

Right Speech

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Tonight the topic is just about Right Speech.

Right Speech is defined in the Pali, in the Pali Texts; The Buddha he said “What is Right Speech?
abstaining from telling lies
abstaining from tale-bearing
abstaining from abusive speech
abstaining from idle chatter”

So first we have to find out the meanings of each of these.

The first one is abstaining from telling lies or abstaining from false speech, and the following translation is by Bhikkhu Bodhi. It’s from the Samannaphala Sutta which is a talk about the benefits of being a monk and in that the Buddha he describes the virtue of a monk, and there’s a part of it concerned with speech. So the Buddha in this translation says:

“having abandoned false speech he abstains from falsehood, he speaks only the truth, he lives devoted to truth, trustworthy and reliable; he does not deceive anyone in the world.”

So abstaining from telling lies which is one of the factors in Right Speech doesn’t only mean not telling lies but it means just to speak the truth and not deceiving people - to be honest; but sometimes when we speak the truth though it’s not of benefit to people so practically sometimes we have to think about whether the truth is appropriate to speak it or not - whether it will be of benefit to somebody or not.

So actually I’m going to go onto that later I think about how to practise all these but first we’ll go through the definitions. So the first thing is to abstain from telling lies. The second one I translate as tale-bearing and in this translation it’s translated as slander. The reason I don’t translate it as slander is that slander is usually a lie about somebody that isn’t true but in the definition here the person he doesn’t slander somebody - he hears something that is true about somebody else or said about somebody else and then he goes and tells somebody else to go and create division amongst them. So it says here “having abandoned slander, he abstains from slander; he does not repeat elsewhere what he has heard here in order to divide others from the people here; nor does he repeat here what he has heard elsewhere in order to divide these from the people there; thus he is a reconciler of those who are divided and a promoter of friendships, rejoicing, delighting and exalting in concord. He speaks only words that are conducive to concord. This too pertains to his moral discipline.” So this practice the Buddha is referring to is not telling lies about somebody and constructing lies and fabrications and taking them to other people but you actually hear somebody say bad things about one person and then you go to that person and say “this person said this about you” in order to make them dislike one person and also make them like yourself more - they think you’re their friend then. So if it was an

outright lie as in slander then that would also come under false speech in the first place - so usually I translate the second one as tale-bearing - taking a story from one person to another, carrying it from one place to another in order to create dissension. So that's the second type of speech that we should abstain from.

The third type is abusive speech, or here translated as harsh speech:

“having abandoned harsh speech, he abstains from harsh speech; he speaks only such words as are gentle, pleasing to the ear, endearing, going to the heart, polite, amiable and agreeable to the manyfolk. This too pertains to his moral discipline”.

So for harsh speech or abusive speech in the Vinaya we have ten bases for it - Sometimes you abuse somebody because of their race, because of their religion, because of their caste, because of their family, because of their work, because of their intelligence - things like that - just calling people names, abusing them, calling them vulgar things or whatever - that type of abuse - this is also included in abusive speech.

The next one is translated here as idle chatter - I think that's a good enough translation of it - it means talk that is of no benefit to anybody:

“having abandoned idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter; he speaks at the right time, speaks what is factual and beneficial, speaks on the Dhamma and the Discipline; his words are worth treasuring, they are timely, backed by reasons, measured and connected with the good. This too pertains to his moral discipline”.

We'll go on to the commentaries because there are some interesting things in it:

Going back to telling lies: There's an interesting point in the commentary about the degree of harm that is done in doing these different actions - it depends on different factors. It says:

“when the welfare that it destroys is slight, it is less blameworthy; when the welfare destroyed is great it is more blameworthy.”

So depending on what context the lie is - whether it is a small lie or something that's going to hurt somebody a great deal - then the kamma is different and the result from it is going to be different. So they give an example here:

“when a householder reluctant to part with a certain possession denies that he owns it, it is of little blame, but when he is called to witness and lies for the sake of destroying another's welfare then the blame is heavy.”

So we have small lies and big lies - the big ones that hurt other people - if you go to court and lie in order to destroy that person.

There's also another interesting one here about telling jokes; sometimes jokes are lies:

“for monks the blame is light when they speak in jestful exaggeration e.g. after getting a little oil or ghee they say “oil flows like a river in the village today”, but the blame is heavy when they claim to have seen something they did not see when they bear false witness in a monastic disciplinary proceedings.”

