

Deathless Speech (How Language-ing ‘Works’)

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Once long ago, a practitioner speaking to the Nikāya Buddha used the phrase 'deathless speech.' The Buddha didn't disallow the phrase in relation to his teaching, and then the practitioner proceeded to utter an impromptu poem - he extemporised. This was a common practice in the Buddha's time. How did words work in that situation? And is it really any different than how these words - the ones you're reading - work, now?

I was on retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh, close to forty years ago, and while out walking in the forest during a rest period, I encountered his friend, student and lifelong comrade, Sister Chan Khong. I had been carrying this issue of the necessity of being mindful while engaged in the act of speaking, so I decided to check my understanding about this with her.

"Sister Khong, to be continuously mindful, that means that even as I say these words to you, I am present in a way that includes the act of speaking, right?" I seemed to miraculously be able to do it, in that moment.

"Yes, that's right," she said, with a look that seemed to say: "How else could it be?" I knew in that instant that I had a patient learning ahead of me: exploring non-egological speaking, a speaking without 'a second' in the wings, without the separate inner speaker watching. It was exciting, because it would mean becoming released from the ever-by-standing 'Critic.'

However, what I didn't realise then, but what slowly emerged, was that this practice would lead to a profound inquiry into the relationship of concepts to experiencing. It's been the most freeing part of my path, taking me all the way to directly seeing the process of 'name and form.' This learning goes on endlessly, of course; but, it took a big leap forward when, a decade after my meeting with Sister Khong, I met Gene Gendlin's *Philosophy of the Implicit*, and digested his articulation of the role that our bodily-felt sense of situations plays in the creation of meaning.

If I talk to you about the 'deathless' element as something that can be known, can we together take the word 'deathless' to mean how it works in the saying? Can we, as Gendlin would say, permit it to mean how it works when it's used? I don't write these present words, and the word 'deathless,' so that you will refer to your dictionary, or to the definitions of others, or even to your past conclusions. If, indeed, any (or all) of these 'sources of knowledge' participate in the move that the word 'deathless' makes in our interaction, how do they participate? How does the word mean, such that there is a 'transmission' of meaning? Gendlin would say that "Concepts and distinctions are not the main way language works." What, then, is the main way words work?

All those resources - your education, your previous reading in Buddhadharma, your previous conversations, and so on - they might all participate in your comprehension, with or without your conscious awareness; but I say that the word has never been said with the meaning it has now. Why? Because words are living events (whether said or written, heard or read) which grow (or atrophy) in situations. So, there is no comprehension of the word 'deathless' without a human body participating freshly, in a situation, in a 'now.' The word means *how it 'works,'* in you freshly in this situation. Any word occurs into our bodies in the situations we are in.

The word 'deathless' in my title occurs into the situation of your reading (which will include that we are having a conversation in the context of a 'spiritual' tradition which began in north India two and a half thousand years ago.

My words, including these ones, mean what their use says. That's not possible without the participation of your body. They will mean what their use is in your body, when read by you. (Notice, by the way, that you can say, "But I don't get what 'deathless' means," and the word is moving in you meaningfully - in that you are using it. It, for example, refers back to my using it, and that is already a meaningful use. 'Deathless' now is something which you can use - you can ask about it, hold it in your bodily-felt experience, resonate it with those felt experiences, and so on.)

"Words bring old uses with them. If they did not, they would not be the words they are. Then they could not do new work either. They work by bringing their old situations into a new situation, thereby changing the whole cluster." Gendlin, *Non-logical Moves and Nature Metaphors* (article at focusing.org).

Recently I had to the occasion to talk to someone who is suffering an experience of a meaningless life. It's a distressing condition for him. It turned out that he had a very fixed view of the nature and limitations of human knowledge, stemming from certain philosophical positions which he had adopted as 'the way things are.' It was a very deeply thought-out position which occluded that life could be meaningful independent of thought.

Just ask yourself: if a child's interactions are without felt meaning from the start, how could she build up enough experiencing to informatively acquire language? The child learns with the body which interacts meaningfully in situations. The question, if you let your bodily knowing open it up, will likely reveal just how creative speaking and thinking are, and that this creativity depends upon feeling bodies.

"The moves of words occur in use, by use. We could even say that such moves are never in a past, they occur only in ongoing use when words work freshly." Gendlin, *Non-logical Moves and Nature Metaphors*

In other words, we haven't ceased to be informed by these bodies. It is a continuous lineage from childhood language-acquisition through to now.

I suggested to the person suffering from meaninglessness, that his belief that all knowledge is conditioned by the past, without a present-moment openness in their use - that is, that there is no unconditioned element in their use - this belief will naturally restrict his inquiry. He lacks the bodily-grounded, optimising openness to find something more than the vision he's committed to; or, even to find a way his present vision can expand to something more life-giving, if possible. At this stage, his words are referred, not to immediate experiencing, to present-moment open experiencing, but to the system of philosophy which is already 'in his library,' so to speak. How could they discover something new, without a 'more' - a '(.....),' as Gendlin called it - to refer them to?

