

Right Speech

By Leland W. Robinson

2018 Paxton Award Winner



Originally from California, Leland W. Robinson has long had an interest in the natural and social sciences as well as philosophy and religion.

Leland served in both the Army Reserves and the Peace Corps (India, 1966-68), with the latter experience strengthening his interest in Hinduism and Buddhism. After his Peace Corps years, Leland earned an MA and Ph.D. in sociology from Northwestern University, and then began a 30-year career as a sociology professor at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

Leland greatly valued and enjoyed his role as a teacher, but also is pleased that during his ten years as Department Head he was able to help his department experience record growth in number of faculty, student enrollment, course offerings, scholarship, and outreach to the community. Now retired, he moved to Frederick, Maryland, in 2006.

"Right Speech" was presented to the Frederick Torch Club on November 27, 2017, and is his third Torch paper, all of which have been published in *The Torch*. All three were also nominated for the Paxton Award, with his first paper receiving it in 2013, and this one in 2019.

He may be reached at robinson942@icloud.com.

In May of 2017, Frank Bruni began an op-ed in the *New York Times* by noting, "These are hard days of coarse language—of tweets and catcalls that appeal to the worst in us, not the best" (Bruni). Indeed, these *are* hard days of coarse language, and they have had a negative impact on the quality of my own speech. This was especially the case during the ugly presidential campaign of 2016. As I became aware of this unwelcomed deterioration in my speech, I decided that, for my own benefit and for the benefit of those around me, I needed to spend some time exploring the Buddhist ideal of Right Speech. That exploration resulted in this paper.

The Buddha lived and taught 2,500 years ago in an oral culture, with the first written statement of his beliefs not emerging until about 450 years after his death. By that time, there were already different interpretations of what he had said. Nevertheless, there has been close to universal agreement that the Buddha's early teachings included a set of practical guidelines for achieving enlightenment, which, over time and with substantial editing, came to be known as the Noble Eightfold Path. Meant to be practiced simultaneously rather than sequentially, the practices of the Eightfold Path are Right

Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. The word "right," we should note, does not imply a moral judgment as such, but rather indicates that this way of thinking or speaking or behaving is right for helping one along the path toward true happiness and inner peace.

The eight guidelines are typically divided into three categories: Ethical Conduct, Mental Discipline, and Wisdom. Right Speech, the topic of this paper, is grouped with Right Action and Right Livelihood in the category Ethical Conduct. Since the Buddha lived and taught in an oral society, his original concept of Right Speech would have been concerned with oral communication, but today his guidelines on Right Speech are taken to cover all communication between people.

Asked to characterize Right Speech, the Buddha is said to have responded that the speaker abstains from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. From this response, and from other things he is claimed to have said, four basic guidelines for Right Speech have been emphasized in the Buddhist literature. Let's look at them one at

a time, starting with no lying.

No Lying

Confidence that what people tell you is generally true is foundational for any society. As people make choices regarding how they are to meet their needs and live their lives, they inevitably must rely on information from others. But if they have no confidence whatsoever that what people tell them is generally true, then questions asked, answers given, and information exchanged all become useless. The individual is left adrift with no basis for making choices or planning his or her life. Society collapses when general confidence in the truthfulness of others is lost, or when the society's members become unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones (Bok 18-19).

Now, of course, societies don't normally completely lose confidence in the truthfulness of others, or completely lose the ability to distinguish truthful from deceptive messages; these declines occur by degrees. But insofar as this confidence is weakened, or the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood is weakened, or where the very truthfulness of a message is considered of less importance—such a society is, to that degree, ill. It is a sick society. It is a society where the people will be lost in false perceptions, and will be unable to clearly and accurately see the societal problems they face.

If a society's top leaders regularly engage in lying, their dishonesty can have a pernicious influence on the entire society. If

the leaders also ridicule the press and others who point out their lies, the effect will be to delegitimize other sources of information, making the followers of these leaders immune to any competing interpretations of reality. We have perhaps descended to this point in America today, and some social commentators are already referring to our “new post-factual political culture” (Sykes). This dangerous Orwellian development rips at the very foundation of our society. Everyone, regardless of where he or she stands on the political spectrum, should see this undermining of respect for the truth as deeply troubling. As the philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris has written, “Lies are the social equivalent of toxic waste: Everyone is potentially harmed by their spread” (Harris 41).

This dangerous Orwellian development rips at the very foundation of our society.

The Buddha, along with leaders from virtually all religious and ethical traditions, was wise to insist that we avoid lying—that we avoid intentionally communicating to others that which we know to be false. It is essential for a healthy society, and essential as well for healthy relationships with our friends and

with those we love. Telling a lie to a friend or partner introduces a little poison, a little toxic waste, into the relationship. Lying is disrespectful and manipulative, and undermines the trust upon which beautiful relationships are built. A tremendous qualitative difference arises between, on the one hand, deeply knowing that what your friend or lover tells you is true, and on the other realizing that sometimes your friend or lover lies to you. In the latter case, you can never be sure, whenever you are told something, that it might not be a lie. And if you are the one who lies, even if you are not caught, you know that you lied. You know you behaved in a disrespectful and manipulative way, and you have to worry about maintaining the lie. All this is corrosive, toxic, to relationships (Rich 185-194).