So telling lies also involves exaggeration sometimes - in telling jokes sometimes we tell lies. These are less of a bad kammic act but in the commentaries they mention that we should abstain from even telling lies for fun when we're telling jokes. In the Rahulovada(spelling?) Sutta the Buddha he told his son Rahula he admonished him “Even for a joke I will not tell a lie - thus you should train yourself.”

So even for fun, just in a joke, even when you tell a joke you've got to be honest and not exaggerate in the way we turn things around sometimes. It's quite hard to do sometimes. Sometimes when we joke about something or exaggerate or be sarcastic or whatever this is also considered to be a lie.

For tale-bearing, the commentary says "the act is less blameworthy when the persons one divides are of inferior moral qualities; more blameworthy when they are of superior moral qualities."

So this means that when you do an action, the person that you harm, depending upon their virtue, their standing in virtue, the harm that you do to a virtuous person actually gives a worse kammic consequence in the future.

If the people are immoral and you engage in tale-bearing and split them up then that one is less reprehensible, it brings less result than if you divide people of virtuous conduct.

So for abusive speech or harsh speech, the commentary says "harsh speech is the definitely harsh volition occasioning bodily or vocal effort that cuts into the quick of another's heart. Such effort cutting into the quick of another's heart does not count as harsh speech when it is backed by tenderness of mind. For parents sometimes tell their children "May robbers cut you into bits" but in truth they do not want even a lotus leaf to fall on them; and preceptors and teachers sometimes say to their pupils "What is the use with you - shameless rascals get out!" yet they wish their success in study and spiritual achievement. Harsh speech is less blameworthy when the person at which it is directed is of inferior moral qualities; more blameworthy when he is of superior moral qualities."

So sometimes harsh speech isn't harsh speech - or isn't abusive unless you have anger behind it. Even the Buddha he used to call some of the monks "Mogapurisa(spelling?) you useless man!" he used to say to some of them before he made a rule, but he did it with compassion to show them that they'd done the wrong thing, just to make a point. He didn't do it out of anger. So sometimes if you don't have anger or you care for somebody and you're saying things like this it's not counted as abusive speech. It's only when you're angry, you have anger in your mind and you're doing it that it counts as abusive speech.

Abusive speech is more blameworthy when the person whom it is directed is of higher moral qualities. In the texts they have the example of abusing or reviling an enlightened person - this is very reprehensible and brings a big kammic consequence. A person who abuses an Ariya cannot attain enlightenment in this life until they apologise to that person. So this one is one that all Burmese teach us to be scared of - is to falsely accuse an Ariya - Ariyupavada (spelling?) kamma is a kamma that will obstruct you in your meditation; and also abusing an Ariya, getting angry with them and abusing them - if you do that then they usually advise us to go and apologise to that person - just in case they are an Ariya and you don't know about it - you have to be scared of this one. If you accidentally abuse an Ariya or even to criticise them with an angry mind then that can obstruct your meditation practice.

Concerning idle chatter it says in the commentary that it is less blameworthy when indulgence is mild and more blameworthy when indulgence is great. So they characterise the kammic effect from it by the length of time you engage in it.

It's also worth noting that I think it's only an Arahanta who doesn't engage in idle chatter - compared with the Sotapanna (Stream-enterer), Once-returner, I don't know about the Non-returner (Anagami) - I think it's only the Arahanta who doesn't engage in idle chatter. So they must be very quiet people.

The Buddha gave some examples of a form of idle chatter which he also calls "animal talk" or frivolous chatter:

"talk about kings, talk about thieves, ministers of state, talk about armies, dangers and wars, talk about food, drink, clothing and lodgings, talk about adornments and perfumes, talk about relatives, vehicles, villages, towns, cities and countries; talk about women (or men) and talk about heroes; street-talk and talk by the well, talk about those departed in days gone by; rambling chit-chat, speculations about the world and about the sea; talk about gain and loss. He abstains from such frivolous chatter."

So it's pretty much what most people talk about. So there's not much left after we have gone through these - you see that the Buddha he mustn't have talked very much and what he did talk about was just about Dhamma. So it's very hard to be like this straight away.

There is another place in the commentaries where it mentions that not all talk about kings and thieves and ministers etc. is idle chatter - it depends on the context in which it is spoken because even the Buddha sometimes he would use them as examples to illustrate a point of Dhamma. So in the context of Dhamma sometimes you have to talk about these things - and talk about food or whatever. So it depends on the context in which it's been spoken - if it is of benefit to somebody in a Dhammic sense in order to teach them some aspect of the Dhamma then you can talk about these things.

