

HOW TO COMMUNICATE LIKE A BUDDHIST



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The Four Elements of Right Speech

In March 2011, I sat on the floor of my apartment in New York City, fumbling for my tissues. My best friend had passed away unexpectedly. He was kayaking and got

caught in a swell on a river in Costa Rica. For months all I could do was lay or sit on my floor, cry, and blow out the pain into tissues or (most of the time) toilet paper. There I was, on my floor, when I read about what in Mahayana Buddhism is known as a *bodhisattva*: essentially an enlightened person who's dedicated to alleviating others' suffering.

I put the book to the side, lay on my back, and looked up to the ceiling. Where was *my* bodhisattva? Where was the person who could help alleviate my suffering? I thought on this for a while, as most of my life I'd hoped for someone to come along and make me feel better or somehow make me feel worthy and deserving, good. And even though I'd put the responsibility in others' laps all my life and had never found anything but disappointment, here I was doing it yet again. I sat up.

Maybe I didn't need to find an enlightened being, but rather learn what made someone enlightened. If I could understand the way of the bodhisattva, maybe I could incorporate some of their qualities into my own life to take away my suffering. So I read. And I read some more. And soon I formed an image in my mind, a kind of mental map of what a bodhisattva embodied. I jotted down words, actions—all the things I associated with a bodhisattva.

There are many definitions of a bodhisattva that are more detailed than mine, but what I concluded was that a bodhisattva sees clearly, speaks honestly, understands pain and suffering, practices compassion, sees everyone as equals, and, most importantly, wants to help others. It is a way of being that aims to eliminate suffering, and I saw how mindfulness and right speech are primary practices used to help reach this goal.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness means paying attention to what we're doing while we're doing it—without judgment. In Buddhism, there is what's known as mindful speech. Mindful speech is the practice of bringing our attention to our words. It means we are aware of what we're saying while we're saying it. It is a practice of observation and not evaluation. It is paying attention on purpose, with a moment-to-moment awareness. We'll start applying mindfulness practices when we get into the five steps to change how we communicate.

While various teachers and schools of Buddhism translate the four elements of right speech in slightly different ways, there is one thing they all agree on: right speech is a guideline for communicating in a loving, compassionate, and authentic way. I teach the elements of right speech as the following:

- Tell the truth.
- Don't exaggerate.
- Don't gossip.
- Use helpful language.

I'll explain all of these in greater detail in a moment.

Another tool we will utilize are three questions, and they act like a litmus test as to whether or not our words are following the principle of right speech. When in doubt about any statement, if you can answer yes to all of the following questions then it's likely your words are consistent with the principles of right speech:

- Is what I am about to say true?
- Is what I am about to say kind?
- Is what I am about to say helpful?

We'll come back to these four principles and the above three questions again and again, as they act as filters from which all our speaking and listening pour through. If we can incorporate these principles into our day-to-day interactions, we not only learn how to speak and listen in a way that helps others and ourselves suffer less, but we also have a checklist to make sure we're clearly communicating.

Tell the Truth

If I asked you if you are reading a book right now, you would say yes. If I asked you what color your shirt is, you'd likely tell me exactly what I see. These are easy truths to express. But what about the harder truths, like when a friend asks if you like her partner and you say yes when you really want to say no? Or your boss asks if you want to take on another project and you really don't but you do it anyway? How do we state those truths?

Let's face it. A lot of the time we don't tell the truth. In a word, we lie. Sometimes we lie because we don't want to offend anybody, or come off as needy, mean, demanding, or even confrontational. Other times we lie because we are afraid of what people will think of us if we tell the truth, or that if we tell the truth then we won't get something we want, or we will lose something we already have, whether that be a material possession or an image we have created and are trying to maintain. If we look at the majority of our lies, the root behind them is desire and fear.

Perhaps we tell ourselves that the issue we're lying about isn't that important. Plus, it can be scary to reveal how we truly feel without knowing what others' reactions may be. On the other hand, maybe we've tried to be honest many times but nobody's getting it, and so we choose to tell people what they want to hear instead of the truth. But by burying the truth of how we feel aside, what we're really doing is being dishonest with ourselves. If we hide the truth one time, and then another, and so on, it compounds over time to create a life of dissatisfaction and resentment.