"We are letting words mean from their fresh working. That is how words work, but letting them do that in philosophy and criticism is my new way." Gendlin, *Non-logical Moves and Nature Metaphors*

Nihilistic views about meaning-making - nihilistic because the views obstruct the creative presence from which words can form relevantly to the new situations - such views are not only tragic, but nonsensical. How could words have come to do any work whatsoever in our experiencing, even bring past meanings, if they arose exclusively from a previous repository of words? That is, how could language have arisen at all, for the species, if it wasn't preceded by non-conceptual experiencing (as it was in evolution)? The only 'solution' which could avoid a non-conceptual, meaningful process in language-creation could only derive from 'divine intervention.' Some creator God must have created humans ready-made with language. Some people believe that, of course; and this belief, too, doesn't account for the novelty of living languages. (You don't get novelty from combining Lego blocks - that's just variations on a limited theme, no matter how much artifice is involved). But, the point, here, is: Can we consider that this 'origin' of words' is still with us? It was Gendlin's task to show how the creation of meaning is still going on.

As it happened, this person said my suggestion of the power for meaningfulness of the 'utterly open and yet felt now' was a 'belief,' rather than an experience. So, he heard anything I said from that openness as something that I simply believed before I said it, rather than something I could say provisionally to see what it did in our experience – that is, to see if it resonated with the whole of our living. I know my words came from an implicit 'more,' a space of (.....), and felt them occurring into that dynamic (.....). They were an uncontrived response to carry forward our present situation, but, due to his commitment to a model, he thought that whatever I was saying was an already done-and-dusted knowledge from my past. He said it was my 'belief.'

I take his word 'belief' to mean what it appeared to mean to Carl Jung in his famous '*Face to Face*' interview. When asked "Do you believe in God?" he responded, "I don't need to believe, I know." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AMu-G51yTY>

Richard Dawkins response to this (in *The God Delusion*) was that Jung had 'blind faith'; however, do you see how Dawkins can't credit a meaning to Jung's 'I know,' because he already has a belief (a blind faith?) in the limits of human knowledge. Knowledge, to him, is confined to what is already in the library. If you think this way, the already-conceived always trumps personal bodily-had experience. Science is replete with examples of scientists refusing to believe the findings of other scientists just because such findings didn't fit their existing models. I'm glad that Galileo or Einstein didn't think this way.

Now, what's interesting is to let Dawkins' phrase work in this situation. Dawkins' believes that there is such a phenomenon as 'blind faith,' which equals delusion. I wouldn't disagree with that. But notice that the meaning of 'blind faith' is renewed by Dawkins as he re-uses it, as he reapplies it, in relationship to Jung's famous 'I know,' forty-seven years later. With every situation in which Dawkins uses 'blind faith' it gathers new sequences of experiencing. It's never the same as when he first heard it, and the phrase again occurs into his bodily knowing, bringing new intricacy. Does he feel that?

Likewise, the phrase 'blind faith' is gathering new resonance for you and I, as we consider it in the context of our present understanding of the contrast between reliable speaking and deluded speaking. Can we use the concept of 'blind faith' to increase our understanding? We'd have to have a different awareness of the relationship of concepts to experiencing to plumb the phrase's possibilities freshly.

We can hold the phrase ‘blind faith’ freshly, and let all the past clusters of meaning cross with our contexts here – which includes my invitation for you to think about language-ing as a gesturing which body’s do to carry forward living situations; and my invitation to feel into what the body has with the phrase ‘the deathless element.’ If we do that - hold the phrase ‘blind faith’ freshly - it brings to light how ‘blind faith’ can work in a person – and, we could go further, to explore, from that felt sense. For instance, we could explore, from the feel of it, the myriad reasons for blind faith. The phrase ‘blind faith’ points to an experience (a felt meaning) which can generate more experiences.

(By the way, the question does arise for some: How do I do the ‘freshly’ part of that? The short answer is: by not doing it. It’s more a matter of letting be, and being there for what presents as a result. Letting the (....) have a pause to occur in.)

I find if I imagine that I have blind faith in something - for example, that a Buddha could save me from death – then, if subjected to my body’s ‘truth compass,’ such a ‘faith’ doesn’t feel like it connects with my present lived life at all. Here’s the experiment I conducted.

