The Noble Eightfold Path: Right Speech - *samma vaca*

### September 27, 2018 ***Right Understanding*** and ***Right Intention*** were part of the prajna group – they are aspects of wisdom that are the ground of action.

With ***Right Speech*** we move into the Sila – the Ethics, the Precepts. These steps include ***Right Speech, Right Action*** and ***Right Livelihood***. These are the specific means by which we align our lives with the Truth of the Dharma and our intentions and resolves. With ***Right Speech*** we’re beginning to our lives so as to make our every action the action of a Buddha.

***Right Speech*** is the third of the eight path factors in [the Noble Eightfold Path](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/index.html). It points us to correct speech, harmful speech (such as lying), [divisive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/divisive) speech, harsh speech, and senseless speech. And along with ***Right Speech*** may I suggest it also points us to ***Right Listening***.

The Buddha is clear about ***Right Speech***. He says: *And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, & from idle chatter: This is called right speech*. — Magga-vibhanga Sutta

False speech - lying.  
 Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to say only what is true  
Malicious speech - divisive speech   
 – using speech in ways that create discord among people.  
 Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to speak in ways that

promote harmony among people  
Harsh speech – not using swear words   
 – not using a cynical, hostile or raised tone of voice   
 Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to use a tone of voice that   
 is pleasing, kind, and gentle.

Idle chatter – not engaging in gossip.

Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to speak mindfully in order

that our speech is useful and purposeful.

Yes, ***Right Speech*** is rooted in ***Right Understanding*** and Right Intention. AND it is rooted in our bodies in the ways that our bodies hold anger, hostility, confusion, or fear.

And because of this we have the opportunity to look to our bodies to give us the information we need to pay attention - to be mindful. Is our voice more high-pitched than usual? Is our voice too loud? Are our knuckles white? What does this tell us? And what is the effect of what we say on others? Do our words create suffering? Do they offer compassion? Do they create happiness in our encounter. Remember, enlightened action leaves no wake.

And because our paying attention to those cues is part of ***Right Speech***, may I suggest that what Beth Roth in Tricycle <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-right-speech-reconsidered/> calls ***Right Listening*** is, too.  
  
Webster’s dictionary defines ‘listen’ as “to pay attention to sound” and “to hear with thoughtful attention.”    
  
Yet effective listening means paying attention to more than just sound, and therefore requires that we use more than just our ears. As Dogen says we need to learn to hear with our eyes and see with our ears.

That means we attend to physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions, as well as to the voice, facial expressions, gestures, pauses, underlying meanings, and rich nuances that accompany the spoken words of others.

Thich Nhat Hanh calls this “deep listening.”    
  
It is what physician Rachel Naomi Remen calls “generous listening.”   
  
Buddhist teacher and Hospice trainer Joan Halifax calls “listening from the heart.”

**Five keys to right speech** *Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five? "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will*. — Magga-vibhanga Sutta: An Analysis of the Path.  
  
Before speaking the Buddha advises us to reflect on whether what we want to say is truthful, kind, necessary and timely.

## **The criteria for deciding what is worth saying**

*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.*

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

*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.*

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

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

*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.* — [MN 58](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.058.than.html)

## **Reflect on your speech, before, during, and after speaking** *The Buddha speaks to his son, Rahula: Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I want to perform — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal act of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then any verbal act of that sort is fit for you to do.*

*While you are performing a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I am doing — is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.*

*Having performed a verbal act, you should reflect on it... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed and joyful, training day and night in skillful mental qualities."* — [MN 61](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.061.than.html)

## **Ten wholesome topics of conversation**

"There are these ten topics of proper conversation. Which ten? Talk on   
modesty

contentment

seclusion

non-entanglement

arousing persistence

[virtue](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sila/index.html)

[concentration](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-samadhi/index.html)

discernment

release

the knowledge & vision of release.   
These are the ten topics of conversation. If you were to engage repeatedly in these ten topics of conversation, you would outshine even the sun & moon, so mighty, so powerful — to say nothing of the wanderers of other sects." — AN 10.

## **How to admonish another skillfully**

"O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who desires to admonish another should do so after investigating five conditions in himself and after establishing five other conditions in himself. What are the five conditions which he should investigate in himself?

Am I one who practices purity in bodily action, flawless and untainted...?

Am I one who practices purity in speech, flawless and untainted...?

Is the heart of goodwill, free from malice, established in me towards fellow-farers in the holy life...?

Am I or am I not one who has heard much, who bears in mind what he has heard, who stores up what he has heard? Those teachings which are good alike in their beginning, middle, and ending, proclaiming perfectly the spirit and the letter of the utterly purified holy life — have such teachings been much heard by me, borne in mind, practiced in speech, pondered in the heart and rightly penetrated by insight...?

Are the Patimokkhas [rules of conduct for monks and nuns] in full thoroughly learned by heart, well-analyzed with thorough knowledge of their meanings, clearly divided sutta by sutta and known in minute detail by me...?

"These five conditions must be investigated in himself.

"And what other five conditions must be established in himself?

Do I speak at the right time, or not?

Do I speak of facts, or not?

Do I speak gently or harshly?

Do I speak profitable words or not?

Do I speak with a kindly heart, or inwardly malicious?

O bhikkhus, these five conditions are to be investigated in himself and the latter five established in himself by a bhikkhu who desires to admonish another. — AN V (From *The Patimokkha,* Ñanamoli Thera, trans.)