

Wise Speech (1 of 5) Timely Speech

August 28, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

communication, right speech, gestures, email, challenges, conflicts, harm, benefit, well-being, healthy, relationships, trust, safety, truthful, pleasant, calming, beneficial, kind, loving-kindness, resistant, defensive, shut down, receptive, understanding, productive, supportive, useful, open, impatient, rushed, care, doors

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Hello on this Monday as we begin a new five-part series. The topic for this week is conventionally called “wise speech,” or “right speech.”

A few things introductory words about this: In the time of the Buddha, people communicated with each other only through speech, maybe through gestures as well. There was no writing to speak of. There were certainly no other forms of communication – no telephones, no email. So speech was the central focus for how to communicate wisely.

I suspect that if the Buddha was alive today, he would call this “wise communication,” rather than “wise speech,” because his teachings would apply all the ways in which we communicate with each other. Now we have so many different ways in addition to speech. Email is an important example of how to learn to communicate wisely.

The overall orientation of these 7 a.m. teachings this year (2023) is support for working with the difficulties and challenges of life. Maybe all of Buddhism is about working with challenges, so it doesn't need to be said. But that's what the focus is. Learning how to communicate in conflicts and when things are challenging is really a crucial skill. We are learning to be in conflict and in challenges in a useful, productive way that causes less harm, and to communicate in a way that doesn't make a situation worse. Ideally, we make the situation better.

I think just the simple instruction: “Don't make it worse” is a powerful principle. Whatever is happening, don't make it worse. Communicate in a way that doesn't make it worse, but makes it better. Communicate in ways that are effective. We take care of ourselves and we take care of what needs to be done, but we do it in ways that lead to long-term benefit. We do not focus excessively on the immediate results but look at what we are creating in the long term for the relationship with other people.

If we say something harsh to people, like a strong, angry “No”, we might have an immediate effect, maybe the effect that we want. But in the long term, we have now diminished the strength of that relationship. We have diminished the trust and the sense of safety that people have, or the interest people have in being with us.

Instead, we find a way to communicate where we create long-term connections and long-term well-being. We find ways of communicating that help develop healthy relationships, as opposed to pulling back from them, severing healthy relationships, or creating unhealthy relationships.

The Buddha had a number of principles for wise communication, wise speech. There are some places where he has five, so we'll talk about those five this week. These are – speech that is timely (spoken at the right time); speech that is truthful; speech that is pleasant, soothing, or calming; speech that is beneficial; and speech that is kind, with a mind of loving-kindness.

These are questions we can ask ourselves when we're about to speak. With timely speech, the first question is: Is it timely? Then we ask, is it true? Is it spoken in a way that's pleasant and settling for people? Is it beneficial to say what I'm going to say? Is what I am going to say kind? These are five different things we can ask ourselves when we wonder, “Should I speak right now?” or, “How can I speak so it's this way?”

The first one is, "Is it timely? Is this the right time?" This is hugely important, especially when there are conflicts and challenges, because people in conflicts have different needs. Some people need to have time to process, be quiet, and be by themselves for a while before they're ready to be in conversation about a conflict. Some people need to address it right away. Letting the conflict stay in their mind and fester is difficult for them. In order to find out what's going on, they need to be in conversation.

This range of how people are can mean that we have to be very careful to understand what the right time is for this conversation. Is the person ready for it? Are the circumstances of life such that now is the time when the person is ready to talk about this? Sometimes when we talk about something when we want to talk about it, this actually makes the situation worse. People are not ready. Maybe they're going through some other difficulty, and they can't add one more problem to their difficulty. Or maybe they're in a kind of a lousy mood, and trying to approach them with some important difficult topic when their mood is just lousy, when they're tired, or upset, or something else, is not going to go very well.

We have to assess the situation and the people we want to talk to. And we assess ourselves. Is this the right time for me to have this conversation? Am I ready? Am I in a good mood? Can the best of who I am come forward for this communication?

For example, if you're hungry, and it's going to be a difficult conversation, make sure you drink and eat first. Maybe that will put you in a whole different state of mind where you're able to be more patient, more accepting, or even more intelligent in the conversation you have.

I think the question, is it the right time to have this conversation? is a very helpful question. Is it the right time for you? Is it the right time for the other person? Is it the right time for the situation?

I find with certain kinds of things, when I would like to talk to people about some difficulty we have, sometimes I'll wait until I feel the person is open to the conversation. Sometimes I've waited weeks or months for this to happen, and productively so. Sometimes the person opens the door to the topic themselves, then it's much easier to step in because they are less defensive.

Bringing up something that's difficult immediately, as soon as there's a challenge, is sometimes really good – clear and clean. But sometimes it's not helpful because the person will be resistant and defensive, and they'll shut down.

They were not ready to hear something.

It is a little bit hard to consider whether the time is right when, in what people want to say, there's a strong impulse, a lot of impatience, and a strong feeling that this has to happen now. And sometimes it does. Then you need to do it perhaps.

But there are times when you have a feeling this needs to be taken care of now, and maybe it should ideally be taken care of now, but you realize the person's not ready, they can't deal with this now. Then I can insist on my way, but it's not going to go well. I've done that. I've had conversations with people right away, and it just got worse because the person wasn't ready. Sometimes even waiting a day, an hour, or five minutes is enough to kind of be ready.

So we ask the question about what we want to speak about – "Is this the right time to speak?" And, "Is there a better time?" "What is the most useful time to have this conversation?"

There are a lot of criteria that you want to look into about what's the right time. Is the person ready? Is the person in a good mood for it? Is the person going to be receptive? Are you going to be able to speak clearly? Have you understood and considered the situation well enough that you can come with the clearest understanding, the clearest articulation of what you want and need to say? Do you need to calm down a little bit? Do you need to change your mood and come back in a better way?

One useful guideline is that if you're angry, this is generally not the time to have an in-depth conversation about something with other people. Learn to find a way to settle the anger, by going for a walk around the block and

coming back, meditating for 10 minutes, or waiting until the next day. Then address the issue. Asking if it's the right time and deciding to wait is not supposed to be an avoidance of issues. It is meant to help the conversation be productive, useful, and supportive for everyone.

In your communication, ask, is it timely? Is this the right time to write this email? I've written emails in a hurry when I felt impatient, and I didn't communicate well. Then I had to spend a lot of time cleaning up and explaining. So sometimes I've written emails and not sent them. Sometimes I've just bookmarked the emails, saying that I'll reply to this some time when I don't feel impatient or rushed. This needs a different kind of care. Is it the right time to write an email? Does it require more consideration than a quick reply? What's the wise way? What's the wise reply, the supportive reply?

We communicate all the time – if nothing else, with ourselves. Even there, how do we communicate with ourselves?

Are we thinking about things that are timely, in a timely way, at the right time for it? Is there something that's more timely to be concerned with and focused on? I think that question is a wonderful question. It opens doors and opens possibilities. It can change the mind stream in which we're flowing when that mind stream may not be very useful for us or helpful for the world.

Wise communication and wise speech begin by asking the question, "Is this the right time for what I'm going to say?"

Thank you very much.