Also in connection with speech it is also connected with Right Livelihood as well. Right Action and Right Speech are also a part of Right Livelihood. Right Livelihood is the way you earn a living. You should earn a living in a way that doesn't involve Wrong Action or Wrong Speech. So in Buddhism it is considered wrong livelihood to earn a living by writing novels or making films or music and entertainments like that because this is a form of idle chatter and it's unwholesome. Or just by making money by lying like some salesmen, con men and that - in this case it's wrong speech in order to obtain a livelihood - so it comes under Right Livelihood and not under Wrong Speech. So in many instances when people think about making a living they usually think about not killing and stealing but you also have to be careful - for it to be a Right Livelihood it has to not involve these four wrong way of speaking as well.

After defining all those you have to work out how to do it in real life - that's the hard part - how to abstain from all these.

There's a sutta in which the Buddha he talks to his son Rahula and he explains to him there to always reflect on his actions. So he's explaining to us to always reflect upon our actions. So when we speak we should reflect either before, during or after and reflect upon whether our speech harms ourselves or harms other people and if we find that we've harmed ourselves or harmed other people then we should determine in our minds not to do that again in the future - so we don't have to feel guilty about having done the wrong thing - we just see it as being wrong, and then accept that and then determine in our minds to find a way out of it in the future.

Most people have difficulty about telling lies. Sometimes they're not big lies but small lies. Sometimes in the office someone rings up and the other person they don't want to speak to them and they tell you

“Tell them I’m not here!” and what do you do? So you have to be skillful and work out different techniques to evade a question sometimes. I think the most skillful one I ever heard is the American Navy. If you ask them if they have nuclear weapons on their ships they always say:

“The policy of the American Government is neither to confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons on our ships”.

So sometimes when people ask you questions you can say “I don’t either want to confirm or deny it”. Sometimes it’s not going to be beneficial to tell them the truth - so you can avoid it just by saying you don’t want to answer the question - instead of just lying. You can be honest in that way and say that you don’t want to answer it, or you can evade it just by saying that you neither confirm nor deny it. So there are different tricks you can have for that.

Those things you have to learn as you live and be aware and mindful and you’ll see that there are different ways to get out of situations and not to lie. It’s always best to be honest but sometimes people are honest but it’s abusive speech. Sometimes you call someone an idiot when they are, but really you’ve done it with anger, so not all honest things are actually kusala (wholesome), not all honest speech. Sometimes it’s also idle chatter even though it’s true.

So a lot of people when they say things and you get into a fight with them they tell you that they’re just telling you the truth to justify themselves but it doesn’t necessarily work that way that that’s also wholesome action. The truth can also be unwholesome - even though it’s truthful it could be abusive towards somebody and done out of anger.

The best way to train yourself in speaking is to try and be mindful when you speak. This is a very difficult thing to do. I have a teacher in Burma who’s really good at it. He’s really mindful all the time when he speaks and he thinks carefully before he says anything - so I’ve seen somebody who can do it. I’m not very good at it myself - he’s always telling me off. He always keeps reminding me to be mindful when I talk with people. I remember last time when I came to Australia he wrote me a letter and he said “Now you’re in Australia you’ll have to talk with a lot of people so just be mindful - mindful of what you say.” He actually spent about 14 months in America once and he described his trip as just being constant talking - he had to talk for 14 months. People came to have interviews and he ended up having to counsel people, doing all sorts of things like that. He put up with it for 14 months. If you ask him about it he didn’t have hardly any time to meditate while he was there but he’s just very mindful when he talks. When the monks come to the West they have to do a lot more talking than we do in Burma but most people when you get talking you forget about what you’re doing, get carried away with it. You have to practice - to speak slowly is one thing that helps. The Buddha advised the monks to speak slowly. It’s less tiring on the mind, less tiring on the body. That’s very hard in a Western society I think - sometimes people get busy and get faster and faster - but sometimes if you can just speak slowly, just a bit slower than normal that’s also very helpful; and if you speak slowly and mindfully then you get less stressed out, less worn out when you have to talk for a long time - the faster you talk the more tired you get afterwards.

Q: If you write a novel and call it fiction (so your intention is not to deceive them) is that wrong speech?

