

Non-Divisive Speech

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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So, tonight I'd like to talk about another way in which we can practice. We come here and we sit in silence, and we meditate together. Sometimes it can be easy to just imagine that just meditating or just being mindful all day long is what practice is about. And certainly, that's a big part of it, but there's a way in which mindfulness shows us the mind, kind of like what's happening in the mind. But there's a way in which we can look at our speech, the way that we speak. And just like mindfulness shows us what's happening in the mind, our speech shows us how we relate to people. How do we create closeness? How do we create distance? How do we create safety with others?

It is such an important, integral part of our lives. Sometimes we can think, "Oh, I just need to do this meditation" or whatever it happens to be. But our relationships with other people, whether it's the grocery clerk, our intimate partners, or people we just know a little bit—our friends, whomever—it's important.

And so I'd like to focus on one particular part of wise speech today, which we often don't talk about. Because when we talk about wise speech, we have this list of things in which wise speech gets defined. And I'll read a little bit from a sutta^[1] here which describes somebody who has freedom, somebody who has ease and peace in the world, and the way they move in the world and how their speech is. What are the qualities of their speech? And so this is a whole training, not just about divisive speech, it's about speech as a whole.

And it goes like this: "They give up lying. They speak the truth and stick to the truth. They're honest and dependable and don't trick the world with their words. They give up divisive speech. They don't repeat in one place what they heard in another so as to divide people against each other. Instead, they reconcile those who are divided and support those who are united. They delight in harmony, love harmony, and speak words that promote harmony. They give up harsh speech. They speak in a way that's mellow and pleasing to the ear, lovely, going to the heart, polite, likable, and agreeable. They give up talking nonsense. Their words are timely, true, and meaningful, in line with the teachings and trainings. They say things at the right time, which are valuable, reasonable, succinct, and beneficial."

I just love this training. There's a lot here, but there's a richness and a depth, and it's so much more than just "don't lie." There's a lot there, and it's so much more than just "be nice." Sometimes I can feel, and certainly I've heard this and thought this at the very beginning of my

practice, like, "Okay, wise speech is don't lie and be nice, and as long as you're doing that, you're doing fine." But here, there's this richness.

I want to focus in on this idea of non-divisive speech, partly to highlight that wise speech isn't just only about being what's true and being nice. But there's a way in which so much suffering in the world shows up this way. We might even say some of the craziness and awfulness that's happening in the world is related to this divisiveness, this divisive speech. And there's a way in which sometimes I can feel maybe powerless or like, what can I do to help make the world a better place? And one way is to be careful with my speech, to not be divisive in the way that I'm showing up in the world.

I'd like to offer this talk about divisive speech, not as somebody who has it all figured out and has perfect speech all the time. This is a practice for me, too. But there's something inspiring about finding a way in which to move through the world in which we're promoting harmony, delighting in harmony, loving harmony, so that we can make a difference in the world in the way that we are showing up. If we can't change what's happening on the world stage or anything like this—but maybe we can do those changes. And if you can, you're excused. You may leave now so that you can go make the world a better place right now. But if you aren't able to do some of those big, giant things, why not do these things here right now with our lives? It makes a difference. It does make a difference.

So, one way we might think about divisive speech is that it's creating an "us versus them." Another way we could talk about this is "othering." There's us, and then there's other people. There's those other people over there. There's "we" and "those others." And whenever we do this, create the "other," then this circle of belonging, we might say, shrinks. The others, they don't belong. Us, we belong here, and then there are others over there that don't belong. This is terrible, painful. Everybody belongs. Everybody wants to belong. We all want to have a sense of belonging.

The opposite of not othering isn't "saming." It's not that we're all the same, because we're not. We're not all the same. We don't need to be. It's kind of a little bit of craziness or naive to say that we're all the same. We would say the opposite of othering is belonging. Allowing people to belong with all their differences, whomever they are, not feeling like they're being excluded.

So there's this way in which we might be doing what I'm going to call this "micro-othering," which may not be intended. In fact, it's most often done in a subtle way, maybe even in a way that's not noticed or a playful way. Sometimes it's blatant, but often it's just polite or maybe even disguised as care in which we might be unknowingly, unwittingly creating some divisiveness, creating some of this othering.

And before we look at some of these what I'll call patterns of speech that we might find ourselves doing, I want to name something that maybe is a little tender, or just human. There's this way in which divisive speech is inviting because, like I said, people want to feel like they belong, and so one way to feel like you belong is to create an "us." And then as soon as there's an "us," there's "them" over there. And maybe there's this way that whenever we feel uncomfortable, the mind is looking for a fast way to feel more comfortable. And one way to do that is just to create an "us." So that like, okay, I got a little tribe here or a camp or something like this. We all have this urge. It's a natural thing to do. I don't want to demonize that we're doing this. I just want to highlight some of the ways in which we might be unwittingly othering, creating a "them" and excluding some people.