To bring the (....) about that ‘belief,’ I imagined being an actor. The director has asked me to walk onto a stage or a film set, with that ‘blindly believing’ feel in my body. How would a blind belief in ‘the historical Buddha’s saving power’ live/feel/be in this body, under that circumstance? Then I can feel, non-verbally at first, something which I can feel is specifically about that ‘belief’ in his saving power. What crystallises for me, after a period of feeling that, however, is a disembodied feeling. A feeling of dissociation. So, it appears that for me to have ‘blind faith’ would be to live in a body which doesn’t feel its combodiment, its interdependence with all and everything in nature. I wouldn’t be grounded with such a belief as ‘the Buddha will save me.’

Now I can say something new, something which I couldn’t before, thanks to exploring what Dawkins’ ‘blind faith’ could mean. Instead of arguing with the phrase, I let it make its moves in me. As a result, I can say that, when I was speaking to the man who is subject to meaninglessness, I was speaking from the felt presence of ‘now.’ When I was talking to him about how the felt openness of present experiencing gives access to a substratum of unconstructed meaningfulness, I was speaking from that openness. Dawkins’ ‘blind faith’ has brought forward how I was fully present.

I return to that moment, resonating the words ‘how I was then’ against my body’s sense of it. It becomes clear that I was at home. I didn’t feel I had to lean in to convince that man with his meaninglessness. I didn’t need to prove anything to anyone. Neither did I need to call in some self-image, the ‘ikonic past,’ a record, like a video, of myself as having some experiences which justified my talking about meaningfulness. There was no gain or loss to me speaking the truth as it presented for me. I was saying it for him. And there was no ‘inner trembling’ which comes with attachment. I could trust what was said, even if I’d never said or thought such words before.

So when I bring Dawkins’ ‘blind faith’ concept into the context of my conversation with that person, the experience named by the phrase ‘blind faith’ is not there. The phrase ‘blind faith’ can’t point to the knowing of the ‘unconditioned element’ (or the deathless element). More suitable phrase would be a ‘solid confidence.’ Jung in that video seems to have a bedrock assurance. I can imagine that Jung felt at peace knowing God, instead of believing in ‘God.’

If you bring a statement into relation with your bodily-felt knowing of the situation, something will happen which confirms or disconfirms the statement as having power to carry forward life - life as life has itself in you. That is, reality as-it-is (*yathabhetam*), in its suchness, doesn't confirm an untruth. Is this what the Nikāya Buddha meant when he said his 'truth' (dhamma) is a 'come and see' truth? He affirmed that it's to be experienced, and merely to be believed.

Is the concept of 'the deathless' when used by a teacher, something they believe in, or does it have a different tonality. This distinction worked in the Nikāya Buddha's foremost disciple Sariputta by the way, when he heard the Buddha teaching. He said within himself, "He's saying this from experiencing." That recognition initiated his final entry into unfettered knowing.

"Words bring their old use-contexts into a new one. In new situations the word's meaning-making is nonlogical, not logically derived from the old. Use, old or new, is not governed by concepts. Words do bring not only their use-contexts, but also concepts (categories, kinds, distinctions, forms, schemes, models, assumptions, etc.)."

Remember the question earlier: What is the main way words work? We still use concepts, but not only concepts. We speak from the felt sense, the bodily felt meaning which the words are meant to carry forward. When we refer back to experiencing in this way, we are letting concepts mean freshly, newly - not in the old way. If the new working is said in old concepts without reference to the body's knowing, then one can at best come to paradox, not to a creative move forward. That is, you will end in "undecidability," limbo. (See Gendlin, *Non-logical Moves and Nature Metaphors* for the discussion of this. He shows how this is where the deconstructionists end up, and can't see a way forward.) And this is the situation when meaninglessness captures the heart. Gendlin: "Even if we want to think freshly, the old concept will prevent next steps that are inconsistent with it. Then what is new and freshly sensed cannot be said and we are stuck."

Above all else, by speaking from the felt presence of your bodily knowing, let your words mean the way they work. Allow words to mean from how they work in the situation of their saying. "Words move in use." (Gendlin, *ibid.*) This requires being awake in the situation. Let your words (which are old only in one sense) do new things. They can change what they are spoken 'into.' They bring all their past sequences of use to cross with what they speak into, what they are occurring into - their present situation with its many contexts.