I understand that sometimes telling the truth is hard—especially when our goal is to protect someone's feelings. That begs the question, is there a way we can be truthful and also mindful of how our words will likely be interpreted? Are white lies acceptable when our aim is to serve the greater good? Questions like these are difficult to answer, and my experience is that very few people are able to give up speaking untruths altogether. But if we can become mindful of when, where, and most importantly why we lie, we have taken the first step toward eliminating or at least minimizing them from our communications.

Personally, I have a habit of lying to others about my own wants and needs, especially when it comes to intimate relationships. I like to pretend everything is hunky dory when it really isn't. Why? Because I want to avoid conflict; I want to be able to go with the flow. But here's what happens when I do that: I don't honor my own truth. I keep myself in the same position of lack. I suffer, and in turn so does my partner. Let's look at a quick example.

I pretend it's fine that my partner is going out with his friends instead of coming to family dinner. (I'm lying.)



My partner thinks I'm telling the truth, so he goes out with his friends.



I'm angry that he went out with his friends, so when he gets home I'm passive-aggressive, saying that I'm fine. Really. Nothing's wrong. (Again, I'm lying.)



Both people suffer. I suffer because I'm not getting what I want. He suffers because I'm now being mean to him.

We will talk more about this graphic in a later section on the language of silence and passive-aggressive behavior. But for now, just notice it as a little example of not being truthful.

When we say what we mean, we signal to ourselves that we believe our truth; that we are capable of taking care of our own needs; that we are ultimately responsible for turning our desires into action. By being clear about our needs, we accept the reality of how we feel and can choose to alleviate our own suffering. If we choose to ignore or hide the truth, this almost inevitably leads to us acting in ways that promote hurtful interactions. The times when it's difficult to be honest are generally the moments when honesty is needed most—to help clear tension, to release our feelings, to gain acceptance of ourselves and others, and to liberate us from resentment and shame.

Depending on the situation, being honest can be uncomfortable, so we get comfortable with it by learning how to tell the truth in an effective way. If we aren't careful, saying what we mean can come across as hurtful, attacking, criticizing, or judging. This is not effective communication. But if we focus on our own needs and not the actions that provoke them, we make it easier for the person we're speaking with to hear us. If we come from a place of observation without judgment it's likely the person we're with will feel safe enough to respond instead of getting defensive, shutting down, or even running for the hills. We will look at effective ways to do this throughout the book.

Don't Exaggerate

The next three rules come out of the first rule.

Before I learned the second rule, don't exaggerate, many things in my life were a big deal. I'd take one critical remark and interpret it to mean that I was the worst person in the world. Or, in the other direction, I would take a positive remark and think I was better or knew more than those I was working with. When I'd want to sound important, I'd talk about how much I had going on and how there was no way I could go out for dinner because I was way too busy. And when I was in catastrophe mode, I would typically collapse on my couch with boxes of Chinese food, wallowing in negative self-talk and thinking the worst-case scenarios in all areas of my life.

The second element of right speech is related to the first, as anytime we are exaggerating, we aren't telling the truth or seeing the situation for what it is—we're lying to others

and ourselves. When we fall into a habit of exaggerating, we often alternate between either being horrible people or perfect saints; we never see others and ourselves as equals.

This second rule of right speech can be related to another Buddhist principle: equanimity. Equanimity, or the art of staying balanced, is one of four principal virtues that the Buddha encouraged his disciples to cultivate. These virtues are referred to as the four immeasurables. The others are metta (loving-kindness), compassion, and sympathetic joy. Any time we exaggerate, we are by definition out of balance.

When it comes to exaggeration, many people can spot the obvious examples, such as when someone exaggerates to seem more “important” (Buddhism is clear that no one is more important than anyone else), or wealthier than he or she actually is. But it’s the more subtle examples of exaggeration that many of us miss, likely because we don’t see them as exaggerations. Take a look at the following statements:

- “This is the worst day of my life.”
- “You always do that to me.”
- “This is taking forever.”
- “I will never get out of here.”
- “I can’t believe you would do/say that.”
- “This place has the worst service on the planet.”
- “He/she is always late.”
- “That was a complete waste of my time.”
- “Someone like him/her would never be interested in someone like me.”

