

Eightfold Path: Right Speech (1 of 3)

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Today I begin the third factor of the Eightfold Path: right speech. This is the first factor of the path which has to do with our actions in the world.

The first two are establishing wisdom; the orientation and consideration of how we're going to live in the world. The next three are very much about what we do, and how we manifest and express this wisdom in our lives. I think of these next three - right speech, right action, and right livelihood - to really be the center of gravity of the Eightfold Path and perhaps the heart of it because how we act and live in the world is so important.

There is a spiral through the Eightfold Path in that we have wisdom, which supports us in how we live and act in the world. That in turn supports the deepening of our inner life, which is the last three factors of the Eightfold Path. As we deepen our inner life, we have even more wisdom for acting in the world. So, it's a kind of a circle or spiral. We don't have to start at any particular place, but there is a way in which understanding is seen as the beginning because with understanding something naturally follows.

So the first two factors of the Eightfold Path lead to an interest, a desire, and a valuing of how we speak. Most of our contact and interaction with other people often happens through speech. This may occur through direct speech where we talk to them as a means of communication, as well as how we talk to ourselves about other people. Even our thoughts are a kind of speech.

The idea of having right speech is not to do it because of a moral code that says you shall do this, but to really understand closely how it arises out of the first two factors. There is a real appreciation for what is wholesome, healthy, nourishing, and beneficial. And then, to feel and consider that; to orient and have an intention around that; to want to do that and to manifest it. Partly because to not do that is more suffering. It's unhelpful and debilitating. So, to really feel and sense for oneself that this is the wholesome direction and also to recognize the ways in which we lose our freedom where we get caught, entangled, and constricted. What leads to more freedom?

Having this as the background, we come to speech. What speech is wholesome, nourishing, supportive, and freeing? What speech keeps us free and keeps opening the doors for freedom? What speech constricts us, gets us caught, and preoccupied, and is the opposite of freeing? What speech is unwholesome and not nourishing?

That's why mindfulness is so helpful with this. The stronger the mindful sensitivity, the more we can recognize the consequences of how we speak. It's not easy to be mindful of speaking. We often get caught up in our speech and get lost in what we're saying, want to say, or the flow of the conversation. It's easy to say things we later regret. To learn how to practice mindfulness of speaking: to stay in our body, be aware of what's going on in our body, our thoughts, our impulses, the emotions that are coming into play, is really a powerful place for mindfulness. It's well worth learning that skill and developing that capacity. The greater the sensitivity is to this world of speech, the easier, more natural in a sense, or more obvious it is to be concerned with those ways of speaking which are beneficial. that leads to happiness, and well-being. We can avoid those ways of speaking which are detrimental to ourselves and others, speech that constricts and limits us.

There are four forms of right speech that the Buddha talks about in this regard. Actually, it's usually stated in the negative: not speaking falsehoods, not speaking divisively, not speaking harshly, and not speaking pointlessly. There are ways in which speaking falsely, divisively (sometimes it's called slander), harshly, hurtfully, and pointlessly diminishes ourselves and others, brings suffering, and brings what's unwholesome.

For mindfulness practitioners, speaking the truth is really a precious, important, and valued action. This is because mindfulness and truth are synonymous. Mindfulness is the act of being truthful about our experience to ourselves. When we do mental noting, we just recognize "This is what's happening. This is what's happening." It might not seem so consequential, but what we're recognizing is what we call the truth. As the practice deepens, we'll come to layers of our being where we may say "Wow, I guess I have to admit this or acknowledge this and see that this is true too." Some of these things might be difficult and painful to see and some of these things that we discover to be true might be really wonderful parts of ourselves and our beauty.

This is one of the great delights of settling deep into meditation: to discover inner capacities of wonder, beauty, value, and goodness that might not have been recognized so clearly and felt as fully early in our lives. To recognize the truth of this goodness within us is as important, maybe more important, than recognizing the truth of the opposite happening with us. Recognizing the truth is a big part of what mindfulness is.

So speaking the truth out loud, what I call honesty, is to be able to speak the truth in a way that has the same beneficial impact and consequences as telling the truth to ourselves. For that purpose, the Buddha gives three different qualities that go along with speaking the truth. He says that it should be kind, it should be beneficial, and it should be timely. We only speak the truth if it's timely to do so, if it's beneficial, and if it's kind.

We want the truth to be spoken in ways that free people from suffering, that don't cause more suffering and don't cause harm. Truth itself can be a weapon and can be used painfully. The fact that something is true doesn't mean that we're speaking kindly or supportively. It could be that we're causing a lot of pain. So speaking the truth goes along with the consideration of non-ill will and non-cruelty, which has to do with the second factor of the eightfold path. This is often translated as kindly, with loving kindness, friendliness, with compassion, and care.

For the truth to be helpful, you have to say it at the right time so people can hear it. We may think it's helpful, but it's not helpful in the middle of someone's big crisis about something else to come and tell them about your difficulty with them. You wait for the right time. And you also try to do the inner work to put aside any hostility you have, or any ways in which you're triggered to be hostile or upset. So the communication is clear, direct, and to the point. Mindfulness is doing our inner work not to deny or repress anything, but so when we say this truth, we are a clear channel for communication in a way that's productive for all parties involved, ourselves and others.

It seems that speaking the truth, knowing the truth, being connected to what's true, and being honest is probably one of the most valuable resources we have and the most wealth that we have. It's more important than how much money you have; it's more important than how intelligent you are; it's more important than who you know; it's more important than what recreational opportunities you have. It's more important than so many things that people are pursuing. It's being honest which really is the way forward for the purpose of really growing and maturing as a human being on the path of freedom, and this Buddhist path. This is what's important: not money, or smarts, or people that you know, or status, or pleasure, or all these other things, which don't have the same power as the power of truth.

Discover how to be truthful to oneself and others in ways that are freeing, kind, and friendly; ways that are beneficial, nourishing, wholesome, and timely, where we know the right time to speak. These are wonderful ways of considering what we're saying. Part of mindfulness of speech is to be considered in our speech: to give some reflection on what we're saying and when we're saying it. So, this Buddhist path is a path of consideration, reflection, of contemplation, starting with right view and then the second factor, right consideration. Right view and right consideration go into considering how we speak so that we can speak in ways that benefit the world. We can speak in ways that benefit self and others. We can speak in ways that are freeing, supportive, inspiring, and meaningful.

For the next 24 hours, until we meet again to talk about the second factor of right speech – avoiding divisive speech – maybe you can spend the day really reflecting on this idea of truth and being true and how it works; what your own personal relationship to it is; your beliefs around it and your experiences of it (both difficult and also wonderful experiences). Maybe talk to friends about your relationship and your experience of truth and truth-telling and maybe ask them what they've learned in their life about that.

Maybe today can be a day that you spend more time reflecting, thinking, talking about, and learning about the value of truth more than who happens to be elected as president. Both are important, but maybe the topic of truth, in the long term, is much more.

So, may you enjoy the subject of truthfulness.

Thank you.