Right Speech

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 55:50

We often think of meditation as being at the very heart of the path of awakening. And in many ways it is. The development of mindfulness, of concentration, of equanimity—all make possible the wisdom that liberates the mind.

But as many of you will be leaving tomorrow and the others leaving in a month or so, it's important to remember that the Buddha's path of liberation is much more inclusive of all of our life's activities than just the invaluable but specialized situation of intensive retreat. We need to remember and internalize the understanding in a very meaningful way that our whole life is our practice. It's not just formal meditation practice.

We see this with unmistakable clarity in the Buddhist teachings of the Eightfold Path. It's the Eightfold Path which is the path to awakening. Having established ourselves to some extent in right understanding and in right thought—which are the thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of loving-kindness, thoughts of compassion—in the next three steps of this Eightfold Path, the Buddha lays out how right understanding and right thought can be applied in our lives. These next three steps have to do with right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

It's interesting to notice, as we reflect on our own commitment to practice and commitment to liberation, how we might have the tendency to make these three steps on the path somewhat lesser in importance than developing meditation or mindfulness or concentration. They're important, but not quite as important—we often hold our practice in that way. But if we think in this way, we are really fragmenting our lives. We're saying one part of our life is about the practice, and the whole rest of our life is something else.

It's interesting to notice that of the ten unwholesome actions that the Buddha spoke of, seven of them are purified by these three steps on the path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So this is not something secondary. It's not of lesser importance. And as we give attention to these steps, we really begin to see the role of ethics as being not simply a way to live a good life, but we see ethics in its relationship to freedom, to liberation.

The first of this triad of path factors is right speech, and that's what I'd like to talk about this evening.

Speech is such a powerful influence on our lives precisely because we speak a lot. A good part of our lives is spent talking. And we can see—it doesn't take much insight to see—that speech conditions our relationships. The way we speak conditions the quality of our hearts, of our minds, and it also conditions

karmic consequences in the future. So speech is something powerful that we need to pay attention to.

The most basic aspect of right speech is truthfulness: refraining from saying that which is untrue. Although this may seem so obvious and straightforward—simply don't say what is untrue—it may not be as easy to practice as we assume. So it's worth really investigating this idea of truthfulness.

There are many kinds of false speech, from slight exaggerations or humorous untruths to falsehoods whose motivation might be a kind of self-protection, or maybe we have a motivation to protect others, and that becomes a reason in our minds for speaking that which is untrue. Sometimes, hopefully not often, there may be deliberate lies with malicious intent to cause divisiveness or harm.

We see this played out on a national scale in every election year, where the norm is for candidates to make many statements and claims, many of which are simply untrue. I heard one report recently that the most honest of the candidates now running spoke truth little more than fifty percent of the time. Isn't that amazing? And that's the most honest. So there's something a little askew here in terms of our commitment, our valuing of this.

We might inquire in our own lives: whenever we might be saying something which is untrue, just even if it's a small one—hopefully it's not some big untruth that wants to cause harm—but at whatever level, whenever we find ourselves saying something which is not quite true, can we stop and pay attention and inquire inside? What's the motivation? Is it greed for something? We're really wanting something and so we bend the truth a little bit. Is it a desire for recognition or some kind of self-aggrandizement? Or maybe we tell a little lie or a big lie out of fear of rejection from someone, or out of jealousy. There could be many different motives, and we want to understand ourselves. We want to see what's going on in our minds.

It complicates our lives a lot, because then we need to tell other lies to support the first ones, and then we need to remember all of it. Mark Twain, with his usual insightful humor, said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." It's helpful to remember that. It just makes our lives very simple.

But even more than that simplicity, as we all know, lying is a tremendously harmful and corrosive force in our relationships, in our society, because it undermines our ability to trust. The great German philosopher Nietzsche said, "I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you." And we know that from different personal relationships we've had—when somebody has been untruthful, that sense of trust has been lost.

