

Saturday, March 9th, 2013

Practice of the Week – Speech That Truly Connects

Speech is one of the most powerful forces in our lives, with the potential to cause great harm or great benefit. It is important enough that the Buddha made it one of the trainings of the eightfold path, his map of how the heart awakens.

Does your speech reflect the wisdom and insight derived from your mindfulness practice? Below are some exercises to make this more likely. When you are more mindful of your speech you can connect that much more deeply with others.

An essay on my website give some background on these exercises. Copy and paste this link into a web browser:

http://truchomewithin.net/psych2/Dharma_essays.html

and see “From the Heart: Speech that Truly Connects,” the top essay under “Essays on Dharma.”

I recommend choosing one of the practices below and dedicating yourself to it this week.

- **PRACTICE: RELAXED AND ALERT** – Relating well involves listening well and mindfulness is the perfect way to do that. You can support mindfulness by paying attention to aligned posture and to receiving, rather than reaching out for, your sensory experience.

A. Take a 10 to 15-minute meditation period to practice what follows. Sit in proper meditation posture, so that your back mimics your standing posture as much as possible. This means that there is an inward curve to your lower back, the pelvis is tilted slightly forward, the tailbone is pointed slightly back, the crown

of the head (back and rear of the head) is lifted and the chin is tucked in slightly. Then let your muscles relax around the support of your erect spine, especially in the eyes, tongue, throat, and shoulders. The posture helps the mind be alert and relaxed.

Next, energetically drop down and back in the torso. You can aid this by noticing the breath in the belly and the space behind the belly back to the spine. This helps counteract the natural tendency to lean forward when listening in the belief that this will help you capture a person’s words better. Usually, because of the strain involved, the effect is quite the opposite.

Next, let yourself receive sound. Notice that you do not have to lean forward for a micron, either in your posture or your mind, to hear well. Stay “down and back” in the body and let sound come to you. Simply receive it and know what you are hearing. After doing this for a few minutes, open the eyes and let them soften back into the eye sockets. Raise your gaze to a normal level and let your gaze be wide, taking in not just what is right in front of you but the periphery as well. Just as you did with sound, receive sight, letting the field of vision come to you. Again, being down and back in the body and being aware of the breath at the belly will help.

B. Take this aligned posture and sensory receptivity into a conversation where you focus on listening well. Use the posture as a touchstone, noticing when you are leaning forward or slumping back. Return frequently to awareness of the belly. Receive the sound and meaning of the person’s words in an easy, relaxed way. Keep the gaze soft and wide, seeing not just the person, but also the space around them.

• **PRACTICE: NOTICE WHEN YOU ARE REHEARSING** – In a follow-up exercise, take a time period of intentional listening, using posture and receptivity as above, and add in noticing when you are rehearsing a response. As soon as you notice this, let go of the thoughts and simply return, without comment or judgment, to listening to the person. This will aid with deep listening, as we often disconnect from the person who is speaking by going off into our own thoughts. If you really want to boost presence and spontaneity, be aware of one full breath before speaking any response. Let any response come quite naturally after that. As the saying goes, “First thought, best thought.”

• **PRACTICE: OWN YOUR PROJECTIONS THROUGH 80/20 ATTENTION** – Ironically, we can listen much better to another person when we have heightened awareness of ourselves. This is because we will own our own reactions and projections when we do so, in the process seeing where we end and the other person begins. Spend some time in conversation giving 80% of your attention to sensations in your body and 20% to listening. If the attention in the body is strong, the person’s words will be known quite effortlessly. While I am not suggesting this as the best way to always listen, it is great to practice this way frequently to counteract our normal tendency to focus so much on the other person that we don’t know how we are feeling. The gift of being aware of the body is that it usually more honestly reflects back to us our mental state than do our ideas about how we are doing. This helps us relate that much better.

• **PRACTICE: “I AM AWARE OF...”** - Find a friend or partner who is willing to do a mindful speech exercise with you. Sit facing each other for fifteen minutes or so and take turns speaking and listening mindfully. Some ground rules: 1) Speak about your present experience, which helps you be more mindful, prefacing your statements with “I am aware

of...” 2) Agree on a signal, such as a bow, to indicate you are done speaking and that it is the other person’s turn. This will allow silent spaces in your speaking. 3) If you want to speak about the other person, give sensory observations, such as “I see you are smiling,” or “I see your brow is furrowed,” rather than interpretations, analyzing, or problem-solving.

See if you can stay grounded in mindfulness of your breath or a touch point, such as the feet on the ground, during the exercise. You can talk about what you are seeing or hearing or feeling. You can stay silent. I like to keep the periphery in view when listening. It helps me stay less reactive, and more present, as I see that a person’s talking is not the only reality of the moment.

• **PRACTICE: NOT A MOMENT OF CONTROLLING SPEECH** - Take a set period, say 30 minutes, where you resolve not to say one thing to control the actions of a friend or partner. This is an exploration in seeing what you have to feel to allow a person to be exactly as they are. Make your only job for this time period be to pay attention to your emotions. What do you have to feel to avoid controlling the person? You are just going to stay interested in your emotions, recognizing them, labeling them, seeing what happens to them as you pay attention. Everything else is none of your business. To deepen the exercise, it may be helpful to remember that Buddhism defines loving someone as wishing them well. This might inspire you to add some well wishing for the person. Silently send them metta phrases, such as “May you be happy,” as you do the exercise.

PRACTICE: FOUR GUIDELINES OF SPEECH - Take up one of the Buddha’s guidelines for wise speech. Use these not as commandments, but as reminders to wake you up to your speech:

Speak truthfully (when it is useful to do so)

Avoid harsh (judgmental) speech
Avoid divisive speech (gossip)
Avoid idle chatter

The gossip guideline is not an outright caution against speaking about others, but more about bringing your attention to the motivation behind such speech to see when your motivations are skillful or unskillful. For example, one skillful motivation for talking about someone else may be to gain clarity about one's own actions and getting feedback

from a friend or mentor. An obvious unskillful motivation for gossip is some kind of effort to make oneself superior to someone else or just pure salacious interest without respect to a person's wish for privacy. We learn this from trial and error, so, again, it is not helpful to use the gossip guideline as a guilt trip. Just let it help you wake up to your motivations for speech.

I hope you have a great week of practice!