

Preparation for G244 — Right Speech

Right Speech is the first principle of ethical conduct in Buddhism's Eightfold Path, but the concept is present in most of the world's wisdom paths. (For a Unitarian Universalist perspective, read a sermon by the Rev. Tom Owen-Towle at: <http://www.uufsd.org/SundayServices/ServiceArchives/Sermon%2001-04-09.pdf>)

What is Right Speech? "Explained in negative terms," writes Thanissaro Bhikkhu (http://www.esolibris.com/articles/buddhism/buddhism_speech.php) "Right Speech means avoiding four types of harmful speech: *lies* (words spoken with the intent of misrepresenting the truth); *divisive speech* (spoken with the intent of creating rifts between people); *harsh speech* (spoken with the intent of hurting another person's feelings); and *idle chatter* (spoken with no purposeful intent at all). ... In positive terms, right speech means speaking in ways that are trustworthy, harmonious, comforting, and worth taking to heart."

Why is Right Speech important? As Sally Kempton, an author, meditation teacher, and the founder of the Dharana Institute, writes in her article "Me Talk Pretty" (*Yoga Journal*, May 2006, <http://www.sallykempton.com/yjarticles/metalkpretty.html>): "So much of the pain we cause ourselves and each other could be avoided if we were just a bit more discriminating about what we say. Our relationships, our work environment, even our feelings about ourselves, can be transformed simply by taking time to think about how words create reality. Yes, words create reality." (*Sally Kempton has granted permission to use her copyrighted words on this preparation sheet.*)



- 1. Choose at least one practice in Right Speech or "Right Listening" (see reverse of this preparation), and try it for several days before your group's next meeting. At your small group session, talk about how you felt and what you may have noticed as you experimented with this practice.**
2. How did you feel when you read the definition of Right Speech in the second paragraph above? Were there any concepts or words that elicited strong reactions in you?
3. Tell about a time that your failure to use Right Speech injured someone else.
4. Talk about a time when you were affected by another person's failure to practice Right Speech.
5. Tell about a time in the past when you successfully practiced Right Speech (whether or not you knew at the time that is what you were doing). Or tell about a memorable time someone else used Right Speech that affected you.
6. Give some examples from your own life that demonstrate the power of words to create reality.

Right Speech Practices to Try

1. Sally Kempton suggests in her article “Me Talk Pretty” (see reverse for details): “[Spend] a day eavesdropping on yourself—ideally, without activating your inner critic. Try to notice not just what you say but also the tone with which you say it. See if you can sense the emotional residue your words create. How do you feel after certain remarks? How do other people react?”
2. **Before you speak, ask yourself these three questions:** (1) Is this true? (2) Is it kind? (3) Is it necessary?
3. **Pick one or more verbal tendencies from which to refrain during this experiment:** lying (even little white lies); gossiping (listening to it or reading it, as well as passing it along); complaining; cursing; exaggerating; raising your voice in anger; speaking at inappropriate times; cynicism; boasting (in all its many forms); sarcasm; denigrating others; hurting others’ feelings; spreading rumors; creating discord; engaging in idle chatter ...
4. **Before you speak, focus on *why* you want to speak.**



“Right Listening” Practices to Try

Beth Roth, writing in *Tricycle* (“Family Dharma: Right Speech Reconsidered,” <http://www.tricycle.com/web-exclusive/family-dharma-right-speech-reconsidered>), suggests that bringing mindfulness to listening is a complement to Right Speech.

The deep listening we do in our small groups could be considered Right Listening. Try bringing this practice into your everyday life by experimenting with one of these techniques suggested by Richard Carlson, Ph.D., in his wonderful book *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff ... and it’s all small stuff* (Hyperion, 1997). (*Kristine Carlson granted permission to use these excerpts from her late husband’s copyrighted book on this preparation sheet.*)

1. **“Don’t interrupt others or finish their sentences.** ... How can you really listen to what someone is saying when you are speaking for that person?”
2. **“Let others have the glory.** ... When you immediately dive in and bring the conversation back toward you, you can subtly minimize the joy that person has in sharing, and in doing so, create distance between yourself and others.”
3. **“Become a better listener.** ... Effective listening is more than simply avoiding the bad habit of interrupting others while they are speaking or finishing their sentences. It’s being content to listen to the *entire* thought of someone rather than waiting impatiently for your chance to respond.”
4. **“Breathe before you speak** ... Pause and take a breath after the person to whom you are speaking is finished.”