

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RIGHT SPEECH IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE PRESENT DAY CONTEXT

Neeru Barua¹

Abstract

The highest importance is given to right speech in Buddhism. It plays a vital role in the present day context. There are enormous examples of speech to inflame violence and make separation among the people and even the world communities. It is hard to find out the path of peace and harmony among the society. Right speech can contribute significantly to building a harmonious and sustainable society to achieve SDG's.

Keywords: Buddhism, Peace, Harmony, Communities, Right Speech, Sustainable Society

Introduction

The concept of right speech is very important in society. Realizing these facts Buddha advised the practice of the Four Noble Truths which show the way to liberation from suffering. The ideal explanation of this fact, which has won Buddhism a universal reputation, is the doctrine of Four Noble Truths. According to the Buddha these (Walshe, 2012:107) are:

- Suffering
- The causes of suffering
- Cessation from this of suffering
- Liberation from the suffering

Narrated these truths are reported to be discovered by the Buddha himself through his own personal empirical. The fourth noble truth is generally well-known as the Middle path which is accepted by the Buddhist as their pathway of life. Buddha also taught the theory of Dependent origination, theory of karma, eightfold path. According to the Buddha there is a close relationship between cause and

¹ **Neeru Barua**, Associate Professor, Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. Email: nbaruadupali@du.ac.bd

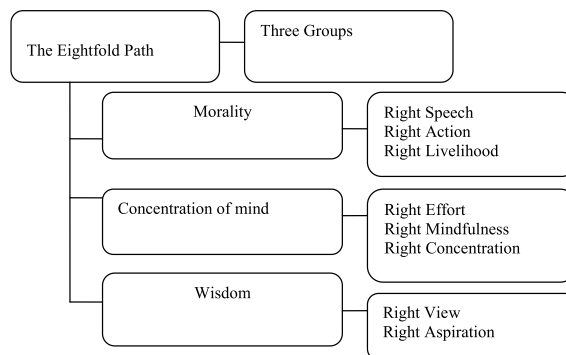
effect, it is for conducting bad talks one may get bad results and doing good tasks may be rewarded with good things. Karma means normal quality at action. For example, good karma is when thoughts activity and actions one guided by non-greed and bad karma is when thoughts, speeches and actions are guided by greed.

Another focal point of this paper is the eightfold path. In the Kinti Sutta of Majjhima Nikaya the Buddha said: “the eightfold path should be taken in concord with mutual appreciation without disputing.” (Chaudhury,1993:17) It is also connected to the four noble truths. This is a very important philosophy of Buddha to build a nice and pacific society is regarded as the middle path preached by Buddha. This is uniformly imperative for reducing violence in the society as the five precepts. If these are accomplished appropriately mutual respects, widespread brotherhood and empathy for others will routinely be formed. However, the eightfold path⁴ has been depicted in the Fig 1.



Source: Nañamoli and Bodhi, 2009: P. 934-940. and p. 1097-1101

From the practical standpoint of these paths are divided into three major categories. These are given below:



Source: Dhammananda, 1993: 80

From the figure of the eightfold path, it depicts that Sīla (ethics or moral conduct) leads to ethical conduct; Samādi (concentration of mind) leads to calmness of mind, and Paññā (wisdom) leads to achievement of knowledge. Therefore they are together in support of each other. These elucidated teachings of Buddhism are essential to guide a nonviolent life in the world. In this paper, I would like to focus on the significance of right speech in Theravada Buddhism and its importance in the present day context.

Literature Review

The ethical part of the noble eightfold path is right speech which represents good words and avoiding inappropriate words or deeds. It is something to be practiced in every sphere of life (O'Brien, 2019). Sharda (2019:32-38), highlighted the right speech as abstention from false and untruthful speech, argot speech, cruel speech and idle chatter. He observed that false or hateful speech disturbs the peaceful condition of one's mind. He said to build a harmonious and peaceful society the importance of right speech is a must. Buttr-Indr (1995:34) right speech can be illustrated as abstaining from telling lies from slander and from backbiting. According to him all these activities may bring hatred, enmity and harmony among the individuals, society and states.

