

RIGHT SPEECH--for UUFDC, May 8

Good morning. I'm delighted to be here today and appreciate being asked to come back to speak with you . The topic of my talk this morning is Right Speech. Right Speech is featured as one component of the Eightfold Noble Path advocated by the Buddha as the way to lead a contented life informed by his teachings of the truths of impermanence and interdependence and thus releasing ourselves from our suffering and its roots in our craving to have and hold things that cannot be kept in the face of incessant change. The other seven components of the Eightfold Noble Path are Right View, Right Resolve, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation.

As you are all well aware, these days in the U.S. we struggle a lot with Right Speech. A lot of discussion goes on and much concern is expressed about the lack of civility in both public and private speech, ranging from the political exchanges that rage on national television to personally aggressive speech at the office or on the street. However this morning I'm not going to take up your time by bemoaning the general state of affairs in current American society. In some ways , that's too easy, and it merely exhibits my personal sense of righteousness, for as you can easily see, I would never speak like that, oh, no! Certainly not! Well, yes, of course, but have I considered how well I actually do or do not communicate with others with kindness and understanding?

What I hope to examine together a little bit this morning is how each of us, as people hoping to practice compassionate and civil speech, may perhaps fruitfully approach our personal behavior. For, when we think about it, society is not an abstraction but is instead a collection of living, individual people. Although I may not be able to dictate how others act, I can try to model right speech in my own behavior and hope that this will have something of an impact on others

I think that perhaps the first step to take in trying to reach someone else with my words, and perhaps the most difficult, is to admit to myself that what I am offering is my own personal opinion, my own viewpoint, and not the only correct viewpoint. I may think I'm right, but you will react badly, either turning off

completely or lashing back, if I imply that I have the only right take on the situation and that this means you of course are wrong. And it doesn't help either if I try to shove my understanding of how to solve the problem down your throat rather than seeking a solution that is acceptable to both of us.

To avoid a negative reaction on the part of the person to whom we are speaking, it is by no means sufficient simply to decide to assume a sweet, kind, caring demeanor. I've been verbally run over more times than I care to count by someone's oh-so-kind insistence that I would be much better off if I adopted the viewpoint that they in their kindness are sharing with me. On the contrary, true compassion involves really listening to the other person, hearing their viewpoint and then if I'm making a rebuttal doing so with as much clarity and honesty as I can muster and avoiding an emotional insistence that my way is the only right way to see it. I don't need to tell you that this is hard to do when in my heart I do believe it's the only right way, but the Buddha would remind me that I am only one among many and that my good absolutely depends upon the good of others. There is no "us" and "them." There is only "we."

The timing of what we say is also essential and it is ideally linked to a correct assessment of the way in which our hearers will receive the message. This of course assumes that we want them to hear it as opposed to just shouting them down. There is a wonderful passage in an early Buddhist text, the Abhayarajakumara Sutta. Listen carefully to this description of how the Buddha, here called the Tathagata, handles the problem:

So, too, prince, such speech as the Tathagata knows to be untrue, incorrect and unbeneficial, and which is also unwelcome and disagreeable to others: such speech the Tathagata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true and correct but unbeneficial, and which is also unwelcome and disagreeable to others: such speech the Tathagata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, correct, and beneficial, but which is unwelcome and disagreeable to others, the Tathagata knows the time to use such speech. Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be untrue, incorrect and unbeneficial, but which is welcome and agreeable to others, such speech the Tathagata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true and

correct but unbeneficial, and which is welcome and agreeable to others, such speech the Tathagata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, correct and beneficial, and which is welcome and agreeable to others: the Tathagata knows the time to use such speech. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has compassion for beings. (Nanamoli and Bodhi 500)

That last sentence is very important --the Buddha is careful about when and how he tells a truth because he has compassion for beings. Something spoken must be true, correct and, importantly, beneficial. One of the four vows we as Buddhists embrace is: "With purity of heart, I vow to benefit all beings." Our desire to speak appropriately has its roots in this compassion for our fellow beings, even those who are noisily disagreeing with us. In fact, one of the most hurtful ways we can utter something is not by bellowing it, but by offering it with utter indifference and thereby showing our contempt for the person to whom we are speaking. Without respect, no one will listen.

