

Oren Jay Sofer

*The Buddha's Communication Toolbox*

Week Two: Creating the Conditions for Meaningful Conversations

June 10, 2019



Hello and welcome back to the second week of the Buddha's Communication Toolbox. I'm Oren Jay Sofer, and this week we're going to look at two of the primary conditions for creating more meaningful and effective conversations.

What do I mean by a condition? The Buddhist perspective of life is that nothing we experience exists independently on its own. Everything that we know and experience is a coming together of different factors and conditions. The path to awakening rests upon our understanding of certain key factors, such as learning which conditions in the mind lead to stress and suffering, and which conditions lead to peace, freedom, and release. This understanding of conditions, and cause and effect—what happens if I do this and what's the result—is at the core of Buddhist practice.

The whole teaching of the four noble truths is a teaching on cause and effect. There is suffering, stress, and difficulty in life and that suffering and stress arises from certain conditions and causes. This cause is our fundamental ignorance, the way we don't really understanding the way things work and the certain energy or quality of control, craving, and wanting to get things and make them our way. When we see that and start to understand the connection between the stress and suffering we experience and the underlying causes and conditions the mind starts to let go. We experience the ending or cessation of that suffering because the condition for it is no longer in place.

There's a whole path to cultivating those conditions. This path is one of deliberately creating and nourishing healthy wholesome qualities in the mind that lead towards peace and understanding, while reducing, eliminating, and withering the unhealthy unwholesome qualities. We can apply this understanding of conditionality to our conversations and relationships. We can begin to study and learn what conditions lead to the kinds of relationships and conversations that are nourishing and meaningful for us in life. How do we create those conditions?

What I want to look at together this week are the two fundamental things that need to be in place to have a meaningful and effective conversation in any context, whether we're talking about a personal, intimate relationship or a situation at work; whether we're looking more broadly at engaging with our communities and society, or working for social change.

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The first and most fundamental prerequisite for having an effective and meaningful conversation is awareness or presence, for the simple fact that we need to be here to understand anything. The purpose of communication is building understanding. It's about sending and receiving messages, whether we are trying to get closer together personally or as friends, or we're trying to build a bridge. We need to make sure that the information we're communicating is accurately received. When message sent equals message received, understanding arises. If we're not present or aware, no understanding occurs. You may have had the experience of speaking to somebody who's looking at their phone or watching TV. They're just several feet away from you, their ears are working fine, but it's like they don't even hear you. What's going on there? Their awareness is not actually present and connected with hearing, so no understanding arises. This is the first condition for creating meaningful conversations—we have to actually be here.

We can feel it when someone is present and when they're not. If you're having a conversation with somebody and they're not actually present, it sends a signal. We feel it. There's not as much trust and we can't really relax. We're constantly trying to get the person's attention. In the reverse, if we're having a conversation with somebody and we really show up—we're making eye contact, and not doing anything else—that communicates something really important to the other person. It says that you're worth my time, I'm giving you my attention. One of the most powerful things we can do to create the conditions for a meaningful conversation is just show up. We feel it when someone's really present with us and giving us their full attention because we are such relational creatures. We're always picking up on social queues we get that information on a gut level.

There are many benefits to having more presence and awareness in our conversations. Not only does it lay the ground for understanding and connection, but it gives us more choice and agency in a conversation. The simple fact is the more aware we are, the more choice we have. We get more information and we see what's happening in ourselves and someone else. Being aware and present in a conversation also sends us a signal about when we're getting reactive or starting to lose track of things. When we get that information more quickly internally, we can adjust. The guideline that I offer here is to do something that I call "leading with presence." This means that before anything else—before what we want to say, how we're feeling, our agenda, talking about what happened—before any of that, can we just show up? Can we just be here with the other

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person? Can we learn to keep coming back to this sense of being present and available? This is also the prerequisite for practicing with the guidelines for right speech that we looked at last week. How can we remember to use those guidelines if we're not present? When we're not present, we're on automatic. The ability to be present with another human being opens the doorway to actually using our conversations and relationships as a form of contemplative practice in the service of our spiritual development.

How do we start to be more aware and present in conversations with other people? There are a few simple tools that we can bring into our life to learn how to be more present, because for many of us it's not something we've practiced. In contemplative practice we learn how to be really present and aware in our own in meditation. But many of us don't have the skill of bringing it into the space of a relationship. I want to give you three tools to practice leading with presence. You don't have to use all of these, just find one that works for you.

For the first tool, start by grounding your attention in your body. Feel the weight of your body and the sensations in your hands or your feet. When we are in touch with the sensation, for that moment we're present, because sensations don't exist in the past or future. Bringing a little awareness into your body during a conversation helps you stay present. This is one way to learn how to lead with presence.

Another tool is just to pause. It doesn't need to be a very long pause. It can be just half a breath. But taking that pause allows us to gather our thoughts and to kind of navigate and steer where we want to go in a conversation. Just think about how many problems and difficulties and challenges could have been avoided had you or someone else just taken a pause and held their tongue, or if you had not hit send on that email. So many difficulties come from following an impulse that we know is not going to be helpful. Pausing helps us to have a bit more restraint with our speech and to bring more presence into the conversation. This is a second way that you can practice leading with presence.

A third way is to experiment with the pace of your speech. This can be particularly helpful in difficult conversations where things get heated and they start to move very quickly. If we learn to slow our speech down just a little bit, that also gives us more choice and awareness. The Buddha was very aware of this. In one text in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, he says, "When one speaks hurriedly one's body grows tired, one's mind becomes excited, one's voice is strained, and one's throat

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becomes hoarse. The speech of one who speaks hurriedly is indistinct and hard to understand.” He makes it pretty clear.

