

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

RIGHT SPEECH (Samma-vaca)

In the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle gets-sick and tired of hearing Freddie wax poetic as he proclaims his undying love for her. She interrupts him with these lyrics:

Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through;
First from him, now from you!
Is that all you blighters can do?
Don't talk of stars burning above;
If you're in love,
Show me!
Tell me no dreams
Filled with desire.
If you're on fire,
Show me!

Eliza sounds like a Zen master. "Don't talk *about* love, show me love." Similarly, the Roshi says: "Don't talk *about* the Dharma. Show me the dharma." This talking-versus-showing presented the Buddha with a dilemma: How could he show us the radiant truth of his illumination? There was only one way: through his being. Just that. His being was his teaching. Ultimately, when you erase all the words that he said or that have been said about him, what remains is the truth of what he was. That truth has endured for twenty-five centuries. His teaching was precisely this: We are all made of the same substance. I was not born with divine powers nor did I have help from above. What I have done, so can you.

Legend tells us that he showed his disciples the Twelve Nidanas by drawing a circle in the sand and dividing the outer rim into twelve sections. Obviously he used words to explain those twelve images. Ananda memorized the Buddha's words and a few hundred years later his word-teaching was transcribed into Pali.

We may sympathize with Eliza's plea for action but look at the irony: Her song about words depends on words! No one understood this irony more deeply than the Buddha. He could have chosen to remain in Noble Silence all the days of his life, but to what end? Without his words - the ancient Chinese masters called it "mouth teaching" – his teaching would not have been told and retold throughout the centuries.

The Zen teachers remind us time and again that "words, words, words" are nothing but pointers to the Moon. Right Understanding is that Moon. To put reality into thought-words is to enter the world of duality. The moment we think about the dharma we have also created "not dharma," or *a-dharma* as it is described in Sanskrit. This is the human dilemma and a great paradox. Although words take us away from the Real by their very existence, they also point us in the direction of the Real. Krishnamurti insisted that truth is a pathless land and yet the Buddha gave us a Path toward the land of truth. Both statements are contradictory and equally valid.

In order to teach the dharma, the Buddha accepted the reality that he had to speak in a language that we could understand. He taught us that our thoughts reflect the silent moon of inner truth as surely as a clear lake reflects the shimmering moon at night. This is the powerful message of the second step as each of us is called to take responsibility for what we think. As inner, or intimate, as thoughts may seem, they are still outside what we ultimately are. I find this insight exceedingly helpful. My thoughts are external to the silent witness that watches them night and day. Watching thoughts of greed, hatred and delusion from a place of mindfulness (not being fused with the content) is the surest path to awakening.

In the next three steps - Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood - the movement of the circle begins an outward curve. We are now asked to take responsibility for the way we *manifest* dharma into the world. As mentioned earlier, cognitive psychology states that we are what we think. Now we move to an even more basic psychological truth: We are what we do. Yes, Dr. Buddha had that one covered as well. Ta-I Tao-hsin, one of the early Chinese Zen masters, says:

...inner thoughts and outward behavior must coincide, and there must be no disparity between truth and practice.

The Eightfold Path divides naturally into three divisions. *Prajna*, meaning wisdom, describes the first two steps of Right Understanding and Right Thought. Other systems of spiritual training, for instance Patanjali's monumental codification of the eight limbs of yoga, begin with *yamas* and *niyamas*, which are the ethical and moral practices of Hinduism. Judaism and Christianity also begin with moral and ethical laws as codified in the Ten Commandments. Buddhism begins with *prajna*. It is as if the Buddha is saying "if you are going to undertake such a difficult journey across the turbulent waters of greed, hatred, and delusion, you had better begin with a smattering of good sense."

The next division of the Eightfold Path is *sila*, the Pali word for virtue or morality. It is composed of three steps: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. These three steps are no less crucial to the Path than the first two steps of the *prajna* division and they zero in on the way in which we manifest the Dharma in the world. It is important to remember that *sila* is not some commandment or law from God or the Buddha, for that matter. In the context of the Eightfold Path, *sila* is nothing but a training regime. If we go to a gym because we want to strengthen our body, the trainer will say, "Here are the steps you must take." If we come to the Buddha's Spiritual Gym because we seek spiritual transformation, our trainer says, "Here are the steps you must take."

