

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RIGHT SPEECH

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 by singing:

Words! 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* truth. Show me. Don't talk *about* Right Understanding or Right Thought. Show me!" The old Zen masters constantly fussed about their students – mouthing - the brilliant sayings of the ancients, as if they, or we, could understand profound meaning simply by memorizing and mouthing the wonderful stories. Sadly, this is how most of us are taught; learn everything by rote, repeat it until it is memorized and then parrot back what we have learned. How about subtle meaning? Too often we don't even know that we don't know what we are talking about. The Mahayanists said it best: We confuse the pointing finger - words and speech - for the moon.

We begin our study of Right Speech from a much lower vantage point, however. We begin, as the Buddha always taught,

carefully at the ground level. After the wisdom aspect of the Eightfold Path, the Buddha introduced the second aspect of the dharma wheel, which he called *sila*, which means morality or virtue. Imagine having the determination to finally get your body in shape after years of little or no exercise. You meet your trainer for an hour's evaluation, and, as you listen to her program to get you back in shape, you get a little nervous about the whole deal and open a can of Pepsi and light up a cigarette. You would get an immediate response! Not allowed! You would be informed that a person cannot get in shape and at the same time abuse his body. There would be no goal of morality or virtue in the trainer's admonition. You don't stop abusing your body for religious reasons; you do so because these are the rules if you want to get physically strong. It is precisely the same with getting the mind in shape. We cannot train the mind and at the same time cling to unwholesome psychological patterns of the past. Perhaps this mind training will develop a virtuous being, but that is a secondary result. *Sila*, the practice of mental purification, prepares the mind for the journey from the unreal to the Real. Just as Right Understanding and Right Thought focus on the internal or intrapsychic aspect of mental purification, *sila* focuses on interpsychic or external relationships. As we said earlier, with *sila*, the dharma wheel turns outward in the direction of the external world.

The first aspect of *sila* is Right Speech, and this is completely on target. Speech is how we communicate love, hate, interest, disinterest, happiness, sorrow or anger to others, and sometimes to ourselves. How often have we sat in silent meditation – or in church or synagogue where we were inspired by a wonderful message – and shortly afterwards found ourselves completely lost in mindless speech with our friends? Many of us have experienced deep silence during a meditation retreat, where everyone sits and walks with such attention to mindfulness and concentration that a connection to the impersonal slowly develops, a feeling inexplicable yet so palpable. As the days go

by, the retreat deepens in intensity, moving in a kind of spiritual crescendo to that magic moment when the bell rings and the silence is broken. Often we have lunch afterward, and before we know it the room sounds like a high school reunion. From that space of stillness and inner-connectedness, we open our mouths and morph back into our psychological selves. Within minutes we are chattering like magpies, as if we never sat in silence at all. How can that be? What happened to the inner silence?

It is an intriguing question. What is it about speech that utterly makes a mockery of Right Understanding and Right Thought? How can our speech pull us out of inner connectedness and destroy concentration in one split second? One thing is for certain, our need for physical and emotional contact is utterly human. A breakdown in communication is the surest sign of serious problems in any relationship, be it between friends or nations. One sure sign of psychological illness is the need to disconnect from human contact. Oddly enough, speech also connects our “internal relations,” the relationship between consciousness and our unconscious parts. We talk to ourselves constantly.

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 image, a vessel of truth. The Buddha says that we must be *devoted* to the truth.

A person 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.

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 a stay on the island of Crete, I could never quite figure out the bus schedules. One day I decided to visit a museum, so I asked a passerby, (in broken Greek), "Ti ora leoflorio?" I was hoping that meant, "What time is the bus?" He smiled and said (in Greek), "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 smiled and 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 toward the museum. Twenty minutes later I watched a busload of happy Greeks, their music blaring, with the ever present windshield tassels dancing in the wind, pass me by. It was a painful lesson. In the Christian Bible, Paul says that all Cretans are liars, but I suspect that Paul had a similar experience as I on a particularly bad day. I think these people only meant to be helpful, thinking that it is better to have an opinion about the truth, even if we don't have any idea what the truth is. 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.

Surely, each person who takes Right Speech seriously must look at the constant barrage of propaganda coming from the political right and left in America as a most egregious example of not speaking the truth. Each side rushes to attack the blunders of the other like wolves smelling blood, convinced that it is acceptable to shade the truth a little, since their side is “saving America.” The end justifies the means in American politics, and whether it is Rush Limbaugh who is evil incarnate to the left, or Moveon.org which is evil incarnate to the right, or Chicago-gangster-politics covered with the smooth elegant smile of President Obama to the right, or angry, hateful white middle class Americans calling themselves a Tea Party to the left, truth has been completely sacrificed on the altar of political speech in this country.