These are a few ways to practice leading with presence and the results are profound. I was speaking with one participant on a communication and meditation retreat where we were looking at how to integrate our meditation practice into our relationships and communication. One of the things he said at the end of the retreat was, “What I realize on this retreat is that my wife is the person I talk *to* the most, but talk *with* the least. And I want to change that when I go home.”

That’s the power of leading with presence. We recognize conversation is a relationship. It’s mutual and we need to take the other person into account. That’s an essential condition for a having a meaningful and effective conversation.

The first condition is showing up and being present. The second condition for creating the space to have a meaningful conversation is about our intention—where are we coming from? We’ve already looked at this to some degree, because this is one of the core guidelines in right speech. The Buddha says, “Pay attention to your intention. Don’t say things that are harsh or divisive on the negative. On the positive, come from a heart of goodwill. Say things that are going to be useful and that are going to contribute.” Our intention is perhaps the single most powerful and transformative ingredient in a dialog. Skillful communication is primarily not about what we say, it’s about where we’re coming from. It’s also about the quality of understanding or connection that we’re able to create with someone else.

A lot of our communication is actually nonverbal. It’s not in the content, it’s in our tone of voice, our facial expression, our body gestures, and our body language. When what someone says doesn’t match all of those nonverbal signals, we trust the nonverbal signals more. We trust that gut instinct that we’re picking up on. The primary factor that shapes our nonverbal communication is our intention. It’s where we’re coming from. Our intention is animating our facial expression, our tone of voice, and everything else. If we’re not consciously and deliberately choosing an intention, we don’t know if it’s actually contributing to the conversation.

There are two very powerful intentions in conversation. Actually, there are many helpful intentions, but there are two that I single out as the most powerful and transformative. If you’ve

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done any meditation practice, you will recognize these, because they are the same intentions that are powerful and transformative in our internal practice. These intentions are the intention to understand and the intention of kindness.

The guideline that I offer here in communication is to come from curiosity and care. This is about looking deeply and having a heart of lovingkindness. These are the factors that we bring in to our moment-to-moment practice with meditation—wanting to understand and see experience clearly, and bringing a quality of care and compassion to our moment-to-moment experience. We bring those same qualities of interest, investigation, and kindness into our communication, and the results of this are powerful.

We feel it when someone is genuinely interested in understanding us. What happens? When we know and trust that someone genuinely wants to understand where you're coming from, we can relax. We don't have to defend ourselves. We don't have to drive so hard to make our case. We don't have to protect ourselves and make sure that the thing that we're concerned about is going to happen. When we trust the other person wants to understand, we can actually start to work together. This is why it's so powerful.

I want to tell you another short story about a person who came on a communication and meditation retreat with me. We did a role play where we were looking at how to implement these tools in one's life. This woman has a very dedicated Buddhist practice and her mother was a devout right-wing Christian with very firm, dogmatic views about Christianity. This was always a point of tension and pain in their relationship, particularly for the daughter, because she felt like there was this whole part of her life that she couldn't share with her mom. So we did a role play. The daughter played her own mother and I played the daughter to see what would it be like to use these tools and try to have a conversation about their relationship, particularly about their different views of religion.

In the course of the conversation, I just kept coming from curiosity and care, using the tools to try to understand the mother. I said, "Let me see if I can really understand what matters to you, what you're saying, and what's important to you." Even when she said things that were hurtful or hard to hear, I would pause, take a few moments, and then come from this genuine intention to understand, "Let me see if I can hear you, mom. Is this what you're saying?" The conversation ended up in a very unexpected place. What the daughter realized in the role of her mother was, "I

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feel like a failure as a parent. It's so important to me to pass on my religious beliefs that when I see the choices you've made in your life, I feel this real loss and pain inside, like I haven't lived up to my expectations as a parent." For the daughter who was the practitioner, it was a huge transformation in being able to understand her mom and see her more clearly with compassion, by having really engaged in a way of coming from curiosity and care.

How do we do this? I want to share just a few more tools with you this week for how we can come from curiosity and care. There are two ways that I want to invite you to practice with this. The first is by using a very simple phrase, and you can find your own, but something along the lines of "Let me see if I can understand," or "I'd like to understand where you're coming from, let me see if I'm following you." Even a short phrase like that helps remind you of your own intention to understand, and also signals to the other person that you're interested and making an effort to try to see things from their perspective. That doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to agree with them. It just means that you're trying to see what it is that they're saying from their point of view.

This is one way that you can come from curiosity and care. Another is to hold a certain perspective in your own mind that we'll explore more deeply next week, but I want to introduce here. It's the perspective that there's something that matters to this person. Part of what makes us human is that we care about things. We have certain values or needs, and we can use that as a way of getting into the person's heart. "Getting in" means trying to understand from their point of view what's most important to them. You do this by holding a certain question in your mind. "What matters to this person? What's important to them?" That's another way that you can get curious.

This week we've looked at these two fundamental conditions that help create the space for having a meaningful and effective conversation with someone. We've explored leading with presence, this capacity to just show up, and we talked about three tools for showing up: feeling your body, pausing, and slowing down the pace of your speech to see if that can help you to lead with presence. Then we looked at our intention, talked about coming from curiosity and care, and using a short phrase to remind oneself and the other person of this intention, "Let me see if I can hear you? Let me see if I'm with you? Let me see if I'm understanding?" I also mentioned

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holding that question and perspective in mind: “What matters here? What’s important to this person?” Saying that to ourselves silently, as a way of getting curious.

Thanks for joining me. In our next segment, we’re going to explore the basic building block of communication: how do we actually build understanding with another person? I hope you can join me.