In most cases, all of these statements are likely exaggerations, and consequently not helpful in terms of developing good communication habits with others and yourself. Take

a look at the last one, “Someone like him/her would never be interested in someone like me.” When you say something like this, not only have you exaggerated, but you have also put forth the implication (to yourself) that you are “not good enough” for the other person. Statements of exaggeration, especially negative ones, carry the energy of suffering with them that can discolor your experience of the moment. (We will cover this in more detail in the section “Listen to Yourself.”)

By coming to a conversation with a sense of equanimity and equality instead of exaggeration, you can avoid many of the pitfalls of miscommunication. Instead of making blanket statements that demean your worthiness or provoke a defensive or antagonistic reaction in someone (and also aren’t true in most cases), you are more likely to create an environment where positive feelings and genuine communication can take place.

Even when you are in a communication scenario with someone who isn’t likely to bring a sense of equanimity and equality, if you can be the one to be mindful of your words and actions, then you have the tools to help create a positive communication experience. Here are some ways you can prevent exaggerating in your conversations:

- Pay attention to words that overemphasize the negative of a situation or the positive of a situation.
- Pay attention to your reactions. Are they over the top? Is everything the worst possible scenario? Is everything the best possible scenario? Are you turning yourself into the victim? The victor? Is it all happening to you? Me. Me. Me. Me.

- Tap in to see if you're feeling "better than" whomever you are with, or "less than" whomever you are with, remembering that in reality this isn't possible.

Buddhism teaches that we all want the same outcome in life—to be understood, to feel good, to be happy. I have found this closely describes what we all want out of communication—to be understood, to feel good about it, and for it to lead to happiness.

We all know what it feels like to hurt and to feel joy; to feel attacked and to feel supported; to feel invisible and to feel seen; to feel frustrated and to feel fulfilled. When we can identify the feelings of others in ourselves, our conversations are more likely to become a dialogue in which the desire is to help. Being a good communicator involves describing situations and your feelings about those situations as accurately as possible, and not exaggerating is a crucial component of this. Developing a practice that replaces exaggeration with equanimity is a good first step on the path.

Don't Gossip

The third rule of right speech, don't gossip, actually runs contrary to what most of us see in our everyday lives. From celebrity websites, television shows, and magazines that beckon our attention in the grocery store checkout line, spreading information about others has become a regular part of daily life for many, not to mention a multimillion-dollar industry. With so much of it going on around us all the time, it's easy to dismiss gossiping about others as acceptable.


And while celebrity gossip is easy to identify, gossip in our personal lives comes in many different forms, including things such as repeating something someone told you in confidence, sharing an assumption of others' lives, or telling others about an issue you have with someone instead of addressing the problem directly. Ranging from small comments about a coworker's performance, to complaining to your friends about your significant other or sharing stories that you were asked to keep private, for many people gossiping is so prevalent that they no longer notice it as such.

Some of us see gossiping as a method of bonding with others, and because of this we perpetuate the idea that gossiping is beneficial. Gossiping can quickly become habit-forming as the rush of being the one "in the know" can make us feel important, and we might find it hard to keep future information to ourselves. This need to express everything the minute it comes in means there's little consideration given to whether what we have to say is kind, true, and helpful. Take the following example:


Jennifer calls and tells you that she and her husband are having problems. She says they are going to start therapy.



You get off the phone and call Susan to tell her what Jennifer just told you.



Susan calls Kerry and tells her that Jennifer and her husband are having problems. They speculate—maybe he's having an affair; neither of them have seen them together in a while.



At the block party Jennifer and her husband show up together. Susan and Kerry stand over by the side and whisper and stare. Neither could imagine staying with their husbands if they cheated. What is she thinking?

Much like exaggeration, gossip creates a sense that you are either “better than” or “worse than” those you gossip about (typically the former). I believe that most gossip stems from envy, as at some point in the past we have been envious of the person we are now gossiping about. This is fairly obvious when it comes to celebrity gossip, as when famous people are shown to have normal human issues and shortcomings, we rejoice in the fact that they aren’t so “special” after all.

