

# Appropriate Communication: A Guide to Ethical Engagement

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## Why "Communication" Rather Than "Speech"

The Eightfold Path uses the term *sammā vācā*, traditionally translated as Right Speech. But communication today extends well beyond spoken words. Text messages, emails, social media posts, and all forms of written expression are equally subject to the same ethical demands. The word *appropriate* highlights that what matters is not the medium but the *intention and impact* behind the expression.

Expanding the frame from speech to communication matters practically: it is easier to communicate carelessly in writing than when speaking. The physical absence of the other person, the speed of digital exchange, and the relative anonymity of online contexts all increase the risk of unskillful expression. The principles of *sammā vācā* apply with equal force — perhaps greater force — to every form of communication.

## The Five Principles of Appropriate Communication

- **Truthfulness.** Communicate honestly and authentically. Avoid exaggeration, omission, or deception.
- **Beneficence.** Communicate in ways that genuinely benefit everyone involved. Focus on what unites rather than divides, and be mindful of the consequences of digital and verbal expression.
- **Timeliness.** Consider whether this is the right moment. Even true and well-intentioned communication can cause harm if the timing is wrong.
- **Kindness.** Avoid harmful, hurtful, or aggressive language. Use words to foster understanding and goodwill.
- **Mindfulness and Intentionality.** Pause before speaking, sending, or posting. Ask: Does this arise from goodwill, or from a desire to relieve my own discomfort? Is this communication truly beneficial — for the other person, and for me?

## The Mechanism: Why We Communicate Unskillfully

Unskillful communication doesn't begin with the mouth or the keyboard. It follows a chain:

*phassa* (contact) → *vedanā* (feeling tone) → *taṇhā* (craving) → *upādāna* (clinging) →  
**unskillful expression**

Something reaches us — a message, a comment, a tone of voice (contact). It lands as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (*vedanā*). If unpleasant, craving arises — not necessarily for an object, but for *the discomfort to stop*. We cling to a response, and words follow.

The pause before responding is not patience or politeness. It is an intervention point at *vedanā* — a moment of *sati* (mindfulness) inserted between feeling and reaction. The chain is not broken; it is *seen*, and that seeing is enough to interrupt it. If you see the river, you are not swept away by it.

**Example:** You receive an email that feels critical. Before any conscious thought, an unpleasant feeling arises. The urge to defend yourself appears. The draft reply begins writing itself. The practice is noticing the unpleasant feeling before it becomes a reply.

## The Abhaya Sutta Test (MN 58)

In MN 58, the Buddha offers a five-part test to apply *before* communicating:

- **Is it true and accurate?**
- **Is it beneficial** — does it serve the welfare of the other?
- **Is it timely** — is this the right moment?
- **Is it gentle**, not harsh?
- **Does it arise from goodwill**, not from a desire to wound?

**Truth is necessary but not sufficient.** A statement can be true, untimely, and harmful. The test is cumulative — all five conditions matter. This applies whether the communication is spoken, written, or posted.

## Aristotle: Kairos and the Virtuous Speaker

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics* converge on similar conditions for ethical communication:

- **Logos** — truthful and well-reasoned
- **Ethos** — reflecting the speaker's genuine character and goodwill toward the listener
- **Kairos** — arriving at the right moment, calibrated to the occasion

*Kairos* (the right time, the opportune moment) parallels the Abhaya Sutta's emphasis on timeliness. But Aristotle locates the source of right speech in *aretē* — stable virtue or character. For him, the person of good character doesn't struggle at the moment of speaking; right communication flows from who they already are.

**The key tension:** Aristotle grounds right communication in character formed over time. The Pali approach locates the problem in the reactive chain — even a person of good character can be hijacked at *vedanā*. The pause is mindfulness intervening in a process that runs faster than deliberate thought.

## Practical Applications

- **Pause and Reflect.** Before responding or posting, consider the intention and likely impact. This applies especially to email and social media, where the speed of the medium encourages reaction over reflection.
- **Practice Active Listening.** Be fully present. Notice when the urge to respond arises before the other person has finished — that urge is *vedanā* at work.
- **Mind Your Tone and Delivery.** Align your communication with compassion and clarity. In written communication especially, tone is easily misread — build in the gentleness the Abhaya Sutta requires.
- **Apply the Test.** Before sending: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it helpful? Is the timing right? Does it arise from goodwill?
- **Extend to Digital Communication.** Online posts and comments carry the same ethical weight as spoken words. The absence of a face does not reduce the impact on the person receiving them.

## Guiding Questions for Ethical Communication

Before communicating, ask:

1. Is it true? Am I being honest and accurate?
2. Is it helpful? Does this add value or insight? Does it unify or divide?
3. Is it timely?
4. Is it kind? Will my words harm or heal?
5. What is my intention? Am I being skillful, wholesome, and considerate of the impact on others and myself?

## Discussion Questions

1. The Abhaya Sutta says speak even unwelcome truths if timely and beneficial. How do you know when the moment is right — and whose welfare are you actually serving?
2. Aristotle says virtuous character produces right communication naturally. Buddhism says the reactive chain can override even good intentions. Which fits your experience?
3. *Vedanā* is pre-reflective — it arises before we choose. Does that change moral responsibility for what we say or write?
4. Where in your own communication do you most often skip the Abhaya Sutta test — email, text, in-person argument, social media? What does skipping it feel like?
5. Silence is also communication. Does the Abhaya Sutta's framework apply to not-speaking as much as to speaking?
6. The test asks "is it gentle?" — but sometimes the most compassionate communication is blunt and uncomfortable. How do you hold that?
7. *Kairos* assumes you can read the moment accurately. What distorts that reading — strong *vedanā*, self-interest, habit?
8. The bodily felt sense of the urge to respond — before words form. Can you locate it? Where does it live?

***Words are well spoken when they are true, spoken at the right time, gently, purposefully, and with a mind of goodwill.***

— Vaca Sutta, AN 5:198