

Oren Jay Sofer

The Buddha's Communication Toolbox

Week One: An Ancient Map—The Buddha's Guidelines for Awakening through
Speech

June 3, 2019



Hello, my name is Oren Jay Sofer. I teach insight meditation and Nonviolent Communication and I'll be offering a *Tricycle* Dharma Talk on right speech. In this first week, we're going to explore the role speech has in early Buddhism's map to awakening. We'll look at some of the basic guidelines for right speech, and the role and relevance they play in our lives today.

First, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself and my background. I started practicing meditation when I was 19, about 20 years ago, with Anagarika Munindraji and a man named Godwin Samararatne from Sri Lanka. This was within the Theravada school of Buddhism, and I mostly practiced Vipassana meditation. I've done a lot of training in the Mahasi method, as well as the more open, choiceless awareness style of practice that Munindraji and Godwin taught. The first ten years of my practice were really focused on that method. In the last ten years, I've spent a lot of time practicing the Thai Forest Tradition primarily with Ajahn Sucitto, who is my main teacher these days.

At some point early in my practice, I recognized that there was a gap between what was happening on the cushion and what was happening in my relationships, conversations, and the rest of my life. It was about that time, maybe five or six years into my practice, that I came across the work of a man named Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg, and the system of Nonviolent Communication. I found that the principles of this method that we'll explore in the subsequent weeks of this Dharma Talk were very consistent with the core values and perspectives of early Buddhism. The tools of Nonviolent Communication gave me a method to put into practice these guidelines for right speech that we're going to explore today. Let's jump right in.

What is the place of speech in early Buddhism? If you've studied Buddhism at all, you know that in the noble eightfold path, right speech is one of the eight factors that the Buddha singles out, saying this is essential for awakening. This always stood out to me.

The five precepts are the guidelines for a lay Buddhist, and they are the basic bar to meet in terms of ethics in the Buddha's teaching. Four of those precepts all get grouped together in the noble eightfold path under right action. But speech was distinct and important enough that the Buddha separated it out. The training in right speech in the noble eightfold path comes right after the training in wisdom.

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If you take a step back and look at the structure of the noble eightfold path, the Buddha is basically saying, “If you're interested in living a meaningful life and suffering less, in fulfilling your potential as a human being and moving towards awakening, first of all develop wisdom.” Pay attention to the way you look at things—your view. Pay attention to your intentions in life, the motivations behind your actions, your thoughts, and your words. That’s the development of wisdom. The very next thing in the eightfold path is to pay attention to your communication. It's right there at the very beginning.

When we consider the role that speech plays in the path to awakening, I think it's helpful to keep in mind the role that communication played in ancient India. Ancient India was an oral culture: things were not written down. The very fact that we have these teachings is due to the human faculty for communication, particularly for memorization. Speech is not only the vehicle for transmitting the teachings in this oral culture, but it also plays a central role in our lives as human beings. As human beings we are deeply relational social creatures. We depend on one another to survive, to meet our basic needs as well as our relational needs. Communication or speech is the key channel through which we can act and develop relationships and life.

The other factor that seems to be a key reason for why speech is given such emphasis in the early Buddhist teachings is that this faculty of language is incredibly powerful. It’s featured in the noble eightfold path, the five precepts, and the transmission of the teachings. The ways in which we think and speak shape the way we perceive and relate to the world. Language is not just a representation of the world. It actually structures the way our mind interacts and constellates experience, so it's an incredibly potent capacity. It's very clear to me from reading early texts and from my own practice that the Buddha understood this. The Buddha understood the power that language has to shape our minds and perceptions, and to determine the quality of our relationships.

Last but not least, the Buddha understood the power that language has to create kamma, or karma in Sanskrit. Speech is one of the three doors of action, it is one of the ways in which we create the patterns in our mind that determine the likelihood of our future actions and also the results of our actions. For all of these reasons, speech is an essential factor in our practice.

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What is the essence of right speech? As we start to look at this, what can we say this is actually about? We'll get into the details and guidelines that the Buddha offers. To keep it really simple, there are two ways that we can understand right speech. Firstly, what is the point of the noble eightfold path? The whole point of the path is awakening and enlightenment, and every factor in the path is designed to further our progress towards understanding the nature of the human mind and the nature of life. Right speech, which is a factor of the noble eightfold path, is speech that leads to awakening. It's using the capacity of speech to listen, speak, and communicate in the service of awakening.