Reddy (2014: 215-217) described Buddha as one of the four major religions that mainly focuses on philosophy, science and religions. It is such a religion that practices a noble eightfold path, five precepts and cause and effects relationship. It is mentionable that Right speech is one of the most crucial elements of the noble eightfold path which guidance to facilitating inner peace and happiness to oneself and other human beings. It is the path that shows human civilization to relief from suffering and liberation to inner peace. (Roth Beth, 2017:217) in Theravada Buddhism discussed speech in the context of human society as language (right speech). Speech can be defined as voice, utterance, noise and making noise.

Research Objective & Method

The primary objective of this research is to focus on the important right speech in Theravada Buddhism. This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach. The general description has been given on the importance of right speech in Theravada Buddhism. For conducting research data have been collected from different secondary sources such as journal articles, book chapters, and related search engines. Therefore, a desk-based literature review system has been anchored to conduct the study.

Findings and Discussions

Right speech

Right speech is known as 'sammavaca' in Pali. (Davids & Stede, 2003:696) Right speech can be defined more than just correct speech. In this context the Dhammapada verse runs as follows: "*Better than a thousand words, comprising improper words, is one single useful honest word by hearing which one is pacified.*" (Narada, 1995:95). As a flower that is attractive and stunning but is scentless, even so unproductive is the well-spoken utterance of one who does not put into practice it'. (Narada, 1995:55) In this purpose the following statement is very memorable : 'Whatever dialogue the Tathagata knows to be not fact, not right, not associated with the destination, and what is not liked by others, unpleasant to them, that words the Tathagata does not utterance. And whatever dialogue the Tathagata knows to be truth, right, but not related with the destination, and is not liked by others, unpleasant to them neither does the Tathagata sheer that dialogue. And whatever dialogue the Tathagata knows to be fact, right, connected with the destination, but not liked by others, disagreeable to them, the Tathagata is conscious of the exact time of amplification that dialogue. Whatever speech the Tathagata knows to be not reality, not right, not linked with the destination, but is accepted by others, pleasant to them, that dialogue the Tathagata does not sheer. And whatever speech the Tathagata knows to be fact, true, not connected with the destination, yet liked by others, agreeable to them, that dialogue, the Tathagata does not utterance. And whatever dialogue, the Tathagata knows to be fact, true, but not connected with the destination, yet liked by others, agreeable to them, neither does the Tathagata utter that dialogue And whatever dialogue the Tathagata knows to be authenticity, true, related with the destination, and liked by to them, agreeable to them, the Tathagata is conscious of right time for amplification that speech'. (Horner,2002:67-68),_It is a perfect expression of Buddhist philosophy. It is not merely a personal virtue. Right speech focuses on avoiding violent action, violent words/thoughts in order to build a general harmonious society. Lastly I would like to say right speech is also called virtuous or wise speech which gives rise to happiness, peace, tranquillity in one to others in society or state.

The Principle of Right Speech

Right speech is the third of eightfold paths and the first of the three groups of the category of the Sīla (Morality). According to Pāli Canon, right speech had four (Bodhi, 2000:1528& Indragupta, 2015 :83) parts. These are described bellows:

- Abstaining from telling lies or deceives
- Abstaining from slandering or speaking to others causes disharmony
- Abstaining from harsh and impolite language
- Abstaining from idle talking or vain talk

The Practice of using right speech is beyond description. It focuses on speaking honestly, truthfully, promoting unity and good will. Language should be polite so that anger and tensions can be reduced. It is said that those who live honestly and speak truth by body, speech and thoughts in life are praised everywhere (Indragupta & Suman 2015:83). Buddha taught to be silent if one's speech is not useful and beneficial to others. In Buddhism it has been advised to abstain from telling lies. It is well-known that telling lies is a great sin. It may hamper individuals or the whole society. Buddha taught telling lies is dangerous for society and the state (Mettavamsa, 2012).

