

From The Heart: Speech that Truly Connects

By Peter B. Williams

“Before you speak, ask yourself - Is it kind? Is it necessary?
Is it true? Will it improve on the silence?”

- Indian mystic Sri Sathya Sai Baba

You Westerners “are all pretty enlightened until you open
your mouths.”

- Japanese-American Zen master Suzuki Roshi

Mindfulness teacher Jack Kornfield writes that to build a sane society, we need to get clear internally and then build out from that. Mindfulness helps us achieve that clarity, but how much attention have we paid to the process of building out? Speech is a fundamental way of doing so, important enough that the Buddha made it one of the eight trainings of the eightfold path, the Buddha’s map of how to transform the heart. Does our speech reflect the wisdom of our mindfulness practice? In this talk, I will address the practice of wise speech in three ways: using speech that avoids harm, invites connection, and skillfully navigates conflict.

Cause No Harm

The Buddha taught the importance of avoiding harm with speech:

Speak only the speech
that neither torments self
nor does harm to others.
That speech is truly well spoken.

-- Sutta Nipata 3.3

He gave four guidelines for avoiding such harm:

And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech,

from abusive speech, and from idle chatter.

-- Samyutta Nikaya 45.8

These guidelines are not commandments but practices, signposts for observing the effects of one's speech. Each recommendation is a significant practice in and of itself. Can you imagine completely abstaining from lying? This is probably impossible and not necessarily desirable. It is not helpful to blurt out every passing aversive thought you have. Let's say you passed a metal-lipped and green-headed dude on the street and you thought they looked bizarre. Would it serve any constructive purpose to tell them so? The Buddha said one should speak the truth whenever possible, but only if it is also useful:

Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing and disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

-- Majjhima Nikaya 58.8

The second guideline encourages us to avoid speech that divides people. This often happens when you tell someone about what someone else did or said. We need to be careful when speaking about those not present, because they are unable to correct misinterpretations or place their actions in the proper context. Of course, we need to talk to friends to clarify our own process in our relations with others. With a motivation not to bash someone else but to gain our own clarity, we might choose a middle ground of talking chiefly about our own experiences in a conflictual situation. If we must talk about another, it is best to describe their actions, and not our interpretations of their motives or actions. The third guideline is obvious. It is wise to avoid aggressive, insulting speech. This is different from avoiding assertive speech. One can assert one's rights or represent one's needs without harshly criticizing someone. The fourth guideline invites us to look at the energy we use with speech. When does our talking squander our energy? Do our words help us be more present or help us get more lost in our stories about things? Does seemingly idle chatter with a stranger actually serve a constructive function of breaking the ice or is it just a mindless use of your energy?

Inviting Connection with Speech

Beyond avoiding harm with speech, we can use it to connect with others and meet our deeper needs. Here are some basic principles for dialoging and deepening with another person, whether it is a romantic partner, friend, or colleague.

Listening Deeply

The first principle is to be willing just to listen. As Sai Baba advises above, “Before you speak, ask yourself...‘Will it improve on the silence?’” Conversation can be, at times, habitual chatter that does not help us connect. Such speech is often fueled by anxiety or social awkwardness. Lighter conversation, of course, is quite necessary with those we are not close to. However, with those whom we feel a possibility of deeper connection, listening might be the best first resort.

If intimacy is about being seen for who one more deeply is, then a huge gift we can offer another person is our silence. Often when we need to talk about ourselves, we are not seeking advice or solutions. Such answers usually come from our own hearts, if we can just get in touch with our emotional process more deeply. For this, we need someone we can hear ourselves talk to, someone who will just listen and be with us. Mindfulness practice can help you be that someone. We can be mindful of our bodies and our breathing while listening to another. This anchor of attention can help you stay balanced and calm in the face of another person’s difficulties, sending the message that there is space, something larger than the difficulty in which they are ensnared. This sense of perspective in the midst of a person’s emotional storms is a tremendous gift to them, helping them move through their emotions and realize they are manageable. Your silence is also communicating loudly to the speaker another very important message: You are worth being paid attention to!

