

Sylvia Wetzel

Words are Working Wonders
Talking with Heart and Mind

A Buddhist Perspective on Communication

Translated from the German
by Akasaraja Jonathan Bruton

Edited by Kerstin Fricke

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Introduction

Words can work wonders. Sometimes, however, they can also result in disaster. This happens, when either our heart or our mind or intellect is not engaged. Words are working wonders if we are speaking with both heart and mind. By “heart” I mean a deep feeling of connection with everything; a sense of common ground, from which we emerge in every instant and in which we live. Mind or intellect refers to a clear view of our strengths and weaknesses and of the differences between us. The great thing about the intellect is that it is capable of recognizing its own limits. Once we really deeply grasp that we are never going to get our lives fully under control, our rational mind wisely surrenders the upper hand in our life to our heart, which somehow “knows” that it is connected.

A good mutual understanding between our heart and our rational mind forms the basis of a life lived in harmony with others and of constructive communication. Another important condition for it is a growing awareness of what we say, do and think, of how we go about all this, and of the consequences that our actions have. Why is it that we often do not know what we are doing? And why do we not put into practice the things that we know? Why do we behave differently than we think? How can we recognize this and learn to do more of what we consider to be right and good? In Buddhism, as in other religious traditions, there are rules and guidelines that offer us a means of orientation. In relation to speech, the recommendation is this: Not to lie and not to use words and gestures that hurt others, not to slander or gossip or to indulge in meaningless chatter. Instead, we should make an effort to speak words, which are

truthful and offer inspiration, words that reconcile and give strength. The idea behind this book is to provide ideas to help us live this out with humour and clarity, in kindness and empathy, and with good cheer and composure.

It is not my intention to present the current state of development in communication research. I rather want to introduce ideas and exercises from talks I have given and weekend and week-long courses I have led that have proved themselves to be practicable and fit for use in everyday life in our time.

Clear, kind and honest words do more than just strengthen our relationships with people we like. They will also improve the atmosphere in the workplace, the general tone at home and in the neighbourhood; and it forms the basis of robust and enduring relationships with people in public life, in local and global politics. If we can learn to conduct our disputes in a constructive way and we can live with each other's differences, so too can the people who represent us in the political arena.

Jütchendorf, Germany, May 2002

I am delighted that this book is now available in English and thus accessible for a wider audience. May you find it as useful as many readers in the German- and Spanish-speaking world.

Jütchendorf, Germany, Spring 2015

Sylvia Wetzel

About the Exercises

This book contains many exercises that are intended to help you get to know yourself better by investigating and becoming more deeply familiar with your use of words, your manner of dealing with conflict situations, and with your old patterns and habits. The idea is to encourage you to try out new ways of speaking and behaving.

You can do all the exercises in this book sitting on your living room couch. You should first read the whole exercise. Then read the first sentence or paragraph once again, close your eyes and let the questions sink into you. Read the next paragraph and, whilst remaining relaxed, pay attention to the images, thoughts and feelings that arise. At the end, sit still for a few moments and let your thoughts wander. It will be helpful to write down your thoughts in a meditation diary and to refer back at regular intervals to the notes.

If time permits, you can also use one of the meditation practices described below to tune into the exercises or build them into your day as regular practices.

Exercise: Meditation on the breath

Find a quiet and well-ventilated room where you know that you are not going to be disturbed. Unplug the phone. If you are familiar with sitting in meditation posture, take a seat on your meditation cushion or stool. Otherwise, take a chair with a straight back or sit in a comfortable armchair. You can also lie flat on your back on a yoga mat or blanket. Place a six-inch cushion under your knees to relieve the strain on your lower back. The most important thing is to have a stable, upright and comfortable sitting posture or to lie in a

stable, symmetrical and comfortable position. If something starts to hurt, allow yourself to feel the discomfort for ten seconds before slowly and mindfully changing your posture. In the first instance, attend to your posture. If you feel happy with it, stop moving and just allow your thoughts to drift for a few moments. Then direct a small part of your attention to the rhythm of your breathing, leaving the rest of your attention unfocused and relaxed. You do not need to change the rhythm. Just allow the breath to flow by itself. When breathing in, say to yourself "Yes to life" and, when breathing out, say "Thank you for life". Do this for ten minutes. If you get lost in your thoughts, noticing this only after a few minutes, categorize the last thought you had according to its object: past, future, pleasant, unpleasant, hearing and feeling. In this way, you can "label" your thoughts. Then come back to the breath. To finish the exercise, sit or lie quietly for a further minute and allow your thoughts to drift. Once you get more familiar with the exercise you will quite naturally be able to bring more of your attention to the breath and become aware more quickly of your thoughts.