Right Speech and Right Listening

Keen attention or listening is the key to right speech. If one does not listen carefully she/he cannot practice right speech. It reminds us that just speech is not a speech unless it happens between people. Mindfulness is linked to right speech because mindfulness includes inside us. Right listening is important to care for our emotions and feelings. Otherwise tension and suffering may rise inside our mind. The Dhammapada a book of the Kuddaka Nikaya of Sutta Pitaka Buddha has narrated that one constructive word is much superior to a thousand ineffective words:

Sahassami api ce vācā anathapadasamhita

Ekaṁ gathāpadaṁ seyyo yaṁ suttvā upasammati. (Narada, 1995:95)

Trans, superior to a thousand utterances, comprising ineffective words, is one sole useful word; by examination which one is pacified.

The Power of Right speech in Buddhism

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to attain Nibbāna, by listening to the Buddha's pleasant speech. It explores the significance of Buddha's Right speech. The Buddha taught four kind of bad or unwholesome speeches to avoid.

False Speech

Here some one person takes refuge by false speech for some reward. When someone is called to testify and speak the truth to a council, a group meeting, to an assembly, in presence of his relatives or to the court and if he/she is questioned

as observer, please let know me honest man what you know. If does not know he says-I recognize. If I know, he tells I do not be familiar with. If not seeing, he says I observe. He speaks deliberately of dishonesty for his personal or another's end (Bodhi, 2012:1519). In the Ambalaṭṭika Rahulovādo Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya the Buddha advised to the young Bhikkhu Rahula who is own son that when anyone realizes no dishonour, disgrace or shame in speaking a intentional false. There is no immoral/bad he will not do. So, be strong yourself not only to speak a deliberate lie for getting fun (Horner, 2002: 87-89).

Divisive Speech

Divisive Speech is also known slanderous also. He tells divisively. Having heard a little here, he tells it to another place in order to separate from these; or having heard a bit elsewhere, he tells it to these public in order to segregate from those. Thus he is one who segregates those who are amalgamated, anoriginator of segregation, one who enjoys factions, rejoices in faction, enjoys concords, delights in concords, and a narrator of words that generate faction.

Harsh Words

Harsh words bring suffering and create unrest in society. It makes us unhappy to each other. Harsh speeches are coarse, rigid, cruel to others, distasteful to others, bordering on annoyance, and conducive to connection. (Bodhi, 2012:1519). In the 'Dhammapada' the Buddha gave advice on how harsh speech can bring unexpected outcomes through requital.

M'āvoca pharusaṃ kañci vuttā paṭivadeyyu taṃ

Dukkhā hi sārambhakathā paṭiḍaṇḍā phuseyyu taṃ.

Trans, utter not harshly to anyone. Those thus addressed will retort. Hurting, indeed, is bitter discourse. Blows in exchanging may damage you. (Narada, 1995:125)

Idle Chatter or Gossiping

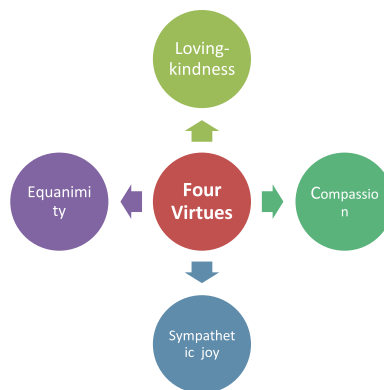
Idle Chatter or Gossiping have an adverse impact on society. He indulges idle Chatter or Gossiping. He speaks at shocking time. Tells falsehood, tells what is unprofitable, and tells opposing to the Dharma and Vinay (discipline); at an inappropriate time he tells such as words are insignificant, seasonable, unseasonable, reasonable, difficult, incoherent and verbal action. This is not factual or any value to others. (Bodhi, 2012:1519)

In positive approach, while avoiding four types of unskilful or wrong or unwholesome speech as narrated above, right speech forms of : speaking the truth; speech that promotes social harmony and goodwill among others; speech that is amicable, polite, gentle and modest; and speech that is truthful, honest, factual and useful to others. Speaking the truth is a universal concept. In vāca Sutta, the Buddha has taught that well-spoken, blameless or faultless and unlawful speech is endowed with five angles. (Bodhi, 2012:1525) These are:

- Spoken at the right time
- Spoken in truth
- Spoken beneficially
- Spoken with a good will mind
- Spoken affectionately

Right Speech and Four Virtues for Excellent Abiding

Right speech and four virtues are closely related. Four virtues of Buddhism play a significant role to build good characters, harmonious society and mutual relationship in the civilization. According to Mahathera, Narada (1973:364) the four inspirational qualities are limitless. They are so called because they find no obstacle or boundary and should be unlimited towards all beings devoid of omission”. The components of four virtues are described below:



Buddha uttered:

Na hi verena verāni sammantī’ dha kudācanam

Averenaca sammanti esa dhammo sanantano.(Narada, 1995:08)

Hatred never ceases throughout abhorrence in this world; through loving-kindness alone they cease. This is an everlasting law’.

Therefore, all organizations of the government and non-government should commit an effort to instil into the minds of people the four inspiring mental states of Loving-kindness, empathy, kindly joy and calmness. Building a happy, harmonious, peaceful and calm civilization for all these four virtues is to be expected. Loving-kindness or *mettā* embraces all existing things, empathy embraces torment, sympathetic joy embraces all types of affluence, and neutrality embraces the wholesome or good and wholesome or bad, the enjoyable and distasteful, and the love and unloved. In Buddhism all these qualities are accomplished for the expansion of affluent, healthy and sustainable civilization. These virtues can be mutual through right speech. Right speech not merely shows kindness but must be based on compassion; loving kindness and sympatric joy always give support to others. In this aspect the following Buddha’s advice is remarkable: ‘Not to perform any terrible or malevolence, to nurture wholesome or good, to decontaminate one’s mind-this is the teachings of the Buddha’.(Narada, 1995:165)

The main centre of Speech is the mind. So people need to control their mind. The practice of four mental states as pointed out in Buddhism will lead to a human world of non-violence and tolerance, peace and loving kindness. Unfortunately, nowadays the arms race between the powerful countries. Now the massive diversion of resources to the arms race denounces countless human beings to disease, displacement, starvation and illiteracy. It is quite necessary to control speech and the above four virtues are required.

Necessity of Right Speech in Theravada Buddhism

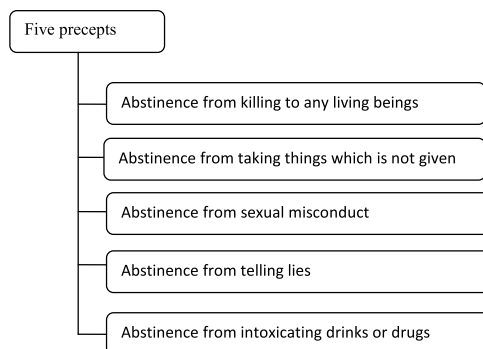
According to Buddha, false speech is hate-speech. There are ample examples of hate speech used to divide people and separation among ideological communities and further leading to violence. In such a situation there is no alternative but right speech, Along with that, loving kindness, Compassion also necessary to build a sustainable society. Buddha always taught about loving kindness, compassion is also necessary to build an ethical society and sustainable development of society. Buddha always taught about loving kindness, compassion and affection to others. (Mahastavir, 2007:36-37; Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009:284) Buddha believed that with the support of compassion and Right speech only a harmonious society can be built in the state or country. According to Buddha harsh and hateful speech brings harsh or hateful results. On the other hand, right speech and right notions

may present a peaceful society. We know that hateful speech creates emotionally painful situations.

From the study it is clearly evident that hateful speech spread out in any form can lead to more hate. From the perspective of Buddha it is clear that He was aware of this fact. From the discussion it is evident that the right speech is equally important in the current times. Moreover, the Buddha highlighted the significance of right speech in the noble eightfold path in numerous ways. In order to build a harmonious society it is mandatory to practice right speech and mindfulness to us. For ensuring a peaceful state of mind, right speaking and right talking is necessary. By practicing the right speech, loving kindness, compassion and affection may grow in one’s mind. Therefore, the Buddha emphasizes the significance of right speech in every sphere of life.