And then we discover that our life becomes richer as more and more people are belonging to the "us." There's this real beauty that happens with this. So with this divisive speech and creating an "us," it can feel like there's some bonding that happens. Okay, you know, we're the ones that have these whatever it is that bond people together. It can be anything. So there's a way it can feel like a certain amount of intimacy, which can feel like a relief, but it comes at someone else's expense. And it also comes at the expense of closing our hearts in some kind of way against those people over there.

And so these teachings, this practice, is more about: can we orient towards harmony? Can we orient towards belonging?

So there are some of these ordinary ways in which this othering happens. One is called "triangulation." That is, person A is having a conversation with person B, and there's a little bit of tension. It's not a big blowout. It's just maybe a misunderstanding, some tension, something that feels a little bit uncomfortable. So then person A goes and talks to a third person, and they say something.

I'll give a little vignette. Let's say that maybe you're part of a small community. Maybe it's a planning team, or maybe it's a family system or a friend group, and maybe there's a little friction—not a blowup, but just a little bit of friction. And then after a meeting, one of them pulls you aside and says, "Can I tell you something? Didn't you think that so-and-so was kind of rude or kind of domineering or something like this?" And there's a sense of, well, first, it feels like intimacy, like, "Oh, this person wants to confide in me about what was happening there in this small group." And maybe there's this pull, you kind of want to join, like, "Yeah, I thought so too." But there's this way in which, in my little scenario, person B wasn't there. They're not there, so they can't clarify or repair or contextualize. And instead, they're kind of on the outside now. It might seem innocent enough, but there's this way that trust has been undermined a little bit. There's this kind of coalition of these two people that's happening. So it feels like

closeness, but now there's this closeness that's based on a little bit of a suspicion towards this third person.

The reason why this is done is just because there's some tension between two people, and so they want to talk to a third person. One person does to kind of alleviate the tension instead of dealing with the tension directly.

I'll give us some vignettes in a little bit to talk about what some alternatives are. But I want to bring in another way in which this kind of three-person dynamic plays out: gossiping. You know, talking about a person who isn't there, and it's done in a way that can also feel like a certain amount of intimacy. Like, "Oh, did you hear about so-and-so and what they did? Yeah, I think they must be feeling really insecure because they did whatever it is that they did." So there's this way that they're talking about a person that's speculative, giving them some motives that we don't know. But it's also maybe entertaining, or maybe it allows us to vent in some kind of way. But it's not aimed at repair. It's not aimed at supporting any relationship, really. It's just talking about somebody who's not there in a way that often is speculating, or maybe it feels like a funny story, or it's entertaining or something like this.

In this list that I gave at the beginning about this description of wise speech, I said they don't talk nonsense. Sometimes that can get translated as gossip, the nonsense, because it's nonsense. It doesn't move anything forward, and instead, it kind of leaves one person out. And then, of course, we all have this experience too: if two people are gossiping, both of those people are thinking, "Oh, I wonder what this other person is saying when I'm not in the room," right? It kind of undermines everybody's credibility there and it doesn't inspire their honesty or authenticity, which is really what this practice is about: finding some authenticity.

So if one wanted to distinguish between triangulation and gossiping: triangulation is just that there's tension between two people and a third person gets brought in, so one person isn't dealing with the tension but instead is just talking to somebody else, venting. Whereas gossip is really just more for entertainment, making yourself feel better in some kind of way, not necessarily due to any tension or anything like this.

So, here are some vignettes and some alternatives that we might use or some situations we might find ourselves in. Maybe we feel like, "I just need to vent." And so, somebody says, "I'm so mad at so-and-so. Let me just tell you everything that they did." Right? Sometimes this can be a skillful thing that we need to work through. So a skillful way could be saying, "I'm activated. I'm feeling angry. Can you help me just find my way with this?" instead of it turning into, "Let me tell you everything that they did," and then all of a sudden the other person becomes a bad person or something like that. Because of course we're going to talk to third parties about

what's happening in our lives. I'm not saying that we're not doing this, but can we do it in a way that doesn't other or harm relationships or undermine other people?

