

On Speech, Silence, and True Nature

Dharma Talk — Audio Transcription

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Those who speak do not know, and those that know do not speak.

We teach best what we need to learn most.

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the true Tao.

Good speech is silver, but silence is pure gold.

So tonight, as we consider speech, silence, talking and not talking, let's begin with the understanding that perhaps the highest use of speech is to point toward the light. But speech is not the light itself.

Like poetry, or rich humor, words can open something in us. They can help us touch something deeper, feel less separate, become more aware of our unity. But ultimately, they fall short.

Despite the enormous amount of energy we devote to speech, it can't really compare to silence. Noble silence. A silence grounded in awareness of how things are, in attunement with the natural order of things.

Because when we're aligned with our true nature, even to a small degree, there's really nothing that needs to be said. Everything is already being said and done and unfolding. There's no need to comment on it or add anything.

And yet speech is silver. It has its beauty, its power, its uses.

We just tend to misuse it. To squander it. To use it as a defense mechanism for our identities, our egos.

And I'm not demonizing the ego. Only an ego would make a demon of an ego.

But this is one of the reasons we're practicing silence.

We need to settle ourselves down. To quiet things externally so we can begin to create those same conditions internally. And only then can we begin to perceive other dimensions of ourselves.

Talking takes energy. Quite a lot of it, actually, especially when we consider everything involved in constructing and maintaining our identities through speech. The brain itself is something like a data center, consuming an enormous amount of energy.

But perhaps one of the more harmful things we do through habitual, unconscious speech is continually reinforce our sense of separateness.

We're defending our identities, polishing our avatars, concealing certain things while displaying others. Or, conversely, we're criticizing ourselves, condemning ourselves, putting ourselves down.

From a Zen perspective, there's attachment in both self-aggrandizement and self-condemnation.

Either way, it's still about me.

And there's an interesting parallel between our outward speech and our internal dialogue.

Just consider how much of our thinking involves judgment, evaluation, comparison, criticism. How frequently that inner voice is commenting on ourselves, on others, on what we like and dislike, what should or shouldn't be happening.

Now imagine that inner voice personified.

Imagine living with someone who spends much of their time judging everything, frequently negatively, endlessly commenting on what you're doing, what other people are doing, what might happen next.

And yet many of us have someone like that living inside us, rent-free.

Quite absurd, really.

And it's all okay.

It's natural to defend our ego when we're identified with it. Because when we experience ourselves as separate, our identity can feel like the very thing keeping us alive. And we'll do almost anything to protect it, to survive and, ideally, thrive.

But this brings us to the heart of the matter.

We've forgotten, or perhaps haven't yet fully realized, our true nature: that we're not separate from everything else.

Our true nature is whole and complete.

But when we experience ourselves as separate, that separation can be frightening. There's fear in it, isolation, a sense of something missing.

And we'll do almost anything to escape that feeling.

One of those things is talking.

We use speech to create the impression that we know, or sometimes that we don't know. To portray ourselves in a particular light. To construct and maintain these characters we inhabit.

And again, don't believe any of this simply because I'm saying it.

As the Buddha encouraged his followers, investigate for yourself. Explore it in your own experience. Observe how these things operate in your life, and perhaps in the lives of others.

Often they're subtle. Often unconscious.

Because otherwise, what is there to say?

When we touch that spaciousness in meditation, what we sometimes call witness consciousness or the observer state, there's simply awareness.

Everything is being beheld without judgment.

And there's no sense that something is missing. No particular dissatisfaction or need to become something else.

We're just enjoying the movie.

And what a movie it is!

Very engrossing.

Of course, it's difficult to remain in that spaciousness. That's part of our journey toward freedom, toward returning home, waking up, whatever language we might use.

And again, words fall short.

I'm not criticizing speaking, nor am I suggesting that I'm somehow the one who knows. I'll come back to that notion of hierarchy in a little while.

Speech is magnificent. It allows us to share awareness, express love, connect, create, laugh, communicate something of the beauty we experience.

But it can also create enormous harm. And when we're not conscious of how we're using it, it can reinforce the very sense of separation we're hoping to overcome.

I realize that may be provocative.

But simply observe it, without judgment.

