**Wholesome Speech In Trying Times**

*The thought manifests as the word;*

*The word manifests as the deed;*

*The deed develops into habit;*

*And habit hardens into character.*

*So watch the thought and its ways with care,*

*And let it spring from love*

*Born out of concern for all beings.*

*--The Buddha*

“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. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, ‘Come & tell, good man, what you know’: If he doesn’t know, he says, ‘I don’t know.’ If he does know, he says, ‘I know.’ If he hasn’t seen, he says, ‘I haven’t seen.’ If he has seen, he says, ‘I have seen.’ Thus he doesn’t consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

“Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

“Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large.

“Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the [goal](http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/WorldeBookLibrary.com/ptf/nibbana.html), the Dhamma, & the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

“This is how one is made pure in four ways by verbal action.”

-- [AN X.176](http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/WorldeBookLibrary.com/canon/anguttara/an10-176.html#speech)

The current social divisiveness we are exposed to is a real challenge to equanimity and the ability we have to manage our interpersonal relationships skillfully. This review of the classic teaching Buddhism has to offer will hopefully be beneficial in this regard.

The first thing to be aware of is what I call our “Circle of Influence”. We are exposed to news in ways that are unprecedented in human history. I recall from earlier years in my life something that was said by a former Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill: *All politics is local*. As a member of the House of Representatives, his career depended upon his ability to dialogue with the population of his district; even in that regard, if he wasn’t giving a speech, he was talking with individuals or small groups of people. This is how we live our lives, through interpersonal dialogue with individuals or among small groups of people, who may or may not have similar political or sociocultural beliefs. We are conditioned by the media we tune in to towards particular beliefs that may be somewhat abstract, although important. How can we negotiate with our circle of influence in ways that promote personal respect and somehow find enough social cohesiveness to minimize the divisiveness that seems to be dominating political and sociocultural life? I want to offer some suggestions from the Dharma that I hope will be helpful in this process.

Samma Sacca, Right Speech, is the first category of the Virtue aggregate in the Noble Eightfold Path. I want to explore how the classic teachings are enhanced by insights derived from modern psychological research. In classical terms, Right Speech first focuses on avoiding unwholesome speech, then manifesting wholesome speech. This is in accord with the suggestion that skillful meditation first requires subduing the hindrances, which often manifests as an internal narrative, then, as spiritual development builds, cultivating benevolent speech in a timely pattern. In the teachings, there are four categories: false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter. After quoting from the teachings, I want to add some observations from a modern psychological perspective.

FALSE SPEECH: “There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, ‘Come & tell, good man, what you know’: If he doesn’t know, he says, ‘I don’t know.’ If he does know, he says, ‘I know.’ If he hasn’t seen, he says, ‘I haven’t seen.’ If he has seen, he says, ‘I have seen.’ Thus he doesn’t consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.”

What can psychology contribute to this understanding? First, use mindful restraint to consider what your self talk is before speaking out loud. Is the motive to gain praise or avoid blame? It’s important to be clear about whether your comments are inaccurate because you lack information, or can you be sure that your comments are factual or just your opinion. If it is your opinion, is it possible that your opinion is distorted or delusional? We are delusional more frequently than we’re willing to admit, so be cautious, and qualify your statement as an opinion, not as a fact or a demand. A standard psychotherapeutic intervention involves monitoring internal narratives to determine whether thoughts are demanding perfection, assuming rejection, restricting authentic emotions, harshly self-critical or assuming privilege. These thought processes contaminate communication and interpersonal harmony and are to be countered with more affirmative and adaptive beliefs.

DIVISIVE SPEECH: “Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.”

We learn to speak in our family of origin and in the neighborhoods we grow up in. It’s not uncommon for families and children to routinely say harsh and shaming things, claiming that it’s harmless teasing or meant to teach children to do what’s right. Children learn how to “split” parents to gain advantage, and verbal bullying is common in the schoolyard. These ways of negotiating relationship become routine, and, in fact, can perversely define what it means to be a family member. Sarcasm, teasing, verbal humiliation, name calling, etc., become normalized, along with the discomfort and distrust that accompany them.

