

Dhamma talk on Right Speech

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Introduction

1. Hi everyone. Today I am going to talk about the principle of Right Speech. This is the 3rd principle in the Eightfold path. The Eightfold path is divided into 3 sections: Sila, Samadhi, and Pragna¹. Sila means discipline or Ethical conduct, Samadhi means mental purification and pragna means wisdom. Right speech is part of the first section, which is Ethical Conduct Discipline.
2. Even though, every week, we talk about how the 8 steps of the path are not sequential steps, but instead are 8 facets of a single goal (which would be enlightenment), there is a (very mild) sequentialness to the 3 parts of the eightfold path. You see, the first part, which is discipline or Ethical conduct, is the least abstract, and therefore the easiest to begin with. Similarly, the middle part, which deals with mental purification ² is easier to approach than the last, which is wisdom.
So, what I am trying to say here is that ethical conduct encompasses the most approachable part of the eightfold path.
3. With that in mind, I have to say that Right speech is like the awkward middle child of the Eightfold path. It *is* important, but when you compare it to things like Right Action (which deals with not hurting and not killing people) and Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, which talk about meditation (which, we have to admit, is kinda cool), it does seem less significant.
4. But, since I am going to talk about Right Speech, I feel that I should begin by defending it, and telling you why it *is* important. The effect of speech is easy to overlook, I feel, because it is less evident than the effect of, say, punching someone on the nose. After all, haven't we all had times when we mention something to someone in passing only to find out later (often rather painfully) that they were really strongly affected by it?

Even if you are really lucky (or have really good judgement) and have not experienced this, I'm still sure you know that when a friend is unhappy, talking to them can have a huge effect on their state of mind. After all, this being college, there are lots of people who are unhappy and need to be reached out to, so I am pretty sure we have all been there.

So right speech Is important. Now that I've established this, let's talk about the meat of the idea.

Body

- Let me start by defining what Right Speech is. According to the Canon, Right speech is defined as abstaining from lying, divisive speech, abusive speech and idle chatter.

That doesn't really tell us much, does it? I am going to talk about each of these in turn to try and make things clearer.

¹I have no idea if this is the right way to spell this

²do you guys have a better translation for this step? Sorry!

- Let me start with lying. Now we all know Lying is Bad, and even though the canon talks about why lying is bad, I don't want to put you to sleep with the giant list of reasons the pali canon gives. Instead, let me try and summarize: Lying to people kills mutual trust, harms social cohesion, and usually comes about because of bad intentions. The idea of Bad intentions is something I want to come back to.

Even the panca sila, the five precepts that Buddhists are supposed to adhere at all times ³, contains once precept that tells you not to lie.

On the positive side, you are encouraged to tell the truth (duh). Now the canon's encouragement is rather metaphysical; it talks about how the truth is more than just words, but is instead the conveyance of the nature of things as they are. I don't really understand that very well, but it sounds nice. As far as I understand it, lying to people causes trouble, sooner or later, and when you lie you end up hurting people and paying for it. Telling the truth doesn't come with heavy consequences like that, so why not tell the truth instead?

- Now on to Divisive speech (also known as slanderous speech). This is also bad, because, according to the canon, it causes dissention and disharmony amongst people. At the same time, this too comes from bad intentions such as resentment, jealousy, etc.

On the flipside, the canon encourages you to speak words that cause friendship and harmony, and help you win the trust and affection of others. Interestingly, aside from gaining you a retinue of loyal and trusting friends in this life, abstaining from divisive speech (and speaking only friendship-and-harmony-promoting words) the canon promises you a retinue of such friends in future lives as well.

- Next comes Abusive speech, or Harsh speech. This refers to words uttered in anger, meant to cause pain. Abusive speech can be scolding, insulting, or sarcastic. Now, some times you need to scold people (children, for example, or drunk college students if you are an RA or something) and sometimes sarcasm can be fun. I think the key here is that you need to refrain from speaking any such words with the intention of causing *pain*. At the same time, you need to be cautious and not say anything that would cause pain, even if you don't intend to.

The antidote to abusive or harsh speech is patience. I guess this means that even if you really want to say something that will cause pain, if you are angry and you know you are angry, you need to take a deep breath and not say it.

- The last part of Right speech is the hardest to define, and the one that makes me most uncomfortable. This is probably because whenever I say something, it takes a moment to make sure it was not idle chatter. Also, it is the easiest part of the four parts of right speech to break (For me, at least).

So idle chatter is defined as talk that is pointless, that lacks purpose or depth, and communicates nothing of value.

One interesting thing is that back in the day, you only had to try and not be the source of idle chatter. Now, in the present world, you need to try really hard to not expose yourself to too much of it. Frankly, we are surrounded by so much media that most of it (even if it had meaning to begin with) becomes meaningless idle chatter ⁴.

So you should try and not expose yourself to it.

- Now that I've talked of the 4 parts of Right speech, let me share with you something I came across when doing some reading up for the dhamma talk. It is a quotation from the pali Canon (MN 28), and it is about the criteria for deciding what is worth saying.

I think it's pretty neat.

³At least, in teravadha Buddhism

⁴Jersey shore, anyone?

The criteria for deciding what is worth saying [1] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has sympathy for living beings."

For the purposes of illustrating this, let's assume we are at a meeting.

- The first criteria would mean not looking out of the window and saying "Look, a blue duck!," when you know there isn't a blue duck flying outside your window. It would be false, and it would waste everyone's time.
 - The next would be like looking at the person sitting next to you and saying, dude, you have a terrible haircut. That might be true, but it doesn't benefit the meeting, and saying it just kills the mood of everyone around.
 - The third is like if you notice that one of the people at the meeting doesn't contribute much, but instead likes to talk on and on and on (there's always one). Instead of looking at him and saying, "Hey, you should contribute to the meeting or can it," which would be impolite And kill the mood of everyone around you, you could try and be more tactful, and try to shift the attention of the meeting toward someone else.
 - Remember the guy with the terrible haircut sitting next to you? Well, this would be telling them they have a wonderful haircut, and then complimenting everyone else on their wonderful haircuts. Quite aside from the fact that you interrupted an important meeting to talk about haircuts, you've probably left everyone with a poor impression of your taste in haircuts.
 - The next is like, if the person beside you has a wonderful haircut, interrupting the meeting to compliment him or her on it. Sure, the haircut could be wonderful, but mentioning it doesn't do anything productive, and probably interrupted someone's train of thought.
 - Now for the last one: If you have a good idea during the meeting which you can use to contribute, you still shouldn't shout it out randomly. Instead, you need to wait for the right moment to share it. Quite apart from helping you out, it could help you be more gentle with your co-workers, which is just as important.
- And that's all I have for tonight. I'm really sorry about the terrible metaphor regarding a haircut; I had a haircut the other day, and it was the first potentially offensive personal thing that came to mind. In any case, I hope what I said made sense, and that we all have new respect for the importance of Right Speech.
Also, haircuts.