Kindness in speech

Human beings spend a lot of time communicating! A lot of time is spent talking as well as communicating through emails, texts and other written forms. If we wish to cultivate kindness fully it is worth giving consideration to how kindness can influence not only the spoken word but also how we express ourselves in electronic and other written words. Words so easily pop out of the mouth and the send button can be so quickly pressed, creating unwanted consequences, if we do not bring awareness to this area of our lives.

Two main aspects of kindly speech (and other forms of word based communication) are truthfulness and helpfulness. A starting point for kindly speech is truthfulness. It is very easy to bend the ‘facts’ to suit our own advantage or preferences. So we spice up a story to make ourselves appear more interesting or for people to like us. When we notice that we are embroidering in this way or feel the urge to avoid the truth, we can use it as an opportunity to bring a friendly curiosity to what is going on. Is it that we are afraid of something if we were to speak the truth? Are we trying to please others by giving them what we think they want to hear, rather than risk being unpopular? The more we are able to stick to the truth, the more confidence we can have in ourselves, rather than be plagued by an uneasy mind.

Truthfulness on its own is not enough for kindly speech. Our speech also needs to be helpful. Something may be factually correct, but it may not be helpful to share that with someone or it may not be helpful right now. We might like to reflect whether saying this is going to be of benefit to someone, whether it is likely to promote real harmony. So bringing kindness to bear in our speech is a matter of skill and judgement that we can start giving more attention to anytime and that we can never completely perfect. (Good news for the perfectionists! In an imperfect world, kindly speech – and indeed kindness itself – is a quality that we can always take further and never get to the end of. So we can let go of relating to it as one more thing to perfect and tick off the list and allow it instead to be a helpful source of guidance for how we live our lives.)

One positive practice of kindly speech is called ‘rejoicing in merits’. In this we take time to notice the good qualities of the people around us and try to find an opportunity to let them know what we appreciate about them. It might be congratulating someone on handling well a difficult situation at work or thanking them for helping out in some way. We could say it to their face, send them an email or drop them a card. When we do this it is not to put down or neglect our own good qualities, but rather it is done in a spirit of appreciation and generosity.