

Right Speech

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Of the three moral categories in the Eightfold Path - Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, Right Speech is probably the hardest to keep. Mainly because we are always talking if not to others then to ourselves and the only respite is sleep! Right Speech is expressed negatively in the Five Training Rules: Not to use wrong speech. The wrong sort of talk we get into are lies, slander, coarse language and useless talk. Lies we probably don't tell any more. I mean real porkers. But what about exaggerations? And for what purpose are we exaggerating. To aggrandise ourselves, to defend ourselves, even to belittle ourselves? And similarly of the other. Slander means telling someone about another's faults, but it depends on the purpose. Is it to do them harm or is to warn someone? And there's :A truth that's told with bad intent Beats all the lies you can invent." William Blake Coarse language usually comes out of lust or anger. But it can also be a bad habit. We need to ask what effect it has? Is it to be 'one of the boys/girls'. A sort of bonding? Is that the sort of company we want to keep? Useless speech is simply talking for talking sake. This does not include the usual social pleasantries. In the Discourses, it often describes how when someone visits the Buddha 'some exchanged greetings with him, and when the courteous and amiable talk was finished, sat down to one side'. M60.3 We find it very difficult to be silent with another, even when we know them well. The other can feel very uncomfortable if we don't speak. So if we feel we cannot keep silent, then at least let us guide the conversation to something mutually interesting. The Buddha also gives us pointers to use speech skilfully. Apart from the opposite of the above, the Buddha suggests: Spoken at the right time: often we have to choose when to say something especially if the other will find it difficult to hear. What is said is true: we have to remember that what we say may not be heard as we intend it to be heard. We sometimes have to check with the listener. In an interview, the teacher may repeat back to the meditator what they said to be sure they have heard properly. It is spoken gently: sometimes that might mean we have to count ten. What is said is beneficial: that is to the benefit of the other, or to ourselves or to the other and ourselves. It is spoken with the heart of loving-kindness. Then, of course, there is the whole area of not speaking when we ought to. Was it because we were afraid? Confused? Or is not talking a way we express our anger, spite, sourness and so on. But then again, silence can speak volumes. Tricky stuff! But in general, the trick to right speech is to pause before we speak; to glance inward and know our mental state. If the heart is not in a good place, then come from the seat of wisdom. Not easy!

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