People often make a distinction between so called “white lies” and more serious lies, but the problem is they blend into each other, and once we get into the habit of telling white lies, it is easy for the lying to escalate. Recently published research by British neuroscientists documents that telling even small lies desensitizes one to further lying (Garrett *et. al.* 1727). And even white lies, when discovered, can undermine trust and credibility, especially if the one lied to senses that the person lying was doing so to serve selfish interests (Smith).

Of course, it is important to try to assess whether the person you're talking with is asking for an honest opinion on the one hand, or, on the other, simply fishing for a compliment or engaging in a ritual

greeting. But if you sense someone is asking for an honest response, then in the vast majority of cases you will find it possible to avoid even a white lie if you pause for a moment and then respond honestly with tact, sensitivity and humility.

There are exceptional circumstances when even a serious lie may be preferable to telling the truth. For example, if you were a Christian in Nazi Germany who was hiding a family of Jews in your attic, and a Nazi came to your door asking whether you knew anything about any hidden Jews in the neighborhood, the compassionate response would be to deny any knowledge. The Buddha did not set his guidelines as rigid dictates that must never, under any circumstance, be violated, and he also counselled that we should avoid hurting others, a guideline which in this case would take precedence.

However, exceptions to the general rule against lying certainly do not excuse the lazy and careless use of either white or more serious lies. If we want to build beautiful relationships and a beautiful society, we will devote ourselves to avoid lying except in those relatively few cases where lying simply cannot be avoided without being cruel. As the philosopher Sissela Bok writes: "Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity" (Bok 249).

No Divisive Speech

For their own good, the

Buddha wanted to help people get along with each other, and to create harmonious, cohesive, and loving communities. He therefore admonished them to avoid divisive speech.

Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain.

Malicious or slanderous speech that puts down other groups, that promotes negative stereotypes, and that self-righteously and judgmentally denigrates others only promotes divisiveness, hostility, and discrimination. When infested with this kind of speech, groups, communities, and societies break apart. In the extremes, civil war may be the result, but more commonly such speech results in societies where hatred is common, where groups are discriminated against, where people feel alienated from each other, and where the society is drastically hindered in its ability to pull together to solve its most pressing problems. In such a society, some suffer much more than others, but living in such a society certainly doesn't benefit anyone's inner spiritual life, so everyone ultimately suffers. Developing our own inner peace and our capacity for loving kindness is certainly easier when living in a loving, harmonious and peaceful society.

One would hope that our political leaders would work to bring our divided country together, and in the past most have at least given lip service to that goal. Unfortunately, today some of our political leaders are not only expressing contempt for their political opponents, but also spreading negative stereotypes regarding groups such as Mexican immigrants and Muslims. Blacks, Jews, women, the LGBT community, and the poor are among other groups regularly subjected to denigrating stereotypes, and one terrible result of this increase in divisive speech has been a corresponding increase in hate crimes (Berman). With our country currently experiencing a very high level of divisiveness (Walsh), it is surely not helpful when some of our most influential political leaders engage in divisive speech.

As individuals we can do our part by not supporting candidates whose speech is filled with divisive and contemptuous messages, by not encouraging and feeding into this kind of speech among our friends and partners, and by working to purify our own speech. If we hear ourselves uttering comments that have a divisive effect, we can stop, breathe, and reflect on whether speaking in this way will ultimately lead either to a better world or to our own inner peace and happiness.

No Abusive Speech

The Buddha counseled his listeners to avoid harsh and abusive speech, and to instead speak with a kind and gentle voice. It's okay, the Buddha argued, if one's speech is

firm and if it directly and frankly confronts injustice, but it should not be inflammatory, dismissive, disdainful or abusive.

When we speak to another person in a loud, harsh and aggressive tone of voice, when we employ vicious sarcasm or use a dismissive tone, or when we lace our speech with swear words, we harden our own heart and the heart of the person to whom we are speaking.

Abusive speech is often born of anger. Few among us have not said words in a moment of anger that we later deeply regretted; recently published research documents that we are also more likely to lie when we are angry (Yip & Schweitzer). So, when angry, it is generally wise to keep one's mouth shut.

With the high level of divisiveness and anger in our society, our language has increasingly become unbuttoned from the constraints of politeness and courtesy, and rudeness is becoming ever more common (Cusk; Kennicott). Ugly speech tends to teach and promote ugly speech in others, and the result is a highly unfortunate social trend that hardens hearts and promotes even more anger and divisiveness.

Love and patience are antidotes to harsh and abusive speech. If we seek to promote kindness and gentleness in our speech, we should also work on cultivating loving kindness in our hearts. The two go hand in hand. And insofar as we can develop these strengths of character, we can face abusive

speech directed our way with greater patience and emotional maturity.

