

## Speaking as a Gift

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So for this Dharma talk, I'd like to begin with a story. And it seemed that there was a young woman who very much wanted to meditate. She'd been introduced to meditation in college. And college was a busy time, especially the last couple of years, with coursework and all the other things of college. She looked forward to a time when she could finish college, and she really wanted to live a Dharma life. She was hoping to go live perhaps in a monastery or live at a retreat center, some place where she could fully devote herself to the Dharma and integrate all the practice into her life, not just meditation, but a life integrated with the path of liberation, path of freedom, path of love, and so on.

But then, soon after she graduated, her older sister and her older sister's husband were in an accident and died, and her own parents were quite elderly and needed a lot of care, so she was left as the sole caretaker for her sister's two children. Her plans to be able to go off and live this integrated Dharma life didn't work out so well. She found herself caring for two kids, needing to care for parents, needing to work long hours in order to just have the finances to do all this. There was no time even for meditation, let alone thinking about engaging in an integrated Dharma life. But she went and found a meditation teacher and told the teacher about her problems and her challenges, and asked what she could do. The teacher said to her, Well, if you don't have time for meditation and you want to live an integrated Dharma life, then what you can do is have the practice of making sure that your words when you speak are gifts.

Practise generosity in your speech. Whatever you say, think about how it can be a gift to the person you are speaking to. So that's what she did, and she learned a lot about herself in that process. She learned how often she was speaking not as a form of generosity, but as expressions of anger or spite or fear, anxiety or desire, and wanting something, and trying to

get someone to behave just right so that she could get what she wanted. She got to see so much about what was operating, what was driving her, but she was not told to look at that. That's just what came up.

Then she had to work through that, adjust for that, and find another way to come from a different place, to have her words be gifts arising out of generosity. Generosity can't be an obligation. It can't be forced as a gift. It's a kind of upwelling of goodness in the heart. She found that in practising letting her words be a gift, she slowly learned how to do that, and over time it really transformed her. She grew in amazing ways.

As she grew in freedom, she grew in love, she grew in understanding and wisdom in a way that made her life integrated with Dharma. So are your words gifts? Could they be gifts for others? Could there be generosity practised in what you say? This begins perhaps by you understanding: what motivates you for what you're saying? What are the underlying drives for what you say?

Is it generosity, or is it something else? Is it kindness and care and respect for others, or something else? What is being expressed through those words? What would it take for your words to be gifts? What are the gifts that people would like to receive through words? Could you say all the things that you need to say, but do it in a way that seems pleasant for other people to hear, that feels right for other people to hear?

That may help people relax or open or trust you in some deep way. How do you take care of yourself socially, interactively with others, if your speech is always going to have this quality of generosity in it, this goodness, this gift-ness in the words themselves? So that's the idea. Not an easy task, but it's a phenomenal task. And if some of you would like to really take your meditation practice and really learn how to integrate it or expand what's happening in meditation into the rest of your life, so meditation is not just a refuge, a relief from your life, but rather as the source from how you live your life, then practise generosity in speaking.

If you want to grow into your life with a sense of freedom, integrity, openness, truthfulness, love, and sensitivity that comes from meditation, if you want to spread that into your life so that your life is integrated with this, then practise generosity in speaking. Do it as an exercise. Do it as a way of learning about yourself. Do it as a way of stretching yourself. Do it as a way of understanding other people better. Be attuned to them rather than just attuned to yourself.

Be better attuned to other people and attuned to care for them, but not at your own expense, because you want to stay rooted in generosity. You can't sacrifice yourself, because you have

to really be available for yourself, for this upwelling of this beautiful quality to be there. If you diminish yourself, or forget yourself, or sacrifice yourself too much for others, maybe that generosity is not really there, available. So practise generosity as a practice, to learn about yourself, to learn about others, to learn about how to relate to other people. I'm confident that if your speech is generous to others, you might actually be benefiting more than the other people, because we all benefit from our own generosity.

When that generosity comes, this upwelling of the heart, this freedom of the heart, this loosening up of the constrictions, the fear, the defensiveness, the resentments, the ambitions that get in the way of simple, ordinary generosity, you might argue with me that this may not be such a profound spiritual thing to do, or maybe a little bit of a sentimental way of practising, or something artificial. That's far from what I intend to get across. Rather, it's a vehicle. It's a means by which to really get deep into our hearts and minds, to understand it, to find out what really makes us tick, and to question it, and maybe even debate it with yourself, and really find out if you are really coming from the best place, the most nourishing, the most healthy place for you when you speak. If you learn to speak with generosity, you'll come from the best place.

I'm confident in that. You'll come from a place that will help you to grow into phenomenal health, freedom, wisdom, and understanding, so to speak, with generosity. So when the Buddha talked about speech, he talked about five different things at different times. But there's a point to one list of five criteria for speaking, and generosity is not one of them. But maybe all five of these are the means or the support to help us understand how to speak generously as a gift.

Now, what they point to is that, for the Buddha, Buddhist life, practice life, is also a reflective life. It's a life that reflects and considers what it's doing. It doesn't just act impulsively or intuitively, but there's a consideration. That consideration can be second nature. It does not have to be a lot of work, but sometimes it's completely appropriate to actually step back and think, go through these five criteria for speaking.

- The first one is the question: is what I'm going to say now, what I want to say, timely? Is it the right time for me? Is it the right time for the other person? Is it the right time to have the conversation? It might be something very important that needs to be talked about, but it's not the time for it. Someone is stressed out, they're busy, they're doing something else, they can't focus, their mood is not really available for a real conversation. What needs to be talked about may need to be talked about at a different time, when they're more receptive, when they're more ready and available. So is it timely?

When asking if it's timely, you take into account the circumstances of the other person. Is it timely for them? Would it be better to wait until it's the right time?

