

Right Speech

The Buddha's Words By Barbara O'Brien, About.com

The moral discipline portion of the Buddhist Eightfold Path is Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. This essay explores the meaning of "Right Speech."

In Pali, Right Speech is "samma vaca." The word "samma" has a sense of being perfected or completed, and "vaca" refers to words or speech. "Right speech" is more than just "correct" speech. It is the wholehearted expression of our Buddhist practice, and with Action and Livelihood it is interconnected to the other parts of the Eightfold Path -- Right Mindfulness, Right Intention, Right View, Right Concentration, Right Effort.

Right Speech is not just a personal virtue. Modern communication technology has given us a culture that seems saturated with "wrong" speech -- communication that is hateful and deceptive. This engenders disharmony, acrimony, and physical violence.

We tend to think of violent, hateful words as being less wrong than violent action. We may even think of violent words as being justified sometimes. But violent words, thoughts and actions arise together and support each other. So to do peaceful words, thoughts and actions.

Beyond cultivating beneficial or harmful karma, Right Speech is essential to personal practice. Abbess Taitaku Patricia Phelan of the Chapel Hill Zen Group says "Right Speech means using communication as a way to further our understanding of ourselves and others and as a way to develop insight."

The Basics of Right Speech

As recorded in the Pali Canon, the historical Buddha taught that Right Speech had four parts:

Abstain from false speech; do not tell lies or deceive.

Do not slander others or speak in a way that causes disharmony or enmity.

Abstain from rude, impolite or abusive language.

Do not indulge in idle talk or gossip.

Practice of these four aspects of Right Speech goes beyond simple "thou shalt nots." It means speaking truthfully and honestly; speaking in a way to promote harmony and good will; using language to reduce anger and ease tensions; using language in a way that is useful.

If your speech is not useful and beneficial, teachers say, it is better to keep silent.

Right Listening

In his book *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Deep listening is the foundation of Right Speech. If we cannot listen mindfully, we cannot practice Right Speech. No matter what we say, it will not be mindful, because we'll be speaking only our own ideas and not in response to the other person."

This reminds us that our speech is not just our speech. Communication is something that happens between people. We might think of speech as something we give to others, and if we think of it that way, what is the quality of that gift?

Mindfulness includes mindfulness of what's going on inside ourselves. If we aren't paying attention to our own

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emotions and taking care of ourselves, tension and suffering build up. And then we explode.

Words as Nourishment or Poison

Once I took a cab ride with a driver who was listening to a talk radio show. The program was a litany of the host's resentments and anger toward other individuals and groups.

The cab driver apparently listened to this poison all day long, and he was quivering with rage. He responded to the litany with foul expletives, occasionally slapping his hand on the dashboard for emphasis. The cab seemed filled up with hate; I could barely breathe. It was a great relief when the cab ride was over.

This incident showed me that Right Speech is not just about the words I speak, but also the words I hear. Certainly we cannot banish ugly words from our lives, but we can choose to not soak in them.

On the other hand, I can think of many times in my life when someone's words were a gift that healed and comforted.

The Four Immeasurables

Thinking of Right Speech reminds me of the Four Immeasurables. These are:

Loving kindness (metta)

Compassion (karuna)

Sympathetic joy (mudita)

Equanimity (upekkha)

Surely these are all qualities that can be nurtured through Right Speech. Can we train ourselves to use communication that furthers these qualities in ourselves and others?

In his book *Returning to Silence*, Katagiri Roshi said, "Kind speech is not the usual sense of kindness. It can appear in various ways, but ...we should remember that it must constantly be based on compassion.... Under all circumstances that compassion is always giving somebody support or help or a chance to grow."

Right Speech in the 21st Century

Practice of Right Speech has never been easy, but thanks to 21st century technology speech takes forms unimaginable in the Buddha's time. Through the Internet and mass media the speech of one person can be flung around the world.

As we look at this global net of communication, there are plenty of examples of speech used to inflame passion and violence and to separate people into sectarian and ideological tribes. It's not so easy to find speech that leads to peace and group harmony.

Sometimes people justify harsh speech because they are speaking on behalf of a worthy cause. But, ultimately, stirring up acrimony is planting karmic seeds that will hurt the cause we think we're fighting for.

When you live in a world of acrimonious speech, practice of Right Speech requires Right Effort and sometimes even courage. But it is an essential part of the Buddhist path.

More and more I think that communication cannot be hurried, and that friendship needs time and patience for its development.

~ Sangharakshita