And when you notice these tendencies in yourself, there's no need to pile on what Buddhism calls the second arrow. The initial discomfort, the realization, whatever arises, is enough. We don't need to add another layer of suffering by condemning ourselves for it.

And the same applies to others.

When we notice these dynamics in someone else's speech, we can regard that person as a teacher rather than someone to judge.

There's a saying that everyone in our life is either a lover, a teacher, or both.

Someone with whom we can share love, kindness, connection. Or someone who helps us recognize where love and understanding are absent.

Imagine how different our lives might be if we approached one another that way.

Everything becomes a gift, in a sense.

Now, I needn't look beyond my own culture for a rather exaggerated, almost cartoonish example of our relationship with speech.

Americans.

You can hear us coming.

We're loud. We tend to speak more or less constantly. And sometimes with extraordinary confidence about things we don't necessarily know very much about.

Add a little arrogance, entitlement, perhaps some cultural isolation, and it's not the most appetizing stew.

Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And underneath so much of it, the subtext is surprisingly simple:

"I'm cool."

"I'm not cool."

"You're cool."

"You're not cool."

That's often what's happening behind the elaborate performance.

And again, it's okay.

But it can keep us from recognizing what we actually are.

This is part of why Right Speech is included in the Noble Eightfold Path.

Of all the dimensions of human experience the Buddha might have emphasized, speech is one of the eight factors of the path.

That's significant.

The invitation is to use speech wisely, without causing unnecessary harm. Not necessarily eloquently, but consciously. And perhaps more sparingly than we're accustomed to.

Because silence has something extraordinary to offer.

And yet, when we're identified with our separateness, silence can be frightening.

In silence, we begin to hear things we've been blocking out. Feelings arise. Memories. Unresolved experiences. Things we'd rather avoid, forget, or imagine were different.

And talking can be a wonderful distraction from all of that.

Again, no judgment. This is something we all participate in to varying degrees.

When I first began attending silent meditation retreats many moons ago, one of the greatest concerns people expressed was the prospect of not speaking.

They simply couldn't imagine it.

Days or weeks without talking?

There was genuine fear around that.

Interestingly, I don't hear that nearly as much anymore. People often seem curious about silence, even hungry for it.

Perhaps the world has become so noisy that quietude feels increasingly precious. Perhaps we're becoming more willing to enter the unknown.

Maybe the noise has simply become deafening.

How is it for you?

How are you experiencing the silence?

And whatever your experience, it's okay.

One step along the way is simply becoming more conscious of how we use speech.

Knowing our intention.

Maybe we're trying to portray ourselves in a favorable light. Maybe we're seeking approval, trying to impress someone, defending ourselves, avoiding discomfort.

And perhaps, in a particular moment, we decide to do that anyway.

Fine.

At least we're aware of what we're doing.

That awareness itself represents a certain degree of freedom.

Because this is what practice makes possible: becoming conscious enough to make choices rather than simply reacting through habit.

And that same principle applies to our internal experience.

Initially, we settle ourselves enough to begin noticing thoughts, feelings, sensations.

Then, gradually, we develop the spaciousness to allow them to arise without becoming completely identified with them.

We don't need to believe every thought.

We don't need to be overtaken by every feeling that moves through us.

We can allow these experiences without suppressing them, resisting them, or becoming lost in them.

And eventually, we begin to recognize that we have choices about what receives our attention, what beliefs we continue to nourish, what stories we inhabit.

What's useful?

What's loving?

What's possible?

This is a profound development in what we might call the process of unfoldment.

Of course, Zen invites us to recognize that there's nowhere to go, nothing to attain. Everything already is as it is.

And yet, within our experience of time and space, there does appear to be a process.

We gradually discover how much more we are than we imagined.

And it's quite something to begin realizing that, ultimately, we're not separate from anything.

All that beauty, all that magnificence, all that power.

And everything we reject, too. Everything toward which we feel aversion.

All of it.

It's a lot to take in.

And although there's no goal in our sitting, this is part of the goalless goal.

We sit so that we can behold what is. So that awareness can unfold, seemingly expand, and we can grow into a fuller recognition of what has always been here.

Again, language falls short.

Silence is golden.

It's precious.

Incomparable.

So may you be enjoying it.

And when silence becomes difficult, perhaps some of these reflections will help.

