



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

59 – Skilful Speech: using the voice to reduce harm

The communications protocol of our raft

*“Speak not harshly to anyone; spoken to, they may answer you in kind.” ~
Gotama (The Buddha)*

*“Speak only the well-spoken: truthful, purposeful, kind, and timely.” ~
Gotama*

The protocol of connection

In this Training stage of our journey, we move from inner orientation to outward relationship. Having set our direction with Skilful Perspective (Chapter 57) and our rudder with Skilful Intention (Chapter 58), we now engage the first factor of ethical conduct within Gotama’s Middle Way Programme: Skilful Speech. In plain language, this is the practice of using the voice – out loud and inside our own head – in a way that reduces harm and increases trust.

In the practice of the ‘Five Gifts’ (Chapter 04), we laid one of the foundational planks of our raft by offering the fourth gift: a commitment to abstain from false speech and to cultivate truthfulness. Now we expand that intention. Skilful Speech is not only about avoiding harm through false speech, harsh speech, divisive speech, or idle chatter. It becomes a living aspiration for wise connection

– how we tell the truth without cruelty, how we set boundaries without aggression, and how we communicate in a way that repairs rather than fractures.

Skilful Speech is our vessel's communications protocol. Whether we're signalling to other rafts (social interaction) or speaking over the internal intercom (self-talk), the transmission needs to be clear for our raft to remain on course. We maintain truthfulness – accurate reporting of our position and condition. If we broadcast false coordinates, no help can reach us and we lose our own bearings. We also prioritise harmony, using the radio to build cooperation rather than spreading conflict through divisive speech. And we speak with purpose, avoiding the static of idle chatter that clogs the channel and wastes the crew's energy.

Skilful Speech begins before the first word is spoken. It begins with listening. If we do not listen carefully, we answer the story in our head rather than the person in front of us. On the raft, this is like transmitting before we have received the signal. Listening gives speech its bearings: we pause, take in tone and context, notice our own reactivity, and ask what this moment is actually calling for. Sometimes the most skilful speech begins as silence – spacious enough for another person to be heard.

Self reflections

1. How has my relationship with truthfulness changed – from a rule ('don't lie') to a skill ('speak truthfully and clearly')?
2. After a mistake, what is the tone of my inner voice – does it sound like harsh speech?
3. Which gate do I most often skip – truth, beneficial, timely or kind delivery?
4. Where do I still 'bend the signal' – exaggerating, leaving key things out, or shaping the story to look better?
5. When do I drift into divisive speech – gossip, triangling, taking sides, or venting in a way that splits people apart?
6. What body cue tells me I'm about to speak from reactivity (tight throat, heat in face, clenched jaw) – and what helps me pause?
7. When I need to repair, do I explain myself ('I was tired') or name impact ('I

realise I have upset you') – and what changes when I drop the defence?

Journaling prompts

1. **The four gate diary:** Write one tricky conversation from today. Score it against true / beneficial / timely / kind. Rewrite one sentence the way you'd like to say it next time.
2. **The repair log:** Describe one repair you made (or avoided). Write the repair in three lines: impact, apology (no defence), change.
3. **Internal rewrite:** Write a short script of your inner critic after a mistake. Then rewrite it as Skilful Speech – truthful, beneficial, and kind.
4. **Divisive to harmonising:** Describe one moment you were tempted to gossip or triangulate. Rewrite what you could have said that protects trust and connection.
5. **One clear message:** Draft a single sentence you've been avoiding saying. Make it simple, non-inflammatory, and aligned with the four gates – true / beneficial / timely / kind.
6. **Pause and tone:** Note three moments when one breath (or three soft out-breaths) changed your tone or timing. What was different in the outcome?
7. **Listening first:** Pick a challenging conversation (digital or otherwise) and practise writing a two-sentence summary of what the other person actually meant before writing your reply. What changed when you did that?

Remember to remember

Skilful speech is where inner steadiness becomes shared reality. Words are actions: they carry weight, they leave a wake, and they shape the conditions we then have to live inside. When we remember the four gates – is it true, is it beneficial, is it timely, and is it kind? We slow down enough to choose speech that builds trust rather than burning it. This protects the integrity of our raft and

the safety of those sailing near us, because relationships are part of our ecology. This protocol applies inwardly too: the way we speak to ourselves after a craving, a mistake, or a hard day either steadies the system or fractures it. So we practise a voice that is honest without cruelty – clear, kind, and useful – the same voice we would offer a friend.

Remember, too, that repair restores trust. We do not have to speak perfectly; we only need to notice when we have drifted and be willing to come back. A clean repair is simple and strong: name the impact, apologise without defence, and state the change. This turns a slip of the tongue into training rather than shame. It also keeps small ruptures from becoming long silences, resentments, or avoidance. In RAFT terms, we keep the channel clear and the hull sound: we pause, listen, breathe, choose the next good-enough sentence, and steer again – not to win conversations, but to keep connection seaworthy.

“Words are windows, or they’re walls. They sentence us, or set us free.” ~ Ruth Bebermeyer

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.” ~ Thumper (Bambi – Disney)

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