



STEP 3

Skillful Speech

MINDFULNESS OF SKILLFUL SPEECH

Skillful Speech is not something you practice on the cushion. It happens in dialogue, not silence. During formal meditation, however, you can think about your habits of speech and try to convert the thoughts that arise to skillful thoughts—those motivated by generosity, loving-friendliness, and compassion. You can analyze your past actions and ask yourself: "Did I speak correctly yesterday? Have I spoken only gently, kindly, meaningfully, and truthfully?" If you find that you have erred in some way, you can pledge to improve your mindfulness of Skillful Speech.

The most important resolution you can make is to think before you speak. People say, "Watch your tongue!" But it's more important to watch your mind. The tongue does not wag by itself. The mind controls it. Before you open your mouth, check your mind to see whether your motivation is wholesome. You will come to regret any speech motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion.

Also make a strong determination not to say anything that might hurt another person. This pledge will definitely help you to think carefully before you speak. When you speak mindfully, you automatically speak truthfully, gently, and kindly. Mindfulness will keep you from using verbal daggers that can pierce people to the marrow. If the intent to speak in a harmful way occurs to you, immediately use mindfulness and Skillful Effort to prevent these thoughts from continuing.

The pledge not to wound others with your speech is especially important when talking with someone toward whom you feel resentment, or when discussing a situation about which you have strong feelings. Be careful! Use only gentle, well-selected words. Speaking softly can bring peace and harmony to the situation and help the conversation to continue in a productive, profitable, and friendly way.

If someone approaches you and speaks irritatingly—nagging or gossiping about one of your friends, for instance—and you notice yourself getting upset, simply stop talking. Remind yourself silently, "I must not be reactive. I must not fall into the same lack of mindfulness as this person. This conversation is not going anywhere. I choose to engage only in meaningful conversation." In many cases, the other person will respond to your silence by stopping the irritating talk. You can use the pause that follows to turn the conversation in a better direction.

Actually, as someone following the Buddha's path, the moment you know that a conversation is heading in the wrong direction, you should take responsibility for putting it back on track. It is so easy to get

carried away with emotional talk and start shouting. A shouting match causes unhappiness to everyone involved. With mindfulness recall how awful you feel when you are out of control emotionally. Remind yourself that it may take hours or days before you calm down enough to talk to this person again. A lot of good feelings will be lost, perhaps permanently. In spite of all your good efforts, however, sometimes you still get angry. If another person continually provokes you, assaulting you with verbal daggers, you may become completely confused and bewildered. Then it is very easy for anger to arise. When you see your confusion building up, say "Wait a minute!" to the other person, with the hope of finding a moment to clear your mind. But what if the other person responds with "No, you wait a minute!" and continues to attack—then what?

In these situations, when the conversation spins out of control, your task is to bring mindfulness back quickly and use Skillful Effort to overcome the anger. Even if your feelings of anger cause your heart to beat fast, your body to break into a sweat, and your hands to shake, mindfulness of your resolution to avoid all harsh speech can help you stay in control. Simply refuse to let your anger tell you what to say. Concentrate on your breathing to reestablish mindfulness until your anger has died down.

Calming yourself gives both you and the other person a chance to open your hearts in a more friendly way. As your heart begins to warm, you see the other more clearly, and maybe you will understand why you both got upset. You can also see how confused an angry state of mind makes you. As your feelings of respect and concern grow, you can resolve to use this moment to begin a new and more loving relationship and to strengthen the companionship between you. That is what you should always hope to do.

When you see that you have disciplined your mind and your words and that the situation has become more harmonious, be happy about it! Say to yourself, "This is what I want. I want always to act in ways that allow these good things to happen." Bring up that thought again and again.

Let me tell you a story of a time when I myself had to use mindfulness to practice Skillful Speech. Perhaps my experience will give you some clues about how to apply mindfulness to situations that arise in your life—at your work, at home, and in your personal relationships.

Many years ago, when I was in charge of running a certain temple, a group of people called a meeting for temple supporters. These people opposed some work I had initiated and needed a forum where they could express their frustrations. A bit of character assassination may have been on the agenda, too. Some of these people had very strong feelings about the matters to be discussed. They had been born into Buddhist families, but they had no interest in meditation. In fact, they considered meditation a *crazy* thing to do. Therefore they did not understand my work. I expected to be on the hot seat during this meeting, but what happened was worse than anyone could have predicted.

