

The Importance of Right Speech in Buddhism and its Relevance Today

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Right speech is the third stage of the noble eightfold path as prescribed by the Buddha and followed by millions of practicing Buddhists. The Buddha lays a lot of importance on the notion of right speech (Samma Vacca). In the Angutara Nikaya, the Buddha mentioned what constitutes right speech, which are basically four kinds of abstentions; namely abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh or hateful speech and abstaining from idle chatter. The Buddha gives reasons in support of his view as to why abstaining from these four kinds of speeches is favourable not only for maintaining the peace and equanimity within an individual but also within a society. It is a known fact that when we say something harsh or slanderous to others it eventually affects our individual peace of mind too. We also know about the many examples of hate speeches which have led to senseless cases of violence and which are well documented within our country and the world. Also, indulging in false speech is not a healthy sign for individuals within a group as this kind of a social group which is based on falsities and lies cannot really survive for long and will eventually lead to chaos. Buddha also told us to refrain from idle chatter or gossip as generally we have seen that idle chatter or gossip does more harm than any good to the individual and the society. Hence, if most of us actually inculcate this third stage (namely, right speech) of the noble eightfold path of the Buddha in our daily life, it would be highly beneficial both for the individual and for the harmony of the society.

Keywords: Buddhism, Speech, Individual, Society

INTRODUCTION

After attaining *Nirvana*, the Buddha realized the answers relating to the questions of suffering, which later on became his teachings also. The first and the most important of His teachings are the four noble truths. The four noble truths are actually related with suffering. According to the Buddha, the first noble truth is that there is suffering (*dukkha*) in this world the second noble truth is that there is a cause of this suffering (*samudaya*), the third noble truth is that there can be a cessation of this suffering (*nirodha*) and the fourth noble truth talks about the path to liberation (*magga*). According to the Buddha, the notion of suffering is tied up with the notion of no-self also known as the *annatta* doctrine. For the Buddha, there is no one permanent self, rather each individual is made up of five sk and has or factors of personality, these are the physical factor (*rupa*), feelings (*vedana*), cognitions (*sanna*), dispositions (*sanskara*) and

consciousness (*vinnana*) (Boiesvert 1995, p.49). There is no permanent self or a higher self over and above these five sk and has, therefore people suffer because they believe that there is a one permanent self, which according to the Buddha is untrue.

The other three great Buddhist teachings are *Pratityasamutpada* which is also called the theory of dependent origination and the Theory of Karma along with the noble eightfold path. Both of these doctrines form an integral part of the ethical teachings of Buddhism. According to the Buddha there is a natural and a universal law of causation which “conditions the appearance of all the events” (Datta & Chatterjee 2008, p.108). In accordance with this law, whenever a particular event (cause) appears, it is followed by another particular event (effect). The existence of everything is conditional, dependant on a cause. This is called the theory of dependant origination: That being thus, this comes to be (Datta & Chatterjee 2008, p109). The belief

in the theory of *Karma* is only a part of this doctrine. *Karma* literally translates to the moral quality of an action. It is a natural law governing all human beings, in which *Karma* means intentional action and intentional action can be considered apt or inapt, healthy or unhealthy. Good *Karma* is when speech, thought and action is guided by non greed and bad *Karma* is when speech, thought and action is guided by greed.

The other important doctrine of the Buddha which would be our main focus in this paper is the noble eightfold path. In fact, the eightfold path is intimately connected with the four noble truths as the last of the four noble truths; namely the path to liberation is the noble eightfold path and the first factor of the path; namely right understanding is nothing but the understanding of the four noble truths. The path to liberation is broadly divided into three parts which are absorbed in the eightfold path, these are *Sila* (morality), *Panna* (wisdom) and *Samadhi* (meditation). The eightfold path constitutes of Right understanding, Right resolve, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness and Right meditation. Buddhism can be divided into two major schools of thought; namely the Theravada and the Mahayana. The Theravada school, literally means 'the school of the elders'. In Theravada Buddhism, importance is given first of all in keeping the five precepts (pancasila) as a guide to right living. Without the preservation of morality, no higher culture is possible according to the Theravadins.

