

## Right Speech, Right Send

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Right speech has always been right there as part of the Eightfold path.<sup>1</sup> In our tradition's particular way of speaking about it, the eightfold path tends to get boiled down to the Precepts and meditation, leading onto wisdom. People know about meditation and they know about the Precepts, but you can ignore the detail of what is being explained sometimes if you don't study the eightfold path more carefully. Within the eightfold path, right speech, action and livelihood are grouped together in the area of ethical behaviour. So you have the very immediate thing of speech and then the more interactive aspect of action, and then how you interact with the wider community, which is right livelihood.

It's interesting that we tend to emphasise meditation a lot, but in the eightfold path the meditation grouping includes mindfulness and effort, and the mindfulness aspect is very broad: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of speech and what you do with your mind. It seems very much as if that's the practice, so we have working meditation—we talk about meditation in action. If you see the kind of detail that we're talking about it goes into absolutely everything. We have this in our practice

with, for example, the Toothbrush Verse<sup>2</sup>; things which point to every activity having this mindful awareness to them. And behind that there's right effort—which includes ways of breaking down habitual patterns of the mind, and to not just break or dissolve them, but also to cultivate different ones, which are kindness and compassion. This mindfulness and effort changes your understanding and deconstructs the sense of a separate self. This new understanding is explained with reference to the five skandhas<sup>3</sup> which are a description of the processes which support this sense of reality which you generate. This understanding affects your thoughts or intentions, and includes the intention of letting things go; the intention of non-aversion or cultivating kindness, and the intention of not harming—or non-injury and compassion. These kinds of thoughts affect how you speak, so if your mind is compassionate then your speech will be gentle and kind.

In the Buddha's time speech was the main way that Buddhism was propagated. You can read the Buddha's discourses: they are questions and answers; he explains things to people that come up and ask a question. So it was the main vehicle for the Buddha's teaching; it was an oral tradition for many years before it was written down (about 500 years after his death). It was passed on by word of mouth, so the area of right speech has been really integrated with Buddhism right from its inception. And there's something about when you speak with people, it's physically much closer and there's a whole lot of other interactions that you can pick up on, so that you can tailor the speech, it's much more immediate. The same kind of thing happened in the Zen tradition with *mondo* and the ceremony of spiritual

direction (shosan):<sup>4</sup> question and answer, something very face to face—very immediate.

We are now faced with something rather different in the way that a lot of communication happens: with mobile phones, texts, email, websites, forums, everything is faster and it's more like an instant response is expected in some of these areas. Anyone can send anything to anybody! Everything is put up there and then you have the problem of what is true and what isn't. The internet was quite deliberately set up to be something which put everyone on a level playing field so that big companies and governments couldn't be the only ones that had all the information. It was set up quite deliberately and is well protected by people who want it to be left open and not censored.

The other thing is that we start to see everything through a screen, which puts a barrier between you and whoever you are talking to. For example you have 'internet trolls' who just go and say whatever they want—be really obnoxious—and they are hidden: that anonymity is possible. Also, we live more separate lives (I'm talking here particularly about our Western culture), people live more separately and then they communicate with their particular friends through this kind of media, and they can be at some distance—they can be in different parts of the world. So your communication has something it goes through—and it's not face to face any more. There's also some kind of difference it seems with a younger generation: that they are quite prepared to write anything they want, and it can be just 'put out there.' What you then have to do is manage information, so we have the rise of the spin doctor, to manage how things are presented. As a religious organisation or

group we are faced with this, as individuals we are faced with this, situations which in some ways haven't happened before. Old information, from years ago, can appear in a search engine and you just read it as now. People can hack your email list and send stuff to everybody. An email can be seen by someone by accident. This happened to one of the email groups I'm part of, we forgot someone was still on this group, who saw an email which it would be best they didn't see, and it caused a lot of bother! People can edit websites like Wikipedia, for example, someone went and edited a particular Buddhist group's website and inserted the word 'cult' and a huge 'edit war' happened as a result of it.