There is a wonderful teaching about Right Speech that comes not from Buddhism but from the words of Jesus, who was no slouch when it comes to illumination. While he was teaching in Jerusalem, some religious leaders were threatened by his radical message and attacked him obliquely by pointing out that his followers were breaking all the old traditions. For instance, many in the crowds who came to hear him preach were not washing their hands before they ate! When he heard about this, Jesus became impatient:

Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts...

These are wonderful words! Can you imagine what this world would be like if we paid as much attention to what comes out of our

mouths as we did to how many calories we swallow? One can be a strict vegetarian and still have very porkish speech.

Another wise expression concerning Right Speech comes from the Zen Buddhist tradition: “Open your mouth and you have drawn a line in the sand.” To speak is to shoot ourselves in the foot. But we open our mouths and limp along as best we can!

How many of us have experienced deep concentration during a sit, feeling very centered and quiet as the bell gently rang? Perhaps there is a connection to the impersonal - an inexplicable feeling so palpable that we are reluctant to break the spell by speaking. In that space of stillness and inner connectedness, we open our mouths and all hell breaks loose! It is as if we never sat in silence at all. How can that be? How can speech pull us out of inner connectedness and destroy concentration in one split second?

It is an intriguing question. What is it about speech that utterly makes a mockery of right understanding and right thought? I pondered this question as we gathered for our final lunch together at the conclusion of one of our week-long retreats. At the end, during the talking circle, people had shared heart-felt experiences that arose from their deepening mindfulness practice. Some had experienced moments of profound stillness and yet barely twenty minutes later we were chattering like magpies over lunch. We had morphed instantly and seamlessly into psychological creatures, as if we had been talking a mile a minute for the whole week. Myself included. I found the experience deeply unsettling.

In no way do I mean to trivialize the work that we all did because something significant had happened during those seven days. As we all sat together at lunch, it became so clear to me how incredibly tenuous and ephemeral our hold on internal silence really is. A few days later, a member of our sangha shared his observation that experiencing silence is only the first step. The crucial follow up is *nurturing* the silence.

We live in and through relationship. If babies are not held or touched, they do not survive. Our need for physical and emotional contact is utterly human and this is where Right Speech enters the spiritual blueprint. Language is the connecting link between two people. A breakdown in communication is the surest sign of serious problems in any relationship, be it between friends or nations.

Speech not only severs the inner connection to our true essence, but affects our relationships in ways big and small. We start to say one thing but instantly slip into the deep patterns of our personality and often find ourselves saying something quite different from what we planned. I am certain that everyone has had this experience. I may be convinced that I am empty of self, that you are empty of self, and that our clinging to the idea of personality is based in delusion but one smile from you and one response from me and we are off to the races!

This strange phenomenon of losing inner connectedness when we open our mouths was very apparent to me the last time I spent a month at the Forest Refuge. No matter how deep my concentration and mindfulness, something amazing always happened when I walked into the counsel room for an interview with Joseph Goldstein. I was really glad to see him and “Victor” would emerge from the silence and enjoy relating to “Joseph.” We were both real, damn it! Clearly there was a Joseph in that body sitting across from me and if there was a Joseph over there, wasn’t there a Victor in here? Ignorance (avijja) convinces me that there is a “me” in here running the show and speech signs the deal. Speech is the primary way that we reinforce one another’s dream world.

It makes perfect sense that the Buddha made Right Speech the third step of the Eightfold Path. It is the next step in an outward movement that takes us away from ourselves. If wrong speech is the main exit off the mindfulness highway, right speech keeps us on the road. Impeccable (right) speech is a brilliant way to practice mindfulness. The Buddha divides Right Speech into four categories, the first being devotion to speaking the truth.

1) not lying

In the first aspect of right speech, the Buddha urges us to speak the truth and to become vessels of truth. This is a beautiful metaphor: a vessel of truth. The Buddha says that we must be *devoted* to the truth:

Someone avoids lying, and abstains from it. He speaks the truth, is devoted to the truth, reliable, worthy of confidence, is not a deceiver of men.

What does he mean by being devoted to the truth? He means that we simply must abandon false speech. The Buddha gives an example of an

individual who is questioned about a certain subject. If she knows nothing about it, she says, "I don't know anything about it." Now there's a novel idea. I know people who would die if they had to confess that they don't know something about a subject, any subject. The Buddha says, if you do not know, then say, "I do not know." If you do know, even if you wish that you did not, you must say, "I do know."