Five Precepts and Right Speech

Five precepts or ethical conduct are the elementary order in Buddhism. For the happiness of all creatures these moralities are extremely indispensable. These distinguished moralities will help decontaminate one’s mind and promote a nonviolent existence in a society. Moreover, the practice of five precepts is equally important in Theravada Buddhism. In five precepts, abstaining from false speech is advised by Buddha is much notable. From this it is closely evident the importance of right speech in Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, practices of five precepts are equally important in Theravada Buddhism. The five precepts (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009:284) are given below.



The five ethical precepts are helpful to construct a sustainable society where there will not at all be hostility. These precepts are called the jewels of virtue. (Bodhi,2012:1526), For building a nonviolent civilization, Holmes expressed five

precepts are the means for the Buddhist to self-discipline. Holmes (2012:40) said these five precepts which advised Buddha are particularly important in Theravada Buddhism. It is said that five precepts play a vital role in leading an honest, harmonious life and society. In five precepts, abstaining from false and untruthful speech is advised by Buddha is much notable. From this it is closely evident the importance of right speech in Theravada Buddhism. We see that out of the above five precepts the fourth precept is to abstain from telling lies. Buddhist monks and nuns observe fourth precepts of their observance time ten precepts. The Five precepts have two aspects. Namely: a. Avoidance of unwholesome or unskilful behaviour, and b. Engagement in wholesome or skilful behaviour. In relation to the fourth precepts is abstaining from telling lies which means false speech. The Buddha said: 'The five precepts are the compendium of Buddhist virtue. They are called 'the treasure of virtue' (Siladhan). The perfect observance of them is to be 'success in morality' Silasampad). Those who observe them will live the life of a householder with self-possession (Visarada) and will never meet with the king's punishment; the reputation of those who observe them and take refuge in the three holy objects will spread all over the world'. (Tachibana, 2013:65) In this context, Professor Dr. Durgadas Battacariya addressed: "five precepts are not only for the followers of Buddhism, it is also an excellent tool for all to make an idle civil society across the world". (Barua, H. (2000:07)

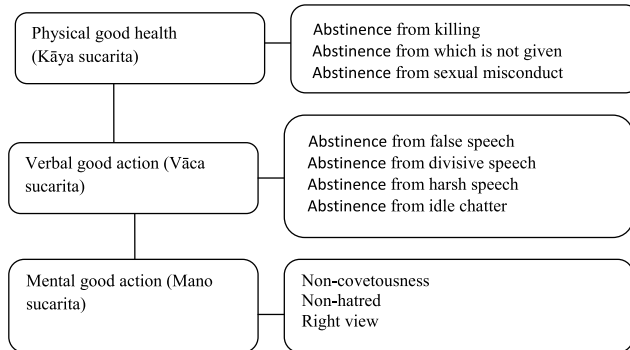
Right Speech and Right Action

Right speech and moral deed are interlinked to each other. By doing right or moral action activities a person makes amicable and understanding relations with each other. Right speech and right action both are Sila (morality) groups of eightfold path. These are created from the mind. Mind is the chief and mental creations are man-made. Quietness of mind is more essential for moral life. In the Dhammapaada as follows: 'Calm is his mind, quiet is his words, calm is his deed, who rightly knows, is wholly unchained, perfectly, quietly, and equipoise.' (Narada, 1995:90).

Attentiveness is the main stage towards concentration of mind. It is narrated that moral life depends on that mindfulness. Moral actions are three sections. These are: Physical (Kāya sucarita), Verbal or Vocal (Vāca sucarita), and Mental (Mano sucarita). Above these three types of action (kamma) are called sucarita or kusalakamma patha. (Barua, 1940) By performing the ten actions they attain happiness and peace in a society or a state all over the world. These (Bodhi, 2012:1544-1545) are:

- Abstinence from killing
- Abstinence from which is not given
- Abstinence from sexual misconduct
- Abstinence from falsehood
- Abstinence from slanderous speech
- Abstinence from harsh speech
- Abstinence from frivolous speech
- Non-covetousness
- Non-hatred
- Right view