Internet forums have a particular structure, they're like Ping Pong, someone writes something, someone replies. Their structure is potentially combative: "You say this," "I say that;" "You say this," "I say that." It doesn't necessarily have to be used in this way, but there is the potential for threads of a forum to be an argument, just by its form—by its structure. You say anything and there's no arbiter of truth: everyone has an equal say. What you put on the internet as an email or as a post can effectively go to anybody—anybody anywhere—and when you write things down it can be so easily misinterpreted, because you are not there to correct it there and then. So we live in this world: this is the world we live in at the moment and we have to practice within it, we're not apart from this stuff.

In one of the groups I'm part of, we had to have a little meeting to talk to someone to say, "Can you just be a bit more careful about what you write?" Because, what this person used to say they now wrote and then sent! When you hear something you can make allowances, but if you see it and it gets wider cir-

culatation, it's like—you're going to get sued! It's a very different dynamic. It's very easy to engage with it, and you have to engage with it, but my goodness, there is the question "What am I engaging with here?" Then you can be inhibited in what you say because you are so careful, and yet you have to respond; it is the kōan arising in daily life in a new and different kind of form.

Aspects of right speech are still valid within this new form. In right speech we are avoiding saying what isn't true. It's quite hard to say exactly what is true when you come down to it, to convey it accurately. It includes trying not to say what isn't true, avoiding malicious kinds of speech—saying something which isn't actually the case. It no longer just applies to writing; it can apply to things like a talk you give that can now appear on the internet. So someone can hear on a website what is being said at a certain time and in a certain place, and can say later: "You said this, you said that." Your words are now imprinted on the internet for however long it takes before it all eventually vanishes! But for the time being it's as if what you say is imprinted in a way that it never was before. When you speak to someone it's imprinted on their mind and has an effect, but it can fade, it's a bit different from being able to go and re-hear it or see it again. There are constantly cases of this; there was a recent case about someone who 'tweeted' about a footballer and made a racially abusive comment about him, and the tweeter has gone to jail; he just had no idea what he was doing and how many people that comment he made went out to.<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect of right speech is avoiding harsh types of speech. It's very easy to be harsh on occasions when you

just react. And the other thing is gossip: you hear that such and such happened and you pass it on—slightly incorrectly—and everyone gets exercised by it. In some ways we could say “Oh, I don’t do any of this” but when you actually look at it there are areas of this which we all can get caught up in quite easily. We can quite easily start to talk about someone and against them.

So as our practice we are trying to abstain from false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech and general hearsay and idle chatter. The other part of right speech is saying positive things which can inspire, create joy, and be kind and be courteous.

It’s interesting that the word ‘slander’ in Pali means “to break up fellowship”, to break something up, and one of the things which we are trying to do is promote harmony. One of the things that Ven. Khemadhammo, a Buddhist monk I know, does at the beginning of every Angulimala<sup>6</sup> meeting is say: “Let us come together in harmony, do our business in harmony and depart in harmony.” There’s something rather nice about that way of looking at things, that you start your email in harmony, type it in harmony and send it in harmony! There’s something important in that way of approaching things. It’s easier said than done, but there’s something about that which we need to do, then we won’t create a problem. You just have to do the best you can: it’s putting your mind back into the present before you respond.

*Notes*

1. The eightfold path can be divided into three divisions: 1) wisdom (prajna in Sanskrit) includes the first two—right view and right thought; 2) ethical conduct (sila) includes right speech, right action and right livelihood; 3) concentration (samadhi) includes right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.
2. The toothbrush verse can be said to yourself before and after brushing your teeth. The two verses are listed in Great Master Dōgen’s ‘Bend-ohō’ (see translation in *Zen is Eternal Life*, available from <http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-publications.html>). They were adapted from the chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (late third or fourth century CE), called ‘Purifying Practice.’ They are a way of bringing the mind back to the present and reminding us of our purpose.
3. The five skandhas (or heaps, or aggregates) are form, sensation, thought, activity and consciousness.
4. Spiritual exchanges between a master and their disciples were written down as mondo. Shosan or spiritual direction is a public ceremony in which monks ask the master a question.
5. A student who mocked the football player Fabrice Muamba on Twitter after the Bolton football player collapsed with cardiac arrest, received a 56 day sentence in March 2012 from a UK court.
6. Angulimala is the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy organisation in the UK.