It's a fascinating contemplation to step back and consider: how often are we using our words, speech, and conversations in the service of enlightenment and our spiritual practice? This is one way just to begin to contemplate right speech.

One of the things that I hope you will take away from this series is the possibility that we can make communication not just an extra, but an integral part of our spiritual practice. Communication itself can be a vehicle for contemplative practice and transformation. On a broad level, this is one way to understand right speech.

In the *Anguttara Nikaya* in the Chapter of the Fours: the Book of Fours, the Buddha talks about what one should say. How do we know what to say and what not to say? The Buddha says, "Everything that you see, hear, think about, and understand isn't necessarily to be spoken of."

How do we determine what to say and what not to say? The Buddha gives a very clear guideline for this. He says, "Consider, will saying this increase the healthy skillful factors in my own mind and in the minds of others around me?" If so, great, say it. Or, "Will it increase the unhealthy, unskillful factors in my own heart and mind and in the hearts and minds of those around me?" If not, don't go there. As a criteria for right speech, here we consider the effect it has on our own heart and mind, and on the hearts and minds of others. Is it increasing wholesome factors and decreasing unwholesome factors or vice versa? At the broadest level, this is what we can begin to contemplate and explore with our communication.

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In the noble eightfold path, what is right speech? Right speech is traditionally defined as abstaining from four particular kinds of communication. These are false speech, harsh speech, divisive speech and idle speech. The Buddha says if you want to use communication in the service of your own freedom and awakening, don't lie. Don't use words to misrepresent the truth. Harsh speech is speech that's spoken with the intent to harm, and sharp or cruel speech is spoken with a biting tone. The Buddha teaches to avoid that kind of speech. Avoid divisive speech, which has the intent to separate people, to pit one group against another. And then there's idle speech, which is speech that's useless and wastes our words and energy as it's spoken for no purpose at all. This is the traditional definition of right speech that shows up throughout the early texts.

Then there are the opposites of these. If you read the early texts of Buddhism, you start to see that the teachings on right speech are not cut and dry. It's not a black and white affair, it's actually a whole matrix of teachings. All of these different templates around communication work together to help us shape our minds. We can use communication to reshape our consciousness and our minds towards the wholesome, in service of awakening.

We can also look at another template from the early texts. This is also from the *Anguttara Nikaya*, from the Chapter of the Fives: the Book of Fives. The Buddha says, "What's a well-spoken statement?" How do we know that we're using our words in a way that's faultless, blameless, and that is praised and celebrated by the wise? The Buddha singles out five factors. We can consider a statement as well-spoken when it is endowed with these five factors. What I like about this list is that it gives us a way to really practice with some of these guidelines. Abstaining from false, harsh, divisive, and idle speech is one way to practice and it's useful. We can also look at what we say. How do we cultivate right speech? Here the Buddha points out five factors. I'll say what these are, how they work, and then we'll talk a little bit about each of them.

The first factor is saying that which is true. You can see already how this is the mirror or the counterpart of the negative definition that we have in the noble eightfold path. These counterparts are saying that which is true, saying that which is kind, saying that which is spoken with a heart of goodwill, saying that which is beneficial or useful, and lastly, saying that which is spoken at the right time.

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How do we work with these five factors, whether we're looking at the four things to abstain from or the ones to actually cultivate? These templates function in three different ways as we put them into practice. First, they give us a kind of guideline for how to act and speak. We can measure our words and what we want to say against them. We can use a little checklist: is this true, is this kind, is this helpful, is this the right time to speak? That helps us to determine whether or not we want to say something.

These templates also act as a mindfulness bell. When we really take on communication as an integral part of our spiritual practice and not an extra, then that is a commitment and inner vow to say “I'm not going to speak in ways that are false, I'm not going to say things that are harmful, divisive, or just wasteful.” When we notice an impulse to say something along those lines, a little mindfulness bell goes off and says “Hey, you made a commitment here to not speak in this way. What's going on?” It serves as a reminder to investigate and notice the intentions and impulses that may be driving our actions. This gives us the opportunity to begin to practice with unskillful impulses that may lead to difficulty, entanglement, or harm for ourselves and others. We can also learn to transmute that energy. These factors give us a guideline for how to act and they act as a mindfulness bell. Lastly, they help us to cultivate certain healthy, wholesome qualities in the mind.