Sucarita or kusalakamma patha expounds the observance of the following (Sharma 2011 ;100-101) groups:



These said paths are more essential to build a peaceful, happy and harmonious society to lead a sustainable society. Once upon a time the Buddha advised the Bhikkunī as people get heaven for five reasons: they are: Dispraise who deserves dispraise; Praise who deserves praise; Says honest speech; Does right action and does not squander gifts given out of faith. (Bodhi, 2012:739) This advice encourages the people to live happily in daily life. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s statement is very important nowadays. He said: `Now new pathway can be discovered to save mankind through new conflict and war but by pursuing the aged pathway shown to the planet by the great pathfinder it had known Buddha’. (Barua, 1994)

Conclusion

The world today is full of many amenities for pleasure and joy. But it should be based on right speech and right intention to live. But the practice of right speech is not an easy task. With the advent of internal and social media speech can be

spread out far and wide within a minute. However, there are ample examples of speech to inflame violence and make separation among the people and even the world communities. It is hard to find out the path of peace and harmony among the society. Right speech can contribute significantly to building a harmonious and sustainable society to achieve SDG's.

References

- Bodhi, B. (2000). *The Connected Discourse of the Buddha- A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publication.
- Bodhi B. (2012). *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha- A Translation of Anguttra Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publication.
- Barua, S. K. (1994). *Buddhist Thought & Meditation in the Nuclear Age*, Reprint. Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- Barua, B. (1940). *Madhyam Nikāya*. Calcutta :Jogendra-Rupasibala Tripitak Board.
- Barua, H. (2000). Good Will Message, *Soumaya*. Dhaka: Dhaka University Buddhist Students Association.
- Butr-Indr, S. (1995). *The Social Philosophy of Buddhist Buddhism*. Bangkok : Mahamakut Buddhist University.
- Chaudhury, B. (1993). *Majjhima Nikaya*, Vol.3. Calcutta: Dharmadher Boudha Grantha Prakasani.
- Dhammananda. K. S, (1993). *What Buddhist Believe*, Fifth Edition. Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- Davids T. W. R. & Stede, W. (2003). *Pali-English Dictionary*, Reprint. Delhi: Motilala Banarsidas Private Limited.
- Horner, I. B. (2002). *The collection of the Middle Length Saying-Majjhima Nikāya*. Vol., Reprinted. Oxford :Pali Text Society.
- Holmes, E. (2012). *The Creed of Buddha*. Jazzybe Verlg.
- Indragupta, B. & Suman, S. T. (2015). *Anguttra Nikaya, Second part*, Third edition. Rangamati: Vanabhante Prakasani.
- Mahastavir, S. T. (2007). Bandarvan: Sutta Nipata.
- Nañamoli, & Bodhi, B. (2009). *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha-A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publication.
- Narada, T. T. (1995). *The Dhammapada*. Reprint. Taipei: The corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- Narada, T. (1973). *The Buddha and His Teaching*. Singapore: Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre.
- O, Brien, B. (2019). *Right Speech from the Buddhist Eight Fold Path*, Retrieved from <https://www.learnreligions.com/right-speech-450072>
- Reddy, R (2014). *Buddhism and its Relevance in Modern World, Social Sciences-Paripex-Indian Journal of Research*, 3 (7).

- Roth,. (2017). *Right speech Reconsidered*, *The Buddhist Review*, Retrieved from <https://tricycle.org/article/family-dharma-right-speech-reconsidered/>
- Sharda, G. (2019). *The Importance of Right Speech in Buddhism and its Relevance*, *Journal of Religion and Theology*, 3(2): 32-38.
- Stavir. M. (2012). *Itivuttaka*. Rangamati: Rajvan Bihar.
- Sharma, S. N. (2011). *Buddhist Social and Moral Education*. Delhi :Primal Publication.
- Tachibana, S. (2013). *The Ethics of Buddhism*, Cosmo Edition. New Delhi : Cosmo Publication.
- Walshe, M. (2012). *The Long Discourse of the Buddha-A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*. Boston:Wisdom Publication.