The Buddha spoke of this very directly, very bluntly. He said, "Thus one should never knowingly speak a lie, either for the sake of one's own advantage, or for the sake of another person's advantage, or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever." That's a very unambiguous statement. Thus one should never knowingly speak a lie.

And it's said that in the Bodhisattva's long journey to Buddhahood—in the teachings the Buddha spent countless lifetimes as a Bodhisattva perfecting all the qualities of a Buddha, the paramis—it's said that at

different times over the course of these many lifetimes, the Bodhisattva broke all of the different precepts at one time or another. But it's said that the one precept he didn't break in all that time was the precept about truthfulness. So central is truthfulness to the path of awakening. We need to really make this very conscious in our lives as an inspiration for our own commitment to being truthful.

But what is so surprising is that something which seems so simple—just be truthful—can be surprisingly difficult at times. Very often little lies just seem to tumble out before we are even conscious of it.

A story which I've told very often, but it's so illustrative of this tendency. This happened years ago at the retreat center during one of the three-month retreats. Like here, at the retreat center there are these big walk-in refrigerators and freezers where the food is stored. So one evening a staff person was going into the refrigerator for something, and there was a yogi in the walk-in refrigerator with their hand in the box of almonds or something. The staff person very politely said, "Can I help you?" And just without thinking at all, the yogi replied, "Oh, I'm looking for the maintenance person." The first thing that came to mind—that kind of self-protective mode. This wasn't a lie with great malicious intent, but there are strong tendencies in the mind.

Just another example: at the end of the three-month course at the retreat center we usually have a few days of integration where people are talking with one another in different group discussions. After some of those discussions one of the yogis came up to me, I guess a little bit by way of confession, but also just reporting, that as yogis were talking to one another and part of it was talking about their meditation—how long do you sit?—this person said that for some reason, whenever that was a topic of discussion, he always added fifteen minutes to his sitting capacity. Again, it's just a small little thing. But we can be aware of these small little things, these small falsehoods.

There might also be lies of omission, where we're covering or withholding something that's of importance. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, "Lying is done with words and also with silence." So that's an even more subtle aspect. The untruth can be not only what we say but at times maybe what we don't say.

We can see this a lot in our society. Just in thinking about this talk, I was reminded of a line from a Bob Dylan song, "Blowin' in the Wind." One of the lines is, "How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?" When we look at the injustices in our society—the racism or the homophobia or sexism or many kinds of injustice and oppression, which can be so blatant and so obvious—how many times do we just turn our heads and pretend that we just don't see? That's another kind of internal lying. There's a lot of depth to this inquiry.

Or we might be living under the illusion that yes, all this may happen with other people, but I would never lie. I had a very powerful situation where I saw that if we don't acknowledge the potential in our own minds for this possibility, it becomes much harder to see it when it actually happens, because we're living under the illusion that I would never do that.

This was an extremely powerful and painful and ultimately freeing experience I had in my meditation practice with Sayadaw U Pandita. This goes back more than thirty years, the first time that I sat with him. As you know, he was a very formidable teacher. We were going for interviews every day and it was very intense—the whole form of reporting was intense, and he was very intense.

And I was lost in some idea of where my practice was. I was familiar with all the stages of insight, and I had some notion of where I was on the path. In some way, I was presenting my report through the filter of that belief. It wasn't simply a straightforward account of what was actually going on—it was shaded through that sense of where I thought I was.

I finished my report, and Sayadaw just said three words to me: "That's not true."

I was devastated. You can imagine the intensity of the situation, this revered teacher delivering those words. It was devastating. It took me days to recover. I would be sitting for days, filled with guilt and shame and self-judgment—all the feelings and emotions you might imagine.

But finally I came to a certain realization, and it was a freeing realization: acknowledging that yes, my mind can do that. My mind did do that. And so there it was, caught in the headlights. There was great freedom in that recognition, even though it was incredibly painful to see and to have it pointed out in that way. I was letting go of a previously unnoticed pretense and delusion—the belief that my mind would be incapable of doing such a thing.