Owning Your Projections

A second principle, which sounds paradoxical, is that intimacy is fostered when much of one’s attention is on oneself. If you stay mindful of your body, then you can know what you are feeling as you relate to another. This is a huge help because we relate to others much of the time by unconsciously projecting our inner state onto them. “We don’t see the world as it is. We see it as we are,” said the 20th century writer Anais Nin. Have you ever noticed that if you are in a bad mood you much more easily see the faults of others? This is projection. Have you ever noticed that you spend a lot of time wondering what is going on in people’s heads? Since you can only imagine what another is thinking, you might inject into their minds what you unconsciously think of yourself. This is projection. A teenager tells you they are afraid of taking a driver’s license test and you remember your first test, the one where you backed into the mayor of your small town, and proceed to scare the wits out of the poor teenager by relating all the terrible things about driving tests. This is projection.

Mindfulness helps us see this projecting process, helps us notice there is an actual difference between the emotions a speaker is eliciting in us and the speaker's experience itself. The surprising thing is that when you really are mindful of yourself, you find that your attention is porous. You can notice yourself and your friend at the same time. Try it and see! When you notice your own emotions and reactions as you listen, you have choice about whether to speak from them or not. Have you ever used "Ready, fire, aim!" as a communications strategy? Have you ever wished there was an "unsend" button for the angry email you just zipped off to a coworker? Mindfulness is preventative medicine for foot in mouth disease.

Taking Responsibility

A related topic is to take responsibility for one's emotions and reactions. Vipassana teacher Joseph Goldstein makes the point that this is unusual with the example of a typical fight in a romantic relationship where one partner tells the other, "Stop making me feel so aversive!" Joseph points out that no one makes anyone feel a certain way. A person can stimulate a reaction in us, but they do not cause it. Our reactions are a product of who we are. On a good day, someone teasing us about our shoes rolls right off our backs; on a bad day it is like being hit with a bat and we become angry. The reaction is about us. Our relations with others improve considerably when we stop feeling ourselves to be the victims of other people's words. In ensuring that our language reflects this truth, instead of saying, "You make me so angry," one can say, "When you tease me about my shoes I feel angry."

Speaking Truthfully

A fourth principle is that when speaking, talk about only that which you know to be true. This becomes paradoxical when you realize that all you can know for sure is your own experience. To speak truthfully, you must talk about yourself. To do otherwise is folly, because you end up telling another person about them. Only they know their experience. The key is to talk about yourself not out of fear or an effort to dominate the conversation, but as an effort to connect. When you and the person you are communicating with share an understanding that you can each only talk about yourself, then you can each speak about yourselves in the spirit of, "This is what it is like for me. How is it for you?"

Speaking truthfully is a tricky proposition. Contemplate this for a moment: what do you know to be 100% true? Is it your ideas and opinions about things? Well, here is a provocative quote from the late Tibetan meditation master, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche: "If you are thinking it, it isn't true." Thoughts necessarily isolate interconnected elements.

Thoughts are always partial. When you think about a boat, you ignore the ocean the boat is in, and the land that bounds the ocean, and the air that bounds all of them. If you think from a broader perspective, taking in the ocean, land, and air, then you miss the details, like the boat, or the bolts that hold it together, or the algae in the water. Which perspective is right? Neither. Thoughts always have a vantage point; their partiality ensures that they will be controversial. Academics, lawyers, politicians and the like will always argue because their viewpoints are based on ideas. As the old joke goes, "Why is academia so contentious? Because the stakes are so low."

Thoughts also necessarily freeze changing things. To think about something, we need to take a conceptual snapshot of it and then contemplate the photo. This is useful if we know what we are doing. But if we forget the artificiality of our thoughts and opinions, reality might shift right under our feet. Here are some examples of the folly of being too attached to opinions:

"Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"

-- H. M. Warner, founder of Warner Brothers, in 1927

"We don't like their sound and guitar music is on the way out."

-- Decca Recording Co. rejecting the Beatles in 1962,
just before their meteoric rise to stardom

If our ideas and opinions are not so reliable, what can we speak about? The most truthful thing is to speak about our present experience, about what we are aware of in the moment. We cannot know our fears to be true, but we can know with confidence that we are scared. We can know that there is a fluttery feeling in our belly. We can know there are thoughts about the future. But we never know the story line to be true.