When we see our gossiping as a product of envy, we can instead challenge ourselves to replace it with one or two of the other four immeasurables mentioned earlier in this chapter, sympathetic joy and compassion.

Sympathetic joy is the practice of celebrating the accomplishments, achievements, or good tidings that come to another. This practice can be easy to do when it’s your children or other close family members you are rejoicing on behalf of. But it can be more difficult to rejoice for those who receive a benefit that you wanted for yourself. For instance, if a coworker gets a project or promotion you were hoping to receive, notice if you have a desire to gossip or belittle their achievement. If you do, instead make a conscious choice to celebrate his or her success instead. As you can imagine, this isn’t easy to do, but I can tell you that the benefits of practicing sympathetic joy instead of gossip are profound. Try it for yourself and see what happens!

On the other side of the coin, instead of gossiping when others experience suffering, Buddhism invites us to bring compassion to the situation instead. In terms of communication, this can be applied by replacing words that make fun of or rejoice in the hard times that have befallen another with

words that express compassion for those affected. Depending on the situation and our feelings about it, it may be that the best we can do to practice compassion is to remain silent when the opportunity to gossip presents itself—but even this is a big improvement on participating in gossiping, and it moves us more in alignment with our desire to communicate like a bodhisattva.

Lastly, there are also times we gossip and internally justify it because we think we are being helpful. For instance, we may converse about one family member to another under the auspices that we are “concerned,” but our real motive is not so benign. If what we’re saying is grounded in judgment and personal gain rather than the intention to be truly helpful, this practice of “don’t gossip” asks us to refrain from speaking at all.

But talking about others without their knowledge is sometimes inevitable, you might be thinking. If your sister wants to know how your great aunt Midge was when you visited last weekend, you will probably want to share how it went. If your boss asks how a new coworker is doing on your team, she’s going to expect some kind of feedback from you. So what’s the difference between gossip and simply sharing information? The easiest way to know for sure is to ask yourself, *What if the person I’m talking about heard me?* How would he or she feel? Furthermore, what energy are you creating inside yourself and others when you talk about people? The key is to never say something that you wouldn’t stand behind if the person were within earshot.

If we want to get out of the gossip cycle, it takes a very disciplined approach to do so—especially if we have

formed a habit to bond with friends, coworkers, and family members in this way. Below are specific questions to start asking that can help stop the wheel.

Before you share information from someone else, ask yourself:

- Is this your information to share?
- If I share this information, whom am I helping?
- Why do I want to share this information?
- If whomever this information belongs to knew I was sharing it, how would they feel?
- If a child overheard my conversation, what would he or she learn?
- Is what I am about to say disrespecting someone else?

Although not participating in gossip can be difficult if we are only beginning to realize the full extent of how we gossip in everyday communication, the good news is that in most cases it only takes one person to change the conversation. We can do this by either not engaging when gossip is presented, changing the subject, or, in some cases, specifically stating, “Let’s talk about something else.” In so doing, we will be on our way to practicing the third rule of right speech. When our conversations are seen through the lens of “Is what I am about to say true, kind, and helpful?” we soon realize there’s no point to gossip except to maintain some illusory sense of superiority.

Use Helpful Language

The final rule of right speech, use helpful language, can

perhaps best be explained and practiced by identifying and avoiding its opposite: unhelpful language.

Unhelpful language is anything that blocks or prevents either person in a conversation from understanding the other's point of view. For example, if we look at past conversations that could be described as critical, confrontational, or even heated, we're likely to see where the words used in those instances have been unhelpful.

When we begin an interaction by using words that criticize others for making mistakes, or blame them for how we feel, we have started the conversation on shaky footing. The situation is not likely to get better for us until we learn how to adjust our language. Similarly, if we raise our voice or bring a threatening tone to our words, it's difficult to imagine the rest of the conversation being productive.

Unfortunately, we can't always predict if a conversation is going to get heated or not, as sometimes we have very little time to understand what we're feeling and needing and what the other person is feeling and needing. So instead we respond defensively or aggressively, or we go the other way and sulk, get quiet, or become uncooperative.