Here's another little vignette. Maybe there's this meeting and, as I said earlier, someone says, "Did you see how so-and-so dominated, or they just kept on talking so much they took over the whole meeting or something like this?" So maybe there's a way, a more skillful way, to keep it more specific. Like, "What actually did you observe, and what impact did it have on you?" "When so-and-so just kept on talking, I found myself just closing down and no longer even wanting to be in the meeting and didn't want to pay attention anymore. And I felt all my energy just drain out." I'm describing the experience. And maybe there's even something that says, "When so-and-so was dominating the meeting and I just felt all the energy drain out and myself closing down, I wonder if there's something we can do next time to help support that so it doesn't happen again? What are some ways that we can work with this?" Right? So this is a skillful way to talk about this instead of just othering and saying this person is a domineering person. "Can you believe how awful that was?" or something like that.

Or maybe there's another way in which we speak with a third person. We want to seek some advice. We speak with a mentor or a therapist or a coach or a teacher or somebody. And maybe there's this way in which a person goes to the coach, mentor, therapist and says, "I'd like to discuss a conflict I'm having," but then there's a way in which they discuss it and they villainize the other person. And then all they really want is justification, like, "I'm correct for cutting them out of my life or yelling at them or something." They just kind of want some justification for their behavior. And maybe a more skillful way is to say, "I'm having this difficulty in a relationship with somebody, and I need some help here to see if I need to talk to them. I'm not sure what to do. Maybe can we brainstorm or roleplay or come up with some ideas of how I might address them or how I might work with it?" So, kind of like taking some responsibility for oneself as opposed to just, "Please tell me that I'm right and that other person is a really terrible person or something like this."

So this triangulation or gossiping is a way in which we might unwittingly or unknowingly or unintentionally be creating an "other" which was unnecessary and can be unhelpful, maybe even painful for the others. And there's this way in which if we pay attention, we can feel our hearts have to be a little bit closed towards that person, and that's not what this practice is about. This practice is finding freedom, and freedom is not having to avoid certain people or feeling closed off from certain experiences or certain individuals. It's about being able to meet whatever life is delivering and bringing.

Triangulating and gossiping is one way we might be using divisive speech. And then there's a way in which we can do what we might say is "category talk," reducing a person to a type. There's a way in which we can say, "Oh yeah, well you know, people like that, they do that." We

just kind of slap a label on somebody and say, "Well, you know, people like that, what do you expect?" This is terrible. I mean, of course, we do it, right? Because it's a simplified way, and we kind of want people to just be on our side and everybody agrees, like, "Oh, yeah." Or something like this. There's this way it might create a quiet or quick bond, but it also creates an exile. The people that are "like that" are suddenly "them," and their othering is happening.

Maybe you have a tense interaction with somebody in your community, friend group, family group, work situation, whatever it might be. Maybe they interrupt you, or they dismiss an idea that you have, or they're dominating the conversation or something like this. So, it's nothing super egregious. But afterwards, you're talking with a friend and you might find yourself saying, or maybe the friend says, "Yeah, that's just how they are. People like that don't really listen," for example. And maybe there's a way in which it feels like, "Oh, okay, neat and tidy, done with that." But there's this kind of alienation. It's like it doesn't feel good in the heart, this way that we've kind of closed ourselves off and undermined whomever that was, undermined their credibility or their humanity in some kind of way because they're just "a person like that." We're not honoring the fullness and the richness of their lives, which is just as full and rich as your life. Of course it is.

Maybe in work meetings or something like this. I know that back in my professional life, I did my share of this. I'd be in meetings, and there'd be people from different disciplines in one meeting. And then afterwards, be like, "Yeah, of course the person from X department did this, and of course the person from Y department did that, and ah, those people over there in Z department, can you believe that in this meeting they showed up in this way?" And it can be in jest and fun. But maybe there is a way in which we are doing some othering, creating some divisiveness that isn't needed. I feel like the world has so much of this. Is there a way that we can show up in the world in a way that is promoting harmony, even in these small situations?

Maybe at that work meeting there was one individual—maybe it's not so much about discipline but about one individual—who really wants to get into the details and talk about, "No, no, there's this part here that we have to talk about," and get really into the minutia that's not relevant for that big meeting, but they can't let it go. And they're like, "Well, we don't really need to be talking about those details. This is more about a big picture." And they're like, "Yeah, but," and they find themselves getting into the details again. Instead of, "Oh yeah, well people like that, they just always behave that way," maybe there's a way that we could show up and say, "I'm hearing that there's a value for details and precision. And some of us here are also valuing staying at the big picture. So, can we have time for both? Or can we zoom out and see what's needed for our time here during the meeting?" Some version of this.

So maybe I'll just close here with this idea of: are our words doing the work of reconciling or promoting harmony, or is there a subtle way in which we're causing division? Is there a subtle

way in which we're othering others? This requires some sensitivity to our speech and the way that we might be flattening individuals or flattening our experience. We don't want to work with it; instead, we just want to say, "Please tell me that I'm right, that you're an ally to whatever view that I have, and then I don't have to look at myself or my contribution or anything like this."