During my travels in Crete, I could never quite figure out the bus schedules. One day I decided to visit a museum and asked one person in my broken Greek, "Ti ora leoflorio?" I was hoping that meant, "What time is the bus?" He said, "Three o'clock this afternoon." But a little voice told me that I had better double check so I asked someone else, just to be safe. She said "twenty minutes after three." Now I was getting nervous and asked a third person who told me that during the winter, the bus did not run along this route at all. So, I gave up on the bus and trudged down the road. Minutes later a busload of happy Greeks, their music blaring and tassels dancing in the wind, passed me by.

It was a painful lesson. I realized that many of us believe it is better to have an opinion about something even if we don't have any idea what we are talking about. Perhaps we prefer this to appearing unhelpful or even stupid. The Buddha says that we must speak only the truth that we know:

Thus, he never knowingly speaks a lie, neither for the sake of his own advantage, nor for the sake of another person's advantage (may I add, nor for the sake of being nice).

As an inveterate fan of politics (a euphemism for political junkie), I find the most egregious example of not speaking the truth in the constant barrage of propaganda coming from Republican commentators who lambaste liberal politicians. But stop! Wouldn't it be lovely if the problem was only located on the conservative side? In fact, the conservatives are perfectly mirrored by liberal Democratic commentators who despise conservatives and twist their meaning at every opportunity. Fox News becomes a code word for homophobia, racism and big business. The Public Broadcasting System is "anti-American." It is insane. Each side rushes like jackals smelling blood when the other side trips up. The greater the blunder the greater the roar of self-righteous outrage. Since the "other side" is leading us to hell it does not matter if our speech is just a little false.

The end justifies the means when it comes to saving America. Sad to say, Right Speech is dead on arrival in American political discourse.

2) devotion to speaking in ways that promote concord

He avoids tale-bearing, and abstains from it. What he has heard here, he does not repeat there, so as to cause dissension there; and what he has heard there, he does not repeat here, so as to cause dissension here.

The Buddha asks us to refrain from speaking in a way that divides or causes discord. Essentially, he is talking about gossip, isn't he? This second aspect of Right Speech pulls me like a magnet off the mindfulness highway. Gossip is such fun. But Krishnamurti offers this observation:

Gossip is the very antithesis of intensity and earnestness. To talk about another, pleasantly or viciously, is an escape from oneself, and escape is the cause of restlessness. Escape in its very nature is restless.

Restlessness is the child of the tenth nidana (*bhava* or becoming). We are constantly trying to escape and we don't have the slightest idea what we are trying to escape from or to. According to Krishnamurti, we are running from ourselves. What better way to run from yourself than to spend your life talking about someone else? To remain silent when you feel an urge to talk about someone else (either pleasantly or viciously) is to remain on the mindfulness highway. The Buddha guides us with great skill.

Western psychology has something to add to this discussion. Murray Bowen, the noted family therapist, said that we constantly stabilize a relationship by triangling in a third party. A relationship of two people (a dyad) creates an inherently unstable system, but adding a third party (a triad) stabilizes the dyad. It's a no brainer. Heaven forbid that all we have to talk about is just you and me. That could get boring very fast.

If Krishnamurti is correct, that restlessness is caused by our need to run away from ourselves, then this need to escape is bound to increase as we enter the relationship as a couple. Now there are *two* people needing to escape! What do we do to camouflage the problem? We spend our time together talking about someone who isn't in the room: the black sheep of

the family, the person we cannot bear at the office, the mother-in-law who is driving us crazy. We even triangle in our child in order to escape from dealing with the reality of our own relationship. If you and I are unhappy; hey, let's make little Jimmy the problem. We can talk about him for the next forty years.

Joseph Goldstein once tried an experiment. He did not talk about someone unless that person was present. As a result, he was nearly reduced to silence! Joseph was practicing the second aspect of right speech as well as a core Bowenian Therapy practice. Why not try the same experiment yourself, and see what happens?

3) devotion to speaking with kindness (no harsh language)

The third element of right speech is perhaps the most directly connected to right thought. Imagine a speech pattern flowing from a mind free of ill will, lust or cruelty. Her speech would not be harsh or abusive. It would not delight in sexual innuendo; nor would it belittle. He would not spice up speech with language frequently used to convince the world that he is just one of the guys. God forbid that people think he's a prude or not normal!