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. How beautiful is that! Essentially, he is talking about gossip, which drags us off the mindfulness highway like a magnet. Gossip is such fun after all. 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 constantly try to escape from inner dissatisfaction. If, as

Krishnamurti says, we are running from ourselves, what better way to run than to spend our lives talking about someone else? To remain silent when we feel an urge to talk about someone else - either pleasantly or viciously - keeps the vehicle 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, which he calls the dyad, creates an inherently unstable system. Adding a third party (a triad) stabilizes the dyad. Heaven forbid that all we have to talk about is you and I. That could get boring very fast, or even worse, it could lead us into the unknown (or even true relationship with another). 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 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, let's make little Jimmy the problem. We can talk about him for the next forty years. Or we watch TV, which, after all is another third party.

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. Speech would not be harsh or abusive. It would not delight in sexual innuendo; nor would it belittle. Speech would not spice itself with language frequently used to convince the world that we are just one of the guys or girls, in other words, 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.

A passage in the Bible says: 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, I found it deeply touching to hear the stories family members and friends shared about this 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 a number of people were describing her gentle speech. It 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 common thread 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 terrify 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: a vessel of truth, like a treasure. The Buddha adds the caveat that non-idle speech must be dharmic, which is to say we love to speak about and share Dharma with others. “Share” implies, however, 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. Indeed, it is said that he would not speak about the Dharma unless asked three times. This stands in stark contrast with religions that insist we have to save the poor heathens, whether they want it or not. In delicious satire, Mark Twain once said, “. . . shall we go on conferring our democratic civilization on the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give the poor things a rest?”

If we eliminated non-idle speech from our interaction with others, what would be left? What would we talk about? After a dharma talk 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!”

I wonder if the Buddha could have 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 to jot down notes for his sermons, no pens with which to write those notes; and, 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 great deal of

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. We also have cell phones that enable us to chatter mindlessly while stuck 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 what is our alternative to Right Speech? What is the point of our hard work – of the all-day retreats we attend that lead to seven-day retreats, and for some of us one-month retreats – if we lapse into complete mindlessness the minute we open our mouths?

A wonderful teaching about Right Speech 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*? [my emphasis]
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...

What Jesus taught perfectly mirrors the third step of the Eightfold Path. The words which proceed out of our mouths come from the heart and they have to power to defile us. This is the meaning of sila. In purifying our speech, we are in fact purifying our mind (and heart). 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.

Why do we lose mindfulness when we open our mouths? It remains a mystery to this writer. One wonders if it is a phenomenon more peculiar to we extroverts than introverts. Perhaps we who are extroverts are so focused on the object that it is natural for us to lose connection to the deep self when we open our mouths or our eyes. Perhaps an introvert more easily maintains a connection to mindfulness when she speaks. My suspicion, however, is that we all lose connection to our dharmic practice because of the unbelievable power of habit formation. Trying to make speech a conscious function seems almost impossible when we consider the fact that our speech patterns were laid down in the first three years of our lives. It is so deeply ingrained! We open our mouths to speak and become semi-conscious, becoming in part our mothers, our fathers, and, most assuredly, our shadows. How many times have we started to say one thing, and heard something utterly embarrassing and inappropriate slip into the light of day?

It has seemed to me for some time that it would be excellent to provide a format for practicing Right Speech at meditation retreats. It would be difficult to format since silence is the common thread connecting all Buddhist retreats, but if speech is one of the holes we are bound to step in within moments of ending silence, why not start during the retreat? We spend hours doing walking meditation, and it is an excellent practice. Walking meditation is as old as Theravada Buddhism. One imagines the monks making their alms rounds, walking with

such mindfulness. Walking is a robotic function, and folding it into consciousness is part of waking up. We practice eating mindfully and in silence. Again this is an excellent practice. Surely this was also a part of the early training of monks. And of course we practice sitting in silence. Why not practice Right Speech? We are allowed to break silence during interviews with teachers and during question and answer periods, so the opportunity is already within the framework.

I well remember, during my first three-month meditation retreat, walking down the hall, hearing sounds of laughter and relief coming from the interview rooms. It was a strange experience; on the one hand it seemed so sweet – meditators having moments of levity after such relentless work. It was as if we were allowed, even encouraged, to explore the impersonal as we sat alone in silence, but then invited to switch to the personal, the psychological, as we interacted with the teacher. The formal reporting as done in the Mahasi Sayadaw style, where the student reports the object of meditation, and then what happens as he continues to watch the object, may cut down on the levity, but I doubt that it has anything to do with Right Speech, nor does formal reporting in any way prepare us for all the holes waiting patiently for our unconscious the moment we exit the monastery gates.

