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Words Heal Words Harm

Can We Learn to Communicate More Wisely?

Dr. Gaya Gamhewage

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Perspective and publication status

This evidence-informed perspective paper brings early Buddhist teachings on skilful speech into conversation with contemporary research on communication, cognition, digital media and social connection. It does not present the Buddhist teachings as scientific findings, nor does it claim that modern research validates a spiritual tradition. Instead, it asks what each stream of knowledge can contribute to the urgent practical question of how we communicate with greater truthfulness, care and responsibility. This paper has not undergone external peer review.

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Words Heal Words Harm

Can We Learn to Communicate More Wisely?

Dr Gaya Gamhewage

Physician, former journalist, global health leader
Founder of The Wisdom House
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Words shape the worlds we inhabit

We use words to comfort a frightened child, reassure a sick patient and correct dangerous misinformation. We use them to share good news, begin and sustain relationships, teach, learn, organize and create. At their best, words allow what is in our minds and hearts to become a source of connection, cooperation, inspiration and hope.

We also use words to end relationships, deepen divisions, stigmatize communities, mobilize violence and conceal the truth. Words can bring peace or punishment, pleasure or pain. Silence, too, communicates: it may create space and restraint, or it may protect power and abandon those who need us to speak. There is always a consequence to how we use - or withhold - our voice.

Words, spoken or written, are the principal material of one of humanity's most extraordinary capacities: communication. Communication has helped us build communities, institutions, movements and nations. Printing multiplied its reach. Radio and television carried it across continents. The internet made it instantaneous and global. Social media gave almost everyone a platform. Artificial intelligence can now generate words, images and voices at a scale and speed we are only beginning to understand.

We are undoubtedly communicating more. But have we become better at communicating well? The 2025 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, covering 48 markets, found that 58% of respondents were concerned about distinguishing truth from falsehood in online news (Newman et al., 2025). At the same time, the WHO Commission on Social Connection reported that about one in six people worldwide experiences loneliness (World Health Organization, 2025). Digital reach and human connection are not the same thing.

Communication as a professional and ethical practice

I have been aware throughout my life of the importance of communication: first as a journalist, then as an advocate, a doctor and public-health professional, and most recently, as Director of Communications at the World Health Organization. I have seen communication reassure frightened populations, mobilize communities, influence policy, change behaviour and help save lives.

I have also seen words stigmatize, divide and mislead; misinformation and disinformation undermine trust; and institutional silence communicate as powerfully as speech. Across three decades in public health, particularly during emergencies and institutional crises, I learnt that the hardest communication decisions were rarely only about what to say. They were about what was true, what people needed to know, what remained uncertain, when and how to speak - and sometimes whether speaking would serve any useful purpose.

My Buddhist practice has given me another way to examine these choices. When leading communications for a global multilateral organization, I tried to begin not with what we should communicate, but why. What is our intention? Whom will this serve? What harm could it prevent or cause? What responsibility accompanies our institutional voice?

Speech begins before the mouth

Speech is not born in the mouth. Before we speak, post, publish or broadcast, we have already perceived and interpreted. We have selected what to notice, formed judgements and assigned meaning. Our prior experience, fears, loyalties, desires and biases can influence what we conclude and how we express it. Psychological research shows that motivation and emotion can shape reasoning, judgement and the interpretation of language (Kunda, 1990; Angie et al., 2011; Vergis, 2024). While this does not make every judgement unreliable, it nevertheless means that responsible communication requires some awareness of the mind producing it.

The same fact can be spoken to illuminate or manipulate, protect or humiliate, connect or divide. A factually correct statement can still be weaponized through timing, framing, omission or intention. Before speaking, a difficult but revealing question is: What is happening within me that makes me want to say this, in this way, at this moment?

Right Speech as practical ethical training

More than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha placed sammā vācā - commonly translated as Right Speech - within the Noble Eightfold Path. Sammā can also convey what is appropriate, complete or skilful; vācā refers to speech or utterance. I prefer 'skilful speech' in this practical context because it emphasizes a capacity that can be cultivated and judged partly by its consequences.

Right Speech belongs to the ethical dimension of the path alongside right action and right livelihood (Bodhi, 1994). Ethical speech has value in itself because it avoids deception and harm. It also supports the trust, cooperation and relative calm without which families, teams, institutions and societies cannot function. Looking inward, the discipline of speech asks us to understand and reduce the mental states that generate suffering for ourselves and others.

In the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta, the Buddha identifies four forms of wrong speech: false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech and idle chatter (Majjhima Nikāya 117; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013a). Their Pāli terms describe a practical field of training to be practiced throughout life:

Musāvāda - false or deceptive speech

Pisuṇā vācā - divisive or malicious speech that sets people against one another

Pharusā vācā - harsh, abusive or needlessly hurtful speech

Samphappalāpa - idle, frivolous or purposeless chatter

These categories are not simply a list of prohibited words. They direct attention to truthfulness, relationship, tone and purpose. Each has a recognizable contemporary form: fabricated content, targeted rumours, online abuse, humiliating workplace communication and the relentless production or sharing of material that consumes attention without adding understanding.

Truth is necessary but not sufficient

Avoiding harmful speech is only one part of the training. In the Vācā Sutta, its opposite of skilful speech is described through five qualities: it is timely, true, affectionate (presented with

kindness), beneficial and spoken with goodwill (Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.198; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2010). This is a demanding framework because it refuses to reduce ethical communication to factual accuracy alone.

