

# Wise Speech (2 of 5) Truthful Speech

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

questions, deceit, basis, interpretation, caveat, explanation, specify, contextualize, declarative, heal, mend, connect, alienation, separation, introspection, motivation, Dharma, attachment, clinging, conceit, freedom, self-making, exaggerate, bend, wedding, harm, lying, useful, supportive, beneficial, self-reflection, understated, wise

## **Gil Fronsdal**

Good morning, good day. This is the second talk on the five criteria the Buddha used for wise speech. These five criteria can be taken as questions that we ask ourselves before we speak. Yesterday I talked about the question, is it timely? Is it the right time to say what we want to say, or to ask what we want to ask?

Today's question is, is it truthful? Are we speaking the truth? I kind of like that this is the second question, and we ask whether it's timely first. That's kind of like the high end. Even the truth might not be timely. It might not be the right time to speak the truth. If we start with truth,

we might speak inappropriately at times when it doesn't help and might even harm and make things more difficult.

So, is it truthful? Of course, the topic of what is true and how we recognize the truth can be philosophically or linguistically complex. But a simple way of understanding it is that, at minimum, the truth involves an absence of deceit. There is no intention and no effort to deceive anybody with what we're saying or doing because, with deception, we're clearly not speaking the truth. At other times we might be attempting to say what's true, or we think we're saying what's true, but it might not be true. We're not intentionally trying to be deceitful. We're trying to be truthful.

One way to strengthen or heighten our capacity to be truthful is when we say something, to follow up immediately with the basis on which we think it's true. Why do we think something is true? For example, rather than saying that today is a great day, we can say, "Today it's my interpretation that it's a great day." This way, we're saying on what basis we're making the claim – it's an interpretation, or it's a great day for me – rather than just making a blanket statement for everyone. Be a little more specific and say what the basis is for something.

The Buddha emphasized this, especially with religious statements. One says on what basis one makes a religious or spiritual claim. Is it based on your faith? Is it based on your reasoning? Is it based on the tradition you're in, or a teacher, or what the teacher has said? Is it based on something you've experienced? Because even experience is interpreted and it's personal.

As soon as you make these caveats or explanations, it's no longer a declarative statement. It is questionable how truthful declarative statements are. But if you specify or contextualize how you came to this conclusion, then it's easier to participate in a conversation with others. It is also easier to stay closer to what's true. Being truthful – is what I'm going to say truthful? How can I say it so it's truthful? This is my interpretation.

To be truthful today, to all of you, I can say that I value the idea of truth, and the Buddha emphasized it. I would like to try to explain my interpretation of why this is important. Now I'm speaking the truth. And I'm contextualizing what I'm going to say so you don't have to automatically assume that I'm making declarative statements about what's absolutely true in the universe. Rather, it's my interpretation. As you hear it, you will have to see what's true for you and what works for you.

Speaking the truth is a way to heal. It's a way to grow. It's a way to mend relationships. It's a way of connecting more deeply to others. We connect more deeply when we're truthful. When we're deceitful, we actually create barriers to connection between people, and a kind of alienation, a separation. It is probably true to say that there's no spiritual growth, no growth in the Dharma, without a dedication to being truthful – to the truth. The truth is that important.

Ultimately, maybe what we're looking for is to become not just truthful, but to become a true person – a person who is true in how they live their lives, how they express their lives, and how they speak. So before speaking, we ask ourselves the question – “Is this true?” Or, “How can I say what I want to say in a way that feels truthful to me?”

It's a very powerful practice to do this. I think of speaking the truth as mindfulness out loud. For us, mindfulness practice is really a continual act of saying the truth to ourselves – the truth of what's happening in our experience – without deceiving ourselves. Being truthful and honest out loud is mindfulness out loud.

Because it's mindful, if we feel that we want to lie or bend the truth in some way, that is a really useful time for deepening our own introspection and taking a good look at what's happening here with us now. What motivates the desire to lie? What motivates being

deceitful? Is it fear? Is it greed? Is it anger? Is it conceit of some type? Is it about avoiding embarrassment or hiding from people so they don't know who we are or what we do? Is it to try to get our way in the world? What's motivating deceit?