It's not easy. Mindfulness practice is not always easy, but speech practice isn't easy either. But it's so powerful. This is a way that we can make a difference in the world, a real difference. People will sense our authenticity, our inclusivity. I know this firsthand. When I first joined a Buddhist community and I started to sense how people were careful with their language, I just felt something within me kind of soften and relax. It had a big impact on me. I was coming from a place where there was a lot of strife, let's just use that word. And wow, what a difference it made. I wouldn't have told you at that time, "Oh, the way they use speech is comfortable." I didn't know what it was. I couldn't have pointed to a specific instance. But there's something that happens when you recognize that somebody is taking care with how they're showing up in the world. And it allows people to show up more authentically. It allows people to maybe show up with their hearts, with what's really happening for them. Not everybody and not all the time, but it creates the conditions in which something different can start to unfold in our relationships, even in our professional relationships or with individuals we don't have intimacy with but that we engage with at certain times.

So this way of asking: are our words delighting in harmony, supporting those who are in harmony, are they helping to reconcile, or is there a way in which we're subtly dividing? This Sutta quote is about the person who has complete freedom, how they are in the world. They give up divisive speech. They don't repeat in one place what they heard in another so as to divide people against each other. Instead, they reconcile those who are divided and support those who are united. They delight in harmony, love harmony, speak words that promote harmony.

I'm not asking us to become perfect speakers, just an encouragement to maybe welcome this as part of practice too. Just to create the conditions in which there might be more harmony in this world that sorely needs it. And why not start with us? Why not? It needs to start somewhere. So why not here with us?

So, may you find yourself having a sense of belonging and maybe inviting others in, in whatever way makes sense for you, that they may also feel like they belong. And when people feel like they belong, beautiful things can happen when there's a feeling of, "Yeah, I belong."

So, I'll end there and open it up for some questions or comments. Thank you.

Q&A

Question: So I'm thinking about a meeting I was in many years ago where I was kind of person C, and had had a similar conflict with person A that person B had had. And at the time, I basically responded in a way that othered person A, and I've been trying to think, "Alright, what would be a better way to respond?" And one might be to say something like, "Yeah, I've noticed the same problem, and I've been trying to think what to do about it. Do you have any ideas?" Do you have any other suggestions?

Answer: I think starting exactly how you said, with "Yeah, I've been having the same problem," is perfectly fine. Maybe I'll say this: is there something we can do? The way you described it doesn't necessarily, but it can turn into, "Oh, this is a problem, let's get together and we're going to solve this problem," and person B turns into the problem. So, maybe there's a way to say what your experience is, and maybe instead of having to fix them or something, talk about if there is a way in which these meetings can be such that this doesn't happen. It becomes less about the person being the problem and more about the whole situation. Like, how can we set the expectations for the meetings, or I don't know what it might be.

Follow-up: Well, this particular situation wasn't so much about an individual meeting. It was, we both reported to the same manager, and the manager's style, as far as we could tell, was kind of creating the problem. And it's like, okay, so what do we do? We're going to keep hitting this bump if we don't do anything.

Answer: So maybe here's the answer I would say: can this be done, trying to solve the problem, from a place of care as opposed to a place of, "Dang it, this person has to change, there's a problem, and we have to fix it." There's a way in which if we come from a place of care, often things that we haven't thought of before can arise. I can imagine this is an unsatisfying answer, but it's a difference.

Follow-up: Well, I can imagine coming at it from a point of view of what it would look like if we had the same manager and the same situation, because things come up at work, right? And so you could say, "Well, all right, next time something like this comes up, what would it look like if things worked in a way that worked for us as well as for him?"

Answer: There you go. There you go. And then maybe find a way to communicate that or create the conditions in which that could happen. Yeah. Thank you.

Comment: Your comments on someone being domineering are very familiar. And I have said this, usually I say, "They just won't stop talking." There's one person in particular. But there is a phrase that I heard when I was doing NVC that I really liked, if I can remember to use it, is the concept, "They're using more words than I want to hear." And that puts it on me, not on them being the problem. I mean, you still have to figure out how to deal with it, but "they're using more words than I want to hear" in this situation.

Answer: That feels nice because it's not divisive. It's not othering. It's just saying they're using more words than you want to hear. Yeah, I like that. Thank you.

Question: I encountered a problem recently where somebody I've known for years seems to be using more profanity, and it's really off-putting. And I've been really struggling with whether to say something, you know, just be direct. I don't think he's that conscious of it. But since I've deepened my practice, I find it really offensive. So that's the only thing I've come up with is just to, in a caring way, just ask him to change.

