

## Right Speech

What is wise speech?  
How does wise speech contribute to well-being?  
How can we learn to communicate more effectively?

Words! Love them or hate them, it often feels like we're drowning in the noise they create - not only in our own ears, or on the page, but in our heads. They have the power to uplift us and to cast us down, to liberate and to entrap. They create friendships and make enemies. They can gain us great wealth and lose us everything we possess. The power of speech is too great for words to do it justice.

Right speech is a commitment to use words skillfully. It is kind and comes from a position of caring for and wanting to contribute to the well-being of others as well as ourselves. It is speaking with the intention to not only to be truthful, but to be helpful, too. Sometimes brutal honesty is not helpful. Wise speech is the opposite of exaggerating, spreading gossip, or breaking confidences. When speech is truthful and authentic, it enables us to share who we are and what is in our heart.

Right speech is always respectful although it need not always be quiet. We might have said exactly what was needed at a public meeting, or stood up calmly but with force to a colleague who confronted us at work. With a genuine desire to help, stern words can be spoken skillfully when we need to discipline a child or be honest and direct with a friend. We are left with a body and mind at peace when we speak from a genuine intention to be helpful even though such speech may be difficult in the moment. When we are focused on what another person needs from us, rather than anything we want from them, then our speech will naturally be more constructive.

Wise speech depends on being able to listen carefully to what the other person is actually saying and the messages they are trying to convey. Do we have the strength to listen deeply and offer another person the space to say anything they want? Right speech is a world apart from the noisy, whirling words that dramatize and misrepresent, or the 'half listening' that we do when we are feeling tired, rushed or plain competitive. It is very different from the non-stop chatter that exhausts and distracts.

It's important to listen with attention to the voice within our own heads. What is the tone and content of the words we direct within? Wise speech does not cause harm, and this includes the interior voice that we use with ourselves. Speaking with kindness to ourselves is a practice that works to cultivate thoughtfulness in the words we direct toward others. Paying attention to how we speak to ourselves matters, because our interior voice is intricately linked to the thoughts and emotions that create our reality and motivate our actions.

Sometimes the most beneficial course of action is to remain silent, to hold back the comment that makes the conversation fly but makes people feel uneasy. Wise speech is about knowing when not to speak at all. Many people find that it is only in silence that they can relax, come back into balance and regain their energy. It is sometimes said that the wise person will only speak if there is a way to improve on silence. And silence, as the saying goes, is golden.

*(Excerpted and adapted by S. Keller and L. Brown from, The 16 Guidelines for a Happy Life, in 2012.)*