



Perfect Speech

The Four Noble Truths...

1. There is suffering in our lives
2. Aspects of that suffering are due to our craving for things to be just how we would like them to be rather than acknowledging the reality of the way things are
3. That with the non-arising of this craving, this self-centred perspective, these aspects of suffering will cease
4. There is a path that leads to this cessation, away from suffering toward wisdom and ultimately Enlightenment and this is the Eightfold Noble Path the first two stages of which are...

Perfect Vision - more than just an intellectual grasp of the nature of reality as communicated by the Dharma but a personal, direct experience and recognition of the nature of existence which affects us deeply

Perfect Emotion - the integration of this vision into our emotional life, into our depths, transforming us in the process and giving us the will and motivation to wholeheartedly engage with the spiritual life - *"the greatest challenge of the spiritual life is finding emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding"* (Sangharakshita).

So now we come to the third stage or element of the path – Perfect Speech

The 'perfect' part is sometimes referred to as 'right' but it is useful to think about it being more far reaching than this latter word might imply, speech or communication being - whole, complete or skilful. As we know, from a Buddhist perspective, that which is skilful is that which stems from skilful mental states, is beneficial and conduces to the good of all.

Our speech is so important because our life and culture is built upon communication, it affects our attitudes, our prejudices, our opinions, our thoughts and our emotions, as such it can be very beneficial and conduce to harmony or very harmful and divisive. It is sometimes said that actions speak louder than words but we can often discourage or hurt people with our words when we would never consider harming them physically or materially, words can just slip out so easily, whether spoken or included in an inconsiderate message of some kind.

Sangharakshita describes four key aspects of Perfect Speech as being:

1. Truthful
2. Kindly
3. Helpful
4. Harmonious

Truthfulness

This is perhaps the most obvious aspect of skilful speech and of course it constitutes the fourth of the Five Precepts of lay Buddhists so is very important as a fundamental ethical practice, we should train ourselves not lie or exaggerate but we can also dig a little deeper.

What springs to mind for me here is do we actually know what we are saying to be the truth? Is it something that we have directly experienced or at least studied in depth and have some reasonable grasp of or are we just repeating opinions, views and prejudices that we have lazily acquired from the other people, our culture or the media? Not all sources of information are balanced or indeed correct.

I think too often we have the tendency, at least I know I have sometimes, of repeating ideas, views and so on that we have acquired as being fact without really having done our homework or really knowing for ourselves. It is OK not to know and to say so, to be quiet and not to take a position about something that we really haven't explored rather than speak what at best might be half-truths and at worst outright untruths. I am thinking particularly here of prejudices against groups of people which are obviously of harmful.

Reflection: do we sometimes relay views and opinions that are not our own and that we have not really thought through and if so why?

Kindly Speech

Here I think it is good to recall the Metta Bhavana practice, the aspiration of cultivating a kindly, loving attitude to all living beings. When we communicate with people we do not know well and even those who we might find a bit difficult, do we consider them as another human being with much, much more in common with ourselves and our immediate circle than we have differences?

Do we really take other people in when we are communicating with them? Are we looking at them and listening or are we gazing at anything but them, waiting for them to finish so we can speak or get away? Is our communication self-centred or are we really taking notice of how the other person is and trying to understand what it is that they are saying? Even with the people we do know and encounter regularly we may not always pay kindly attention to them.

According to one broadly accepted formula, only 7% of our communication is contained within the words that we use, 38% is contained within tone of voice and 55% within facial expression and body language, so it is certainly worth considering how incomplete our communication might be if we are not really paying attention when either speaking or listening.

Reflection: try to notice when you are talking to another person what it is that stops you taking them in fully, why should this be so?

Helpful Speech

We can either speak positively or negatively, we can encourage or discourage, be helpful or unhelpful. Given that the effect of the former is harmful and the latter beneficial, it is essential that we strive to become mindful of our speech and undertake to transform that which is negative. This does not mean that we should not point out what is wrong or offer constructive criticism where there is a need but this should be timely and kindly. It should also be truthful in the sense that it should be specific, avoiding discouraging generalisations such as 'you always...'

One aspect of unhelpful speech that I am particularly aware of because my father does it a fair bit and I think I have done too, is the tendency to bring up a negative viewpoint when it is unnecessary. For example, recently when I was concentrating on filling out a disabled parking badge form for my mother, my Dad chipped to moan about the fact that many people who don't really need them have them. Although this may be true, it didn't help me at the time; in fact it didn't help anyone.

Yes there are negatives in life and we shouldn't ignore them but neither should we keep referring to them to no positive effect, just for the sake of speaking when we have no intention take action to remedy the situation. Far better to rejoice in what is good and in the qualities and good fortune of others, indeed rejoicing in the merits of others, even sometimes making them aware of their own qualities is a very important part of the practice of Sangha.

Reflection: do we sometimes notice ourselves griping and moaning for no positive effect? If so, what is it that makes us feel the need to do this?

Harmonious Speech

If we are mindful of all the points above then our communication would be well on the way toward conducing to harmony rather than discord but I would just like to mention one further point. Sometimes we feel the need to talk about people who are not present, on occasion this can be to 'rejoice in their merits' or simply to pass on news, sometimes though it is to pass on things that we have heard about them which are not positive or to criticise them in some way or another, subtly or unsubtly, in short to indulge in gossip or hearsay. In the case of denigrating others to a third party, there can be no positive effect, it is not helpful or kindly and may even be to some degree untruthful. So once again, it is essential that we become mindful of any tendency that we have to do this and determinedly wean ourselves off of the habit.

Reflection: do we sometimes find ourselves 'talking about someone behind their back'? If so what is it that makes us feel the need to do this?

This is just a quick dip into aspects of our speech and communication, there is much more that could be said and explored. It is important to point out that our efforts in these areas are underpinned by our efforts in meditation to cultivate awareness and loving-kindness, awareness to be mindful of our communication and the kindly intention to infuse it with care and warmth.