With kindness, self-respect, gentleness, we simply look.

"Oh, there's my edge in this yoga posture."

"There's that memory again."

"There's something I want and can't have, and that's painful."

We make space around it all.

We become quiet enough to hear and feel, rather than exhausting ourselves trying to avoid that still, small voice within.

And interesting things begin to happen.

As spaciousness grows, there can be more joy. More spontaneous pleasure. A subtler, more nuanced enjoyment of life.

Things we previously overlooked begin to reveal themselves.

The smallest experiences can become extraordinary.

Sometimes we hear accounts of people approaching death who become deeply moved by something as simple as watching an ant cross the floor.

The astonishing nature of reality, right there in that moment.

And perhaps this is our birthright.

Perhaps this is what we really are: this mysterious no-thing expressing itself as everything, appearing as separation, rediscovering itself, taking delight in its own unfolding.

And we're part of that.

We are that.

As we begin to allow this recognition, life can change dramatically.

Perhaps externally. Certainly in our relationship with it.

Because the world we've constructed, with its extraordinary emphasis on the rational mind, competition, control, and a kind of hypermasculine orientation toward life, often seems profoundly out of balance with our deeper nature.

And as we begin waking up to what we really are, we may find ourselves increasingly at odds with the world around us.

That can be frightening.

We begin looking inward and recognizing that perhaps we've been living according to someone else's story.

"Wait a minute. This isn't actually how I feel."

"This isn't what I believe."

"This isn't my experience of how things are."

And coming into alignment with that recognition may require change.

Sometimes significant change.

Relationships may shift. Friends may fall away.

You might become some weird hippie living in a van down by the river.

Who knows?

But at a certain point, what else are we going to do?

We're here. We're practicing. Something in us recognizes the value of looking more deeply.

So let's create the conditions that support that.

Let's engage with these practices that have been shared and refined over centuries, practices that help us settle, see more clearly, and allow this unfolding.

And this brings me to something of an aside.

We're fellow travelers.

I love that expression.

Ram Dass famously said, "We're all just walking each other home."

There's no one here but us chickens.

Really.

There's no one who knows and someone else who doesn't know. No ultimately separate teacher and student, seeker and finder.

Those are useful roles, perhaps, but they're still stories.

We're the same mystery experiencing itself in different ways.

So please don't do yourself, or the world, the disservice of imagining that you're somehow less than someone else.

That someone possesses some essential wisdom unavailable to you.

As the Tantric saying goes:

"What is here is everywhere. What is not here is nowhere."

Everything is here.

Within us.

We've all heard versions of that, but consider what it really means.

If we spend our lives searching outside ourselves for someone who possesses the truth, someone who can finally give us what we believe we're missing, we're continually giving away our power.

Of course, we can learn from one another. We can benefit enormously from guidance, experience, teaching, companionship.

But ultimately, the recognition has to happen here.

Within our own experience.

In that sense, we're all just walking each other home.

We remind each other. We share love, laughter, delight, support, hugs, whatever serves the moment.

And there's something wonderful about inhabiting a space in which we recognize ourselves in one another.

When someone is suffering because they believe they're missing something, or because something unwanted has appeared in their life, we can recognize that experience.

"Ah, yes. I know that place."

Rather than seeing someone fundamentally different from ourselves, we recognize a shared humanity, a shared condition.

And we can love them better.

We can love ourselves better, too.

Through acceptance, embracing, allowing, forgiveness.

And forgiveness, in a sense, is simply letting go with kindness.

As we loosen our identification with these stories, something remains.

Gratitude.

Appreciation.

Delight.

Love.

Again, don't take my word for it.

Explore it.

Because the extraordinary thing is that this has been here all along.

All the striving, all the avoiding, all the effort to become something or escape something.

And underneath it, what were we really seeking?

Connection.

Peace.

Safety.

A sense of being home.

And perhaps these qualities become more accessible as the noise settles and the smoke clears.

Sure, a little austerity may be necessary now and then.

We pause. We simplify. We clean things out, settle down, check in.

Because at a certain point, what else are we going to do?

Keep distracting ourselves?

Keep chasing things, running away from things, fantasizing about some future in which everything will finally be right?

That hasn't worked particularly well, or perhaps we wouldn't be here.

