

## Jack Kornfield: Right Speech

(excerpt from: [http://www.dharmaweb.org/index.php/Jack\\_Kornfield:\\_Right\\_Speech](http://www.dharmaweb.org/index.php/Jack_Kornfield:_Right_Speech) )

Right Speech is the next step of the Eightfold Path and it's the first of the three steps that speak to this uprightness of heart or virtue, *sila*. Speech has enormous power. There's a story of a Sufi master, a healer. He goes into this household one day where there's a sick child, and there are people gathered around. He goes over and he passes his hand over the child and he says some sacred words, a kind of prayer, and he says, "Now you will be healed." The parents are very grateful, but a really disbelieving and somewhat aggressive man says, "How can you heal a child just by saying some words, all this healing and this spiritual junk"? The master turns to him and looks him in the eye and says, "What do you know of this? You are an absolute fool. You know nothing!" He says this in front of all the other people. The guy becomes enraged and he turns red and he is shaking with anger. And the master says, "Wait a minute, sir. If a word of mine has the power to make you turn red and shake with anger, why should not a word also have the power to heal?"

We speak a lot in our life. We talk so much to each other. Words have tremendous power. They have the power to put us to sleep. Do you know that one? "La, la, la, yes, yes, no, no," back and forth for hours. Or they have the power to wake us up. Words of wisdom, words from the heart, words from the eye of wisdom can make all kinds of things clear to us, can help us to see, to let go, to discover, to awaken. There are two principles to Right Speech, to this foundation of speech as the first aspect of uprightness of heart. The first is that our words be true. Truth is so sweet. If you know anyone who really speaks honestly and truthfully, admittedly sometimes they're a pain in the ass, but mostly one's sense of that person is a delight, that here's somebody I can go and speak to or listen to and hear that which is true. It's just wonderful. There's a story of Mullah Nasrudin, the old wise man and fool, this kind of strange character. He puts up his booth. It's sort of like Lucy in "Peanuts." It says, "Psychiatric Assistance" or "Psychological Counseling -- two questions," or something like that, only instead of five cents it's five old dinars. It's really a lot of money. People think, "Gosh, he must be very, very good to charge so much money." So one person goes up to him, and takes out five old dinars and puts it on the counter. He says to Nasrudin, "Isn't that an awful lot to charge for just two questions?" Nasrudin looks back and says, "Yes, it is; and what's your second question?"

Two principles: First, that the words are true for Right Speech; and second, that they're kind or helpful, because it's possible to say what's true and not have it be helpful at all, what one might call "brutal honesty". "I'll tell you just what I think, whether it's helpful or not." The second principle is that speech be helpful, not only that it be true, but also that it speak in some way that's compassionate or kind or useful to someone. What does communication do in our world? It makes society. Our society is built on communication. We're isolated individuals, in some measure anyway, even if perhaps cosmically we're one, but mostly we experience ourselves as separate. Our society, our friendships, our love, the laws, the whole world around us, is created by agreement through communication. It's very, very powerful. And when it's truthful, or it's honest, or its genuine, it builds trust, and it builds a society of harmony with our friends, with our

loved ones, with our family. When it's truthful, it opens a channel for our hearts to meet. When it's not, there's no chance for the hearts to meet, or very, very little. You probably know this in your relationships, don't you, that if you have stored things that you haven't communicated, stored resentments, what happens? Or if you have things that you've said that really haven't been true, that haven't come from your heart, that have been covered over, or were manipulative, or made to sound one way when they weren't -- what happens to that communion, that sharing, the space of love? It gets weakened or it disappears, for a little while anyway. It's not available to you. In many ways, the love between people that we live with or spend a lot of time with rides on the vehicle of our communication. If the communication is clear, or open, or truthful, where it's not held, where it's not stored, where there's forgiveness, then there's a real sense of communion. Classically, wrong speech -- or what's not considered Right Speech -- is False Speech, or gossip. Most of you who have been to retreats have heard Joseph Goldstein tell the story of when he vowed not to gossip anymore for a period of time. He picked a month. And for him he meant in this particular vow not to speak about a person who wasn't there, even if it was a favorable thing, just not to talk behind someone's back. He discovered this amazing thing, that 90% of his speech was eliminated. We spend so much time talking about third people, most of which is pretty useless. So it's not false speech, not gossiping, which is very helpful, not back -- biting or undermining people, refraining from harsh or abusive language -- these are the classical things, but they really speak to speech as a vehicle for love, as a vehicle for communion, as a vehicle for awakening. What Right Speech does, it acts as a question: Can we start to become conscious all of these hours where we talk on automatic pilot? Can we make our speech become more useful to ourselves and to our planet? To that question, I ask: What do you care about, what do you want for the world and for yourself?

