

RIGHT SPEECH

Mudita Nisker

www.comoptions.com

Many people long to live their lives in accordance with higher principles. They feel disheartened when they get caught up in the repetitive irritations of everyday life. It can be quite humbling to think that we are living with wisdom only to find ourselves arguing and not getting along with those around us. We are enticed by our desires, wanting things our own way. We blurt out our thoughts and feelings, alienating each other. A real challenge is to incorporate our wisdom into our lives.

How can we express the wisdom we have in our lives? These are the kinds of issues many people bring to Dan and me in our communication work. I find that the Buddha's teaching on right speech offers useful guidelines. Right speech can promote harmony between people by fostering more skillful communication.

In traditional Buddhist teaching, right speech is one of the steps in the eightfold noble path. Its four guiding principles are:

1. Telling the truth
2. Not speaking harshly or cruelly
3. Not engaging in useless speech
4. Not gossiping

In working with my clients, I often suggest these principles as a guide to practicing mindfulness in everyday speech. By keeping the focus on the speaker, they encourage us to look within ourselves rather than to judge others. Following these four simple rules would eliminate much of the conflict, misunderstanding and hurt feelings that result from careless speech.

I prefer the term skillful speech to right speech. Skillful suggests speech that is acquired through practice. The term "right speech" is often misunderstood as "I'm right and you're wrong." This kind of polarized thinking is exactly the opposite of the spirit of the Buddha's teaching. Right/wrong arguments harden people's positions, leading them to lose sight of what is really important to them. I have even heard couples argue over which of them was using "right speech," evidence that when people are caught up in anger almost anything can be used as a club.

To avoid the polarity of right /wrong speech, I teach the concept of intentional speech, that is, being mindful of one's purpose in speaking. When people are aware of their

intention and express their thoughts and feelings truthfully (and with kindness, if possible), they are likely to achieve their aim and increase compassionate understanding. When they are unaware of their intention, they are most likely to forget the Buddha's four principles of right speech and resort to lying or stretching the truth to make a point, shouting hurtful and unnecessary words, and wasting time talking behind each other's backs.

The discrepancy between how one wants to live one's life and how one actually lives it can be particularly distressing. Most of us find it is easier to behave in accordance with higher principles when we're alone rather than when we're with people we live with daily. It is the difficulties of familiar life--petty irritations and ego clashes--that present the greatest tests of our belief and commitment to right speech.

Recently, I worked with a young couple, both serious students on a spiritual path, who were disturbed to find themselves squabbling over household rules. Neat and orderly surroundings were important to Stacey, and she wanted the dishes washed as soon as they finished eating. Jim (fictional names), on the other hand, often left the dishes in the sink to clean up later.. Their arguments over the dishes began to escalate, as evidenced by the following conversation they reported to me.

Stacey: How many times have I asked you not to leave your dishes in the sink? You know I can't stand to have dirty dishes around. Why do you keep doing this?

Jim: Can't you see that I'm trying to finish this assignment? Why does everything have to be done according to your time schedule? Doesn't mine count? Now stop nagging about this.

Stacey: I'm not nagging. I'm telling you that I don't want to clean up after you..

Jim: When did I ever ask you to do that? I always clean up after myself. The difference is that you're compulsive about it and I'm not.

Stacey: I can't talk to you. You discount whatever I say.

Using the four principles of skillful speech as our guide, we can see where Stacy and Jim lost focus of what they wanted to achieve and worked against themselves.

Telling the truth: Most people believe that they should speak the truth, but which truth? One's person's truth is not necessarily the other person's truth. In this case, Stacey and Jim made the common error of confusing the facts of the situation with their assumptions about the situation. The fact of this situation was the dirty dishes in the sink. What those

dishes meant to each one, however, was open to interpretation. Stacey assumed that Jim's leaving the dishes in the sink meant that Jim expected her to clean up after him. Moreover, when he didn't do it, she assumed he dismissed her wishes. Jim reacted to her assumption with one of his own: that Stacey was compulsive.

Many disagreements result from people being unaware of the other person's assumptions and often of their own as well. Articulating assumptions illuminates each person's truth, allowing them to separate fact from assumption. Once Stacey and Jim learned to be mindful of these distinctions, they were able to think about how to resolve their disagreement.

Not speaking harshly: When people are in conflict, they often express their anger or annoyance by making sweeping accusations or trading insults, as Stacey and Jim did. Learning to express themselves clearly and firmly, however, they were able to resolve the situation swiftly.

Stacey: Would you mind rinsing the breakfast dishes in the sink and putting them in the dishwasher?

Jim: I'll do it in a little while.

Stacey: I'd appreciate your doing it now. Looking at them really bothers me.

Jim: I'm right in the middle of something. If it's bothering you, maybe you can wash them now, and I'll do the dinner dishes.

In this dialogue, Stacey and Jim stated clearly and truthfully what they wanted without insulting each other. Stacey expressed what bothered her. Jim didn't cave in, but he responded in a way that showed he respected her feelings and that he did not expect her to clean up after him.

Useless speech: When we are mindful of our intentions, we are less likely to engage in useless speech. Some individuals, for example, feel compelled to blurt out their anger whenever they are upset. Later, after the dust settles, they may see the situation differently and regret what they said. In my communication work, I ask clients if anyone modeled angry behavior when they were growing up. Typically, it is a parent, and I suggest tongue-in-cheek that they may be channeling him or her. This suggestion often helps clients understand that their behavior demonstrates their conditioning more than their choosing.

Changing behavior requires self-awareness. I encourage my clients to pause when they recognize an angry thought and to ask themselves: Will expressing this thought be useful? Will it help me achieve the outcome that I want?

Not gossiping: Gossip is often untrue, cruel, and useless, and those who follow the Buddha's first three principles of right speech would find little to gossip about. I emphasize intention as the overriding principle of skillful speech and self-questioning as the means by which we can test our intention. For example, when we complain about someone to a third party, is our intention to make ourselves look good and the other person look bad? When we repeat unflattering information about others, is our intention to discredit them or make them appear foolish?

Inseparable from right speech is good listening. When we talk without hearing the other person, we are engaged in a monologue, not a dialogue. Staying open to others' thoughts and feelings enhances understanding and harmony. We can bring our wisdom into the world through our words. The more skillfully we speak and listen, the more skillfully we can live our lives.

Originally published in Tricycle Magazine, Spring 1999