By seeing and by opening to the truth that yes, the mind can do that also, that it can shade the truth even in situations where one would think we would never do it, it became much easier to recognize whatever impulses arose in the mind to do so. I became less self-judgmental about it all, and developed the actual ability, through seeing it clearly, to refrain from that kind of speech.

This is about honesty regarding our own minds—what they can do and what they do at different times. As one character in the book *Zorba the Greek* said, "Self-knowledge is always bad news." The more we look at our minds, the more we see all of these shadowy parts of ourselves. But we need to see them, and it's ultimately liberating and freeing to do so. Because as we open up to the shadow side and make it more conscious, we become able to make wiser choices. When we don't see it, when we're simply living in the delusion that our minds would never do such a thing, then we're simply acting out all of these sometimes hidden patterns.

Truthfulness as the first aspect of right speech has profound implications. This is significant because our whole goal in practice is to see what is true. In fact, that's one of the meanings of the word *Dharma*—the true nature of things. When we're practicing the Dharma, we are actually practicing what is true.

Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote about this in his book on the Noble Eightfold Path. He said, "Truthful speech establishes a correspondence between our inner being and the real nature of phenomena. Thus, much more than simply being an ethical principle, devotion to truthful speech is a matter of taking our stand on

reality rather than illusion."

I think this is a beautiful statement because it connects our speech to our commitment to seeing things truthfully, to seeing things as they are.

The Buddha was so clear about this. When we read the suttas, he expressed the overriding importance of truthfulness in a conversation he had with his son, Rahula, who at the time was a novice monk. The Buddha pointed to a bowl with just a little bit of water at the bottom and said, "So little—just like that little bit of water—so little is the spiritual achievement of one who is not afraid to tell a deliberate lie. Therefore, one should not tell a deliberate lie even in jest."

These are strong statements. And so can we bring our mindfulness and dedication to our practice to this huge realm of speech? This is a very big part of all of our lives.

At the same time, we need to recognize that this is a practice. We may not be perfect in it—and probably will not be. There may be times when little lies tumble out. "Oh, I'm just looking for the maintenance person." Or shading the truth to present ourselves in a certain way. There are many variations. We may not be perfect in this, but if we take it as a practice and commit to it as a practice, then we're sensitizing ourselves to those times when we might be saying a small falsehood. It's almost as if a little mindfulness bell goes off within us. We find ourselves having said something and realize, "Oh, that wasn't exactly true." This mindfulness bell sounds: "Ah yes, that was not true." It helps to wake us up when we really establish our commitment to right speech.

So truthfulness is the first aspect of right speech. The second aspect is refraining from slandering, from gossip, from backbiting—those words that cause disharmony and loss of friendship. Again, the Buddha is very direct. He said, "What one has heard here is not repeated there, so as to cause dissension. What one has heard there is not repeated here, so as not to cause dissension. One unites those who are divided and encourages those who are united. One delights and rejoices in concord, and it is concord or harmony that one spreads by one's words."

This itself is a very powerful practice. A question for us to consider, given the strong worldwide tendency to gossip and speak about others: this is not unique to any particular person. As it says in the Buddhist texts, this is the nature of the uninstructed worldlings, which is most of humanity. We love this kind of gossiping. So it's interesting just to inquire why. What is the pleasure? What is the enjoyment of it? When we're gossiping about others, does it in some way reaffirm our own sense of self? It would be interesting to look the next time we find ourselves in that situation. What's the pleasure in it? Is there some ego gratification?

Another example of this—and this one had a happier outcome for me. Again, this goes back years to when I was first starting to teach, maybe in the late seventies. Meditation was just beginning to become known in the culture, well before it became popular. A quite well-known journalist came to interview me about

meditation and this new thing that was beginning to happen. He was very skilled, and he started asking me about all the various teachers who were teaching meditation. Of course, I had my own opinions and two cents about everyone he mentioned. I could just feel it—he'd ask me, "Oh, what do you think about so-and-so?" and I could feel that impulse arising: "Oh, yeah..."

