

Mindfulness of Speech

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One more reason to be critical of yourself. Mindfulness is turning that around and using mindfulness as a way to start having a positive relationship with oneself, so that something different can happen that couldn't happen if we're critical, angry, upset, or we're caught in greed and all kinds of things. So the same thing in our external world. We're learning how to be mindful out loud. One of the reasons why mindfulness of speaking is so useful is it's useful to understand yourself better. It's a way of looking and understanding, tracking what you're saying and why you say it.

Many people speak without really much care to what they say. There's a kind of a little quote that goes around sometimes that says that many people take more care in how they dress than what they say. But what we say has a much bigger impact on our life and our communal life than how we dress. And so to start seeing, what am I doing here when I speak, what motivates it? Why am I saying what I'm about to say? This creates a tremendously useful window into your inner life.

Why am I saying this? Really? Is that the reason? You might say, well, the person asks me a question, so I'm just going to, you know, I'm just answering the question. That's why. But then if you look more deeply, well, I want the person to like me, I want the person to see that I'm knowledgeable, and I know how to, you know, and there's all these different motivations that are operating at the same time.

And so to stop and have the ability to take a deeper look, to track what's going on as it's going on. Another area that mindful speaking is useful is that if you pace your day, so that your day, you'd go about the day at the speed of mindful speaking. How fast would you do things? How fast would you speak? Okay. Maybe you want to speak fast and furiously, but if you want to bring mindfulness into your life, then you might want to consider the speed in which you speak.

And, you know, any speed is fine for mindfulness practice, provided you can track it while you're saying it. You can track it before you say it. You're kind of tracking, you know the impulses, you know what's inside of you, and you can kind of then live more wisely. So there's a lot of self-understanding, a lot of development and growth of mindfulness that happens if we begin practicing it in our social life, communal life, around mindfulness of speaking. Okay. Another reason for mindfulness of speech is so that we can create good relationships with people around us with the world, so that we can create a better world, because speech has a big impact on other people and ourselves, the world we live in.

And rather than creating more animosity, more hurt, more conflict, can we speak in a way that does the opposite, that creates more concord, it creates more friendship, that creates more healing in this world, more unity rather than divisiveness. And so if you're able to track your speech, then you can kind of begin seeing, is this really what I want to say? Is this the best way of saying it? Is there a better way of saying it? So in the Buddhist tradition, there are guidelines or signposts maybe that are presented, offered, to track what you're saying. And the questions to ask yourself.

And this could be as you're speaking, but maybe a place where it can be even harder to do this in speaking is in emails or texting or something, where it doesn't have to be as quick. Socially, you know, long periods of silence are kind of awkward. But, you know, texting or messaging or emailing, it's not so awkward. Right. To be silent for 10 minutes, not respond right away. It's not such a big deal to take it a little bit while, maybe even to compose something and not send it and say, come back five minutes later. Is this what I want to do? What's the impact? What does this express here?

And then you can ask yourself these questions. Is it the right time to communicate it? Is it timely? Is it truthful? Does it express the truth? Is it beneficial to say what I'm about to say, to write what I'm about to write? And is it kind? Does it come from a place of goodwill? There's sometimes a fifth one that's offered, and that is, I don't know if I really know what the Pāli word means, but some translators translate it as gentle. It's possible it means beautiful. Beautiful. It's possible it means polite. But, you know, so in most common translations, it's a gentle, gentle speech. Is it polite speech?

But the first one, is it timely? Is it a timely? Is it a time right time for something? And that goes, for me, very closely connected to this idea of, is it effective? Is it useful to say what I'm going to do? Because some things are important to say, but the timing of when you say it is really important. People might not be ready to hear it. They might not be able to process it and respond to it. If you say it, you know, turning your head... As you leave, as you leave, hey,

by the way, and then off you're running to catch the bus or something, there's no processing. There's no chance to kind of work with it and interact with it and clarify it or hear their response or see what the response is. So is it the right time to say something?