What would practicing Right Speech look - or sound - like at a meditation retreat? The meditator would be encouraged to continue her practice while speaking. She would be asked to be on the alert for the emerging of self-consciousness, fear of being judged, pride at some intelligent comment, shame at feeling stupid, and a desire to be noticed or praised by the teacher. Perhaps the teacher might ask, “Were you able to maintain awareness a moment ago when you spoke? Did speaking affect the level of concentration (samadhi)?” The key to the right practice of Right Speech is not the content of our words. This is where we often get confused. The key is the degree to which we

maintain mindfulness and samadhi as we leave the world of silence.

There is a paradox in Eliza's complaint to Freddie. She sings, "Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!" and yet, her song about words depends on words. No one understood this irony more deeply than the Buddha. The insight he saw when his mind awakened came from a most profound place of silence, and no words could possibly contain the mystery. It is said that he sat in silence for days, and initially was convinced that it would be impossible to teach what he had seen to the rest of us. He came close to remaining in nirvana for the remainder of his life, but in the end chose to come back into this imperfect world in order to teach us. He had to step into duality in order to point toward the non dual, or as the ancient teachers put it, he had to take off his radiant clothes and don the rags of humanity.

When we speak, we slip between the iron walls of duality, and this is our human dilemma. It is not true of all humans however. Some rare beings experience the unconditioned and choose never to come back into the world of duality. Indeed, it is not clear that some beings even have the choice to reenter the world of duality. One doubts that a being such as Ramana Mahashi had that option after his Great Death experience, as the Ch'an masters call it. Perhaps the impersonal was all that was left of the entity. Perhaps this is true of Nisargadatta and Krishnamurti as well. But some, who have a choice, cannot bear to reenter this world of samsara and delusion. They remain on a mountaintop for the rest of their lives, at least psychologically.

This is not what the Buddha chose. Determined to speak his truth, he walked into the marketplace, carrying his alms bowl, and teaching with words, teaching the meaning of Right Speech by his example. Ananda, from his prodigious memory, repeated the Buddha's words to the great council that met after the Buddha's death, and his words were repeated by the monks for a

few hundred years until they were finally transcribed into the scriptural language of Pali.

A thousand years after the Buddha's death, called the Parinirvana, a movement began in China to create a language that would recapture the "scent" of the Buddha's teaching, the essence of the flower that had been lost in transcribing his meaning into words. This, of course, was the Ch'an teaching, which to my mind is the nearest the teaching ever came to pointing toward the moon. The early Ch'an masters truly mirrored Eliza's urging Freddie to *show* her his love. They were ruthless, but their aim was high. They attempted to speak and teach while maintaining the context of the non-dual. This was an amazing struggle. They admitted that to open your mouth is to draw a line in the sand, and surely they were speaking of themselves as well as others. In other words, to speak at all is to enter duality. But why give up the game just because you have a handicap? The Ch'an masters devised ways of speaking that admitted the handicap as they struggled to point to the moon. "Where are you from?" they might "innocently" ask. Such a deadly question! "What was your original face before your parents were born?" Huh?

A monk asked Zhaozhou (pronounced Jow-joe), I have just joined this community; may I request the teacher's instruction?"

Zhaozhou answered, "Have you had your breakfast gruel yet?"

The monk replied, I have had my gruel."

Zhaozhou said, "Then go wash your bowl."

The monk had an insight.

Rather than asking if you have had your gruel, a teacher might ask, "What is your name?" If you dare to answer his question, you might do well to remember Eliza's penetrating glare as she shouted, "Show me!"

We shrink from that sort of intensity today. We want Buddhism on our own terms, less serious and little more user-friendly. For better and worse, our wish has been granted. But let it be said that the Buddha's teaching of the Eightfold Path is every bit as ruthless as that of the Ch'an teachers. He tells us that Right Understanding, which he experienced in the midst of unfathomable silence, must find its reflection in our thoughts. Thus, they become Right Thought. Then as we come off the mountain of the non-dual, we reenter the world around us. We come home from a one-month retreat, or an all-day retreat, or after being inspired by a wonderful message from our preacher, teacher, or rabbi. We come off our cushion in the morning or evening and back home to our partner, or our children or friends. And we speak.

We reenter the world of duality, stepping between the iron mountains, temporarily losing the precious silence. Right Speech is our practice of remembering. It is our willingness to be *here*, in relationship with others while holding onto the fragile thread that connects us back to the Real. This is the challenge of sila. If we have gained a measure of Right Speech, we are empowered to take our dharma practice even further into the world with the practice of Right Action and Right Living, the next two aspects of the Eightfold Path.