

The Power of Kind Speech

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Kind speech means that when you see living beings you arouse a mind of compassion and offer words of loving care. It is the absence of cruel or harsh speech. Please know that kind speech comes from a kind heart, and a kind heart has compassion as its seed.

—Zen master Dogen

This summer our Center offered a course on “Mindful Speech and Deep Listening.” One of the participants said it was the hardest class he'd ever taken. I think he meant that it was the hardest practice he'd ever undertaken. It is hard because speech permeates our daily lives and we have deep habits of mindlessness. To bring awareness again and again to speech that may be harsh, untimely, dismissive, or untrue is indeed hard.

Our speech comes from our thoughts, and our thoughts come from the quality of our hearts. If we see our world and all the many beings in it as worthy of kindness and compassion, our speech will reflect that. And when we practice kind speech, it waters the seed of compassion in us. Practicing kind speech involves changing our minds, and this involves doing something different from our customary ways.

Praise those with virtue; pity those without it. If kind speech is offered, little by little virtue will grow. Those who hear kind speech from you will have a gladdened countenance and a joyful mind. It is the basis for reconciling rulers and subduing enemies; it has the power to turn the destiny of a nation. —Zen master Dogen

This summer we began to see more clearly the difficulties and misunderstandings caused in our families, friendships, and work places through unwholesome, unkind speech, as well as the wondrous power of truly kind speech. A participant said that the most profound thing he got from the class was probably the simplest: remembering to use kind words whenever possible. “Not because the recipient has behaved in a certain way, or lived up to my expectations, or in any way ‘earned’ it, but just because they are alive, are there, right here, right now.” To notice, to become mindful, of what we say and the difference it makes is truly great! It is a key step in changing our destiny, our family's destiny, and the destiny of our nation.

One of the kindest people I know is Norman Fischer, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center. He is also a former high school teacher, and wrote this about working with his students:

The other day in one of my classes a student complained to me, “Why did you tell me to shut up? She was talking too, and you didn't tell her to shut up.” I said, “I never told you to shut up; I said ‘Please be quiet,’ but I would never tell you to shut up.”

There's a big difference between “please be quiet” and “shut up,” a difference that the whole class realized then. In fact, I never do tell people to shut up or ever talk disrespectfully to any of my students at any time, no matter what they are doing.

There is a statue of the Buddha that has lotus flowers coming out of his mouth. This is an artistic way of expressing the kind of speech of a great being. When we practice kind speech it is just like bringing flowers into the world, cultivating a beautiful garden for others and ourselves through the words we speak.

Please be willing to gladly practice kind speech for this entire life and continue on, lifetime after lifetime.

—Zen master Dogen