
HOW TO SPEAK AND HEAR THE TRUTH

We are always evolving, for that is our nature, the way of all things. And while we may not realize it, we live, speak and listen from a perceptual vantage point that is unstable: our breath, sensory awareness, gut feelings, level of attention and thoughts—all that constitutes our present experience and internal landscape—are shifting and flowing.

Of course, we prefer our “personality” to be comprised of solid and stable elements, so we rally around what seems to be the most secure component of the mind, namely our ideas, which are easy to grasp, recite and protect, rather than the fluid physical and emotional processes which are much harder to grasp and far less reassuring. We internally repeat a series of beliefs and habits around which we establish our sense of identity, a self. Like those dropping an anchor that doesn't quite reach the bottom of a lake, we believe our boat is secure, but in fact we're slowly drifting this way and that. *Our ideas never touch anything firm, for they exist in symbolic language alone, not in*

what's real; meanwhile our somatically expressed emotions, our bodies, our breath, all of which are real, concrete experiences, fluctuate and evolve.

And so our views and opinions provide us with only an illusory solidity, a false sense of a platform from which we can engage easily with others. To maintain stability, we defend these positions: when others speak, we compare what we hear against our views and opinions—*ditthi-upadana* in pali, the language of early Buddhism—which are providing us with the mirage of a static identity—*sakkaya-ditthi*. We're in full agreement when other people's statements seem to correspond with our views, and we disagree when the “their ideas” don't coincide with ours. This is why the beliefs of others can be so challenging, if not threatening; they highlight how arbitrary and frail are our own foundations.

So it becomes an important question: *how do I communicate mindfully, especially from a place that isn't solid?* How can we connect the changing quality of our experience with the act of listening and speaking with others?

Let's start by noting that the force that propels us into speech can be quite powerful, for we are asserting and protecting our sense of identity; we arrive into each verbal exchange carrying a set of established ideas, a mental load that builds a feeling of momentum and urgency. It's difficult to break off the impulse to defend what's ours and open to the truth of what's actually occurring between us in each moment. It requires a great deal of practice.

Making the task even more challenging is the way in which we speak; we're so facile and quick with the tongue. We fall into a tendency of speaking spontaneously as we humans are built for interaction with others as fish are built for water. The very shape and structures of our massive prefrontal cortex are crammed with subregions allowing social interaction and exchange (speech, language processing, facial recognition, emotion recognition, moderating social behavior, decision making and so on). This is why we've become the dominant species; communication allows coordination and sharing strategies, which provides the very bedrock of our survival (we're not particularly fast runners or ferocious fighting machines; without social organization and allocated skills we would be vulnerable to many predators). Our ability to communicate is so powerful that it works without requiring much, if any, supervision; we can, in other words, speak without thinking.

When we don't pay close attention, we're not mindful, and when we're not mindful, we get into trouble. We attack when we feel insecure and vulnerable; we agree with peer pressure when we crave acceptance.

Spiritual practice, the Buddha taught, is about seeing things as they really are (*yatha buttha nanna dassana* in pali). We can investigate how being together, via communication, can liberate, rather than continually shackle us to habitually ingrained beliefs and practices. To really break through our beliefs and touch the heart of a moment

together we must not engage from ingrained, set thought patterns and speech habits. This is a challenge that requires setting aside the hypnotic incantations of our thoughts and opening to the complexities of that which is observable.

The Process of Mindful communication

There are so many realms and sensations occurring in this moment from which the mind can choose. To be mindless is to simply focus on the parade of thoughts, plans and concerns that unspool in the mind, providing false solidity and identity. Trapped in our thoughts, we don't really take in others, we live under a spell, hypnotized by our beliefs. For thoughts are actually a conceptual layer placed on top of feelings, emotions, perceptions and body states. When I say "I'm angry" it's an overlay, its pointing to an array of uncomfortable memories, physical energies, muscle contractions, a sense of sadness and discomfort. When I say to you "I'm angry" its an effort to relieve the physical state of frustration or disappointment, I belief I can expel those underlying conditions by stating them aloud. The same goes for "I miss you" and "I'm happy," which points to other bodily sensations and life experiences.

So our ideas grow from areas outside of language. To open to what's really occurring, we need to become observers at that most crucial point of vantage: the physical, embodied ground from which our ideas grow. From here we can extend and fully investigate the pause that occurs before speaking, putting aside the words we plan to say,

and open to what else resides: how does the breath feel? the body? is the mind expansive, aware of background sounds and contact sensations, or is the mind contracted? And what of the other person: what does their face express? their body? what do both of our bodies postures express? what is the space like between us? what isn't being spoken of? The list goes on. And so we have to maintain a continual observance, as these underlying conditions are in constant change. This is what the truth, or mindfulness during communication, entails.

When we remain mindful, we can observe which pieces of our bigger experience we translate into language. We watch as each statement is born of an intention to express, relieve or control our underlying emotions and perceptions, our desire to manage and contain that other being with whom we speak. When I say "I enjoy your company" it can point to a fear that you may be wanting to take leave of me, a felt need to solidify our status as friends, a desire to establish myself as a caring individual.

Beyond the ideas expressed and the words that are so chosen, we need to bring attention to the tone, the pitch, the expressions used to convey each articulation. Are we aware of what these elements are expressing? Are we cognizant of how our bodies could be undermining our sincerity, or overemphasizing our concerns?

Can we open to the recognition that the other is receiving our words from within their own landscape, constructed out of ideas, fears, memories, emotions, body states and history. Speaking can be like

throwing a ball from the open roof of a car to another convertible, both cars moving in the opposite directions at different speeds. There are so many factors to take into account if we want to communicate an experience accurately.

But its not as overwhelming as it might initially seem. For we humans are constructed to interpret and communicate; we have mirror neurons that allow us to feel what another is feeling, we have a fusiform gyrus to read their expressions, an orbital frontal region to understand their emotions, an insula to inform us of our own somatic, bodily states. We can use our eyes and physical expressions to connect in ways our words cannot. And when we practice taking more into account than the ideas we assume others are expressing, we can evoke the power of communicating from real awareness, supporting each other fully from a depth that words fail to reach.

In conclusion, the result of mindful communication is an experience of connection that is profound, unique, and allows us to really drink in the highest expression of our humanity. We can establish this practice with those we love, or amidst the warm attention we give to the members of our spiritual community. If we stick with the practice, we can begin to let go of all those views and opinions to which we desperately cling, and open together as evolving, fluid, growing beings.

Josh Korda, July 10, 2013