

Cultivating Right Speech

offered by Debi Papazian

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it helpful?

Is it the right time?

Is it the right place?

The Buddha began and ended his teaching career with a discussion of the Eightfold Path—guidelines for living ethically, training the mind, and cultivating wisdom that brings an end to the causes of suffering. He spoke of the path in his first sermon immediately after his awakening and in the last teaching he gave on his deathbed 45 years later. The Eightfold Path is the Fourth Noble Truth, the way to awakening.

What the Buddha said about right speech:

- Abstain from false speech; do not tell lies or deceive.
- Do not slander others or speak in a way that causes disharmony or enmity.
- Abstain from rude, impolite, or abusive language.
- Do not indulge in idle talk or gossip.

Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to say only what is true, to speak in ways that promote harmony among people, to use a tone of voice that is pleasing, kind, and gentle. When we deeply listen to each other and respond with right speech, it generates trust and harmony in a sangha. Our practice of zazen, to be in stillness, lays a foundation for right listening.

Deep listening is the foundation of Right Speech. If we cannot listen mindfully we cannot practice Right Speech. No matter what we say, it will not be mindful, because we'll be speaking only our own ideas and not in response to the other person.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Kind speech is not the usual sense of kindness. It can appear in various ways, but...we should remember that it must constantly be based on compassion. Under all circumstances that compassion is always giving somebody support or help or a chance to grow.

—Katagiri Roshi