When we speak falsely, when we back -- bite, when we gossip, and all those other kinds of things, what makes us do that? Have you ever done that? Have you ever engaged in some kind of unskillful speech? Alright, so you know that. Now, look for a second -- for the process of awakening is in investigation. What makes us do that? Entertainment, justification, self-importance, anger, bonding. Yes, sometimes we do. We'll talk about somebody else and put them down because it makes us a little closer to this other person, or we do it for entertainment because we're bored. And God spare us in this culture if we ever had nothing to do and weren't entertained. It's horrible, you know! You come into someone's house and if they can't be with you, "Here, I'll turn on the TV. Would you like some music? Here's something to eat. You can read." Anything but just waiting and being bored. Terrifying thing! There are all these reasons that we do it. Let's start to study it in our lives. Look at the moments. Don't judge it. We're just looking at the principles of what makes happiness. Happiness or harmony comes from understanding the principles of things. So this week let's also study speech a little bit -- start to look and see if you can find moments where you feel your speech isn't so skillful. Just look at what's cooking inside and what's going on when you do it. I would like to change the name of Right Speech to "Speech from the Heart." What keeps us from speaking the truth, and with the value in what we know? What keeps us from speaking from the heart all the time? What does it? The society does, you know. I mean, it's not a very good example when you turn on the TV and most of what's there is false, or politics. It is 1984 after all, double -- speak.

That's one thing. We're in the soup where nobody can speak straight, nobody tells the truth. It's a very hard thing, advertising. It's not just our society. Don't think it's just ours. Sure, in our society we hide death and paint up the corpses and lock away old people and mental patients so we don't have to look at them. We are a society which really suppresses a lot. We just want to look at young, attractive people. It's not quite the youth culture it was since the baby boomers are getting a little older now. We settle for what Time Magazine called, "active and attractive." Before it was, "Young and glamorous," and now it's just "active and attractive."

We still have a mass of youth in our culture, so there are all these things that we don't deal with. It's really the same in other cultures. I remember dealing with some Chinese merchants in Asia. Business is business, it has very little to do with virtue, generally. I went in this store and this Chinese merchant had these statues and I was interested in one. I said, "That's a beautiful Cambodian statue." He said, "It's ancient, fantastic, it's an antique." I said, "Are you sure?" He said, "Oh, yes, yes; really, really old." He told me the whole story, where he got it. I said, "How much?" He said, "Oh, \$8,500." Wow, really fantastic. I looked at it, and I said, "I know this statue, this was made over in Ban Cheng Dow. I know where they make them, and it's a copy, and it's not an antique at all. It looks like an antique. But they make it in that village, I know that's so." And he looked at me and he said, "So how much will you give me for it?" Not a moment's hesitation. It was \$20 instead of \$8,500. It's not to put down Chinese merchants particularly because we all have that in us in some way. We all have that part.

What is it that keeps us from speaking the truth? The society that hides things around us, the American or the Chinese society? Why else don't we speak the truth? We won't be loved. Look what happened to Jesus. You have to be real careful. That's an extreme admittedly. We feel that. We're really afraid. If we're not loved, then what will happen? Then we'll be pretty much ostracized and abandoned. What happens when you're abandoned? You die, you know. So we better be careful and say the right things. Why else don't we speak the truth? Fear of rocking the boat. Fear of rocking the boat outwardly -- people will get upset, also a fear of being exposed inwardly. If we really speak the truth at times we'll show our own judgment and fear and violence, and all those things in ourselves that we may not want to let out so much. It would be wonderful to let them out with a little less judgment, because the fact that we all hide them and keep them in is what makes wars. We don't know how to express ourselves, we don't know how to share, we don't know how to see things and let them go and not be caught. It gets bottled up in us individually and as a culture, and then we go to war. War is the expression of the fact that we don't know how to deal with the violence in ourselves. So if we don't like nuclear war, it's tremendously compelling and important to learn about the shadow, about the dark side of ourselves, of our being. William Blake said:

If one is to do good, it must be done in the minute particulars. General good is the plea of the hypocrite, the scoundrel and the flatterer.

If we want to do good, it has to be in our words to the people that we live with, and the people that we meet on the street, and the people that we interact with in the stores, and

the people that we work with. If you want to stop nuclear war, pay attention to your speech, pay attention how and when your words are connected to your heart and when your words aren't connected to your heart, and what's going on when they're not. Without judging it, just study it, begin to look at it. Look and see what you haven't said. Stop for a second just now. Think about your unfinished business, because life, as you know, goes quickly and sometimes it ends quickly. Who haven't you said something to that you really need to, words of the heart? Just think about it for a minute. Think about it and see if you can see what stops you from doing it. A lot of times what stops us is we think we're immortal and that we'll get to it; that we'll live forever. As Don Juan said:

The problem with you, Carlos, is that you think you have time.

