

Right Speech

samma vaca

Right Speech is the third of the eight path factors in the Noble Eightfold Path, and belongs to the virtue division of the path.

The definition

"And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, & from idle chatter: This is called right speech."

-- SN XLV.8

The danger in lying

"For the person who transgresses in one thing, I tell you, there is no evil deed that is not to be done. Which one thing? This: telling a deliberate lie."

The person who lies,
who transgress in this one thing,
transcending concern for the world beyond:
there's no evil
he might not do.
-- Iti 25

Self-purification through well-chosen speech

"And how is one made pure in four ways by verbal action?"

"There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, 'Come & tell, good man, what you know': If he doesn't know, he says, 'I don't know.' If he does know, he says, 'I know.' If he hasn't seen, he says, 'I haven't seen.' If he has seen, he says, 'I have seen.' Thus he doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world.

"Abandoning divisive speech he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord.

"Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large.

"Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, & the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

"This is how one is made pure in four ways by verbal action."

-- AN X.176

Its relation to the other factors of the path

"And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong speech as wrong speech, and right speech as right speech. And what is wrong speech? Lying, divisive tale-bearing, abusive speech, & idle chatter. This is wrong speech...

"One tries to abandon wrong speech & to enter into right speech: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong speech & to enter & remain in right speech: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities -- right view, right effort, & right mindfulness -- run & circle around right speech."
-- MN 117

The criteria for deciding what is worth saying

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[1] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has sympathy for living beings."

-- MN 58

Speak only the speech
that neither torments self
nor does harm to others.

That speech is truly well spoken.

Speak only endearing speech,
speech that is welcomed.

Speech when it brings no evil
to others
is pleasant.

-- Sn III.3

Reflect on your speech, before, during, and after speaking...

[The Buddha speaks to his son, Rahula:] "Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I want to perform -- would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal act of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then any verbal act of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are performing a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I am doing -- is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having performed a verbal act, you should reflect on it... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed and joyful, training day and night in skillful mental qualities."

-- MN 61

Kinds of speech to be avoided by contemplatives

"Whereas some priests and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to talking about lowly topics such as these -- talking about kings, robbers, ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women and heroes; the gossip of the street and the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity [philosophical discussions

of the past and future], the creation of the world and of the sea, and talk of whether things exist or not -- he abstains from talking about lowly topics such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue.

"Whereas some priests and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to debates such as these - ' You understand this doctrine and discipline? I'm the one who understands this doctrine and discipline. How could you understand this doctrine and discipline? You're practicing wrongly. I'm practicing rightly. I'm being consistent. You're not. What should be said first you said last. What should be said last you said first. What you took so long to think out has been refuted. Your doctrine has been overthrown. You're defeated. Go and try to salvage your doctrine; extricate yourself if you can!' -- he abstains from debates such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue."

-- DN 2

Ten wholesome topics of conversation

"There are these ten topics of [proper] conversation. Which ten? Talk on having few wants, on contentment, on seclusion, on non-entanglement, on arousing persistence, on virtue, on concentration, on discernment, on release, and on the knowledge & vision of release. These are the ten topics of conversation. If you were to engage repeatedly in these ten topics of conversation, you would outshine even the sun & moon, so mighty, so powerful -- to say nothing of the wanderers of other sects."

-- AN X.69

How to admonish another skillfully

"O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who desires to admonish another should do so after investigating five conditions in himself and after establishing five other conditions in himself. What are the five conditions which he should investigate in himself?

[1] "Am I one who practises purity in bodily action, flawless and untainted...?"

[2] "Am I one who practises purity in speech, flawless and untainted...?"

[3] "Is the heart of goodwill, free from malice, established in me towards fellow-farers in the holy life...?"

[4] "Am I or am I not one who has heard much, who bears in mind what he has heard, who stores up what he has heard? Those teachings which are good alike in their beginning, middle, and ending, proclaiming perfectly the spirit and the letter of the utterly purified holy life -- have such teachings been much heard by me, borne in mind, practised in speech, pondered in the heart and rightly penetrated by insight...?"

[5] "Are the Patimokkhas [rules of conduct for monks and nuns] in full thoroughly learnt by heart, well-analyzed with thorough knowledge of their meanings, clearly divided sutta by sutta and known in minute detail by me...?"

"These five conditions must be investigated in himself.

"And what other five conditions must be established in himself?

[1] "Do I speak at the right time, or not?"

[2] "Do I speak of facts, or not?"

[3] "Do I speak gently or harshly?"

[4] "Do I speak profitable words or not?"

[5] "Do I speak with a kindly heart, or inwardly malicious?"

"O bhikkhus, these five conditions are to be investigated in himself and the latter five established in himself by a bhikkhu who desires to admonish another."

AN V (From *The Patimokkha*, Ñanamoli Thera, tr.)

Right Action

samma kammanto

Right Action is the fourth of the eight path factors in the Noble Eightfold Path, and belongs to the virtue division of the path.

The definition

"And what is right action? Abstaining from taking life, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual intercourse. This is called right action."

-- SN XLV 8

Its relation to the other factors of the path

"And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action. And what is wrong action? Killing, taking what is not given, illicit sex. This is wrong action..."

"One tries to abandon wrong action & to enter into right action: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong action & to enter & remain in right action: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities -- right view, right effort, & right mindfulness -- run & circle around right action."

-- MN 117

A life lived skillfully

"Having thus gone forth, following the training & way of life of the monks, abandoning the taking of life, he abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, kind, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He takes only what is given, accepts only what is given, lives not by stealth but by means of a self that has become pure. Abandoning uncelibacy, he lives a celibate life, aloof, refraining from the sexual act that is the villager's way."

-- AN X 99

A layperson's skillfulness

"And how is one made pure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He does not take, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them. Abandoning sensual misconduct, he abstains from sensual misconduct. He does not get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how one is made pure in three ways by bodily action."

AN X 176

The Five Precepts

I undertake to abstain from taking life.
I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.
I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.
I undertake to abstain from false speech.
I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.

The Five Positive Precepts

With deeds of loving-kindness, I purify my body.
With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.
With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.