

Wise Speech (3 of 5) Pleasant Speech

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Hello. Welcome to the third talk on wise speech. Wise speech includes the idea of kind speech, or speech that supports healthy relatedness – healthy relationships with others. I want to bring to the forefront that we want to establish healthy relationships that are beneficial, mutually supportive, caring, and express love and respect.

It is all too easy for our words to not do that. Our words sometimes carry with them hostility, our frustration, or our criticalness of others. In that habit formation, we say things that are mean or harsh, in which the relationship doesn't come together into some kind of connectivity or healthy relatedness, but actually does the opposite. We push people away. We create bigger divisions and rifts between people by what we say. In extreme versions, relationships might take a lot of work to repair.

When we use our harsh voice with strangers, we never have a chance to repair anything, but it's clear that we are pushing people away. Maybe that's what we want to do when we yell at someone whose driving we don't like, for example. We'll never see them again, but by doing this we have contributed to a society of angry, frustrated people who somehow feel defensive and are more likely to be triggered and stressed by everything.

Wise speech, supportive speech – speech that connects people and creates unity. It unifies people rather than dividing people. These teachings are clear instructions from the Buddha. He talked about the importance of speech that unifies rather than divides. He talked about abandoning malicious speech, which divides people, and speaking instead in supportive, kind ways that unify people and bring them together.

In terms of these five areas of wise speech, the Buddha talked about speaking with what is sometimes translated as “gentle, pleasant, soothing” speech. These are all translations of the Pali word. The Buddha said it is speech that goes straight to the heart. It is speech that is pleasing to the ear.

We are still looking at the question of how our speech can connect us to other people. How can it unify us? How can it create good bridges between us and other people? In addition to that, how can we speak in a way that brings out the best in people and touches them in a good way? How we speak is really important.

So speak with a tone of voice that is not harsh, a tone of voice, a speed, and a volume that doesn't come across as harsh or unpleasant, and doesn't make people cringe, pull back, or shut down. Speak in a way – at a pace, in a tone, in a volume, and with a choice of words – that is pleasing to listen to and goes right to the heart. It doesn't shut the heart. Pleasant speech opens the heart and warms it. It helps support warm-heartedness.

One aspect of this is to be conscious and mindful of how we speak when we're speaking on habit energy, habitual speech, where we're not really conscious of what motivates us to speak and we speak impulsively. Often when we do that, we're asserting ourselves on other people. We're asserting our wishes, our attitudes, and our feelings onto others in order to get our way.

Sometimes it's okay, within reason, to need to do something like that, but is it really necessary to assert ourselves in such a way that it's unpleasant for the other person? Is there another way? I'd like to suggest that more often than not, there is another way. There is another way of caring for ourselves and taking care of ourselves in a situation, without doing it in a voice that is perpetuating the divisions, the harshness, and the unkindness that can exist.

Sometimes we can do this by saying things like, "Wow, that was difficult to hear." But we say that in a kind, gentle voice, "Wow, that was difficult to hear," or, "Wow, that was quite something. Can we pause a little bit?" Or, "Did I hear right? What was that about?" As opposed to immediately coming back with something harsh and critical, make space. Saying something like, "Oh, that was hard to hear," or "I don't think I heard that properly" in a kind voice highlights for the other person what they just said, so they can become more conscious. Some people will then give what they said a second thought. Some people will become aware of the impact their words had, and that maybe that wasn't the best thing to say. Rather than meeting harshness with harshness, you meet it some other way.

I think of this gentle pleasant speech as one where we are maybe caring for ourselves and trying to get what we want, but we're not asserting ourselves on others. We are not pushing others around. We are not diminishing the value of others. We do it with respect for others. They can feel that respect in how we speak.

Is this too much work? Is it too much of a burden to pay attention to how we speak and speak in a nice way? It is if that's the only thing we're doing. But hopefully, for people who meditate, we're doing it with a foundation of being settled in ourselves, feeling at home and connected to ourselves. When we don't feel settled in and connected to ourselves, for mindfulness practitioners, it's a high priority to find a way to do that. Because if we're not settled, at home with, and comfortable with ourselves, not really present for ourselves with some modicum of calm, that's when we're more likely to do things that we later regret.

On that foundation of well-being, then we can speak kindly and pleasantly, with caring for others that goes right to the heart. We are not forcing ourselves or doing a "should. Kind, pleasant speech wells up from within in a way that seems natural – of course, we want to do it this way.

So don't take this idea as an admonition to speak kindly. Take it as an encouragement, as instructions. Speak kindly, but do the inner work so that you have a foundation of well-wishing and well-being in yourself. From that foundation, speaking kindly seems like a natural thing. Speaking harshly feels like you're doing violence to yourself. Why would you do that? Speaking kindly, gently, and pleasantly becomes something that nourishes us and is supportive for us, and we feel the benefits of it. It goes right to our heart. It comes from our heart rather than closing it, irritating it, or harming us in the process.

So spend time and take care to speak gently, kindly, respectfully, politely maybe. I don't know what the best word is here to mean a tone of voice that's not harsh. It is pleasant to hear, and pleasant to speak this way. If you can't do that, maybe it's time to take a pause and do a check. Sometimes this checking-in with yourself doesn't have to take long. There is what I call the "three-breath journey." Just pause for three breaths and really connect to yourself. Those three breaths don't take long, but that might be enough for it to be easier and more natural to avoid harsh speech.

I want to end with a very inspiring (at least for me) but also instructive and challenging quote from Mahatma Gandhi. This is from his autobiography:

"My hesitancy to speech, which was once an annoyance, is now a pleasure. Its greatest benefit has been that it has taught me the economy of words. I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts, and I can now give myself the certificate that a thoughtless word hardly ever escapes my tongue or my pen. I do not recollect ever having to regret anything in my speech or writing. I have been spared many a mishap and a waste of time. Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of the seeker of truth. Proneness to exaggerate, to suppress or modify the truth, wittingly or unwittingly, is a natural weakness of people. And silence is necessary in order to surmount it. A person of few words will rarely be thoughtless in his or her speech. He or she will measure every word."

I'll end with the idea that if silence is the better option, don't speak. This doesn't mean don't speak at all. Don't prefer silence, but when silence is the better option, maybe don't speak. If you're going to make the situation worse through your speech, maybe you should not speak, or at least pause and be silent, and see what you can find.

As you go about your day, if you're interested, you might try this. First, look at establishing yourself in some modicum of well-being, or settledness, or connection to yourself. Maybe do the three-breath journey lots of times throughout the day. Be quiet and just attend to three breaths, and then go about doing or saying what you have

to do or say. See if you can experiment with speaking words that go straight to the heart, that come from the heart then go to the heart – words that are pleasant to hear and pleasant to speak. Experiment with that and see what it's like. See how you benefit from that and how it might benefit the relationships you're in, the people you're with, and the connection you have with them. Thank you. I look forward to continuing tomorrow.