

The Dharmic Life (2 of 5) Attention to Speech

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This week's topic is how to replicate in your daily life some of the benefits that come from living a religious life in the Dharma, such as on retreat or in a monastery. Some people have a strong desire to plunge more deeply into the practice. But, because of family or work, they cannot go off and spend some serious amount of time devoting themselves to the Dharma.

It is quite a wonderful desire to deepen that way. I support it wholeheartedly. But you can benefit a lot by practicing in ordinary life. When we practice in everyday life – not leaving our lives to go someplace special – our practice has an honesty and richness to it. We are addressing some of our life's issues rather than avoiding them, thinking that we can somehow make progress while living in a monastery.

There are some simple ways that, in principle, are not very complicated. In practice, they can be quite significant and profound. Yesterday I talked about bringing more attention to the body – to living a more embodied life. To come back to your body over and over again throughout the day with whatever you are doing. To see and understand what is happening in the body, learning from the experience of the body.

Today, I want to emphasize speech – how we talk. It can be speaking with our voice. It can be electronic communication. It can also be our self-talk – how we talk to ourselves.

There is a lot to say about Right Speech and speaking well. There is a tendency in Buddhism to look at speech ethically. We evaluate speech by its impact and how we do it

Another way is to practice mindfulness of speaking. Not so much looking at whether what we are saying is beneficial, true, kind, or timely. These are all good criteria for knowing how we speak. But, to simply bring non-judgmental awareness – mindfulness – to our communication itself.

As we do this, we become more aware of how we are as we speak. What prompts us to speak? What are the emotions? What are the body sensations? How is the body activated as we speak? Are we settled in our bodies? Are we outside our bodies? Are we leaning or pulling back with our bodies? What is happening with our body as we speak?

What emotions do we have when speaking? To what degree is there impatience when speaking? To what degree is there forcefulness? (We have to get our words out. "Can't that person stop talking so I can.")

There are a whole slew of things to become aware of if you start becoming attuned to what is happening with you as you speak. So practice mindfulness of speaking.

One reason why this is so powerful is that speaking is the tip of the iceberg. It represents so much of our beliefs, assumptions, desires, aversions, and orientation about life. It also represents our beliefs about the purpose of life and our sense of self, which has been constructed and lived with. So many things are underneath the tip of that iceberg. If we stop and take a good look, we start seeing some of those underlying things. We learn so much about ourselves.

If you want to do one thing that can reveal so much – before speaking, ask yourself, "Why do I want to speak?" Do not settle for the first answer. "I want to speak because they asked me for directions, and I want to give them directions." That may be true, but you might be overlooking the benefits of this exercise.

Yes, they asked for directions, and you wanted to give them. But more deeply, “Oh, I’m trying to prove to them that I’m a good direction-giver.” Or: “I want them to like me. I don’t want to seem unfriendly.” All kinds of things can be there. Often there is not just one reason why we speak, but multiple ones.

It can be quite humbling to see all the motivations that we have. It is a window into what is under the water of the iceberg. We can see so much more of who we are.

An interesting area of speech to look at is the idea that sometimes leaders lead in front or they lead from behind. Leading in front is about leading the charge and pushing ahead, bringing everyone along, or encouraging everyone to follow.

Leading from behind is more about encouraging. It is more like letting other people take the lead. It gives them enough space to be who they are and go forward. And then, to offer support and guidance from behind, like a shepherd. Offer encouragement from behind so that other people do not feel like they are in the wake of a leader. They do not feel like they are only doing someone else’s bidding.

In the same way, are you asserting yourself when you have self-talk? Are you asserting yourself when you speak to others? Are you pushing ahead? Do you have an agenda that you want to achieve? Are you leading in the front? Are you pushing yourself into the forefront?

Or is there an appropriate way to lead from behind with your self-talk and how you talk to other people? Leading from behind means that we are not asserting ourselves. We are not trying to manipulate or change situations in a driven way.

We certainly can still be involved in changing what needs to be changed. But there is more of a sense of cooperation and receptivity. We are more in touch with and connected to ourselves than if we are advancing in the front and leading the whole show.

By being ahead of ourselves – focusing on what we want to accomplish with our speech – we often lose touch with ourselves. We are less in touch with our feelings, emotions, or centeredness. We are not resting in ourselves. Certainly, I have talked when I felt like I was in front of myself. I was not really inhabiting my body.

When we lead from behind, we are at rest here. We are connected to ourselves and know what is happening. We can track our feelings and emotions. We can more easily recognize when we are speaking in unwholesome ways. If we are leading in the front, we are not following and tracking ourselves as carefully. We are focusing on what we are trying to accomplish and get across.

So, to become aware of what we are doing when we speak. Why do we speak? Why are we saying what we want to say? Go through the layers of that. Be aware of mindfulness of the body as you speak. Be aware of what is happening in the bigger picture around what you are saying or wanting to say.

Are *you* being driven by your speech? Are your speech, thoughts, and ideas ahead of you, pulling everything else about you with them? Are you leading from the front? Or is your thinking coming along with some deeper motivation – some deeper way of being in the world? Is your thinking guiding and offering some leadership from behind, where you are connected and supportive of everything that is who you are?

Mindfulness of speaking leads us to have more choices about what we say. We can track what we are about to say and notice speech that is wholesome and unwholesome. We can notice speech that might have negative consequences or be hurtful versus speech that is supportive, kind, and positive.

We are better able to choose *not* to say something. To wait and not speak until we have something more useful to say or have a more useful way of speaking.

There is an ancient saying that speech is more like an arrow than a sword. When you shoot an arrow, you cannot pull it back. When you pull a sword out of a sheath, you can always put it back in the sheath. So be careful with your words and what comes out of your mouth.

By practicing mindfulness of speaking and leading from behind, we can see better what is coming. We know what words want to be said. We have much more wisdom. If our words are going to be like a sword and stab

someone, we can see that and put the sword back in its sheath. Then we can see if we can say something supportive, helpful, or beneficial in the situation.

Of course, you do not have to practice mindfulness of speaking. But if you want to live a dharmic life – to have the Dharma much more fully in your life in a way that is as beneficial as going on retreats or into a monastery – this is a way to do it. Tremendous benefits and good can come out of this.

Slowly start practicing mindfulness of speaking. Do not feel like you have to do all or nothing. Do not go from zero to 60 mph in three seconds with mindful speaking. Maybe you do it over days, where you slowly begin to stretch yourself into this world of mindful speaking so that you are leading from behind. You are tracking and watching. You are attentive as you speak to the whole world happening in yourself.

A great benefit is that you speak to others in a more beneficial way. You can also begin shifting how you talk to yourself. Perhaps, you will have more wholesome self-talk rather than unwholesome.

So, in the next 24 hours, you may want to look at and practice mindful speaking. Talk with friends about mindful speaking. Ask them what they have learned. Tell them what you are learning or what you are experimenting with. Then do the experiments. Do the exercises and see what you learn. Pause more, and thereby be more mindful. Thank you.