The advantage of asking the question of what is motivating my desire to lie is that looking at our deeper motivations

is an important place of practice. That's an important place to really look deeply. The opportunity there is to discover what we're attached to, what we're clinging to, and what kind of conceit and self-making we are involved in so that we can begin to dissolve them and become freer from those kinds of attachments.

There's a kind of delight that exists in Dharma practice, that of recognizing where we're caught, and recognizing our attachments. That delight is there because we realize, "Oh, this is where the practice is. Now I get to practice. This is good." Rather than assuming that Buddhist practice is all about joy and delight, skipping in the clouds in a happy-go-lucky way, Buddhist practice is about this deeper truth-telling, and a deep appreciation for the value of doing this – we see our attachments and clinging so that we can be on the path of freedom from them.

So, rather than seeing our attachments as bad news when we identify them, there's a way in which, if we are committed to being truthful, we see them as good news. I think that the dedication to being truthful begins to highlight all the little ways we exaggerate, and all the little ways we bend the truth.

Maybe sometimes we do it for what we think is the sake of the other person, so as not to hurt them or upset them. That seems good – there's some compassion or care involved in that. But is it necessary to be deceitful, to lie? Part of the art of speaking the truth in our relationships with others is to avoid causing harm and avoid lying.

Sometimes that takes some cleverness, some consideration, or reframing the conversation.

Sometimes it even means responding with a non sequitur or saying something that maybe satisfies the person's question but doesn't really address it, because to address it honestly just would be complicated.

A classic example people give is when someone is dressed for their wedding and about to go into the ceremony, and they ask you, "What do you think of my dress (or my suit, or my clothes)?" You think it's pretty gaudy, or the wrong color combination, the colors clash, or something. But you don't want to say that just before someone goes to their wedding. The truthful statement about what you think is what you really think.

So what can you say that's truthful? You might say something like, "Wow, is it tailor-made? It fits your body really well." You say something different. You say something that's truthful that is not your first impression, but something that you have to think about. You decide, "Oh yeah, I can speak about that." Saying that might settle the person or allow them to go along.

Being truthful and speaking the truth when there are conflicts and challenges can be very hard. This is why it's important to remember the first criterion: Is it the right time to have an honest conversation with someone? Are they ready for it? Are you ready for it? But then the other three criteria, which we'll do over the next days, also come into play. It's not only, "Is it truthful?" and therefore I should say it. It's, "Is it truthful, and can I say it in a useful way? Can I say it in a supportive way? How can I speak the truth so that it's beneficial?" We'll talk more about this as we go on.

"Is it true?" What happens to you when you ask that question? As you go about your day today, you might have occasion to speak. If there's enough self-reflection when you're about to speak, maybe you can ask yourself these questions: "Is what I'm about to say truthful? Is it truthful in a simple and clear way, or is it truthful in an exaggerated way, or an understated way,

or leaving something out? Why am I kind of adjusting myself when I'm speaking the truth? What's the motivation for that?" I'm not saying your motivation is wrong because of that, but start looking more deeply. So is it truthful? Can you be truthful? What motivates any moving away from a really clear, simple, truthful statement? This is a great practice.

Maybe before you go to sleep or at some point near the end of the day, review what you've talked about during the day in regard to this question of truth. How truthful was I today? Where could I have been more truthful? Where could I have been wiser about how I spoke the truth? Where was I kind of twisting the truth a little bit? And why? Sometimes it's hard to do these exercises live in the present moment as we're speaking, but sometimes reviewing it later can really help us to see what's going on.

I offer you this not to highlight something bad about yourself, but really to highlight your capacity to grow, develop, learn, and heal in a deep way within. It's a powerful thing to speak the truth. I've found it amazing what opens up, and what opens up in relationships when we learn the art of truth-telling. But it is an art and it takes a while to learn that skill. It is a skill well worth learning. Thank you very much.