

Can We Talk?

by Lisa Hoffman

My girlfriend and I had just broken up, and one by one my friends said they'd never thought she was very good for me anyway. Why hadn't they mentioned this before?

My mother and sister-in-law separately told me about a painful situation between them. Both were upset and spoke in confidence. I realized that it was simply a misunderstanding and longed to share their secrets. What was the right thing to do?

A consultant colleague was helping a nonprofit find a fundraiser but had concluded that whoever was hired would not be successful unless the executive director resigned. How should she ethically handle and communicate about this situation?

All these situations raise classic questions about Right Speech, one of the Buddha's first teachings after his enlightenment.

Right Speech is a point on the Eightfold Noble Path, which is the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth: this path is the end of suffering. The First Noble Truth acknowledges that with life comes suffering; it is unavoidable. The Second relates the cause of suffering to craving -- we don't want what we have, and want what we don't have. The Third promises that suffering can end.

Harm is often caused to others, ourselves, or both by what we say and how we say it. How many times have you told a white lie and felt unsettled and guilt-ridden? Ever done the opposite and expressed a blunt truth that caused damage?

I have done both, which leads to my appreciation of Right Speech. I would not say that my suffering has *ended*, but it definitely has been *reduced*! The Buddha's characteristics of Right Speech are: not lying, slandering, spreading ill will, or engaging in idle chatter

I was rather worried about avoiding idle chatter. How would we ever survive the holiday season, family dinners, or go to fundraising events without idle chatter?

I was reminded by Bhikku Bohdi, in [The Eightfold Noble Path](#), that the Buddha taught monks, and standards are different for those of us in the world. While he describes strict idle chatter standards for monks, he writes that: "Laypersons will have more need for affectionate small talk with friends and family, polite conversation with acquaintances and talk in connection with their line of work."

After reading this passage, I immediately called my mother and engaged in the recommended "affectionate small talk," which made both of us happy. And that is a sort of Right Speech pointer for "idle chatter" and Right Speech in general: does it create connection or distance? Is it destructive, positive or benign?

There are no all-encompassing rules for Right Speech, though I definitely know it when I say it. Right Speech feels solid. Harmful speech creates a sense of uneasiness and often clouds my mind. I have found the following questions, from Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master, helpful to ask myself:

- Is what I'm about to say truthful?
- Is it helpful?
- Is it kind?
- Is the timing right?

If I can't answer yes to these questions, I try to remain quiet, or wait for different words.

Sylvia Boorstein has a fifth Right Speech question that I also find useful: "Would anything I have to say be an improvement over silence?" It certainly gets to the point, though there might be little conversation in the world if we held ourselves to such a standard.

It's tempting to remain silent when what needs to be said is painful. It can be hard to see honesty that hurts as a kind and helpful expression of caring for all parties.

A 79-year-old close friend has advanced heart disease and is not consistently taking care of himself. It's hard for him to accept his age and the realities of his condition. The result has been life-threatening emergencies that can be planned for, and possibly avoided. Basics like a stock of nitroglycerin need to be put into place.

I realized that I needed to tell my friend that while I would always be there help, I would become angry and resentful at the drain on my time and emotions if he was not also doing his part.

This was a difficult conversation to initiate. But, I knew that besides the importance of expressing what was true for me, compassionate honesty might also help my friend come to grips with his own reality. I have my own chronic health problems, and know from personal experience how hard it is to accept limitations and help.

I breathed deeply and gingerly brought up the topic during a phone conversation he had initiated to thank me for helping with an all day emergency room trip. I was relieved when he responded with understanding of my point of view, and appreciation of the honesty. There was a feeling of closeness and mutual support between us. Right Speech in such circumstances can often be a healing experience.

What about all those friends who didn't share their opinions about my girlfriend with me? I thought about how often I had been in the same spot. I realized that Right Speech varied depending on the friend, the situation and the relationship. Often the timing was wrong because a friend clearly would not be open to my concerns. Sometimes I didn't have the whole story, and my intuition told me to hold my tongue. And sometimes I saw the strong potential for harm, which meant I simply had to speak up.

How did I handle that misunderstanding between my mother and sister-in-law? I didn't feel betraying their confidences would be helpful or kind. And, such third-party meddling usually backfires. I finally found a way to gently suggest other points of view to each of them, and encouraged them to talk. And they did. It wasn't a perfect discussion, but it helped.

How about my colleague and her conclusion that fundraising success was not possible with her nonprofit client's current executive director? Her role was a very narrow one: helping with hiring. She suggested to her client that she provide fundraising related recommendations based on her observations, and was able to craft a list that indirectly conveyed her concerns.

Right Speech is sometimes obvious and often subtle. But sometimes what seems obvious isn't -- like gossip.

You would think that gossip would be a clear Right Speech violation. Again, the question of destructiveness points the way. Some gossip that builds community, intimacy and connection. A close friend has ovarian cancer, and our group of friends regularly checks in about who has spoken with her, how she's doing, how the latest round of chemo has affected her.

She has told us that she is comforted by the fact that we care and keep each other informed. And talking about the situation is one of the ways we support each other and stay strong for our friend.

A gossip question I ask myself is: have I said anything I would not say directly to the individual I am discussing? If the answer is yes, then what I want to say or am saying is most likely a violation of Right Speech. In fact, it's a question that's probably a good general Right Speech guideline.

Another good general guideline comes from Blanche Hartman, Senior Dharma Teacher at San Francisco Zen Center, who describes Right speech as "saying the right thing to the right person at the right time."

What else is there to say?

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