- The second is: Is it true what I'm going to say? Is it truthful? Here's where it's so useful to be true to oneself, to be honest about oneself, and to grow in this self-honesty, self-truthfulness. Self-truth, self-honesty in particular, is a guaranteed way to grow spiritually, a guaranteed way to grow on this path of liberation and freedom. Keep coming back and be really honest: this is what's happening. Not just with the first thing you see, but keep looking: what's really going on here? What's happening here with me? What's really true here? It's a way of healing to do so. It's a way of creating healthy relationships, to really stay close to what's true. Sometimes what's true is not the right time to speak it to other people, but it's always the right time to know it for yourself. So consider: is what I'm saying true? Is it a lie? Probably most people don't lie automatically, but is it a lie? Is it a falsehood? Am I twisting a little bit, am I adjusting what I'm saying so it's mostly true, but I'm putting a little spin on it in order to make it look better or something? Is it true?
- The third is how I am going to speak. Is it gentle? Gentle might mean: is it harmonious? Is it with a tone of voice that is friendly, that people would want to hear, that feels supportive for others, as opposed to a voice which is harsh, that comes across critical or angry or demanding or something? So is what I'm going to say gentle or is it harsh?
- The fourth is: is it beneficial? Is what I'm going to say going to be beneficial, does it have a good purpose? Part of that also is that maybe you'll say, Yes, it's beneficial because of what purposes I have for it. However, I don't think the person is going to be receptive. So yes, I hope it could be beneficial, but in fact, when I realize the person is not receptive, I'm just going to waste my energy to keep saying this to the person over and over again. So maybe it's not beneficial to say it, even though in theory it should be. Maybe there's no point in saying it actually. Maybe it makes it worse if the person is closed to hearing what I want to talk about. Is it beneficial has other connotations and associations as well. Is it going to have a good impact on people, can it have a good consequence? If I say this, maybe I feel it's the truth, maybe I feel like I tell you now, I can say it gently, but maybe the person will get angry. Maybe the person will not want to talk with me anymore, and so the doors are closed, and that's maybe not beneficial to have that kind of reaction. So is it beneficial? Do people learn from it? Do people change in a beneficial way because of how we speak, what we're saying? Is it beneficial? There's a lot of speech which is not particularly beneficial. Yesterday I was at a talk, a public talk, and I kind of thought that the talk wasn't so, you know, very good,

to say it simply. I found it strange that I had this insight: I could feel this compulsion to want to tell my companions, you know, that wasn't a good talk, was it? I looked at myself and said, Why would I want to say that? Why bother? Is it beneficial to say that? Maybe it's true that the talk wasn't particularly good, but why would I say that out loud? Maybe there's another approach: I can talk about what the person talked about, and maybe I can highlight what was beneficial. Maybe there was something beneficial in what the person talked about, and then we can all benefit from the conversation. If we spend time talking about how it was not a good talk, do we benefit from that?

- So is it timely? Is it true? Is what I'm going to say gentle? Is it beneficial? And the last one is: do I speak with a mind of loving kindness? A mind of care, a mind of friendliness. Sometimes there are difficult conversations to be had, but can I do that with a mind of kindness, of kind regard, or friendly regard for self and others? In the teachings of the Buddha, this has a very high value, tremendous importance on this idea of coming from a kind, loving space, coming from *mettā*, and kindness. My assumption, my understanding of why the Buddha puts such a high level of importance on coming from loving kindness, is that the alternative, more often, is to come from a place that's not beneficial. To come from a place maybe of ill will. It's to come from a place where there's not much freedom. Good will, *mettā*, when it's really genuine, when it really comes, this upwelling of the heart, when it is healthy and nourishing, it is an expression of freedom. It comes from that kind of letting go of attachments and clinging. We're no longer contracted around something or tight around something. So this idea of opening to the world. Anything less than that goes in the opposite direction to this wonderful Dharma path, the Dharma path of freedom.

If what a person wants, what you want, is to really take what you may be learning in meditation about yourself, in the capacity for freedom, for peace, for ease, for love, finding it here in meditation, and you want to not leave it as something you do only in meditation, but to learn how to bring that into life so that you live that, because maybe that's where real honesty, real integrity, real being true to yourself really resides—in this place of being free—then to bring it into life is one of the great satisfying tasks. Certainly for me as a teacher, this is what I love to hear, that just what people want to do is to integrate or bring it into the whole of their life. So I'm suggesting that one way to do that is to practise generosity with your speech. Have your words be gifts to the people you speak them to, and learn how to do it in a timely way. Speak what is true. Speak in a gentle or caring way. Speak with what's beneficial. And speak with a mind of loving kindness, a heart of loving kindness.

In doing that, especially the beneficial one, there's a feedback loop that we constantly want, a kind of reassessment: How was that gift received? Was that a useful way to do it? Perhaps it takes a while to learn how to be generous in speech so that it feels authentic for ourselves and is not too contrived, so that it makes other people actually uncomfortable because this is too much trying to be generous. How to make it natural and simple, so that when we speak maybe we help people smile. We help people readjust the direction in which their mind and heart is going—from talking about how a public talk was not such a good thing, and commiserating with each other, "Oh, that wasn't so good," versus talking about something that was beneficial, that kind of spark of joy and delight, and we benefit from talking about it.

So how can we spread joy and delight and benefit and growth to grow in the Dharma? One of the great ways to grow in the Dharma is to be truthful. Maybe there is very little growth in the Dharma without truth, dropping truth, true, honest to oneself. So those are my thoughts for this day. I hope that it gives you some suggestions of how to practise in your life, and I hope that you benefit from it. Maybe run it as an experiment for a week and see what you'll learn in the process of practising generosity in speech. So thank you very much.