But fortunately, at that time, I was mindful enough to see that impulse. No, I don't need to say this. And so I didn't. I didn't speak about anybody else. Then a few weeks later, when the article came out and everything I had said was in print, I reflected with tremendous appreciation for the restraint that I had managed to have. I was just imagining—well, what if I had actually given voice to all these various opinions and then they were all in the article? It would have felt terrible. So there's great power in being aware, when we can, before we give voice to this tendency.

I first became interested in Buddhism when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I had just finished college and was teaching English, and it was my first introduction to Buddhist teachings. I got very interested, excited, and enthusiastic. I was first learning about the Eightfold Path and right speech. So I was reading about this, and I decided that for a period of time I was going to make an experiment: I would not speak about any third person. If the person wasn't there, I wasn't going to speak about them.

It was amazing. It was like ninety percent of my speech was eliminated. It was so astounding to realize how much of our talk is about other people. And there were some very interesting consequences of that experiment. One is that I found my mind became much less judgmental, because I wasn't giving voice to the judgments—even if they weren't harsh, even friendly ones. If I wasn't giving voice to that pattern of judging others, I found that my mind actually got a lot quieter. And as there was less judgment of others, I also saw that there was a lot less self-judgment, because I wasn't reinforcing that pattern.

So you might, if you want, just make an experiment for a period of time. Sometimes it can be challenging—if you're with somebody and they're speaking about someone else... I smiled a lot. Just finding ways not to engage in the conversation, or even to say what one is practicing. It becomes a little education moment. But even if we're not following such a strict guideline and we just engage in normal conversation, we can still take a lot of care in how we speak of other people. What is the motivation?

This goes back to the Buddha's words, which I have found to be an incredibly important practice: what one has heard here is not repeated there so as to cause dissension. When we're speaking about others, just in a friendly way or among friends, what is our intention? Is the intention to bring people together, or is the intention to divide in some way? Simply paying attention to that would have a tremendous impact on our speech and would be very transformative.

It would be transformative in the world if, in our speech and speaking about other people, we only spoke that which brought people together rather than divided them. That would transform not only our own worlds and relationships, but it would have a huge influence in our society, in our culture.

On another whole level, speech can be a kind of gossip about ourselves. It's really a form of māna, which is the Pali word usually translated as conceit. It's that sense of the underlying "I am"—I am better than, I'm worse than, I'm equal to. It doesn't matter what the comparison is; it's the constellation of the I am-ness. This is māna.

We can notice if in our speech, in our conversation, we're overly self-referential. I'm sure we've noticed it in other people, but can we notice in ourselves if we're always bringing the conversation back to ourselves in some way or another? And again, it's insightful to look at the motivation.

Or we might have the opposite kind of māna. Rather than always taking center stage, being at the center of things, maybe we are always staying behind the scenes and never giving voice to what we think or feel. That's another kind of māna, of "I am." Maybe we're feeling inferior, we don't feel worthy of speaking. So it's just to look at all these kinds of speech and non-speech to see what the motivation is behind it.

It is such a powerful mirror and reflection for our states of mind, because it's so obvious when we're really being mindful. It's out there. And if we're looking, if we're paying attention, it's such a mirror of what our minds are doing.

I had another interesting example of the power of māna, of conceit. This defilement is not uprooted until one is an arahant. So even after we've freed ourselves from the view of self and freed ourselves from desire and anger—these are high stages of realization—māna is still there. It's not uprooted until the final stage of liberation. It goes very, very deep.

I was with a friend and we were driving back from New York. I had the thought to say something that was not related to anything—it wasn't related to our experience, what we had done. It was just an "I am" thought. It was basically a thought that was announcing, "Here I am." We're old friends and we're driving in the car for hours, but this thought came to say something. I saw it. I saw it in my mind. That's really just māna. And it went away.