Speaking from one's experience can be quite challenging. When my partner, Lisa, tells me she is upset that I did not do the dishes, I can get defensive and argumentative, saying, "Yeah, but you didn't mow the lawn." Isn't it ironic? I am talking about her, but I would bet she would not feel heard. If I must talk about myself, I might have to tell her that my feelings are hurt or that I feel guilty or frustrated. Maybe I would have to confess that I do not enjoy doing the dishes.

One of the main reasons we resist talking about ourselves is because we rarely know what we are feeling. Mindfulness can help with this. A great technique for staying in touch with yourself is to periodically ask yourself, "What am I feeling?" Be mindful of your body as you ask the question and listen for an answer. Then just stay grounded in the body sensations of the emotion as it reveals itself to you. We can be

strangers to our emotional lives because we judge our emotions so heavily. The last thing we ever want to feel is hurt, vulnerable, needy, afraid, or sad. We are adults and do not want to burden other people with our difficulties. We are supposed to take care of these things ourselves. Although mindfulness is a path of self-sufficiency, we do not become whole by denying what is true for us. We do so by embracing our emotions, knowing that we can be with them with mindfulness and tenderness. Our emotions just want to be seen and listened to. Kind attention allows us to feel our feelings without drowning in them, to accept them more and believe them less.

Talking about others is often an effort to manipulate them. We try to manage our own emotional experience by controlling others. I find that if get bossy with Lisa there is usually anxiety underneath. Instead of sitting with my anxiety, I try to make it go away by pressuring Lisa to do something. In the process, I am obliterating her reality as a separate person with her own needs. If I can sit with the anxiety and tell Lisa about it, I avoid provoking her defensiveness. Instead, her natural compassion towards me can begin to open and the situation becomes so much more workable.

Speaking Deeply: Unilateral Disarmament

Something shifts in a relationship when one member is willing to let down their guard and expose their deeper feelings. When I lived in Vermont a good friend and I both felt a subtle frustration around each other. We were subtly competitive and sometimes testy with each other. One day when sharing dinner, I felt the familiar tension. I asked myself, "What am I feeling?" I felt the answer but was hesitant to share it. My friend might judge me or think I was weak. Finally, I mustered the courage to look him in the eye and say, simply, "I'm scared." My heart raced as I awaited his response. His face softened and he said, "Me too."

This was a hard thing for us to do, both victims of male conditioning to avoid vulnerability at any cost. But this moment was a pivotal one in our friendship. Rather than provoking a judgmental reaction, my revealing myself allowed my friend to identify with me and contact his deeper feelings. Our friendship reached a new depth as we began to speak more openly about our competitiveness and jealousy of each other and how this all traced back to our own feelings of inadequacy. We became partners in connection and shared humanity rather than combatants in a tug of war for superiority.

Inquiring Deeply

We speak from our truth in an attempt to connect deeply with someone, showing them our vulnerability, all in the spirit of inviting them to do the same. When

it feels appropriate to do so, we can help draw a person deeper into their experience by helping them feel what is under their story lines. If a person is obsessively hashing over a conflict at work, the simple question, "What are you feeling right now?" can help them realize they are anxious. They can't know the outcome of the conflict, which is in the future, but they can know they are scared. This can help them come back to the present. A follow-up question might be, "What is it like to be afraid?" or "I'd like to hear more about your fear. What are you really afraid of?"

Working with Conflict

Most of us are terrified of conflict. We avoid it whenever we possibly can. However, with wise speech one can actually use conflict to deepen connection. Conflict, when approached non-violently, with each person's perspective and needs being listened to and validated by the other, can help us see a person's vulnerability and deeper humanity.

As a starting place, it is important to realize that avoiding conflict can actually be a form of disconnection. If we do not assert our important rights, needs, and boundaries, we will resent people who unknowingly trample us. Doormats do not feel compassion. Ironically, maintaining connection can mean maintaining boundaries. If you say "yes" to a person when you mean "no," you are disconnecting from that person. A key distinction in conflict is between assertion and aggression. Aggression in speech does a bad job of getting your needs met. It causes defensiveness in another and makes it likely your needs will not be heard. Asserting your needs in a calm way without criticizing another, however, is a very effective way of representing yourself. In skillful assertion, one's "no" needs to end with a comma not a period. The comma signifies a willingness to hear another's needs and do whatever one can to help them meet those needs in a way that works for both parties.