Right Speech in the Noble Eightfold Path

All the aspects of the eightfold path practiced together are meant to bring about a change in an individual that involves changes at an intellectual, emotional and moral realms. One might think that right speech as an independent stage or aspect is not necessary and that speech being a kind of action should come under the aspect 'right action'. Since the effects of speech are not as immediately evident as those of bodily action, its potential and importance might be overlooked sometimes. But Buddhism considers right speech as one of the most important principles as far as the individual human beings and the society is concerned.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, body, speech and mind are associated respectively with the three psychic centres. The body is associated

with the head centre, speech with the throat centre and mind with the heart centre. There are many correlations of body, mind and speech with one of them being that the throat centre representing speech lies between the head and the heart centres. The head not only represents the body but also the intellect or understanding; while the heart centre represents our feelings and emotions. The fact that the throat centre; i.e. speech lies in between the head and the heart centre means that speech shares the nature of both, that is both our thoughts and emotions. Right speech therefore gives expression both to wisdom and to love and compassion (Sangharakshita 1990, p.55-56).

In Pali, Right speech is 'Samma vaca'; the word 'samma' refers to a sense of complete or perfect and 'vaca' means speech. Right speech is more than just correct speech, rather for The Buddha, it is a passionate manifestation of our Buddhist practice. Speech or verbal communication is something that we have to engage in all the time, whether we like it or not we have to communicate. If we think about it, it is speech or verbal communication, with the help of a structured language, that distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. If we try and reflect, a great part of our culture depends, directly or indirectly on speech. Right speech is a mindful practice. By undertaking this practice we commit to greater awareness of our body, mind and emotions. Mindfulness makes it easier to recognize what we are about to say, and thus it offers us the freedom to choose what we speak. With right mindfulness we learn to restrain ourselves in moments of anger, hostility and confusion (Roth 2017, p.56). Right or perfect speech is an important part of the entire Buddhist ethics the practice of which leads to cultivation of virtue, truthfulness and liberation. To the question 'What is right speech?', the Buddha answers that right speech can be divided into four components; namely abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh or hateful speech and abstaining from idle chatter (<https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-right-speech-reconsidered/>).

The Four Abstentions which Constitute Right Speech

Abstaining from False Speech

In the Pali canon, specifically in the *Angutara Nikaya*, the Buddha mentions the

following about False speech : “Herein someone avoids false speech and abstains from it . He speaks the truth, is devoted to truth , worthy of confidence and not a deceiver of people. Being at a meeting, or amongst people, or in a society, or in the kings court and called upon and asked as witness to tell what he knows, if he knows nothing, he answers I have seen nothing, and if he has seen , he answers I have seen. Thus He never knowingly speaks a lie, either for the sake of his advantage, or for the sake of any other person, or for the sake of any other advantage whatsoever”. With this statement the Buddha reveals both the negative and the positive side of the precept. The negative side is abstaining from lying and the positive side is speaking the truth.

Worthy of observation in this precept is the intention to deceive or lie. If an individual speaks falsely or tells a lie believing it to be true then the breach of the precept as an intention to deceive is absent. As far as deceptive intention in terms of lying is concerned, it can be caused due to three factors : greed , hatred and delusion. Greed can be a cause for lying for someone who is selfish enough to gain personal advantage for oneself or someone close to oneself or the person tells a lie for material wealth , position or admiration. With hatred as the motive , the lie takes the form of malicious lie intending to hurt or damage someone, whereas when delusion is the motive for someone to lie , the result is a more toned down version of falsehoods; namely irrational lie, compulsive lie (psychological disorder) or just lying for the sake of pastime or humour.