About fifteen seconds later, the same thought comes. I see you. It went away. Third time, fourth time, fifth time. It kept coming back. I don't know what number it was—the fifteenth time or the twentieth time—out it came. It was just so interesting. I was being mindful in that time, so it was fascinating to observe the power of it. And it was about something completely unimportant. There was no reason to say it, except that the force of māna wanted to be expressed.

So speech, if we're paying attention to it, can reveal things about our minds. It can reveal the potency and the power of different defilements in the mind. And likewise, it can reveal the wholesome intentions.

The third aspect of right speech has to do with the emotional tone.

What's the energy behind our words? The Buddha talked of this aspect of right speech as refraining from harsh, angry, or abusive speech. And again, the Buddha was really clear. He said, "One speaks such words

as are gentle, soothing to the ear, loving. Such words as go to the heart, are courteous, friendly, and agreeable to many." Can we practice that? Can we practice speaking in that kindly way?

Years ago when I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya—this goes back to the late 60s—there were just a few of us then. This was before lots of people came. Maybe there were ten of us staying at this Burmese Vihara in Bodh Gaya. It was not a structured retreat, but we were all doing our own practice, so there was a little bit of informality about it.

We had been there quite a long time, and one evening we all got together. There was a young woman there who had a guitar, and as we were sitting around she said she had just written a song about all of us. The thought I had was that this was going to be like a funny roast, just pointing out the quirks of each person, as we're very likely to do in that situation.

But instead—and it was so surprising—her song, in speaking about each person, described what their beautiful qualities were. That was her song. And what surprised me was how surprising it was to me, because I expected exactly the opposite. It was unusual to have somebody express things in that loving way. It was striking and very beautiful.

So it's an example of how we can use our speech in a way that creates concord, that creates harmony, that brings people together. We really need to be conscious of the energy behind our words. Just think of how you might feel if angry, harsh words were being directed at you. How would we feel? Mostly, we would feel hurt, or defensive, or maybe get angry in return. That is not a good environment for communication when that kind of energy is happening between people. And really the essence of right speech is about connection. It's about communication. So we need to pay attention to the quality of the energy of our words.

Here it's not so much a question of suppressing feelings or emotions. Sometimes we may need to say difficult things—but how do we say it? Can we say it in a way that connects, in a way that can be heard?

Right speech also has implications for how we listen. How do we listen to others speaking? There's one teaching from the Buddha on this—it's really about right listening—which is a great practice and very challenging. I'll read what he said, and you'll see how challenging it is and what a high level the Buddha is suggesting that we practice at.

He said, "Bhikkhus, there are five ways of speech that others may use when they speak to you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving-kindness or with a mind of inner hate. Herein, bhikkhus, you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness."

So just imagine somebody is yelling at you very harshly, saying that which is untrue, wanting to cause you harm. And the Buddha is saying we should train ourselves thus: our minds will remain unaffected, we

shall utter no unskillful words, we shall abide compassionate for their welfare. You see how challenging? That's a hugely challenging practice.

But it is really the practice of being present, of being mindful. This is mindfulness externally, where we're mindful of what the other person is doing, even with all the unskillfulness that's present, but our hearts can remain unaffected and actually practice feeling compassion for their welfare.

This is not easy to do, but I love having it as a reference point for a possibility. When we find ourselves in those situations, maybe we can remember this and it just helps us a little bit to stay in that place of openness, of compassion, of mettā.

Do you see that right speech is not some secondary practice on a spiritual path? The practice of right speech can bring us right to the edge of our capacity and our willingness to be present. It's an essential part of our path of practice.

The last aspect of right speech—it's not saying that which is untrue, it's not gossiping and backbiting, it's not speaking harshly or angrily—the last aspect is refraining from useless talk. And the Pali word for this, I think is my favorite word in Pali. It's a word that expresses onomatopoeia, which means that the word sounds like what it is. So the Pali word for useless talk is *samphappalāpa*. Just don't *samphappalāpa*. It's just what it sounds like.