Exercise: Walking meditation

Take a familiar route and walk at normal speed for ten minutes. Say the words "Yes" and "Thank you" to yourself in rhythm with your gait. Say "Yes" to yourself as you set down your right foot and "Thank you" as you set down your left. You can build this into your daily walk to work or make it a regular exercise when out walking your dog. If you are out and about alone or have a garden, a long hallway or a large room in your apartment, you might want to spend ten minutes walking up and down very slowly, making it a

distance of no further than twenty paces in any one direction. When setting down your right foot, say to yourself "Yes to life" and, when setting down your left, say "Thank you for life". If you notice any thoughts, "label" them as you do in the meditation on the breath.

Exercise: Magic moments

Recall a minor situation from the last few days in which you felt happy, and ask yourself the following: "What exactly triggered the pleasant feelings? What was the occasion? Which factors were present? Was I out in nature or indoors? Alone or with others? Was I resting or doing something? Was it a familiar or an unusual situation? What did I experience as especially pleasant?" Think of a similar experience and ask yourself the same questions. Conclude by asking yourself: "What can I do – or stop doing – to give such experiences more space? Can I do or not do something today? And tomorrow? And the day after tomorrow? Who or what might be able to support and inspire me in doing so?"

You may wait with trying the following exercise until you are at least somewhat familiar with the exercises in general.

Exercise: Motivation and dedication

At the start of a meditation practice you can ask yourself about your motivation: "Why am I sitting here now? What is it I wish for? What do I want to gain from this meditation or exercise?" Notice all your thoughts kindly: "I don't really know. Because I said I was going to. Because I'm anxious and am looking for peace and quiet." Be aware of your motives and expand them, using thoughts that inspire you. Doing so might look like this: "May this practice open my heart and

clarify my mind. May it help me to get a clearer sense of my opinions and to give them appropriate expression. May it help me to become a better listener and not to steamroller other people with my views.” Then do an exercise from this book. Finally, channel your experience in a particular direction. In Buddhism, this is known as “dedicating” your practice. You “share” the good experience and insights you have with all beings. You can also relate the dedication to the particular exercise you have done and to your own life and ask yourself the following: “What effect should this exercise have on my life?” Then you can go on to phrase the dedication. It might look like this: “May this exercise help me always to pause and to take note of my attitudes and motives when I’m talking to others. May everyone else be able to do the same.”

I Speaking with and without Words

One: I can hear what you cannot

The first section of this book is concerned with four things. Firstly, we ask what is actually meant by speech and what factors other than language define a conversation. Then we seek to investigate the motives which lead us to speak the way we do. Then I will follow with some general thoughts on the use of rules – both per se and in the sense of the rules of a game. These should help us to become aware of what we think, say and do: above all, of what we say. A brief look at the power of habits shows us that the practice of right speech doesn't just make our lives easier when we are young; it also provides us with very effective provision for old age.

1. Speech

I can hear what you cannot.

What happens when we talk to one another? We speak both with and without words. One rule of thumb has it that only about ten percent of what we communicate is verbal. The other ninety percent of our everyday communication can to some extent be heard and seen; a large part of it, however, can neither be seen nor heard. We hear voices and see gestures, facial expressions and bodily dispositions. What remains partially invisible and inaudible, however, are conscious intentions and unconscious attitudes, hidden motives and culturally determined basic views. Yet these hidden messages go in, even if we are often not conscious of them. The Jewish philosopher of religion Martin Buber once jokingly said that, when two people meet, it is actually the case that four or more people meet. We bring to the encounter what we know and expect of each other – and not only that, but also what we don't know about each other.