Okay. I receive email sometimes that maybe it was, in some ways, maybe it was not the right time because email is not a good way to communicate the nuance of attitude and emotions that's behind what's being said. And I've kind of misread an emotion, either didn't see the emotion or saw emotions that weren't there. So is it the right time to communicate what I want to communicate? Maybe a phone call is better. Maybe there's another way. Maybe wait. There are sometimes that I have waited a long time to have an important conversation with someone because I felt that they were closed to having it. And it didn't make any sense to it. I had every right to say something, you would think.

But being right doesn't mean it's going to work. Right. And so, is it the right time? So to ask yourself that question. And that's a difficult question to ask for some of us, because the impulse to speech can be quite strong. And where I see it is when I'm ready to speak before a person to stop speaking. I don't know if any of you have that issue. You know, I'm just... Sometimes, you know, I'm not just like... You know, we just can't wait. Sometimes I, you know, in a social conversation or something, I don't really hear the second half of what they're saying because I'm, in my mind, I'm telling them what I feel is important to say.

And so... So... So to take time, listen... So then, and so that's one question, slows you down, just ask the question. It's just the right time. The second is, is it the truth? And that has a multi-layered kind of analysis consideration. What is the truth? Is how you feel the truth? Maybe it's true as a feeling, but maybe it's not true as a judgment.

And that line between an emotion or feeling we have and it being the truth about a situation out there, the lens through which we see it, is a kind of ambiguous world. And sometimes what we say, we're saying what's true, you know, I feel that you're awful. Right. That was a true statement, right? I had this feeling. But actually, it's a judgment. And maybe it's welling up quite powerfully as a powerful impulse inside. Something's really uncomfortable or strong inside. But, you know, it'd be very careful what we say. Is it really true?

What might be more true is say... hearing what you have to say, I'm feeling quite uncomfortable. I feel unsettled now. I wonder if we can talk about it. That's getting closer to the truth. But then you ask the question, is it timely to say that? Maybe not. Maybe some people, just they hear that you're uncomfortable, makes them so uncomfortable they shut down, or so uncomfortable they leave, they don't want to bother, or they can't. Is it true? Is all truth right to say?

Some people feel that they're justified to say something if it's true. But that's the next guideline is that is it beneficial? Does it benefit? Is it useful? Is it strategic? Is it effective? And so, I mean, I've thought about this sometimes in political discourse. People can be right, maybe. They believe they're right. People have a right to say what they're going to say. They have justice on their side. So, of course, they should speak up. But is it effective? What's the impact that's going to have? Is it beneficial the impact? Right. And a lot of political discourse in all kinds of directions, people feel it's true. They feel it's just to say it. But it's received in a way that actually is counterproductive.

And you might, you know, be yelling and screaming because feeling you have every right to say something. And maybe you do. But the question is, is it effective? Is it beneficial? And then you can ask yourself your question, beneficial in what way? How are you trying to benefit from the situation? If it's simply to make yourself safe, that's certainly sometimes important to do. But is that the only thing that's necessary to do or important to do? What about the relationship you have the other person? How about can you create a friendly relationship, a mutually supportive relationship?

And so then the other guideline is that is there *mettā*, is there goodwill in the communication we have. And goodwill means that we also care about the other person's welfare. We want them to be happy. And that's a high bar because they don't deserve it. They've disrespected me. They're in the wrong. They really messed up and caused a lot of trouble. And they were mean. So, of course, they were so mean. They don't deserve any goodness for me. They've now forfeited all rights to receive anything good for me. And I'm going to give them a piece of my mind. People don't think that way, I don't think. No. But sometimes they operate that way. Because we don't stop to look at and think, what are we doing here? What's going on here? The impulse to speak sometimes is so strong and unexamined.