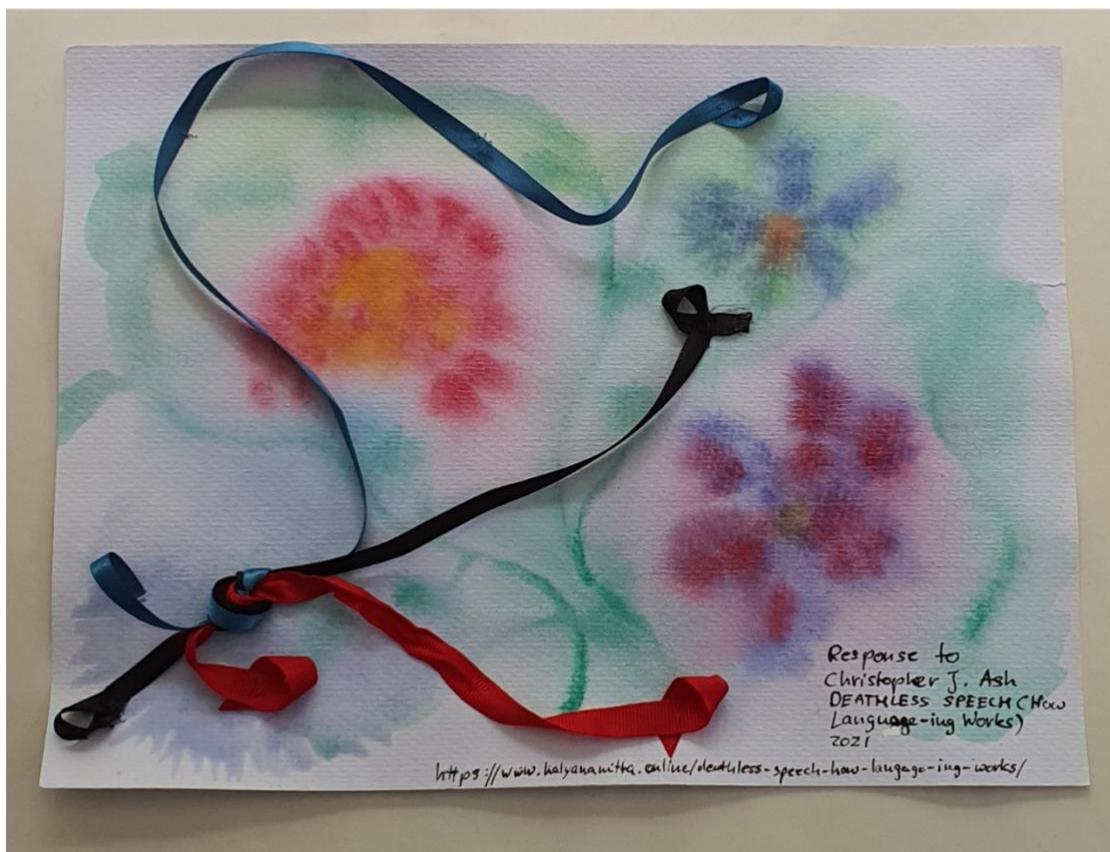
Normally, in non-mindful, dead speech, non-vigilant speech, we might imagine that words are doing a job of simply expressing some other idea which is in the background somewhere, pre-formed. That belief is just so much static in our meaning-making, and such a belief is best examined in the way I've been describing. Words work in the open space of now. They don't work by "pre-set definitions," or as contrived by the inner homunculus. They work by bringing the bodily sequenced old situations (where we used them before) to meet the present, never-occurred-before situation; and there a 'crossing' occurs – a crossing which includes how the words are changed by their changing the situation. (Gendlin's concept for this is 'schematized by schematizing.')

This an aspect of mindfulness of speech which is not mentioned in the ancient texts. It's easy to find teachings on the content orientation of mindfulness of speech. There is, however, this process orientation. The fact that mindfulness can support a process of unconditioned speech

is not there in the texts (as far as I've seen) and is not addressed in modern Buddhism. In the ancient texts (the Nikāyas), we have helpful advice about intentionality; that is, about the appropriateness of *what* is said, for the development of the heart. It's mostly a content orientation supporting ethical development. The extent to which this content orientation supports awareness of process, is not drawn out. It is not made clear how it could do so, though it might well do. Whatever the case, articulating the kind of process which language-use is, through understanding Eugene Gendlin's approach to human process, can supercharge mindfulness of speech. It can become a direct 'Dharma door.' The timeless (and so the 'deathless') aspect of such speech is in its *process* character. Every speech act, then, can be an act extempore.

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The following is an 'Intersubjective Response' (ISR) from Stefanie Roth (March 2022). Thank you, Stefanie.



References:

My article 'Deathless Speech' was inspired by reading: Gendlin, E.T. (1985). *Nonlogical moves and nature metaphors*. http://previous.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2134.html

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Experiencing and the creation of meaning. A philosophical and psychological approach to the subjective has also been reprinted and published as paperback by Northwestern University Press (1997), with a 'Preface to the paper edition', pp. XI-XXIII. This preface is also available at <http://previous.focusing.org/ecmpreface.html>.

The first part of chapter three of ECM ('How felt meaning functions'), the part that treats 'direct reference' (III.A.1) (pp. 90-100), is available at http://previous.focusing.org/ecm_iiia1.html.

Some of the process concepts in this paper are from Gendlin's *A Process Model*, published as paperback and hardback by Northwestern University Press, and it is available as an ebook.