Another important principle is movingly articulated by the Dalai Lama. Imagine these words coming from the leader of a people whose population has been reduced 20% as a result of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s (the author uses His Holiness' broken English):

I always tell people, it's very important to make distinction: actor and act. We have to oppose bad action. But that does not mean we against that person, that actor. Once action stopped, different action come, then that person could be friend. That's why today Chinese is enemy; the next day, there's always the possibility to become friend. And that's why I have no problem forgiving the Chinese for what they've done to my

people.

-- The Wisdom of Forgiveness, p. 111-112

Our problem is not with people but with their actions. If we can separate our view of people from the actions that cause us difficulty, then we can oppose the actions while remaining connected to the person behind the action. The people we have difficulty with are essentially just like us: they want love, happiness, esteem, fulfilling work, and are probably afraid of rejection, aging, sickness, and death. If we can remember the thought "They just want to be happy" when confronting a difficult person, the situation will feel more workable.

The Buddha's Advice on Feedback

The Buddha gave five guidelines for communicating with a person about behavior we deem problematic (from the *Patthimoka*, or rules for monastics):

1. Do I speak at the right time, or not?
2. Do I speak of facts, or not?
3. Do I speak gently or harshly?
4. Do I speak profitable words or not?
5. Do I speak with a kindly heart, or inwardly malicious?

1. Do I speak at the right time, or not? – Clearly, criticizing another person is best done in private. When giving feedback, it is also important to ask the person if they are up for it. In addition, it is best to give this feedback when one is not in the grips of a disturbing emotion. Neuroscience shows that in the maw of a difficult emotion like anger or fear thinking becomes very limited. The thought center, or frontal cortex, is actually bypassed as neuronal input goes through the amygdala (a primitive brain organ) and straight back out into action.

An alternative to impulsive action is to let a strong emotion be a reminder to you that it is time to be still and mindful. Can you feel the heat of the anger in your body? Can you be curious what it is like to be angry? Can you even befriend your anger? This is a much more effective way to deal with anger than yelling at your partner or friend. You can have your anger so much better if you do not have to work it out through a person you love, a person who down deep you are not interested in hurting. You can just sit and let the anger rip. Sure, the story will be there, so notice it, but try not to feed it. Just see the story and come back to the sensations in your body. Eventually, the anger will lessen. It can also come back when you remember the provocation. Keep with it again. Stay with it until its charge has lessened enough to where you can think calmly

about the event. When the brain is deactivated, more possibilities emerge than in the black and white, fight or flight world of strong emotions. This is the best time to address the difficulty.

2. Do I speak of facts, or not? – This fits with the principle above of speaking truthfully. Make your feedback behavior-specific, staying out of characterizing someone's personhood. Ideally, as the technique of Non-violent Communication recommends (Marshall Rosenberg, *Non-Violent Communication*), mention a behavior that you both could agree on. Beyond that speak about yourself – your feelings and your needs, communicating with "I statements" (see Speaking Deeply above). Don't interpret the person you are talking to. Don't blame them or try and tell them how they should have acted. In short, tell them about you, not about them.

Here is an example of skillful communication in conflict: "When you joked about my haircut, I felt hurt. I want to connect with you, but I disconnect when I feel hurt." The speaker is the first beneficiary as it is usually a relief to give up argumentativeness and just speak from the heart. Secondly, by naming a vulnerable emotion such as hurt, the speaker invites compassion, rather than defensiveness. When one person unilaterally disarms and shows their vulnerability, conflict can begin to move, since a kind of intimacy has been invited.

3. Do I speak gently or harshly? – This is covered above in point two. Anger is often a defensive emotion, though it can be important to show that as well. But don't let the anger spin stories about the other person. Just let the person know you are angry. Buddhism is often misinterpreted as saying one should not get angry. This is due to mistranslation. The Buddha warned strongly against intention to harm, or aggression, but not the emotion we in the West label anger. Anger can be a positive force for standing up for one's rights, for snapping out of inertia, and for ridding oneself of self-blame and judgment. However, trying to resolve a conflict when one is angry is bound to backfire (see point one).

Guidelines 4 and 5 seem pretty straightforward so I will not elaborate further on them here.

For an extensive set of exercises on speaking more consciously, cut and paste this link into your web browser:

http://truehomewithin.net/psych2/Dharma_essays_files/Practice%20of%20the%20Week%20-%20Speech%20that%20Truly%20Connects.pdf