

## Mindful Speech

### How to Practice Right Speech Anywhere, Anytime, and With Anyone

And why right speech begins with good listening  
- Krishnan Venkatesh

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Mastering our minds begins with mastering our mouths. We spend the first 10 years of our lives learning “elementary right speech”: how to interact politely, respectfully, and inoffensively; when to speak, when not to speak. Then we spend another decade learning to express more complex feelings and ideas to others. We might call this intermediate right speech, although what we study even on these two preliminary levels is bottomless. Even something as simple as when to speak and when not to speak can't be determined by a formula; it is a skill refined over a lifetime.

If you want to stop suffering, the Buddha taught, there is an eightfold path of practice to that end: right view, right motivation, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. While the word right: carries connotations of orthodox correctness, it is a misleading translation of the Pali word *samma*, which means perfected, completed, or consummated. The eight limbs of the path are not eight steps to be taken consecutively, but are to be worked on simultaneously. Like the eight branches to one trunk or eight tributaries flowing into one river, each is essential to the elimination of suffering. Of these limbs, none seem plainer than “right speech” or *samma-vaca*, yet *samma-vaca* is a powerful practice, and one that we can do anywhere, anytime, and with anyone.

“And what is *samma-vaca*?” asks the Buddha in The Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation. “Refraining from lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and meaningless speech.”

The process of learning to improve ourselves through language can be thought of as advanced right speech. In this practice, we become more consciously skilled with our words, aware of the effects they can have on ourselves and others, and alert to the ways that our thoughts and statements

can grow into habits. We avoid speech that makes us “impure”—confused, muddy, self-evading, and unable to separate truth from untruth.

Impurity, according to the Buddha, can come about in four ways. The first is telling falsehoods, by which we deliberately relax our commitment to truth and eventually even become so tied to subtly evolved fictions that we can no longer notice when we might be fooling ourselves. The second is saying things that are certain to cause strife, contention, and bad feeling, thus destroying social harmony by creating a miasma of mistrust and at the same time turning ourselves into someone who delights in dragging other people down. The third way is uttering words designed to hurt and upset, which sows internal strife in those around us and undermines their capacity for contentment. And the fourth destructive way may be the hardest for a modern person to understand: filling precious silence with babble that matters to no one, just to hear our own voices or to cover over a silence in which anxiety might arise. (Accustomed as we are to the sounds of entertainment and commentary, silence can disturb us; we find it awkward.) The effect of these together is unproductive emotional entanglement and mental confusion.

In contrast, when we learn to be more disciplined and scrupulous with our words, we find ourselves becoming better people. In The Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation, the Buddha says: “And how is one made pure in four ways by verbal action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech.”

This is the rare person who can always be counted on to be truthful and honest; who never speaks in such a way as to cause discord and is both good at and enjoys making friendships; someone whom people routinely seek out because of her sincerity, kindness, good nature, and encouragement; and one who is always to the point and worth listening to. This is an image of a wonderful, lovable human being—the kind of person we would want for a friend, and also the one that we aspire to become.

The beauty of such a path is that it can be practiced. At the beginning of each day, we can articulate to ourselves an intention to work on the four aspects of *samma-vaca* with the particular people and situations

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we come across. Before we go to sleep, we can reflect on our conversations, evaluate in detail whether we succeeded or not, and then decide what we need to do to improve. It is the conscious application of our reflective intelligence that makes this a practice and not just the spontaneous play of natural gifts. Did I tell the truth? Was I right to tell my friend X what my other friend Y had said about him? Did I hurt W's feelings and make it harder for him to speak with me? Did I just waste an hour chatting about politics on Facebook?

Underlying all of these queries is the larger question about motivation: why did I speak, and what in me needed to say this? In thinking about these things and trying to cultivate lucidity regarding our own actions, we gradually become smarter about ourselves, more sensitive to other people, and more nuanced in our actions. When we do, we are able to, as the Buddha says: "speak words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal."

Speaking well depends on listening well, and learning how to listen may be one of the hardest things for a human being to accomplish. Impatience, arrogance, desire, and fear can make us poor listeners. We are impatient, eager to say our own thing because we have some other task to check off. We can be arrogant, assuming we are qualified to judge others or that we already "know" both what the other person will say and what it is worth. We want to hear ourselves corroborated, and this desire prevents us from truly listening or causes us to be fearful because there are things we know we don't want to hear. When we are silent, is it because we are listening or because we are waiting to speak? When we speak, are we responding to the person in front of us or merely reacting or deflecting? If we are habitually not responsive to people and situations, we cannot be sincere practitioners of samma-vaca. It will be obvious that our silences are also included in this, because all silence expresses something, and some silences are more eloquent than words. To the extent that many silences are in fact preparations for speech, words exist in a continuum from intuition, to thought, to utterance—which means that the thoughtful practitioner of samma-vaca must attend to what precedes speaking as much as to speaking itself.

Thus the art of speaking well includes the complementary art of listening well. Both of these arts cannot be taught as a technique or strategy to master. For example, we can know everything there is to know about different methods of beginning an argument, but how do we know when to start and how to choose the words that will move this particular

person? We can have a large enough vocabulary and wide experience of life to understand the words that are spoken to us, but how do we intuit the real intentions behind the words—such as whether the speaker is friendly or unfriendly toward us—let alone understand why the intentions are what they are? If we have no insight into these deeper matters, we are unlikely to address this interlocutor effectively in speech.

But how do we learn such things? There is no shortcut; we learn from paying attention to every interaction and reflecting afterwards on what went right or wrong. We learn from mistakes, and also from letting others point out our mistakes: when we said things poorly, when we misunderstood, when we completely misjudged another person, when we failed to sustain a harmonious relationship. Mistakes and failures make up the rich seedbed of self-reflection and improvement. Because of this, samma-vaca is a practice that will tend to make a person more grounded, generous, humble, attentive, observant, present—and at the same time, more reflective, imaginative, far-sighted, and open to other people and possibilities. It is a richly rewarding practice for a thoughtful person and a salutary discipline for a less thoughtful person, because it encompasses so many other virtues. Indeed, samma-vaca is a mindfulness practice that gives instant feedback, because it occurs in the moment, with other people.

Every human being can do this practice; each of us is capable of trying to listen well, speak well, and self-reflect.