When you look at what it takes to implement these guidelines, we start to see we actually have to cultivate all kinds of wholesome qualities. We need mindfulness to know where we're coming from and what's happening. We develop lovingkindness and compassion. We develop concentration because we need to have enough stability of awareness in our mind to stay connected to what we're saying and what's happening in the moment of a conversation. The whole process of working with the guidelines and paying attention to our speech allows us to begin to understand the functioning of our minds, habits, and the perceptions that we carry. Ultimately we start to understand the roots of suffering and the roots of freedom in our own mind. Working with these guidelines—investigating where is this coming from, what the results are going to be, and why do I want to say this—becomes a practice of examining the four noble truths in our direct experience and relationships.

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I love working with right speech because it's so accessible. Most of us are communicating all day long, whether it's with other people or on social media. We're just the narrative that's happening in our own mind, and that's a really important part. An important point of right speech is that it's not just about what we say with others, it's also about how we speak to ourselves—that inner dialog that's happening. Can we apply these guidelines and principles to our own speech?

I want to say a few words about these guidelines and their relevance in our life to give you a bit to chew on as you think about taking this into your life in the next week. I said there were five factors—saying that which is true, speaking in a way that's affectionate and kind, coming from the heart of goodwill, saying that which is helpful or beneficial, and speaking at the right time. When I teach, I actually combine two of these because I find it's a lot easier to remember four factors than five, and two of them are connected. Saying that which is affectionate is about how we speak, and speaking with a mind of goodwill is about where we're coming from. Those two are very closely connected, so I combine those into one, which is to speak in a way that is kind and comes from a kind heart. That's both the intention as well as the delivery. If we combine those we end up with four factors for speech—that it should be truthful, kind, helpful, and timely or appropriate to the context.

Let's look at each of these in detail. Truthfulness is sometimes taken to be one of the most important guidelines for right speech. There is a text in the numerical discourses where the Buddha is quoted as having said to his son, Rahula, "One should never knowingly speak a lie either for the sake of one's own advantage, for another person's advantage, or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever." It's super clear there's no leeway there—don't do it. Why is truthfulness taken to be such an important guideline?

The whole path of practice is about coming to see and know the truth clearly and directly for ourselves. The practice of being truthful with our words is about aligning all of our life behind the intention to know and see the truth. When we bend the truth or say things that aren't in alignment with the truth, there's a way in which the mind deviates from this core intention to know and see clearly. It begins to refract and fragment the mind's ability to see clearly because our words and our actions are no longer in alignment with that deep intention to know and see the truth. This guideline for truthfulness is at the grossest level about not telling blatant lies. But

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there are many ways that we can bend the truth—through omission, shading, or not entirely being truthful—in order to gain some advantage. These are subtle ways in which we exaggerate or tell a half truth or avoid a certain topic. When we look closer, what are the results of this?

Being honest in relating to others is the basis for having trust and being able to develop a solid connection with others. If we can't be truthful, we can't really relate, because we can't trust one another, and the same thing goes for building community. Honesty and truthfulness are prerequisites for safety. We've already looked at the importance of truthfulness in not fragmenting or agitating the mind on the spiritual level, because untruthfulness means we aren't in harmony with the reality that we know to be true. Practicing this guideline also means having a commitment to investigating the truth, to deeply seeing what is true in my experience.

In one text The Buddha talks about safeguarding the truth by pointing out the distinction between saying “this is my conviction” and “this is my belief” versus “this is the truth and the only truth.” It's interesting to look and see how often we present our opinions or views as facts, even if it's something trifling like “That was the best movie.” Is that actually true or is it more true to say “I really enjoyed that movie?” Or, “That was the best movie I've seen in a long time?” How much space do we leave for someone else if we own our experience rather than making a blanket statement? This is just a very small example, but we can see how that applies when there's some interpersonal conflict or we're trying to deal with a more important issue, whether it's at work or in our community or society. This investigation and commitment to truthfulness can go very deep in examining our perceptions. We'll look at this further in subsequent weeks and really give some concrete tools to investigate the truthfulness of our perceptions and words.