Truth matters. But truth can be delivered at the wrong time, without context or for the purpose of humiliation. Conversely, affectionate language can conceal manipulation or avoid a truth that must be faced. In the discourse to Prince Abhaya, the Buddha distinguishes between what is true, what is beneficial, what is agreeable to the listener and what should be said at the appropriate time (Majjhima Nikāya 58; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013b). Skilful speech therefore requires discernment rather than a formula.

Silence must be judged by the same ethical standard. Silence may be wise when speech is untrue, unnecessary or likely only to inflame. But silence is not automatically noble. When people face harm, injustice or preventable danger, remaining silent may serve the speaker's comfort rather than the wellbeing of others. The relevant question is not simply whether to speak, but which choice is most truthful, beneficial and responsible in the circumstances.

The pause between emotion and expression

Knowing these principles is not enough. We need to notice ourselves before words become action. In the traditional ordering of the Noble Eightfold Path, right mindfulness is the seventh factor. It supports the effort to recognize and abandon unskilful speech and to cultivate its alternative (Majjhima Nikāya 117; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013a). Mindfulness here is more than concentrated attention. It includes remembering what matters and discerning what is arising in the mind.

What am I feeling now - anger, fear, envy, hurt or shame? Am I trying to clarify, protect or help? Or do I need to be right, impress, retaliate or belong? This moment of mindful discernment creates a small but potentially consequential space between impulse and expression. Contemporary mindfulness research suggests plausible effects on attention, emotion regulation and self-awareness, although study quality and findings vary and should not be overstated (Tang et al., 2015). Research on online misinformation also shows that redirecting attention towards accuracy before sharing can improve discernment, principally by reducing willingness to share false headlines (Pennycook et al., 2021; Pennycook and Rand, 2022). A pause is not trivial when it changes what we amplify.

At its root, skilful speech is also connected to sammā saṅkappa - right intention - described through orientations towards non-attachment, goodwill and harmlessness (Majjhima Nikāya 117; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013a). With practice, the question shifts from 'Can I say this?' to 'What intention is speaking through me, and what consequence am I willing to take responsibility for?'

Right Speech in a digital environment

Digital communication magnifies both our reach and our reactivity. Emotionally and morally charged language travels readily through social networks, and study of Twitter posts found that false news spread farther, faster and more broadly than true news within the dataset examined (Brady et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). These findings do not mean that emotion is inherently harmful or that every platform behaves in the same way. They show that the information environment rewards some forms of attention and expression more readily than others.

Right Speech in the digital age therefore concerns not only what we produce, but what we consume and amplify. Social media can connect, educate, mobilize support and give voice to people excluded from traditional institutions. Its consequences are nevertheless complex. A 2024 systematic review of 67 studies found associations between problematic social-media use and symptoms of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents. Sleep deprivation, social comparison, feedback seeking, social support and the type of use appeared among the relevant pathways, but the studies were heterogeneous and did not establish a simple causal relationship (Saleem et al., 2024). A large US study similarly found that adolescents reporting more than three hours of daily social-media use had greater odds of internalizing difficulties, while emphasizing that further research was needed (Riehm et al., 2019).

The discipline of communication must therefore extend to listening, watching, clicking and sharing. What we repeatedly allow into our minds helps form the mental environment from which our own speech emerges. The digital equivalent of skilful speech asks: Is this credible? Is sharing it beneficial? Am I adding understanding or merely heat? Whose dignity or safety may be affected? What is the platform encouraging me to feel and do?

A practical discipline for wiser communication

Drawing on my own life and career, and acknowledging the missteps I took in my own communication, I use two sets of questions in my own training. The first is diagnostic: Is it true? Is it likely to cause unnecessary hurt? Is it divisive? Is it consuming attention without contributing meaning? The second is constructive: Is it true? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time? What is my intention? How can I speak with goodwill without avoiding what needs to be said?

For institutions and leaders, the same discipline requires additional questions. What do people need to know to protect themselves or exercise agency? What remains uncertain? What evidence supports the claim? Who may be excluded, stigmatized or placed at risk by our framing? Are we prepared to correct the record? Is our silence responsible restraint, or avoidance of accountability?

This is where ancient ethical training and contemporary communication practice meet. Mindful discernment helps us see the facts, our assumptions and our internal state. Compassion keeps human consequences visible. Connectedness reminds us that communication creates or weakens relationships. Courage enables us to tell difficult truths, correct ourselves and speak when silence would permit harm. These capacities do not guarantee perfect communication. They make wiser communication more practicable.

The mind finds a voice

Words heal. Words harm. They shape the inner life of the speaker, the experience of the listener and the quality of the space between them. In a world of continuous communication, the responsibility is not merely to say more, faster or more persuasively. It is to communicate with greater truthfulness, discernment and care.

The teachings on skilful speech offer neither censorship nor passivity. They offer a demanding practice: understand the mind before it becomes a message; tell the truth without abandoning compassion; consider timing and consequence; refrain when speaking serves no good purpose; and find the courage to speak when silence would deepen harm. We can test this framework in daily life. The evidence will appear not only in what we say, but in the relationships, institutions and world our words help to create.

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