



Manchester
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Vision and Transformation: The Buddha's Eightfold Path

Week 3 – Perfect Speech



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Last week we looked at Perfect Emotion, the cultivation of which has the effect of harnessing our emotional energies for use in the spiritual life. Through Perfect Emotion, therefore, we can begin the “harmonisation of the whole emotional and volitional side of our being with Perfect Vision”, to quote Sangharakshita. The next limb of the Noble Eightfold Path is Perfect Speech. It is significant that this is the first ethical (we might also say ‘practical’) stage of the path. Speech (or, in a broader sense of the same meaning, ‘communication’) is such an important, all-pervading aspect of human life that it clearly has to be included in the scope of our aspiring spiritual life. We can all recognise that the possible ways in which things are said affect our lives – whether to inform or mislead us, to support or to hurt us, to bring people together or inflame them against one another. Perfect Speech, which we might alternatively call ‘Ideal Communication’ in our global, electronic environment, is traditionally regarded as having four different qualities, as set out below. Each successive quality can be regarded as a deeper level of communication than the one preceding it:

Perfect Speech (‘Ideal Communication’)

4 Levels:

- deeper
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1. **Truthfulness (rational AND emotional)**
 2. **Affectionateness (involves knowing the other person)**
 3. **Helpfulness (an aspect of GENEROSITY)**
 4. **Promoting concord, harmony and unity**

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1. The first quality, and the most obvious in a way, is that of **truthfulness**. This seems to have a direct link with the fourth ethical precept, which is stated in its positive form “With truthful communication I purify my speech”. The dangers of telling down-right lies seems obvious, but Sangharakshita says more about this area than that. For one thing, he warns against the very common temptation to exaggerate, to embroider our own actions and supposed virtues (or, equally, to deflate those of others).

Looking deeper, he advises us to “introduce some sort of order into this intellectual chaos of ours” in our pursuit of telling the truth. This has profound implications –we might say that it is very common for people to dress up their opinions and views as objective fact, not necessarily with the deliberate intention to mislead. We also often encounter a strong lack of intellectual rigour and a tendency to ‘woolly-mindedness’. Even if only at the intellectual, rational level, we owe it to ourselves and others to communicate as ‘the truth’ only what we can justifiably give that title.

If this is the rational level of truthfulness, there is equally an emotional one. This consists of ‘being ourselves’ – in other words, saying what we believe, regardless of who is listening. We might study our normal modes of speech with the different people around us and recognise that, in a sense, we are a number of different people. We might also know certain people who we suspect never reveal their ‘true selves’ to anybody!

2. The second quality of Perfect Speech is that of **affectionateness**. We can see this as having the person to whom we are speaking in mind, to be sensitive to them rather than just ‘talking at them’. In fact, we can say that speaking to someone is a real opportunity to practice *mettā* – to communicate with them in the context of an attitude of friendliness and empathy. Without this, communication can be, at best, sterile and unable to reach the other person, at worst alienating. If we consider this quality of *metta* in our speech, it clearly means that we must **know** the people with whom we are communicating, to the best of our ability in the circumstances. This may sound obvious, but if we speak to someone with total disregard for who they are it is clear that we have no chance of finding the appropriate language with which to ‘get through’ to them.

In the area of needing to know the other person, Sangharakshita says a fair bit about how many of our relationships are without *mettā*, instead just a set of ‘projections’ of our own needs and views onto others. In fact, he makes a bold statement here, that most communication is insincere and between ‘mutual projections’. Can you recognise this in your own experience?

3. Thirdly, Perfect Speech requires that we are **helpful**. This means that the things we say to others, and the way in which we say them, actually contribute positively to the well-being and development of others. We could perhaps see this as an example of the cardinal Buddhist quality of **generosity**. In a practical sense, it often comes down to being positive – we could apply the principle here of “if you’ve nothing good to say, don’t say anything”. As Sangharakshita observes, there is often a huge amount of negativity in speech – in fact, we quite often meet people who only seem able to speak in a negative, critical, destructive way. However, the advantages of positive speech are as great as the dangers of being negative, and it’s possible that speaking helpfully in this way is actually the most we are personally able to do in the service of the spiritual development of people in our lives.

4. The last of the four qualities is **promoting concord, harmony and unity**. This is indeed the deepest of the qualities listed, because it amounts to 'mutual self-transcendence'. In other words, when we cultivate the use of Perfect Speech in our communication we are moving closer to reality – communicating in a way that helps to break down the delusion of 'self' and 'other', and to loosen the powerful grip of ego. This work of attacking self is a hugely important part of the Buddhist path, sometimes known as the stage of 'spiritual death'. At a more mundane level, we can recognise when we are engaging in this sort of speech, as we really seem to have a 'meeting of minds' with the other person (or persons), and there is an energy in our communication which feels much greater than just an exchange of words.

At this point the chapter in 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path' actually leaves the area of speech, in the conventional sense, altogether. Sometimes we can recognise how communication through the spoken or written word is actually very crude. We might recognise particularly skilful forms of verbal communication, for example certain forms of poetry, as being able to reach us more deeply than others. However, it is very interesting that, as we try to refine our speech in the direction of Perfect Speech, we might actually find ourselves speaking less. The logical conclusion of this tendency is to investigate the possibilities of **silence** as a means of communication. Despite the apparent contradiction in terms here, we might find that cultivating periods of silence in the company of our spiritual friends can be deeply rewarding, and that, far from feeling isolated by the silence, we actually experience a deeper and more fulfilling means of communication. Periods of silence are a common feature of Buddhist retreats, and people taking part in them usually feel that, far from being limiting or threatening, they actually seem to liberate energy and bring people closer together, freed from the pressure of constant, often fairly pointless conversation. If you have a chance, try it for yourself and see!