He avoids harsh language, and abstains from it. He speaks such words as are gentle, soothing to the ear, loving, going to the heart, courteous and dear, and agreeable to many.

There is a passage in the Bible that says it best: "A soft word turneth away wrath, but grievous words stireth up anger." That describes the third aspect of right speech precisely.

At the memorial service for my mother, who recently passed away, I found it deeply touching to hear the stories family members and friends shared about a remarkable woman. She was a beloved member of the community and taught first grade for over thirty years. Clearly, the people who spoke were describing some extraordinary quality. As I pondered what we were each trying to say it occurred to me that her gentle speech was truly a vessel of lovingkindness. She had an extraordinary capacity to absorb whatever you threw at her. She would pause and then return whatever came her way with soft, kind speech. To know her was to understand the deep significance of Right Speech.

4) devotion to speaking what is important (no idle “chatter”)

He avoids vain talk, and abstains from it. He speaks at the right time, in accordance with facts, speaks what is useful, speaks about the Dharma, and the discipline; his speech is like a treasure, at the right moment accompanied by arguments, *moderate* and full of sense (my emphasis).

The fourth aspect of right speech teaches that we must not engage in idle chatter. No idle chatter? One thread of commonality that runs through the words of the Buddha and contemporary teachers such as Krishnamurti or Nisargadatta is that there simply is no idle chatter. Have you noticed? The language is spare and to the point. Not an ounce of energy is wasted. Perhaps we use idle chatter to fill up empty space because empty spaces terrifies us.

“His speech is like a treasure” is the Buddha’s description of an individual who practices non-idle speech. I love his description of speech. Is my speech like a treasure? Is yours? The Buddha adds that non-idle speech must be dharmic, which is to say that we love to speak about and share Dharma with others. “Share” implies an invitation from someone who is interested in what we have to say. The Buddha does not suggest that we invade another’s space with our conviction or need to change and convert them. Legend says that even the Buddha would not speak about dharma unless asked three times.

If we eliminated non-idle speech from our interaction with others, what would be left? What would we talk about? After talking about right speech one Sunday afternoon, a meditator came up to me and said, “I agree with most of it, but I certainly cannot agree with that last part about idle chatter.” “Why not?” I asked with genuine curiosity. “Well, idle chit chat is the only way my dad and I can carry on a conversation,” was the reply.

I wonder if the Buddha imagined what the practice of Right Speech would entail in the twenty-first century. Twenty-five hundred years ago, there were no yellow legal pads on which he could jot down pithy notes for his sermons, no pens with which to write those notes; in fact, there was no written language to begin with! In the Buddha’s time, Right Speech meant one thing: Speech. Today, the practice of Right Speech covers a lot more territory. It includes the thousands of words we write and certainly the torrent of e-mails that blanket our lives. Now, we do have a written

language, and we speak through the written word as surely as we do through our spoken language. But the plot thickens.

We also have cell phones that enable us to chatter mindlessly while stuck (with ourselves) in line at Trader Joe's or in a traffic jam on the freeway. We never have to be alone again! In a world so inundated by wrong speech, why practice right speech if it means that we must stand out like a sore thumb? Why go against the grain by cultivating speech that is a treasure?

The question is best answered with another question. What are our options? If mindfulness is the sure path to self-realization, which is what the Buddha taught, then we have no alternative. After all, the Buddha's Spiritual Gym doesn't offer a pick-and-choose policy and what is the point of our hard work if we lapse into complete mindlessness the minute we open our mouths?

Right Speech is the transition between internal work and external manifestation. Right Speech begins the outward curve of the Eightfold Path. From Right Understanding, which is the language of silence, we move into the world of duality. The Buddha Way teaches us to maintain a connection to the silent heart of understanding through Right Thought. Now our task becomes even more difficult. How do we remain tethered to this ephemeral thread of truth as we open our mouths to speak? Only through Right Speech.

Without this fragile connection to Right Understanding and Right Thought, it does not matter how "treasured" our right speech sounds to ourselves or others; it will still have a hollow ring. This truth is movingly expressed in the transcendent words of First Corinthians, Chapter 13, from the Christian Bible:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

The practice of Right Speech connects us with the inner world, which ultimately is love itself. Now we are empowered to take our dharma practice into the external world through right action and right living, the next two steps of the Eightfold Path.