About forty people were attending the meeting, including many of my relatives, close friends, and others who hoped to show support for my programs. Before the meeting was properly opened, even before introductions had been made, a very simple man stood up and began to speak. This fellow was uneducated and unskilled, with a tendency toward unrefined speech. He had little to say about the temple

business under discussion, but a lot to say about me. In low, vulgar terms, he charged that I had done nothing for the temple for years, that I was damaging support for the temple, and so on. He used socially unacceptable, derogatory, and hurtful language throughout this tirade, which went on for about twenty minutes.

During this shocking verbal assault, I worked with my mind. To prevent anger from arising, I reasoned with myself. I could see that the man was in a disturbed state, and I thought to myself, "I know this man to have a peaceful nature. We have had a good relationship. He must have been poisoned by someone else who feels strongly about these matters to say such things." As the man continued to speak, I reflected that I had had many opportunities for spiritual and cultural development that this man lacked. I recalled that he had only an elementary school education, few skills, and little interest in spiritual training. In this way, I tried to cultivate compassion for him and also gratitude that my training made it unlikely that I would ever speak or act as he was doing.

I also reflected on the context of what was happening. I considered that if I were to say anything to oppose him, my supporters would stand up for me, and the meeting might degenerate into an ugly fight. I watched people's eyes getting bigger and saw them frowning at the man and shifting in their seats. I sensed that my relatives in particular were deeply affected. I am an elder in my family—a brother, uncle, granduncle, and great granduncle—and I am known to be a gentle monk. Naturally, my family respects me and feels protective of me. I knew that if I seemed to be hurt or upset by what this man was saying, my relatives would experience anger and other unwholesome states of mind. They might even physically attack the man. So I told myself: "Here I have to exercise mindfulness, patience, and understanding to bring peace to this meeting."

I established mindfulness by concentrating on my breathing. When challenged like this, it is very important to pause and take some deep breaths before responding—perhaps two minutes of deep breathing, or thirty inhalations and thirty exhalations. This pause gives you time to relax and clear your mind, so you can speak sense, instead of blowing up.

Finally, the man seemed to have exhausted himself and stopped talking. Everybody was tense. They all looked at me. In a quiet voice I said, "This gentleman has been a friend of mine. He has been a very good supporter of this temple and has done many good and helpful things. He also knows what I have done all these years for the temple. But today, somehow, he seems to be upset, disappointed, and maybe not feeling quite himself. Therefore I feel like giving my blessings to him and to everybody."

I asked everyone there to put their hands together in the prayer position and to reverence the Buddha by saying three times, "Homage to the Blissful One, the Noble One, the Fully Enlightened One." This is how we commonly begin formal ceremonies. From the sheer weight of tradition, there was no way anyone could bring up any quarrel or express any negative opinion from that point on. It would have seemed disrespectful to the Buddha. Then I led the group in taking the five precepts, which uplifted their minds and made sure that everyone recalled the Buddha's guidelines for proper, harmless behavior. Finally, I recited a lengthy blessing chant, and when I finished, I said, "Now you can go home. The meeting is over."

And that was the end of it. For some years, this man remained cold toward me, but later I had the opportunity to be of service to him when he went through some serious difficulties. Since then and to this day, he remains friendly to me and expresses only his gratitude and respect.

Mindfulness is the key that helped me resolve this difficult situation. The same technique can work for you. I sometimes hear people say that things were happening so fast that "even with mindfulness" they could not control their actions or speech. Saying "even with mind-fulness" makes no sense. Perhaps their mindfulness was weak or undermined by greed, hatred, or delusion. But by definition, mindfulness keeps us in control of what we think, how we act, and what we say. It's impossible to shout at someone mindfully, or to abuse alcohol mindfully, or to engage in sexual misconduct mindfully. If you are truly mindful, you simply cannot do these things!

Because our habits are so strong, whenever we open our mouths, things seem just to spill out. We may not be aware of how much energy pours away with our speech. With mindful awareness, we put a stop to this outpouring, and energy collects. We can use this built-up energy to develop insight into the nature of our habits. Using this energy as fuel, we can talk to ourselves mentally in meditation, taking stock of our factions, further training our minds.

However, when we let this bottled-up energy out without mindfulness, it often explodes with a *pop!* like a cork from a bottle. I see this especially at the end of retreats. A few moments before, a perfectly silent group of people were sitting still or moving slowly and quietly. Then the Noble Silence of the retreat ends, and a roar of babbling conversation breaks out. This flood of talk goes on for an hour or two, until all the built-up energy has dissipated. The longer the retreat, the louder and more light-headed people will become, unless they make the effort to remain very mindful of their speech.

The only antidote for wrong speech is a strong dose of mindfulness—not just during retreats, or when you are in a challenging or difficult situation, but for your whole life. Mindfulness of Skillful Speech will contribute to your happiness. I guarantee it.