Abandoning false speech is of utmost importance for an individual if she/he has to walk on the path of a Buddhist monk. It is of paramount importance for the Buddha, that is why giving up lying is considered to be a part of the five precepts of morality. Buddha has cited several reasons as to why it is of so much importance. The first reason being that lying in general is not good for a harmonious society or for mutual upliftment of the individuals in a society as a whole. A society made up of liars is bound to perish in due course of time because of mass suspicion amongst the people in the society , the social order will collapse and will eventually lead to chaos. The second

reason which the Buddha states is of an individual nature. An individual who does not abstain from false speech tends to surround himself in a web of lies as one lie leads to another and the process repeats itself until it is impossible for the individual to move out of the self-constructed web of lies. Therefore, an individual should abandon false speech completely.

Now, coming to the positive side of the precept, i.e. Speaking the truth. Again the concept of intention comes into play here as well since right speech means telling the truth intentionally and speaking in ways that are trustworthy. Truthfulness is both a psychological and a spiritual phenomenon and besides factual accuracy, speaking the truth also involves an attitude of honesty and sincerity. Psychologically speaking , in our day to day life, when something wearisome is bothering our mind, something about which we are really concerned, it is only when we speak out the truth to someone about how we really feel do we stop ourselves from worrying further. Such is the power of words and of perfect speech. For the Buddha, to realize the truth , our whole being has to be brought into actuality with things as they are, which requires that in communications with others we respect things as they are by speaking the truth and abstaining from lying or false speech.

Abstaining from Slanderous Speech

Slanderous speech can be said to be a speech which is intended to create enmity between individuals or a malicious statement or report about someone. Slanderous speech can also be referred to as communication of false statements which is injurious to a person’s reputation. The motive behind such speech is generally aversion or resentment of a rivals success and the cruel intention to cause hurt to someone whom one considers as a rival. Slanderous speech is one of the most destructive moral transgressions.

When the slanderous speech is false , one negative adds with another negative and they both combine to produce an extremely unwholesome Karma. In slanderous speech , the underlying intention is to cause emotional harm to others, to pull them down and thus raise oneself up. Hate speech is also a kind of slanderous speech as the root of a slanderous speech is that of hate. The opposite of slanderous speech is the

speech which promotes harmony and unity between people. Therefore, the Buddha says that right speech is not only truthful but is also affectionate and loving which originates from a mind of compassion and sympathy. As the Dalai Lama says, "there should be a feeling of mutual love between people, a feeling of understanding, only then shall we also know what the other individual's needs are and only then can a society be said to be truly harmonious, truly in synchronization".

Abstaining from Harsh Speech

In the *Dhammapada*, *Danda vagga*, it is mentioned "speak not harshly to anyone, those thus addressed will retort. Painful indeed is vindictive speech. Blows in exchange may bruise you." Harsh speech is speech uttered in anger intended to cause the hearer pain. Since the violation in this case tends to come out of anger which works through impulse and not deliberately, the karmic result of harsh speech is relatively less severe than slanderous or false speech, but still harsh speech is an unpleasant act from which one should refrain. Such speech can obtain different forms; one is abusive speech which can be reprimanding, shouting, cursing and defiling another person with bitter words to cause emotional hurt. The second form of harsh speech is insult; i.e. assigning a predicate to an individual which actually demeans the person.

The third is that of sarcasm, in which the level of deliberate intention is higher than the other two. In sarcasm or sarcastic speech; it is to speak to someone in a way that which on the face of it applauds the individual, but with such a twist of tone in which the ironic element becomes clearer and eventually causes pain to the hearer. The main root of harsh speech is aversion assuming the form of anger.

Instead, the Buddha talks about patience and silence in the moments of anger. We tend to think that violent, hateful words are less wrong than violent and hateful action, we might even think that harsh and violent words are justified sometimes. But according to Buddhism (and even in Jungian developmental psychology), hateful thoughts and hateful words lead to or become the process for hateful or venomous actions and they support each other. The main point to consider is to avoid speech that is motivated by anger and ill will, learning to tolerate

blame and criticism from others, to respect differences in viewpoints and to endure abuse without a feeling of retaliation. Only then can an individual and a society be said to live in perfect harmony and peace.