Answer: Well, we can't change people. You know this, right? You could just say, "I just noticed that there's a lot of profanity in your language." Wow. And then just see what happens.

Audience: You could say it makes me feel uncomfortable.

Answer: Thank you. Say it makes me feel uncomfortable. I've told the story here a few times that I watched a movie, one of those surround sound movies, and it was a type of movie I don't usually see, but there was so much profanity. It was like many hours of just an onslaught. I walked out of that movie cussing like a sailor when I left, and I thought, "Wow, that was just amazing how just being surrounded by that for hours..." I kind of left like, "That was so effing loud." Maybe this person is spending a lot of time in a movie theater before they see you.

Follow-up: I think what's so interesting to me is I don't think they're that aware of it.

Question: I remember one time I took a drama class and we did improv, where you just play out a scene but you don't know what you're going to say. I'm wondering with speech, is there a trap of thinking about it too much, like overanalyzing your speech, thinking about it too much instead of a little more improv?

Answer: Well, how would you know that you are thinking too much about speaking? It does get awkward if somebody's like, "Wait, I have to think my next thought. Uh, yes, thank you." And then the person says something else. I mean, that's awkward. But this is definitely a practice. It's not something that we can just immediately have a skill about. But there's value, of course, in spontaneity, and that's how humans communicate. I don't have an answer, Matt. I think this is a great question just to explore. What happens if I am a little bit more thoughtful? Does it feel too clunky and awkward and nobody wants to talk to me anymore? Or do I feel like, "Oh, being more intentional with my speech helps me be more clear and bring in a little bit more of this harmony or something like this?" I don't have an answer to this, but I think it's worth exploring.

Comment: I wish I had a word for what happens in a conversation when like-minded people are all in agreement about othering. And I wish there were a word for "de-othering," for donating something to the conversation to turn that around. It's on my mind because I saw a beautiful example of this. I'm really moved by those monks who are walking from Texas to DC. They aren't

really talking about Buddhism because they aren't there to give religion to people. I think they know that would be divisive. They're just talking about this one common thing we have, which is we long for peace. I was at a dinner party with my wife and a whole bunch of people, and we all politically see eye to eye, which meant somebody started complaining about the "others." My wife and I kind of cringed, like, "How are we going to get out of this whirlpool?" And in a pause, my wife just said, "Hey, have you heard about those monks who are walking for peace?" And some of them hadn't. So then she told them about it. So there they are on the eastern seaboard, and here are my wife and I watching them on YouTube, and it gets into our hearts, and then she puts it into that conversation. And so, for lack of any better word, I'm gonna call it "de-othering."

Answer: There you go. I appreciate the example. I mean, these individuals that are walking for peace is just beautiful. But if I wanted to do a little generalization, she changed the topic. And this is often what I would say is the way to do this. Just change the topic. But it's not always easy. You have to think of something that's engaging enough that people are willing to shift. I have a little story about these monks. I was teaching online last week, and somebody who lived on the eastern seaboard went to see them. She said everybody that was there on the road was silent. And she was so touched, she put her hands together, and she said she had tears, and one of them came up and put his hands on the outside of her hands. She said it was one of the most beautiful experiences she's ever had in her life. So for me, it felt like, okay, here's a first-person account of somebody having interacted with these monks.

Comment: I've been to maybe five of these women's marches so far. You've got to do something more than just vote at the ballot box. That's pretty good, but more is better. But at each one of these, I've seen a fair number of signs that were just profane and had very foul language. I mentioned this because earlier in your talk, you talked about how speech affects the larger society as well as interpersonal and one-on-one and the workplace. People out there who vote conservative or Republican, they know what liberals are saying about them. And most of these people are very well-spoken. I mean, most of the conservatives I've met—because I'm from a red state originally and I go back often—they're generous, they're well-spoken, but they know, and some liberal attitudes are pushing them in the opposite direction.

Answer: So, you're pointing to the power of speech. I appreciate this. It's so powerful if one group can harness this speech and use it to trigger, push the buttons of the other side.

Follow-up: It's counterproductive, actually.

Answer: Yeah. Right. We could all learn about wise speech. Thank you. Thank you, Bill.

So, non-divisiveness. May we find a way, in whatever way that feels available to us, in which we can promote harmony. So thank you. May you have a harmonious rest of your evening and a safe drive home. Thank you.

1. **Sutta:** A discourse or sermon attributed to the Buddha or one of his disciples. Suttas are a central part of the Pali Canon, the sacred texts of Theravada Buddhism. [↩](#)

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