No Idle Chatter

The fourth and last of the main guidelines regarding Right Speech is that we avoid idle chatter—speech that is pointless, lacking in purpose or depth. The Buddha held that we should be mindful about what we are about to say, and that we should speak only if we are confident that what we are about to say is true, kind, necessary, and improves upon silence.

Continuous
chatter blocks
reflective
thinking and
prevents careful
listening.

Now, of course, much important human bonding occurs through mundane conversation about relatively minor topics. If we only spoke when discussing weighty matters, most of us wouldn't be talking much. That might be fine for a monk living in a monastery, but won't work so well for the rest of us.

Nevertheless, it certainly can be argued that many of us babble on too much, engaging in pointless chitchat and gossip. Gossip often violates one of the other guidelines in that it can be divisive, abusive,

or dishonest. But even if the gossip avoids these errors, much of it still could be fruitfully avoided.¹

In the Buddha's day, idle chatter took the form of one person directly speaking to another. Today we are bombarded by communications—from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the cinema, and the internet—the great bulk of which could rightly be considered idle chatter. Whether we are contributing to that chatter through Facebook, tweeting, or whatever, or simply wasting our time through passive viewing, most of us would probably be better off if we cut back substantially. As citizens we need to keep ourselves informed, and much electronic communication is necessary and justified, but total and continuous immersion is probably not a good idea. Balance is important.

Often we babble on endlessly, either with direct or electronic speech, because we are uncomfortable with silence, or because our ego needs are such that we can't shut up. This is an unfortunate affliction since continuous chatter blocks reflective thinking and prevents careful listening. When engaging in a direct conversation with others, instead of being tempted to fill even the smallest gap in the conversation with meaningless chatter, we would be wise to pause, reconnect with ourselves, become mindful, and focus on really listening to what others are saying. Indeed, if we are to develop our capacity for right speech, we must learn to wholeheartedly listen. But one of the main reasons we do not listen

well is that the internal noise level and turbulence in our own head is so high that it masks what others are saying. So, learning to listen is directly related to developing our capacity to calm that inner chatter and to be mindful (Kipfer).²

Conclusion

Considering the many ways that communication is integral to our daily lives, working on Right Speech could profitably become a central focus of one's spiritual path. There is, of course, nothing particularly religious about Right Speech or the guidelines for achieving it. Although I have organized this talk around this Buddhist concept, nothing said here would be foreign to other religious, spiritual or ethical traditions. In fact, perhaps the danger is that these guidelines are too obvious. Still, my experience has been that just because a guideline may be obvious and uncontroversial doesn't necessarily mean that I will be successful in following it. The challenge is not in the intellectual acceptance of a guideline, but rather in the day-to-day practice. May we all make progress in our

practice of Right Speech, and may this divided and angry society be healed.³

NOTES

¹ "The best thing about animals is that they don't talk much." Thornton Wilder, from his book *The Skin of Our Teeth*, quoted in Kipfer (189).

² Mindfulness may be defined as "a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations" (New Oxford American Dictionary).

³ Practicing Right Speech, without addressing our society's major social problems, will not by itself lead to a healthy or healed society, but Right Speech is necessary if we are to successfully address those problems. And, in turn, as we successfully address those problems, Right Speech becomes easier to achieve.

REFERENCES

Berman, Mark. "Hate crimes in the United States increased last year, the FBI says." *The Washington Post*. 13 November 2016.

Bok, Sissela. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Bruni, Frank. "Mitch Landrieu Reminds Us That Eloquence Still Exists." *The New York Times*. 23 May 2017.

Cusk, Rachel. "The Age of Rudeness." *The New York Times Magazine*. 15 February 2017.

Garrett, Neil; Stephanie C. Lazzaro; Dan Ariely; Tali Sharot. "The Brain Adapts to Dishonest" *Nature Neuroscience* Vol. 19, No. 12 (December 2016), pp. 1727-1732.

Harris, Sam. *Lying*. Four Elephants Press, 2013.

Kennicott, Philip. "Crude Awakening: Profanity is a Black Mark Upon Public Discourse in Today's Political Climate." *The Washington Post*. 23 May 2017.

Kipfer, Barbara Ann. *What Would Buddha Say?* Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2015.

New Oxford American Dictionary 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. New York: Norton, 1979.

Smith, Jeremy Adam. "What's Good about Lying?" *Greatergood.berkeley.edu*. 8 February 2017.

Sykes, Charles. "Why Nobody Cares the President is Lying." *The New York Times*. 4 February 2017.

Walsh, Kenneth T. "Polarization Deepens in American Politics." *U.S. News & World Report*. 3 October 2017.

Yip, Jeremy A., and Maurice E. Schweitzer. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 137 (November 2016), pp. 207-217.

Get Social with Torch



If you're already on Facebook, please add IATC to the pages you follow to stay in touch with other members and share your Torch experiences. It's a fast and easy way to spread the word to prospective members, as well, so Like, Share, and Post away!

[Facebook.com/internationalassociationoftorchclubs](https://www.facebook.com/internationalassociationoftorchclubs)