HARSH SPEECH: “Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large.”

This pattern is reflected in what was said about divisive speech. Hostile, aggressive speech becomes the normal way of seeking status in social settings, to the extent that to not engage in that exposes us to rejection. My personal experience is that thinking well of others and openly appreciating them is a wonderful way to develop interpersonal trust and loyalty.

IDLE CHATTER: “Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the [goal](http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/WorldeBookLibrary.com/ptf/nibbana.html), the Dhamma, & the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.”

So much of social life involves idle chatter, “small talk”, that serves no purpose other than to avoid silence, which is often anxiety provoking. Speaking in season means talking about what’s circumstantially appropriate, respecting others’ privacy, etc. Regarding the goal, the Dhamma and the Vinaya, the intention is not toward orthodox speech or piety. Rather, it indicates respecting wisdom and promoting closeness and trust socially. Interestingly, avoiding idle chatter often means quietly enjoying each other’s company, and a willingness to practice patience with the idle chatter of others.

Right Listening

Listening doesn’t involve these principles directly, except perhaps the timing, affection and the beneficial aspects, and hopefully involves a mind permeated with good will. The art of listening is a rare practice in our culture. In these trying times it is more important to listen carefully—often we stop listening halfway through the other person’s comments, attached to how we disagree and in preparation for countering. How can we cultivate Right Listening? Here are some pointers:

* **Cultivate tranquility with daily meditation practice.** An abiding sense of peacefulness in the mind creates a space of non-reactivity, an ability to check the emerging internal narrative.
* **Be sure to listen with your eyes as well as your ears.** A larger portion of the brain is dedicated to visual processing than auditory processing. It is well documented that infants “read” facial expressions as well as vocalization.
* **Try to listen to everything being said with an open mind.** It is also well documented that people, in conversation, will often disregard a large portion of what the other is saying, preparing a response.
* **Avoid interrupting or talking over the other person.** If the other person isn’t letting you have your turn to speak, consider what other issues may be pressing her or him (see the next suggestion).
* **Listen to your own internal responses without clinging.** Try to be mindful of little surges of urgency or body tensions—they’re part of the message. We’re empathic, so your feelings are important, but don’t attach to them.
* **Listen for the underlying theme.** Try to understand what desire or dread the other person may be influenced by. Often, the speaker’s tone of voice or body language contradicts what is actually being said.
* **If you’re uncertain about what’s being said, try to repeat back what you heard.** This doesn’t have to be a copy of what was said, and it shouldn’t be judgmental about what’s being said; just be sure of what you heard.
* **Don’t take what’s being said personally, whether it’s about you or not.** The speaker is talking of his or her experience, through the filter of prior experience.
* **Listen with an open mind and heart.** Remember, wisdom comes from clear awareness and benevolent intention. Be genuinely curious about how the other person understands life.
* **Listen with the intention to understand, not necessarily with the intention to be right.** Relationships benefit from mutual understanding more than from dominance or compliance.
* **Be sensitive to the other person’s vulnerability.** Don’t press an issue if she or he is reluctant to disclose, unless expressly invited to do so.
* **Notice when the level of conflict is becoming louder and more confrontational.** When I or the other person becomes flooded with emotional energy, the ability to communicate and negotiate different views and goals is disabled. At that point it is best to take a “time out” to allow yourself and the other person(s) to calm down before continuing the dialogue.
* **Ultimately the goal is to cultivate kindness and compassion interpersonally.** When we can maintain that aspiration and move the conversations towards that outcome we can all work together more beneficially. This may take time and several encounters to accomplish, but, after all, we are practicing the ability to maintain communication through conflict and can frame the encounters as practicing relationship!