The alternative is what's left when we stop.

Be here now.

This is it.

This moment.

This is your life.

This is it!

There are miracles unfolding all around us, right now, always.

And of course, I forget.

You forget.

So we remind each other.

One of the countless things we might feel grateful for is simply the opportunity to gather like this. To remind one another. To practice together in an atmosphere of safety, mutual respect, gentleness, kindness.

It's strong medicine.

And I'll leave you with one final consideration.

In addition to the joy and subtle appreciation that practice can bring, there's another recognition that sometimes begins to emerge.

Right now, in this moment, there may be no problem.

There's simply what is.

Now, I imagine some of you are reacting to that already.

I can almost feel it.

It's provocative, isn't it?

But let's look a little more closely.

A problem is often the name we give to a story about something we believe shouldn't be happening.

Yet in the immediate moment, there's simply a situation, and whatever response that situation calls for.

There's a hot flame. We pull our hand away.

We've cut ourselves. We're bleeding. We apply pressure, seek help.

Something requires attention, action, or perhaps acceptance.

But the additional story that reality is somehow wrong, that this shouldn't be happening, is something the mind contributes.

And we often suffer enormously because of that contribution.

The truth is, we simply don't know enough about the nature of existence to determine with certainty how everything ought to unfold.

That's not to suggest we abandon discernment, responsibility, or the protection of ourselves and others.

Of course not.

We respond as wisely and compassionately as we're able. We protect life. We act according to our understanding.

But beyond that, the universe is simply too vast, too mysterious, too strange for us to pretend we understand the ultimate significance of every event.

And there's tremendous freedom in being open to that possibility.

There's a classic Zen saying:

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

When we're convinced we already know what something means, we become less available to discovering anything new.

Judgment narrows our field of possibility.

Curiosity opens it.

And this is something we can investigate directly.

How different might your life feel if you weren't continually organizing your experience around problems?

What if some of the things you call problems were simply the unfolding circumstances of your life, inviting a response, teaching you something, perhaps opening a possibility you couldn't previously imagine?

The alternative, so often, is additional suffering.

Dukkha.

Unsatisfactoriness.

So here's a question:

Do you want to be right, or do you want to be free?

Do you need to know, definitively, that something is good or bad, right or wrong?

Or can you remain open?

It's remarkable how much freedom we sometimes resist.

We can't necessarily control what's happening around us. Certainly not all of it.

But we can develop greater freedom in how we relate to what happens.

And with that freedom comes responsibility.

Sometimes it's easier to blame, to condemn, to insist that reality should be different.

But practice invites us to recognize where we have a choice, and gradually to inhabit that choice more consciously.

I'll leave you with an old story. Perhaps you've heard some version of it. There are many.

A farmer in ancient China lived with his son.

One day, a beautiful wild stallion appeared at their farm. It had become separated from its herd, and the farmer took it in.

The villagers were delighted.

"What wonderful fortune! What an extraordinary gift! Such a magnificent horse!"

And the farmer simply replied:

"Good news, bad news? Who knows?"

Some time later, the farmer's son was working with the horse. The horse threw him, and he broke his leg.

He couldn't help with the harvest.

The villagers were horrified.

"What terrible misfortune! What a tragedy!"

And the farmer replied:

"Good news, bad news? Who knows?"

A little while later, the army arrived, conscripting young men to fight in a terrible war.

They took the young men from the village.

But they left the farmer's son behind because his leg was broken.

And on and on it goes.

We don't know.

And why burden ourselves with pretending that we do?

It's not our job to understand the ultimate meaning of everything.

Our work is to be human beings.

To be present.

Open.

Allowing.

Responsive.

We have plenty to do simply stewarding our own being in this world.

And yes, there's tremendous power in that. Tremendous responsibility, too.

It can be frightening to recognize how much freedom may actually be available to us.

Perhaps that's one reason we cling so tightly to our stories.

But consider this:

If we're going to inhabit stories, why not choose ones that are as helpful, loving, and liberating as possible?

Stories that support our awakening rather than reinforce our imprisonment.

Stories that help us recognize the freedom that, in some deeper sense, we've always been.

Thank you for your presence, and your attention.

Tomorrow we'll turn to the questions in our magic question jar, and whatever else arises.

Enjoy your evening.