I have seen this so often, just in ordinary social situations, just hanging out with friends. We're not saying anything bad or using harsh speech, but how often I can see the tendency of the mind just to say something that is completely useless. It has no point whatsoever except to be speaking. That's the only point of it.

This can have some harmful consequences. So this is a story of a friend of mine from New York. He was taking a trip to Bali, and he got on the plane having injured his arm. He had a rubber exercise ball to exercise his hand and arm. The flight attendant came by and was interested and said, "What is that?" Keep in mind this was before 9/11—you have to keep that in mind. So the flight attendant says, "What is that?" And just by way of joking, he said, "Plastique," which is an explosive. It's what people use to blow things up. Even before 9/11, within a couple of minutes, the police were on the plane. They took him off. The airline threatened to never let him fly again. It took him days to disentangle from that one moment of *sam phappalāpa*.

Usually it doesn't have quite such dramatic consequences, but it can. More importantly, what I've noticed is when I see that tendency—and it's a common one, just the urge to say something that is really useless—when I see that impulse and I can be mindful of it and refrain from speaking it, I can feel the conservation of energy. That kind of speech is like energy leaks; it's enervating. We lose the respect of others because our words, at least in that situation, are useless.

Every time we can see it—no, I don't have to say that—there's really a very good feeling. It feels like one of

life's little victories over Māra. Māra says, "Just say that even though it's useless." No, no, I don't have to say that. We settle back and there's a feeling of strength, a feeling of inner strength.

There's one meditation teacher, his name is Jonathan Foust. He has a very good acronym. His acronym is WAIT—W-A-I-T—and it stands for Why Am I Talking? When I read that, I thought, perfect. Can we remember that? Why am I talking? It would reveal a lot about our minds.

In this way, this kind of attention shows us, it's a reflection, it's a mirror of what's going on in our minds. The Buddha expressed it this way: one speaks at the right time, in accordance with facts, speaks what is useful, speaks of the Dhamma.

Such a person's speech is like a treasure, uttered at the right moment, accompanied by reason, moderate and full of sense.

Here, the Buddha was really talking to monastics, and so he's given quite a high standard, basically saying one should speak only the Dharma. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in some of his writings, explained that as lay people, we may have slightly wider parameters. Acknowledging, as Bhikkhu Bodhi said in his own words, we have "more need for affectionate small talk" as lay people—with family and friends, polite conversation with acquaintances, or talk in connection with our work.

But even within these more expanded guidelines for our life in the world, can we pay attention to *sampha ppalāpa*? Even as we're speaking in a more relaxed way, can we refrain from useless talk? It's a tremendously powerful practice.

It's not by accident that the Buddha gave so much importance to this. This is the third step on the Eightfold Path. This is a key element of our spiritual practice. And it's such a powerful one because speech is such a big part of our lives. It's not a small thing. If we really take on right speech as a practice, this is a very powerful way of imbuing our lives with mindfulness. People often ask, "How can I bring the practice into the world?" If we did nothing other than pay attention to speech, we would be mindful throughout most of the day.

So can we really take this on? When we do, not only does it cultivate abstinence from unwholesome mind states, but right speech or wise speech also helps cultivate the beautiful qualities of *mettā*, of loving-kindness, of compassion, of sympathetic joy. And most importantly, as we practice right speech, it aligns us and keeps us in alignment with what is true. And that is the very essence of Dharma practice.

I'll close with this, also from the suttas. The Buddha says, "If speech has five marks, it is well spoken, not badly spoken, blameless and above reproach from the wise. What are these five marks? It is speech that is timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and spoken with a mind of loving-kindness."

If we can keep these in mind—speech that is timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and spoken with a mind of loving-kindness—then this becomes a powerful force for the Dharma in all our lives.

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