Abstaining from Idle Chatter

In the *Mahasihananda sutta* of the *Dighani kaya*, "The ascetic Gotama speaks at the proper time, what is true and to the point the *Dhamma* and the discipline." Therefore the Buddha knows when to speak, how much to speak and what to speak. Idle chatter is pointless talk, speech that lacks any purpose or rather, speech that communicates nothing of value. The Buddha advises that idle talk or gossip should be curbed as much as possible and a state of silence should be achieved. Idle talk or chatter disrupts serious and constructive discussion, although humour and small talk aimed at putting another person at ease may be used in moderation. Speech and other forms of communication should be aimed at benefit of the individual and the betterment of the society. Since the metaphysical questions regarding the cosmos and the origin of the world are not aimed at the ending of suffering and hence for the betterment of the society, therefore even asking these metaphysical questions and pondering upon them is useless waste of time and is considered as idle chatter by the Buddha. When asked about these metaphysical questions the Buddha answers simply with silence. Therefore, for the Buddha the mind should not stray around in idle chatter but rather be in peace and harmony with itself and others in the society (Bhikku Bodhi 2009, p.25).

Right Listening and Silence

In Buddhist ethical theories, emphasis is also given on two more aspects of right communication which can be bought under the precept of right speech and these are right listening and silence. The Buddha emphasized a lot on the notion of Silence and He himself communicated with a lot of seekers through observing silence. The Buddha believed that if your speech is not useful and beneficial it is better to remain silent. In fact the Buddha practiced silence when someone would ask the Buddha about certain metaphysical questions which do not lead to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha's avoidance of these metaphysical

questions has been called ‘The silence of the Buddha’. Some of these questions to which the Buddha remained silent are as follows: “Is the universe eternal or non eternal?; Is the universe finite or infinite?; Is the soul one with the body or is it anything other than the body?; Does a Tathagatha exist after death or He does not exist after death or He both exists and not exists after death?” ([https:// www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka /sn/sn44/sn44.0_08.than.html](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn44/sn44.0_08.than.html)). The Buddha who had realized the true nature of these issues , in response to these questions put to Him just observed silence.

The Buddha’s silence regarding these issues is more meaningful than attempting to deliver hundreds of discourses on them. When the Buddha knew that the questioner was not in a situation to understand the answers to these questions because of its profound nature , the Buddha chose to remain silent. He did not attempt to give an answer to all the questions put to Him as he felt that it was meaningless and unfruitful to respond to questions asked not with the intention to learn how to lead a spiritual life, rather simply to create an opportunity for “empty hair splitting”.

He was a practical teacher , filled with compassion towards fellow humans and animals alike. For Buddha, there is a close link between truth and silence. Buddha’s silence was not wordlessness or noiselessness, rather it had a transforming power permeating the atmosphere around Him with such intensity that even people seated around His presence experienced ineffable bliss. In the Brahmajala sutta of the Dighanikaya , the Buddha explains and lists the sixty two ways in which the Brahmins and recluses “reconstruct the past and arrange the future”. The Buddha says “they are trapped in the net with its sixty two divisions, and wherever they emerge and try to get out, they are caught and held in this net.”

For the Buddha , another important aspect that makes human communication possible is the aspect of Right listening. It reminds us that our speech is not just our speech rather communication is something that happens between people. 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 can never be mindful , because we will be speaking

only our own ideas and not in response to the other person”. This statement shows how important right listening is, if one has to communicate in a harmonious way. Before teaching the Dhamma , the Buddha used to propound to His disciples “Listen carefully , pay attention and I will speak”. There is a beautiful Theravada saying that we have just one mouth and two ears, therefore we should listen more as compared to speaking. The Buddha laid more focus on listening profoundly which includes the whole heart, complete presence and focus to the words of the speaker and being totally in the present moment while putting aside our egotisms and actually truly listening. To speak is to express words that carry certain meanings , and to listen is to be conscious of the words that are spoken. Human communication is a process that requires both speaking and listening concurrently in order to present our ideas, emotions and desires to each other. Like any other mindful practice, right listening is both a talent and also a way of life. “Only when the seekers are able to listen rightly to the Dhamma, are they able to get the true essence of the Buddha’s teachings”. That is why Buddha gave great importance to right listening as a part of human communication and when the Buddha spoke about Right speech, He was including in it both sides of the communication process ; namely intentional speech and listening (Hanh 1998, p.48).