The last thing I'll say about this factor of saying that which is true, is that it is really a tenet for a better world. We can just consider what the implications would be if this were a value that were held universally by our society, by organizations, corporations, and governments, and the great detriment that comes when we can't trust the information we receive from the structures around us in our society.

The second factor is saying that which is kind and coming from the heart of goodwill. When we have a conflict or disagreement with someone, even a few words of care and kindness can have a huge impact on setting things in the right direction. This takes training and practice. One of the

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great benefits of lovingkindness practice is that it strengthens this quality in the heart and our ability to return to and come from a place of care in a conversation.

Where are we coming from? What's our intention when we speak and how are we delivering the message? Is it coming with the sense of care and kindness in the words and the delivery?

Because one of the things that you may have noticed is that we can say that which is true and still cause harm. We might say "I was just being honest."

This is where we start to see the beauty and complexity of this teaching in that we're looking to balance these factors. How do we say that which is true, and also kind? Often, we feel like we have to do one or the other. Either I'm going to be kind and not share everything or I'm going to tell you what's on my mind and the kindness goes out the window. This practice is about bringing these two together. Again, this includes how we speak to ourselves. Can we bring this quality of kindness into our own speech? This doesn't mean being nice all the time. The Buddha was very forceful with people at times, saying, "You foolish person. Have I not told you?" Being kind can still mean we're very direct and powerful in our speech. It just means that we're connected to our heart and we know where we're coming from. The intention is one of care and we're able to communicate that in some way.

Saying that which is truthful, kind, useful, and beneficial, is why we speak. How often do we check "Why am I speaking right now? What's my purpose? What am I hoping to accomplish?" Are we just speaking habitually or automatically? Often, our habitual speech will go towards the unwholesome, unskillful, and that which causes harm for ourselves or others. It's important to take that pause to consider, "Where am I coming from? Is this kind? Why am I speaking? What's the purpose?"

One way we can practice with this at the deeper level is to ask, "Is this in line with my deepest purpose in life? Is this in line with my highest aspiration?" We can ask the same thing with the truth, "By speaking the truth, is this in line with the deepest truth that I know in life?" With our distracted, unintentional speech, and when we're not purposeful in our speech, we waste our words. We burn up a lot of energy and the speech or conversation just wanders. It's important to be deliberate and take care with the purpose behind our speech.

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The last of these factors, which can be the trickiest in some ways, is timing. We can be truthful, come from a good place, have a really clear purpose, but it's not the right time for the conversation. This is a very useful thing to contemplate, to check and see what the conditions are and if this is the right time and the right place. Checking in with the other person communicates a certain kind of respect. We can say, "I wanted to talk about something, is now a good time for you?" We should be willing having the patience to wait if it's not.

I encourage you to contemplate these guidelines—saying that which is true, kind, helpful and timely. You can work with just one of them, or you can work with all four of them. Write them down, put them on the back of your cell phone or on your computer, carry them on an index card in your pocket. As you go through the day and have conversations, just let that list run through your mind—truthful, kind, helpful, timely—and see if you can begin to shape your speech in this way. What would it mean to listen in ways that are truthful, kind, helpful and timely? That's a whole other contemplation.

When we practice with these guidelines, the effect is that we win the trust of others. We give others the gift of gentleness and safety, knowing that we're not going to cause harm with our speech, and it promotes peace. We can take these criteria as underlying principles that guide our speech in life.

Let's step back and summarize what we've looked at in this first week. We talked about the role that speech plays in early Buddhism, and the incredible potential that speech has to affect our relationships, but also the potential of speech to shape our own mind and heart in terms of the intentions and the karma we're creating. We then looked at some of the Buddha's guidelines on the traditional definition of right speech to avoid false, harsh, divisive and idle speech, as well as the other teaching on the positive factors that we can cultivate in our speech. We can summarize these other factors as speaking in a way that is truthful, helpful, kind and timely.

Next week, we'll dive into how you can use your meditation practice to begin to create the conditions to have more meaningful and effective conversations.

Thank you so much for joining me, and I look forward to seeing you next time.