When we talk to one another, two things are going on: our actual verbal behaviour and other things we don't say or consciously know, but nonetheless communicate. We can use two exercises to take a closer look at this. The first exercise is concerned with our general speaking style, the second with an actual conversation.

Exercise: My style of speaking

Think of someone you often speak to and ask yourself: “What do we like talking about? What don’t we like talking about? How do we talk to one another? How does the way I speak affect me and the other person? What bothers me? What do I find inspiring, helpful, or beneficial? Do I talk too much or do I merely tend to listen? Do I like putting forward ideas? What kinds of words do I use: do I tend to the simple and factual? Do I like telling stories and using poetic images? Do I value complex discussions? Do I prefer a ‘scientific’ style?” Then think of another person and ask the same questions over again.

Exercise: Your last private conversation

Think of the last conversation you had with a trusted friend and ask yourself: “What did we talk about? Did I mostly talk or did I mainly listen? How did we talk to one another – was the tone objective or emotional? Did I tell stories or put forward ideas and give advice? How did I feel during the conversation and afterwards? How did the other person get on with the conversation?” How can we explore what we can neither see nor hear in our conversations?

Exercise: Motives

Think of a conversation you have had in the last few days and ask yourself: “Did I think more about the other person or about myself, about the subject or the general tone? Did I have something important to say or did I talk out of insecurity and restlessness - or out of boredom or the urge to fit in because the others were talking, too? Did I sometimes keep quiet out of the feeling that none of the others were at my level? Or did I just not feel a match for the

others?” Then maybe think of another situation with a different person and ask the same questions over again.

When we speak our attitudes and motives are influenced by many factors. In this chapter I want to briefly examine four of these factors, to which I will return repeatedly later on, exploring individual aspects in greater detail: Physical and verbal habits, emotional patterns and self-images, the feeling of fundamental detachment, and the lack of contact with what Buddhists call the “Unborn” or “Buddha Nature”, what Christians call “God”; and philosophers “transcendence”.

You will find more details on this topic in my book: *Living with ease*.

That habits influence our actual behaviour and way of speaking is surely known to us. During childhood and adolescence we encounter and adopt different conversational styles and continue to do so throughout our lives. Our emotional habits also have a major role to play. What we normally call personality traits are seen in Buddhism as habits, coming from the present and previous lives. Do we tend to be anxious or self-confident, rather demanding and extraverted or reserved and introverted, aggressive or depressive? Our emotional patterns are intimately connected to our self-image and general attitude to life. What kind of self-image do we have? Do we know our strengths and weaknesses? Can we live with them? Or do our personal and cultural feelings of inferiority “force” us into adopting high standards and expectations which we can never achieve or fulfill? Self-images and emotional patterns are hard to recognize and even harder to change.

Why do we cling to self-images, which either restrict us or stretch us too far? According to Buddhist teachings this has much to do with our fundamental attitude to life. Do we feel

at home in the world, or essentially separate from other people, the natural world, and our cultural context? This depends on whether or not we are in touch with our inherent nature. Having a connection to our “true being” is fundamental to a fulfilled and fulfilling life. This is the starting point of all religions, which teach the way of Awakening or Liberation. In our true being, in the vertical dimension, we are all essentially connected. In the horizontal dimension with its tens of thousands of myriad things and objects we are existentially separate. Problems arise when we seek to pit one dimension against the other, or confuse them with each other.

The feeling we have of existential detachment finds its voice in speech and thought in English in the form of the main clause. The main clause in English reflects the horizontal dimension of reality: “I am the subject, you are my object, and then something happens between us: e.g. we talk to each other. I talk to you”. We can now posit the hypothesis, because this is how we think and speak, that we believe ourselves to be not only existentially, but also essentially, separate. Not so, say the theistic religions, and Buddhism concurs with them. It is “only” in the horizontal dimension that we are separated: here, your nose is not my nose, and my experience is not yours. But the Buddha, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Awakened and the saints throughout all ages also had to eat and sleep; yet our desire for union with them will not be met just by eating and sleeping, too, no matter how intensely at one with them we may feel. Nevertheless, in spite of this existential separateness we are essentially connected with one another.