The Relevance of Right Speech and Concluding Remarks

For the Buddha, the worst form of speech along with false speech is that of Hate speech. History has been evidence with plenty of examples of hate speeches used to incite passion or hatred amongst people and dividing them into different sectarian and ideological communities and further leading to large scale violence. Internationally examples of hate speech leading to large scale violence can be taken from the Nazi holocaust. Although Hitler was a ‘good orator’, he did not use his gift of oratory in a constructive way. He came to power partly because of the political situation in Germany at that time and partly because of his ability to communicate in a proficient manner. His hateful and vile public speeches against the Jews and the communists ultimately led to large scale massacres the world has ever seen. Countless other examples of hateful

speech leading to large scale violence can be taken from history like Mussolini, Stalin and much recently to the suicide bombers and religious extremists. Examples like these make us realize how important it is to monitor speech to a certain extent and how correct Buddha was when He said the same thing about 2500 years ago.

The Buddha always preached about compassion and love for the other human beings. Speech on the matters of public concern was given due importance by the Buddha simply because such kind of speech leads to the determination of harmony and disharmony in the society. For the Buddha harsh or hateful speech leads to harsh or hateful action which further leads to the defilement of the entire society. Also harsh or hateful speech in itself is also a wrong thing since it also leads to emotional pain for the recipient of this kind of speech. Now hate speech does not necessarily mean words spoken face to face to another person, Hate can also be propagated by written words. A famous example of this kind can also be pointed out. Not long ago a writer was charged with viciously and gratuitously wounding the feelings and dignity of millions of people. He was charged with exhibiting flagrant prejudice against a particular community and outrageously slandering their beliefs (White 2011, p.406). Although He also got the same form of 'hate' by the 'victims' in the form of 'Fat was' and look out notices against him.

Therefore, from this example we can clearly see hate speech working both sides and also hate which is spread through any form, be it through speech or through written words can lead to more hate. Now through the readings of the Buddha we can make out that He was aware of this fact. In fact, the kind of speech which belongs to any of the four categories which the Buddha wants us to abstain from, can seriously impact the maximum number of people and can create an environment of disharmony. Hence, we can see how important the notion of right speech was for the Buddha and how important it is during these current times.

It is true that the Buddha mentioned the importance of right speech in the eightfold path many times in His discourses. The notion of Right speech is intricately related

with the other notions of the eightfold path. Now, If we sit down and focus our attention on ourselves, we realize that all our thoughts, conceptual constructions and volitions are constructed through or it arises directly or indirectly from language. Language is a social construct made by humans so that communication between each other is possible. In fact our thought is also made up of language, therefore speech can be communicated to oneself through language in the form of thought. This is where mindfulness meets speech, therefore we should train our mind in such a way so that we speak to ourselves with the same equanimity as we speak with others. So much of speech is unconscious or a recurrence of our stream of thought.

Speaking rightly or talking rightly to oneself is imperative for a peaceful state of mind and when the individual mind is peaceful because of practicing right speech with oneself; compassion, love and joy flows outwards towards other human beings. Even if one does not understand the Buddhist philosophy or beliefs one can still benefit from the action of right speech. Speech is a powerful force that binds all of us together. Therefore the Buddha emphasizes on Right speech as propagating truthfulness, compassion, kindness and equanimity which ultimately can become a powerful motivator for the Good. By using one's gift of speech to create uplifting thoughts within oneself, it can also create the same in others. Again emphasis should be given to the intention before the speech as what matters the most for the Buddha, is 'Intentional Right Speech' and not mere 'Right Speech' that, in the Buddhist view, leads to the betterment of an individual and the society and ultimately leads to the cessation of Suffering.

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