

Dharmette: Right Speech (2 of 5) Useful.

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September 29, 2026

Keywords: *right speech*, AUDIT, usefulness, purpose, *Dharma* practice, contemplative life, goodwill, attachment, aversive thoughts, Buddha

Hello, everyone, and welcome.

This week, I'm exploring the five forms of *right speech*, or five ways of considering our speech so that our speech is well formed and beneficial. It's kind of the five criteria, the self-audit that we can do to know whether it's okay to say what we're going to say. The five are put under the acronym AUDIT, since it's a kind of way of checking in with ourselves.

Is it accurate? Is it true? Is it useful? That's today. What's the disposition that we have when we speak? Do we have a good disposition, a good attitude? And what's the impact of what we're doing? What's the impact on ourselves, the impact on others? And is it timely? Is it the right time to speak?

So, these five criteria. Today, it's: is it useful? For this, it's important to have some sense of purpose. Why are we speaking? What purpose do we have?

What I'd like to propose is that's always a good question, because there are layers of purpose for speech. There might be the most obvious one we have, you know, the most overt one, the one that everyone can see. But, in fact, there are layers of purpose underneath that that are operating.

Something as innocent as someone on the street asking you for directions to a place that you know where it is. You're happy to give them directions, and so you point them down the street where they have to go. What purpose did you speak to them for? Because they asked. Because you were able to offer them directions.

But if you start looking below the surface of that, you might find that there was some feeling of fear or anxiety. Maybe you didn't know the stranger, so you wanted to speak quickly and briefly to get out of there. Or maybe there was a layer of wanting to impress the person. The

person seemed very nice, attractive, or interesting to you. So, you were interested in saying it in a way that cast a good light on yourself, so you would make a good impression on them.

You were speaking not just to give them directions, but to make an impression. Maybe you wanted to show them how clever you are, that you knew the kind of shortcut, and you really wanted them to see, “Wow, you really know.” So, there might be different purposes. With what purpose are we speaking?

And with what purpose is it for other people? Is it useful to speak? Some people want to get something done, talk about a difficult topic, work out a disagreement. But the other person has a migraine, and it’s not useful to try to talk to them. Then we’re not going to get the best of them. This is not the useful time to talk to them.

They might not be available. They might be so closed down or so angry that it’s not useful to talk with them. So, we can exhaust ourselves trying to get through to them, trying to explain, but it’s not going to be for any purpose. It’s not beneficial.

Not a few people try to express their opinions, get other people to understand them, insist on getting their way, or try to work something out when the other person is simply unavailable for that kind of conversation. It might be quite sad, maybe sometimes heartbreaking. But it also doesn’t make sense to exhaust ourselves trying when it’s not useful to do so.

It might be that the purposes we have are not kind. Is it useful to complain? Is it useful to be cynical? Is it useful to attack someone or put them down? Is it useful for what purpose?

If we’re trying to get them to be annoyed by us, then it’s useful. But what do we really want? What do we want in our relationship with other people? What kind of relationships do we want to have? What kind of impact do we want to have on them?

So, is what we’re doing, how we speak, and what we’re speaking about useful? Or is it not useful? Is it useful? Sometimes things are accurate and true, but is it useful to speak it? Is it kind to speak it?

You know, I once wanted to criticize someone who gave a public talk, a public figure. I criticized what they said and why they said it. I certainly wasn’t talking to them, but I had people around me that I could speak to. I thought about it a little bit first. Is it useful to complain? Is it useful to be critical of them? Why am I trying to do this?

The study of purpose and usefulness is very helpful because it helps us to ask questions. Why am I doing this? What’s the purpose it serves? Is there a better purpose to have?

Simply to vent my frustrations, my anger at someone, when it’s not going to have any impact

on them, any good impact on our relationship—maybe this is not the useful conversation. Maybe what's useful is to bring some particular topic up out of the public talk that I heard. Maybe it's an indirect question, instead of criticizing it, saying something like, "This person was trying to convey something important for them in a way. I wonder if it could have been done in a more inspiring way. I wonder what would have been the compassionate thing to say around this topic."

Then you engage in interesting conversation, and it can be a kind of exploration that falls away from what the person said publicly to what's an interesting conversation with your friends. So, is it useful? What's the purpose?

In Buddhism, this idea of purpose is: is it useful for the goal of practice? If a person is deeply rooted in *Dharma* practice, that's one of the constant reference points. Does this help me to become a better person? Does this help me to become a freer person, to be less attached? Does this help me to be honest with myself and to really see myself in a deeper way?

Does this help me to let go of the ways that I am caught, the ways that I'm tense? Does this help me to relax? Does this help me be open and not closed? So, there's a reference point to ourselves.

Although all those kinds of *Dharma* reference points are double-sided, because it's not only good for ourselves, but whatever is good *dharmically* for ourselves will translate to being interested in the welfare of others. To really ask yourself these *Dharma* questions: Is this really my speaking from my freedom? My speaking from my goodwill? Or am I speaking from my attachment? Am I speaking from my fear? Am I speaking from where I'm most closed down?

Can I change that? Is it useful to speak from there? Is another way of speaking more useful? Is it more useful not to speak, to be silent?

If I speak now, am I going to make the situation worse? Surely, the person will be more angry and there will be more tension. Let me not speak at all until I can find a way of speaking about something that is not going to agitate the situation, but rather help make us feel more deeply connected to each other, know each other well.

Instead of making a statement, let me ask a question—a sincere question. "What do you think? What do you think we should do now? Or is there anything you'd like to say?" Or, you know, "I find this challenging, but I want to know from you: how is it for you, and do you have any ideas of how we can go forward?"

So, to not hold on to our complaining, hold on to our challenge in some ways that we kind

of get words out of us that are attacking others—that's not useful. But to have words that come out that help make connections and create the conditions for a deeper conversation, that allows for a deeper connection.

So, this question: is it useful? Is it beneficial? Chances are, there's some percentage of the conversations you're going to have where maybe it's not so useful to have the talk in that way. Maybe realizing it's not useful, or not the most useful, can allow you to reflect a little bit. How can I make it more useful?

All this, using these five audits, these five criteria that the Buddha uses, like today's, "Is it useful?" is a way of living a contemplative life. It's a life where we really are contemplating, considering, thinking about what we're doing and what we're saying. We're not just kind of going along thoughtlessly, just saying whatever comes to our mind spontaneously.

That's part of the quality of *Dharma* life: to live a conscious life, a deliberate life, a considered life. To be able to find a way to be our own companion in our thinking. That we enjoy thinking about these things. We find that our thinking mind is beginning to shift now, to not be harsh, not be complaining, not be angry, not be anxious.

But our thinking mind now becomes a contemplative mind that is thinking and engaged in a mature, kind, serious way with what is useful here, what is beneficial. One of the things to keep in mind is that the question of what is useful and what is beneficial can be directed to how we think, how we're considering things. So, rather than thinking becoming more and more thinking and busy, our thinking becomes more and more satisfying.

Now, if this is a new skill, to contemplate in this way, it might be, you know, awkward. You fall off easily, fall off the bike easily when you're learning. But keep practicing it until it becomes second nature.

Some of us have been practicing complaining and anxiety for decades, aversive thoughts for decades. That's what we've been practicing and building up. It might be time to practice something else and let that become second nature.

So, thank you, and may you live a contemplative life today. Before you speak, if you would like to do a homework, just check in with yourself for a few moments. What's the purpose of what you're about to say? Just asking yourself that question, does that change what you're going to say?

So, thank you very much, and we'll continue tomorrow.