So the Buddha keeps emphasizing, examine what's going on when you speak. Look at it. And so can you have goodwill? Can you aim to create a healthy relationship here? Can you somehow break through the meanness or the closeness or the hostility that might be here? It's not an easy thing to do, but maybe it's better than making the situation worse. Sometimes the best way to deal with all these criteria somehow to cope with them is not speak. Just be silent. And one of the guidelines is, if speaking is going to make it worse, maybe you don't say anything. Some people will protest, but you have to speak, you know, you have to fight for the good cause, you have to set things right, you have to, have to, you know. But maybe if you're making a situation worse, maybe you don't speak, maybe you wait. And this is where mindfulness of speaking comes into play in big time.

The mindful speaking also means... knowing how to speak at the right time, the first criteria, which might mean after you've paused for a while, after you've been silent for a while, after you say, can I take a breath or two? Can we pause? That was a big impact on me. Before I speak, can we just take three breaths together? Or can I take three breaths? And then I'll try to respond. Just some kind of pause. And I've done that in difficult conversations with people where I was triggered. And I thought to myself, you know, Gil, right now you're not going to say good things. You're not capable of it. And I ask that I have permission. I say, the person I'm having this very difficult conversation with. This is difficult. And could we pause for a while? Can we just sit here and breathe for a little bit? And last time this happened, the person was very gracious and said, yes. I think the person trusted me with that. Maybe I thought they were going to be treated better. And so I took about two minutes, three minutes to get my breath back, get my senses back, and then I could continue in the conversation. But instead I was in, you know, it was not going to work. So sometimes not speaking.

And then can we speak with goodwill? Can we care about the other person's welfare as well? And one reflection I do sometimes is that when someone is hostile, mean, they're hurting. Chances are that their meanness and hostility represents some suffering they have. Does that justify that they're mean or hostile? No. But to know that means, oh, they're hurting. Of course I want to care for them. They're hurting. I don't want to make it worse. Can we find another way I had this conversation? Can we talk in a way that fosters some kind of mutual understanding, some kind of mutual care for each other, some kind of friendliness, friendship for each other?

And then the last criteria is to be gentle or to have beautiful speech, kind speech, and I've said already, but beautiful speech, polite speech. Some people say this is the opposite of harsh speech. And so I don't know what you think the opposite of harsh speech is. But harsh speech is speech which just a tone of it is harmful. So can you have a tone of voice which makes space for people that is not domineering, not filling the space, but makes room for a dialogue to go on. So, of course, you don't have to do any of this, if you don't want. But if you have the question, how do I bring my mindfulness practice into my social life, my community life? This is a really effective way. It's not easy for most people. For some people, it seems like mindfulness of speaking is the most difficult area of life to be mindful in.

Because when we're talking, we get pulled into our concerns, our emotional life, our impulses, our desires. There's such a complex world that we get pulled into, that relationship to other people, that sometimes we're not really tracking ourselves very well. But the benefits of doing it are immense, huge. Huge. We learn about ourselves, we learn how to stay

balanced in ourselves, stay healthy in ourselves, to stay closer to a place of well-being. We don't give up in ourselves when you're mindful of speaking, tracking it. And we create better relationships in the world. Relationships that have a feedback loop where they come back to benefit us. The more we can develop friendly relationship of other people, the more that we can... I had a conversation recently with this person who many years ago I had that difficult conversation where I had to ask, can we pause? And I was pretty angry, so, you know, it was kind of difficult time. And she said, Gil, you've always been so supportive of me and so accepting of me, and I just feel your love for me. And I said, but we had that time. And she said, yeah, yeah, that didn't matter. Your good intent was there. So anyway, so somehow, you know, that relationship continued and is now a warm, friendly relationship in a nice way.

So mindfulness of speaking. So that's the topic. And so now you get to practice it. So for those of you who want to stay, those of you don't want to stay and don't want to be part of this, can just sit quietly or, you know, get some water and just hang out until we come back. But the invitation is for you to go into the small groups of maybe three people. And just look around you and you make your groups and no one's end up left alone. Because sometimes everyone goes.