To undertake a path with heart is to begin to realize how precious time is, and that we have very little. So let's turn it around and instead of asking why we're afraid to speak -- we can study that in ourselves -- let's ask: What do we value, again, going back to that question. Our life is short. What do you really value? What do you want? Courage, freedom, love, wholeness, integrity, happiness, pleasure; what is it that you love, that you value? When Gandhi was teaching about non-harming, non-harming of speech and action, *ahimsa*, the avoidance of harm to any living creature, in word or deed -- someone asked, "Well, couldn't one kill a cobra to protect a child or oneself?" And his reply was, "I could not kill a cobra without violating two of my vows: fearlessness and non-harming. I would rather try inwardly to calm the snake by vibrations of love. I could not possibly lower my standards to suit my circumstances. But I must confess, I could not carry on this conversation so serenely were I faced with a cobra in this room."

When we're reminded, most of us value integrity. It really lights up the heart to think about living in a way that comes from inside, where our actions, our words, and our inner being are connected. It's very precious. In the Buddhist tradition they're given as training precepts, training precepts which we practice. It's not some God -- given law that we must follow, but precepts which we begin to practice -- to begin to learn to live our life from our hearts, to live our life, as I said, with an uprightness of heart. Don Juan said:

Only when the inner dialogue stops can the hidden parts of ourselves be seen and revealed.

We keep this endless speech going on inside, as well. We'll get to the internal dialogue in another few nights. Really, it's the external dialogue. We go "la, la, la" and someone else goes "la, la, la" and we're on automatic, and we're making friends or passing the time, or whatever, and not waking up enough -- not so much to others but to ourselves. Why do we do that? Why do we talk so much? When the inner and the outer dialogue is going on, it hides our loneliness, it keeps us from being bored, doesn't it? It keeps us from feeling afraid. It fills up all that space that's empty, that's scary. It also blocks our heart from opening in some way and from the width of growing. We grow when things get quieter and we can look.

Think about it for a second. When we meet someone, they say all the things that are happening to them, and we say all the things that are happening to us. You know, mostly what's going on, we're just saying, "Hi, I'm here! Are you in there?" That's about all, it's just making a little contact. We have all this elaborate ritual to do it. Or maybe if we're a little quieter we might be saying, "I love you," but that's a pretty scary thing to say, so we say a little here, and she says a little there, or whatever, and it keeps us amused, its true, but it's a safe way of touching another person. So I just suggest to you that we can learn in our practice to let our words come a little more directly from our heart. It's a wonderful thing to learn and it takes some practice. So the exercise for this week has two parts. One is to look to see if there are occasional moments of unskillful speech, and just see what's cooking in there, what's going on that motivates it. See if you understand it, without trying to change it. Just look! Are you trying to make friends, or are lonely or angry, or whatever it is, or you don't want to rock the boat Look and see if you'd be afraid of what would happen if you did. And its opposite side; see if you can pay attention when you speak the rest of the time, the best you're able, and listen to your heart. See if you can begin practicing letting your words come from your heart. A good clue for this is if you're in a conversation that lasts more than five minutes, so you've been talking for awhile, pause, or wake up for a second in the middle of it, and ask inside, "Now, what does my heart really want to say?" You're having this conversation. "What's in there that really wants to be said? Maybe I won't see this person ever again. What do I really want to say?" That can begin to empower your speech, to transform it from automatic pilot to the place where you start to wake up. It's fantastic. It's really wonderful to work with.

I want to close by reading part of the "Four Quartets" by T.S. Eliot, this wonderful, wonderful poet. In this section, at the end he's talking about speech and about his life as a poet.

What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is a beginning, To make a beginning. the end is where we start from and every phrase and sentence that is right, where every word is at home, taking its place to support the others, the word neither dissident nor ostentatious. An easy commerce of the old and the new, the common word exact with vulgarity, the formal word precise but not pedantic, the complete consort dancing together. When every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, every poem an epitaph, and any action is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat, or to an illegible stone, that's where we start. We die with the dying. See them depart and we go with them, and we are born with the dead. See, they're returned and bring us with them.

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, every poem an epitaph. Any action, a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat. If we could do just Right Speech we would change our lives, we would change the world, and we would become enlightened. Just in that. "Enlighten" means awaken to what we do and what's true, because to speak truly means that one has to touch one's heart, one has to listen to it, one has to be there. Then all the rest of what one calls The Path with Heart follows from that.