that saying the truth right now is not beneficial. Even saying the truth kindly might not be beneficial right now. This may not be what the person needs to hear. This may not be onward-leading.

The word "benefit" here is a very significant word. How do we know what's beneficial? How do we know what is for people's welfare? In Pali, one of the meanings of the word "*attha*" is "purpose." It means to speak for a purpose. In other words, don't speak pointlessly. Don't just speak because you want to speak. Don't speak the truth, even in a kind and timely way, if it doesn't really have a purpose. When you ask the question, "Is it beneficial?" a very powerful version of that question is to ask yourself, "For what purpose am I saying what I'm going to say? What is the purpose?"

There can be multiple layers of purpose in what we say. If someone asks you for directions on the street, you could say the purpose of responding is to give them directions. But there might be a deeper layer where we really want to impress people by knowing the right directions and we never want to be wrong. I visited one country where I was told that no one will ever admit that they don't know directions. So you have to ask at least two or three people because the first person might give you the wrong directions since they think they have to do something. So maybe there's wanting to impress. Maybe below that is a fear of rejection or the fear that people will judge us negatively if we don't give a good answer.

There are all these layers of purpose when we speak. There are all these things going on. To ask the question, "What's my purpose for saying something?" can be really valuable because sometimes the purpose we have for saying something is not really the wisest. It's very important to understand ourselves well enough to know why we're going to say what we're going to say, even if it's true and kind.

The expression the Buddha uses to talk about speaking what is beneficial is actually a compound word. The word for beneficial, "*attha*", has many meanings: "welfare," "benefit," or "advantage." It can also mean "a blessing" – "to speak a blessing." It can also mean "to speak what's purposeful, to speak for a purpose." It can

mean speech that is “related to the goal” – in Buddhism, sometimes *attha* refers to the ultimate goal of liberation and freedom.

So that's what *attha* can mean, but it's a compound word. The second half is *samhitā*, which means “possessed with,” “connected with,” or “endowed with.” Speak words endowed with benefit. Speak words endowed with purpose. Speak words connected to the goal. This relates to what I said in the guided meditation: that we speak not only what's beneficial for a purpose – for the person we're speaking to and for the situation – but we also speak in a way that's connected or endowed with the purpose of Buddhism.

If the goal is to not cling, then speak in a way that has no clinging in it. If the goal of Buddhism is to be free of greed, hate, and delusion – one of the primary ways that the Buddha talks about the goal of liberation or enlightenment is the absence of greed, hatred, and confusion or delusion – can we speak in a way that partakes of that? Can our speech be endowed with elements of that?

This fourth criterion really connects our speech to our practice. Our speech itself can be endowed with practice and can be as rich as our meditation practice. The core aspect of Buddhist practice is not just to be mindful. The core aspect is to be mindful *so that* we can be in the world without clinging, and without greed, hatred, and delusion.

Nowadays with all the hatred that's going on in our society, it's even more important to understand the value of non-hatred. It's important to speak up for truth, for what's right, for the ending of brutality, harm, hatred, and economic exploitation. It's important to speak against all these things that go on in our society and in our world. But it's important to do this in a way that's endowed with liberation, endowed with the qualities of the goal of practice itself. The means of the practice, the means to freedom, should contain elements of the goal. It's not that the means and the goal are the same, but the means should reflect or mirror the goal.

This is why the issue of what's happening in relation to our speech is so important. It's in this relationship that we can begin exercising and practicing pieces of that goal: pieces of non-clinging, non-greed, non-hatred, non-confusion. We're not confused if we know we can always be mindful. We're not confused if we know that the purpose of all we're doing is to do what we're doing without clinging. There are multiple layers of purposes, and this is one.

Speaking can be an integral, essential form of Buddhist practice. I hope that we speak. I hope that we learn to speak up strongly and clearly about all kinds of issues with our friends and our family any time we need to speak up. In our society, when we need to stand up for civil rights, to stand up against brutality, against the harm that people are doing to each other politically in all kinds of ways, of course, we should speak up.

Can we speak while remembering that we're practicing for the greatest benefit, the greatest welfare of self and others? The greatest welfare is found through exercising our freedom to relate to what's happening without any greed, without any hatred whatsoever, and without any confusion or delusion about what's going on.

This is radical. When we are speaking and we ask ourselves, “Is it beneficial?”, this is a very rich, important, multifaceted question. Is it beneficial? Is it purposeful? Is it spoken in a beneficial way? Is it spoken in a way that's endowed with qualities of liberation? Is it endowed with non-clinging?

As I said in the guided meditation, we will cling. Unless we're fully enlightened, clinging will happen. The important question is: when we see clinging, how do we relate to that? Can we not cling to the clinging? When we have impulses that shouldn't be acted on, that are harmful, or when difficult aspects of ourselves arise – of course, things like that arise – the important thing is not that we have these difficult thoughts or even hate. The important thing is, do we see it and do we relate to it in a way that is non-clinging, without picking it up, without being involved, without saying it?

When we ask ourselves the question, “Is this speech beneficial in all the ways I'm talking about?”, if it turns out the answer is no in significant ways, then don't say it. We might need to find the inner strength to not say it. It's hard sometimes not to speak. The impulse to speak, the drive to speak, the need to speak is so strong. It's so connected to the deep emotional reservoirs or experiences that we have.

But if it's going to cause harm, don't say it in a way that causes harm. Find a different way to speak. Find a way to speak about what's happening for you, what's happening in the world, and what's going on, in a way that is beneficial, has a good purpose, and is endowed with and connected to the goal of practice itself – connected to freedom, compassion, and love. That is how to speak what is beneficial.

See you tomorrow. Thank you.