That we are essentially connected becomes manifest in what is in Western terms known as access to the “transcendent”,

to the “depth dimension” or the “divine ground of being”, to what Karl Jaspers calls the “Encompassing”; to the “Unconditioned”; or to Paul Tillich’s “vertical dimension” of life. This connectedness manifests as trust in the unfathomable basis of life as the source of strength and vitality, of love and joy, of meaning and truth. In Buddhist terms it is about access to the “depth dimension of the mind”, to the “nature of mind” - to “Buddha Nature”. Without access to this dimension we cannot feel at home in ourselves and in the world. The Conditioned – anything that comes and goes and is impermanent: people and things, nature and culture – can’t provide us with any ultimate security. We can only accept and cherish the fact of constant change if we develop trust in our own true nature.

Without trust in our common ground we can have no basis for constructive encounters with other people. We need confidence in ourselves and in others so that we may approach one another in love, that we can sense and express differences, to safely negotiate oppositions and conflicts – and if necessary even argue in a constructive rather than a destructive way. Without a deep sense of an essential connection both with familiar people and strangers any conflict can quickly escalate into irreconcilable hostility and even into war.

Sharing our lives with other people and animals, with nature and the world, we can “sense” the Unconditioned as feeling connected with others and as an unshakable basic confidence in ourselves and the Universe. We need both, the sense of connection and the basic confidence if we are to live – and talk – with each other in all our diversity: as “people in plural” (Hannah Arendt). This is the basic thesis of many religions – which does not mean, however, that we need to

have a sectarian trust in God or to belong to a religious community. Borrowing from Martin Buber, we may say that connection to the Unconditioned is not everything, but without it everything is nothing.

If we have trust in ourselves and in the world we will be able to accept both our own and others' strengths and weaknesses with relative equanimity and make the best of them. We can uncover and strengthen trust in ourselves and in the world by following a path of contemplation. Our ability to trust is, however, also culturally determined: this is especially obvious in gender roles. Despite all the progress that has been made and all efforts to the contrary, women and men still have unequal initial opportunities and living conditions: this has an effect on self-image and, consequently, on behaviour in speech. Even if it is the case that girls generally are starting to talk earlier than boys and are often more articulate as they are growing up, men are still inclined to firstly listen to what other men say. This has nothing to do with biological gender; it is connected to cultural gender, to gender roles.

When you look at people in general, it doesn't take much to see they are always ultimately defined by the agendas set by men; this, however, remains unrecognized. As an example, women are always expected to "hold their own like a man" in working life and in public, whereas it is not generally expected that men should "hold their own like a woman" in the raising of children and in home life in general.

This imbalance leads to inner contradictions and tensions. Women tend to take their strengths for granted or to understate them. They don't generally find it easy to "sell" their strengths. Many men tend to do the exact opposite. The almost inevitable resulting tendency towards failure thus

reinforces the culturally determined lack of self-esteem of many women, because being a woman and doing a woman's work is still undervalued in comparison to being a man and doing a man's work. Arrogance on the one hand, feelings of inferiority and fears of various kinds on the other get in the way of relaxed encounters and constructive discussions. This is an obstacle, but not an insuperable one. Once we are in the position to recognize our individual and cultural patterns we can work with them and apply patience and humour to changing them. Seeing that it is often easier to recognize self-esteem and self-images in others, your next exercise starts from there.

Exercise: Self-images

We think about our last conversation with a colleague at work or with a neighbour and ask ourselves: "What kind of self-image has the person facing me? What factors might be underpinning it? A healthy self-confidence? Professional expertise? High expectations of him - or herself? High expectations of others? Reliability? High levels of motivation to achieve? What is missing? What needs to be further developed?" We then go on to ask: "And what about me? What is going on under the surface when I meet people whom I don't know so well?"

Exercise: Strengths and weaknesses

We ask ourselves: "What are my strengths and weaknesses? Who knows my strengths and who is allowed to see my weaknesses? Do I define myself more in terms of my strengths than of my weaknesses? What is my general attitude to life?" We then think of a person who is close to us - a good friend, a colleague or a neighbour - and we ask her or him, as it were, within ourselves: "What are your

strengths and weaknesses? Whom do you show your strengths to? What is your attitude to life?"