

# Wise Speech (5 of 5) Do I Have Goodwill?

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Greetings. Today is the final talk on wise speech. There are five questions we can ask based on the five criteria the Buddha suggests for wise speech and for when we should speak. The first is the question, "Is it true?" The second is, "Is what I am going to say timely?" The third is, "Is it kind, nourishing, supportive, or pleasing? Is it gentle (the opposite of harsh)?" The fourth is, "Is it beneficial?" Today's question is not so much about the words themselves, but asks, "When I speak, is there a mind and heart of loving-kindness (*mettacitta*)?" If we can speak from a mind of goodwill and friendliness, then we speak.

This is a high standard. It is interesting that the Buddha applies these five criteria in talking to his monastics. He said there are occasions when a monastic needs to be admonished or receive some feedback or maybe even needs to be criticized. The Buddha gives these five criteria for when we go to someone in order to provide this feedback.

We may have some difficult words to say to someone about their behavior, or we may be going to stand up in a demonstration and protest, expressing ourselves in very clear strong terms about what we feel is right or what we clearly feel that we want to oppose.

The Buddha recognizes there are situations when it's appropriate to have difficult conversations. He encourages us to ask ourselves these five questions, ending with, "Do I have a heart of kindness?" Certainly, we don't want to reproach someone from a mind of hatred, ill will, or anger that has hostility in it. There can be a fierce "No!" with anger but without hostility. In fact, there can be goodwill and kindness towards the person.

This is a high standard in challenging situations where there are difficult discussions. Some people might feel that having kindness, goodwill, and friendliness is too high a standard and it's hopeless – they'll never be able to speak to someone. But the Dharma does have high standards. That's why we have a practice. That's why we work with ourselves and gradually learn. We move in the direction where we can live a life of goodwill and can have that heart.

Goodwill does not mean we don't act, speak up, protest, or give strong feedback to people that we feel need to receive it. But we do it from a place of goodwill where we really consider whether it is beneficial for everyone. We ask ourselves, "Am I speaking from a place that benefits me so I'm not harming myself as I speak? Is it beneficial for our community? Is it beneficial for the person I'm talking with? Am I doing it in ways that are not harsh? Am I following the five criteria?"

The Buddha does recognize the importance of speaking up, but with these criteria. The idea of acting and speaking with kindness, with *metta*, is taught in a very particular place – for a monastic. There's a tremendous emphasis on non-violence and non-harming. However, if a monastic is being physically attacked, the monastic is allowed to strike out for the purpose of escaping. It's possible to throw up your arms to block someone who's going to hit you in order to stop the hit so that you can leave and get out of the way – not to fight the person, but to become safe. So in the Buddhist monastic community, you're allowed a certain degree of contact like this.

However, if the monastic is going to do this, there is a criterion: there has to be kindness in the monastic's heart. There has to be *metta*, a mind of loving-kindness. This monastic precept or rule is probably behind the words of

the famous Indian teacher Munindraji, who was a teacher for Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg and introduced them to *vipassanā*.

There was a Western woman who (I think) was accosted on the street in India. She came to Munindra and asked, "What do I do if someone accosts me in some way?" Munindra said, "With all the loving-kindness you can muster, you hit them over their head with your umbrella." I think the purpose was in order to escape, to make oneself safe. The emphasis is not that we are supposed to hit people all the time with the umbrella, but there are ways in which we are supposed to take care of ourselves and make ourselves safe. There is a very high standard – to do it with loving-kindness, with *metta*.

I'm sure some people will strongly protest that if they act with kindness, they can't be safe; it's not appropriate; people deserve our hostility; they deserve something different; *metta* is too forgiving or soft; we're not strong enough in our protest or our caring for ourselves. I suggest that loving-kindness might look soft because there is a softness to it, but it can also be very strong. There can be strength in showing up with kindness, not giving in to hostility, and not speaking harshly.

The whole idea of these five criteria for wise speech is not meant to be wishy-washy. It's not evasive or vague, or saying things in such a broad, soft way that no one really knows where we stand. It's possible to speak our mind quite definitively about what's going on, to be really clear and precise and even strong in our statements, and while doing that, for people to feel that we're not here to diminish, hate, or dismiss anyone. We are here to speak strongly with kindness, looking for what is beneficial, with a caring voice, not with harshness and hostility.

People will feel that we know how to speak what's true, actual, and close in. People can rely on our words because they are not wild interpretations, assumptions, judgments, or abstract blame. Our words stay close to the experience of what's happening here. They are timely. If not now, then when? This is a good time.

So we cultivate a heart and mind of kindness, goodwill, and friendliness. There are different ways of translating *metta* into English. Probably each of you will find some of these words more useful than others. The word "loving-kindness," which is the common translation, is a beautiful translation of *metta*. For some people, it might be a bit too idealistic or vague (but how do you do that?) because it's possible to have goodwill for others without loving them.

If the idea is to have to have *loving-kindness* for everyone, that might be too high a standard. But instead, we can aim for always having goodwill, always approaching and being with people with well-wishing for everyone, including for the person we're in conflict with, and with ourselves. "Yes, there's well-wishing, and I don't have to love you. I don't have to be gushing with kindness." There's basic human friendliness, goodwill, and well-wishing. That is where we're coming from, and doing that is beneficial and nourishing for us.

In the Dharma, we are always using as a reference point that which nourishes and supports our own inner growth and development. Our growth does not have to exist apart from our engagement in the world. In fact, our engagement in the world has greater value for the world if we are staying close to the development of our own freedom, kindness, honesty, and capacity for being present in an aware way, and are nourished from the inside.

I would encourage you to experiment with the five questions and become adept at them, and maybe have conversations with other people about each of the questions. Learn what people think about them, and really massage them, work with them, and make them part of your life. See how the conversation begins to shift and change your perspective on things, and also your understanding of yourself. In the process, you'll learn to become a wise speaker and a wise person.

Thank you very much.