A: It’s not necessarily a lie but it’s under idle chatter that it’s wrong speech. Writing is a form of speech. Anything you use to communicate comes under Right Speech - I was thinking of music itself

- sometimes you get music without words - it's also a type of communication - they are trying to communicate some feeling to you.

Q: What about when the words are Dhamma?

A: The Buddha he didn't like it - so it's not the only thing wrong with it - but he didn't advise the monks to do that. People listen too much to the tune and get attached to the tune and they don't listen to the words - that was his objection to it. Even for the monks to recite with a long drawn out tone like they do in Sanskrit - he didn't like that - the monks aren't allowed to recite like that - although you see many monks who seem to be doing it (but we're not sure exactly what it entails). The Buddha allowed us when we recite to put an emphasis to try to enunciate clearly and also to make ourselves heard - they didn't have microphones - so to put some effort in - but to draw out the tones and to change them and make them into a melody just for entertainment - it becomes entertainment. So people spend too much time on the tone and the musical quality of it and the sound quality instead of thinking about the meaning - so he objected to it on those grounds. People get attached to the sound.

The Buddha didn't compose music I'm afraid and putting the Dhamma to music - I think the devas and that do it and lots of people have done it - but in a higher sense it's not the right way to convey Dhamma - to convey the teachings of the Buddha - I think the Buddha didn't like it. It doesn't have the potency because it's been mixed - it gets diffuse.

In the beginning the Buddha wasn't composing stuff like that and it had more effect in those days - there were lots more people who seemed to be doing a lot better in their meditation with less distractions - things were simpler. People used to just meditate and listen to the meaning of the words.

Especially since we've lost the meaning of them - the chants are really good if you know the meaning. The other day I had to go to a funeral for the Burmese so I did the chanting in Burmese Pali. I had planned to read it out in English so people would know what I was saying - like a translation of some of the stuff - because they don't know what it means, and it's the meaning that is the most important part of it - not just sounds. In the Buddha's day you understood it straight away - didn't need a translation and the Buddha he allowed us to teach in our own languages and to learn Dhamma in our own languages. So he wasn't trying to keep the Dhamma in some foreign language. He didn't want it to be translated into Sanskrit - there's part of that in the Vinaya where some Brahmins come to him and wanted to put the Dhamma into Sanskrit because it's a better sound and then the Buddha he refused their request.

So I think the Buddha he just wanted us to know the meaning of things. With time it's become ritual - people just listen to the sound and say "It sounds good" but it would be better if we knew the meaning of what the monks chant - that would be the most important part. The monks know the meaning so they enjoy chanting - they know what they're talking about - so they're the only ones who really get benefit out of it sometimes. When we recite some of the suttas it's very good for us - it reminds us of many things - we recite them to ourselves or recite them with people. We know what we're talking about but there are very few other people who do.

As we've gone on through time - the Buddha he spoke in an everyday language and so later we've had problems with the language because the Pali nobody uses it anymore - so it's become a dead

language. So to learn what the Buddha spoke, to understand the Dhamma is more difficult now. So gradually with time you lose the meaning of it, you have to study more, then you have to learn grammar and you have to waste more time on that - so just to learn what he spoke or learn the meaning of it takes a lot more time than it did in those days. You could get straight into practice, you could memorise a sutta very easily in those days because it's in your own language. When I memorise something in Pali I have to go through every letter - if you try to memorise something in English in a few seconds you can get one sentence, just memorise it. The words you already know and the grammar you can tell when it's wrong but when you memorise something in a foreign language if you're not good at it you can't tell the grammar's wrong, you can make a mistake and memorise it wrong and when you study with Pali sometimes you start off with every letter until you get good at grammar then sometimes if you know the meaning of them as you go through you can tell it's wrong sometimes but if it's in your own language it's much easier. So I think gradually if you put Dhamma to music and things like that you make it more diffuse so it has less effect - really it's not for entertainment - it's something much deeper than that. With music and entertainment and novels they're for entertainment - a lot of them instill greed, anger and delusion in people - and that's what the Buddha had against them. The people who listen to them - it doesn't lead them to any benefit or lead them out of suffering. Sometimes there's a little bit in it but in general most novels and things like that they're really pointless - they encourage people to be more greedy, more stupid or more deluded - just take you away from reality for a while - a little holiday - movies is the same. Some of them do have some deeper content in them so it's mixed in there so they'd be less reprehensible probably, less blameworthy if they have some sort of intelligent content in them but the majority of movies and novels are just a waste of time - of not much benefit - just burning up time.