Helpful language is when we choose words that express ourselves in such a way that others don't feel attacked or criticized. Little is gained if our words cause someone else to become defensive, or to feel as if they have to prove themselves or hide themselves. Let's look at this example:

Your friend is late to meet you at the restaurant.
You're annoyed. The minute she walks up, you say,
"You're always late. What's wrong with you?"



Depending on your friend, her reaction could look like: jabbing back and getting righteous; defending herself or denying her action, or shutting down, too overwhelmed.

Or

Your friend is late. When she arrives, you say, "When
you're late, I feel hurt."



Because you've consciously thought about how to express yourself, your
friend doesn't feel attacked, or accused of anything.

It's important to mention here that using helpful language not only applies in situations when we talk to others, but also when we talk to ourselves. It's my experience that how we talk to ourselves sets the foundation for how we speak to others. If we're always on our case for not meeting our own expectations, or judging ourselves for things that we perceive to be wrong or a mistake, it's very likely that we're going to think everyone else is judging and talking about us that way as well. The words we speak to ourselves over and over again become our beliefs, and if we are feeding ourselves a diet of negative self-talk, we create an environment of suffering.

Below is a list of descriptive phrases that people say about themselves, all of which aren't very helpful. Things like:

- "That was so dumb—I can't believe I did that."
- "Leave it to me to screw everything up!"

- “I’m sorry, this isn’t going to be very good.”
- “That’s so like me to say I’ll do something and then not follow through.”
- “I’m never going to be able to afford that.”

While some of these statements may not seem like obviously hurtful speech, if we look closer, we can see that, really, what we’re saying to ourselves in some cases is pretty mean. In all of these instances we’re telling ourselves, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, that we aren’t good enough. And each time we put ourselves down, we build on the belief that we aren’t worthy or deserving. There’s a phrase in politics that says, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” If we sit in our insecurity and self-judgment, we stand for it as well.

Another way to think about helpful language is to consider the previously unmentioned of the four immeasurables—metta, or loving-kindness. While the first part of metta, love, gets most of the attention in our society, I would like to focus on the second part, kindness.

For instance, when someone is short, abrasive, or rude to you, how do you normally respond? For many people, the first inclination is to respond in kind instead of with kindness, but this can rarely be described as helpful. Making a conscious decision to be kind in our responses rather than reactionary is helpful. Oftentimes this can be as simple as overlooking another person’s remark and not letting it draw in our ego, instead responding in such a way that shows our intention is to be kind.

This sense of kindness can be extended to ourselves, especially when we “make a mistake” and our current habit is

to unload a barrage of negative self-talk. We can start using more helpful language by paying attention to our words and the stories we're telling ourselves over and over again. This will be discussed in great detail in the next section, Listen to Yourself. If we start speaking to ourselves in a kind, honest, nonjudgmental, and helpful way, then we are far more likely to create interactions with others that follow these same rules.



Cultivate Communication

In your journal, write the four elements of right speech with room under each one:

- Tell the truth.
- Don't exaggerate.
- Don't gossip.
- Use helpful language.

Now think a bit about the last time you didn't tell the truth, exaggerated, gossiped, and didn't use helpful language. This isn't to call you out and point fingers, but rather to get you to notice your actions, which will help you to become aware of your communication patterns. The first step to changing a behavior is to become aware of when, how, and why we do it. Start to see these moments as opportunities for change.

What to Remember

With the rules of right speech, we now have a foundational understanding of how a Buddhist communicates. She uses words that are true, balanced, necessary, and kind. She listens intently to others and to herself. And while she realizes

that she is only responsible for what she says (not what others hear), she still takes great care to choose her words skillfully, so that the recipient is more likely to hear and understand them. She doesn't speak negatively about people. She speaks from the heart. And once the words are said, she lets them go.

The rules of right speech are by design simple and easy to remember. But that doesn't mean they're simple and easy to apply. At this point you may be wondering, how does this actually work? It's all good in theory, sure, but how do I apply these rules to my life? In heated discussions? How can I make sure I'm being honest, not making everything a big deal, giving up my own agenda, and choosing helpful language? The following visual shows the five steps, which we'll learn more about in the coming pages!

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