So both the timing and the nature of our communication are very important. It is also important to be someone whose speech can be trusted, who doesn't alter it to suit his hearer. That kind of ,shall we say, "manipulating the truth" can come back to bite us. Let me give you an extreme example. When my husband and I first moved to Chicago in the late fifties, we worked with a tiny semi-pro theatre company on the north side of the city. The producer, Niki, would tell my husband one thing about something and me another. She was apparently such a compulsive liar that she overlooked the fact that as husband and wife we might actually compare notes. On the other hand, although we all wish to be truthful and most of us can probably abstain from speaking falsely to curry favor, we often struggle with how to communicate truth in a situation where the facts can be devastating to our hearer. As an example, here's a situation that I once proposed to a prison sangha and one of the members later told me he'd actually experienced:

You have a dear friend who is in the hospital in the final stages of a terminal illness. You receive a call from the hospital saying that he will die within a few hours, and urging you to see him as soon as possible. You rush to the hospital and, with deep concern for the impending loss, you enter his room. You expect to find

him at the end, yet with a burst of unexpected energy, he looks up at you and says, "You know, I think I'm going to make it!" What do you say?

The truth is that he will NOT make it, yet to say this is cruel. To say something like, "You bet you are! You'll be out of here in no time!" is lying. We agreed that what could be said is, "I'm glad you feel that way," speaking to the truth of our response, not to the truth of the state of his illness.

There are also two other components of our communication with others that are crucial to what we've been calling Right Speech. These are Right Listening and Right Hearing. Let's take up Right Listening first, since it is perhaps the easiest to understand, for it involves simply allowing the other person to speak and listening carefully to what they have to say.

The capacity to really listen to the other person is crucial to decent communication. Far too often, we aren't really listening at all, but mentally fashioning our own brilliant rebuttal and chomping at the bit to get to the moment when we can deliver it. I'm intimately familiar with this one, since it's something that I struggle with. Too many times, someone has said, to my intense embarrassment, "Will you let me finish, please. Stop putting words in my mouth! That's not what I meant at all." My mind is too quick and I've jumped to a hasty conclusion, unfortunately sometimes a wrong conclusion.

Right Hearing is more difficult for us. The degree to which we can hear beyond and beneath the words that someone speaks is the degree to which our compassion can be accurately expressed. To illustrate what I mean I'm going to use an example from a painful period of my own life, when my gratitude for Right Hearing knew no bounds.

In 1969 I found myself separated from my husband, living in a walk-up tenement in East Dedham, Massachusetts, raising two latch-key sons, at that time roughly ten and twelve years of age, and struggling to manage and sustain an avant-garde professional theatre company in Boston. Needless to say, I was exhausted and depressed most of the time. One morning, the boys seemed impossibly slow at getting ready and off to school in time, and I simply exploded, screaming at them to "Get out, get out! I hate you!" They slunk off to school and I went to the theatre,

where the guilt over my behavior began to rise until it nearly swamped me. To make matters worse, there was some crisis at the theatre, and I had to make that awful call home to tell them I wouldn't be home for supper, but there were a couple of hot dogs in the fridge. (We were subsisting on less than welfare at that time.)

I finally stumbled up the steps to our apartment about ten o'clock. I have never forgotten what I found when I opened the door: from the single light bulb in the living room hung three balloons and on the coffee table were three bottles of Coke. A shirt cardboard also hung from the light fixture, and on it was awkwardly printed: "We love you all the time [sic] and don't forget it." "We thought you needed a party," said one of the boys. The gratitude I felt that night will remain with me always. They had heard my misery below the hateful words that I'd spoken.

The Buddha would say that behind our aspiration for courteous speech is our unconscious understanding of the great truth of interdependence. We depend on one another. Whatever we may think, in truth we cannot go it alone. We are, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." Together we all have a stake in positive outcomes. The trick is to achieve them by a means other than just bulldozing the other person into silence, shouting down his argument to bludgeon him into an acceptance of ours. The problem with the technique of verbal bludgeoning that we find so prevalent today is that its major and lasting effect is resentment, a resentment that will bloom to stand against us on another occasion. Instead, we must try together to solve our problems by concentrating on them rather than on each other.

There's a lot more I could say, but I just want to finally emphasize the deep and urgent importance of what the Buddha called "right speech." Without it, any solutions to our problems will be lost in the shouting. And we desperately need solutions, not who "wins" the verbal contest.

In closing, I'd like to share with you the manner in which the speech of great enlightening beings was described in the great Avatamsaka Sutra and ask that you take this away and think about it:

Great enlightening beings have ten kinds of speech: gentle speech, causing all sentient beings to be calm; sweet elixir speech, causing all sentient beings to be clear and cool; nondeceptive speech, everything they say being true; truthful speech, not lying even in dreams; great speech, being honored by all the gods; profound speech, revealing the essence of things; steadfast speech, expounding truth inexhaustibly; straightforward speech, their statements being easy to understand; various speech being spoken according to the occasion; speech enlightening all sentient beings, enabling them to understand according to their inclinations. Based on these, enlightening beings attain the supreme subtle speech of buddhas. (Avatamsaka Sutra Cleary 1069)

Isn't this how we'd all like to speak? Thank you for listening.