

Wise Speech (4 of 5) Beneficial Speech

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Good morning. This is the fourth talk on wise speech. Today's talk is about beneficial speech.

The Buddha gave five criteria to be used as a reference point and support for wise speech. Today we will consider the question, "Is the speech beneficial?" When we are about to speak or when we are speaking, does it have a good impact? Is it beneficial? Is it helpful to have this conversation?

This question encourages us to consider what it is we want to accomplish. Is our speech timely? Is it true? Is it pleasant? Is it something that people can hear and listen to? Is it said in a way that sounds kind and supportive? Does it touch people's hearts? Is it beneficial?

There are certainly times when we feel that we need to speak what is true. Sometimes we feel it is the only time to say this. Maybe we have been waiting for a long time or there isn't any other time. We might say our thoughts in a kind, gentle way, but the person we are speaking to is not capable of hearing this, registering it, or taking it in.

No matter how much we think it is true, and that it must be talked about, the person is not capable of hearing it. The person is shut down. The person is not receptive at all. It can be exhausting when we keep trying to explain or make ourselves heard. This can be a waste of our energy. It can be harmful to us.

Sometimes it is hard to believe that people are not amenable to a conversation. They are not available to hear the truth or to have a serious conversation. We might keep trying and trying, but there are times when it is just not beneficial to have a conversation with someone.

Sometimes it is not beneficial because there will be retribution. They will be angry or upset. We know if we bring something up it will come back to us. They may be in a bad mood. We can feel there is an angry cloud over the person, and if we talk to them about something we feel it is necessary to talk about, they will react in a strong way. This will make things worse. Some people are too guarded and defensive to lower their guard. They are not going to allow any kind of valuable or truthful conversation to happen. They will just shut down. They will avoid and deny.

At some point, trying to have the conversation becomes a waste of time. At some point, it is no longer beneficial. At some point, it becomes harmful. Some people use the truth to harm others. "I am just speaking the truth." Sometimes people are receptive and ready to hear the truth, but the way we say it is so harsh, and judgmental that it is not beneficial. If what you are saying is not going to be beneficial, the Buddha says not to bother. Don't exhaust yourself when it is not beneficial.

This goes back to the question of timeliness. Sometimes you must wait a long time before someone is ready and receptive. Something must shift and change in their lives. Sometimes there is wisdom in waiting.

Sometimes the truth is true, but we haven't learned how to say it. We haven't learned all the details. We haven't learned all the aspects of it. The piece we know is true, but we don't know the bigger picture.

For example, what we can see of what has happened – the event, the action, what the person has done – might seem misguided or wrong. It might be truthful to point that out to them, but we don't know what challenges they might be living under internally. Maybe they feel afraid or insecure. Maybe they have just had a terrible loss and they are grieving. Coming with the truth of the action misses the person. The truth doesn't work in circumstances where someone's inner life is in turmoil or difficult.

Is there more truth to open to? Have we taken the time to get to know the person better? Do we understand what is happening? We can try to be gentle and kind. Sometimes even gentleness or kindness doesn't come across well to some people.

One of the ways to find our way with speech is to not come on assertively. Do not begin speaking by being assertive or aggressive. Begin with simple questions that try to understand what is going on in a bigger way. "What happened? What was happening to you? What happened to you when you did X? I was really troubled by what happened before. What was it that happened from your point of view? What happened when you said X, Y, and Z to me?"

Don't immediately start with assertions as if we know what is going on. Ask simple, almost innocent questions to discover more. "Yesterday was hard. What was it like for you? What is going on for you? How was that for you?"

As we start unpacking and learning what is going on, then we might learn what is beneficial. It is beneficial to get to know the person better and learn what is going on. Slowly fill in the picture with all the missing pieces of what was happening to the person. Once we understand a person better, then we can have a better sense of a beneficial way to speak to them. As we know more, we can offer them appreciation, gratitude, or empathy for how they are. Only then is it beneficial to speak. Do not go headlong into a conversation. Find a way to ease into a difficult conversation, if possible.

Ask, is what I am going to say beneficial? Maybe we are unsure about it. In that case, we can go about it in a roundabout way. Find other things to talk about that are beneficial or supportive. Connect and create a richer relationship. After doing that for a while, then switch it over.

I have been in conflict with people and have asked to meet with them. When we sat down, I said, "Before we begin to talk about this challenge we have, can we just check in with each other? I would like to know how you are, and what you have been up to these days, and what is going on for you." Now I have entered the conversation in a beneficial way. It is beneficial for me, and maybe beneficial for the other person. I am trying to establish a human connection and get to know the person and what is going on better. Once that is established, then I am ready to talk about the challenge we have. If I had started the conversation by immediately discussing the challenge, it might have been difficult.

When considering whether it is beneficial to speak, we don't just consider what is beneficial for the other person, but what is beneficial for us as well. Are we in a situation, a state of mind and heart where having this conversation is going to be beneficial? Do we need to come in a different mood, more rested, or less charged from the events that are going on? Do we need to walk around the block so we can come back and be available in a beneficial way?

Even though it is timely, even though it is true, even though we can speak gently – even with all that, we might not be in a state to address certain challenging topics. We might not be in a state where we can benefit from it – where we are not triggered, exhausted, agitated, or over-activated by it. The question of benefit is this: is it beneficial? Is it useful?

Finally, we should consider the purpose that we have for the conversation. Ask ourselves, "What is our intention in speaking here? What are we trying to accomplish? Are we trying to put the person in their place? Are we trying to jab the person with our anger or criticism to harm them? Are we trying to find a way to understand them better? Are we trying to establish some kind of richer human connectivity with the person? What is the intention?" Ask ourselves, what is the purpose of speaking? Is that purpose beneficial?

If you have one answer to the question, "What is the purpose?" ask again. If that is the purpose, what purpose do I have for that purpose for? Be clear that the purpose you have is beneficial. I would like to propose that it should be beneficial for everyone concerned. This is the way I like to live my life. Can we have the welfare of everyone on our minds? Certainly, our own welfare is important, but what is best for the other person – even if this is a person who has done something that has been harmful to us? Within reason, there are times when we should consider what is best for this person. This person really needs something. Is just having this person stop what they are doing or giving the person a piece of our mind really beneficial for them?

The Buddha championed this concern for the welfare of everyone. He championed *anukampa* – the care for the welfare and happiness of everyone, even the people we are challenged with.

Keep in mind this guideline – is it beneficial? Asking that question is multi-dimensional. As you go about your day today, you might consider this before and after you speak. You might look for a time when you know you are going to say something, or when you are about to have a conversation with someone.

Spend some time considering what is beneficial here. What is beneficial for us? What is beneficial for the other person? Is the purpose of the conversation beneficial? Is how I approach the conversation beneficial? Ask these questions before and after the conversation. After it is all over, review what happened. Consider again, was that beneficial? How was that beneficial? Did I miss an opportunity?

May your conversations be beneficial for all involved. May they be helpful, and may they be a way of living your life that brings you greater peace and greater well-being. Thank you.