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Right Speech Is Not Always Gentle: The Buddha's Authorization of Sharp Criticism, its Rationale, Limits, and Possible Applications

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Right Speech Is Not Always Gentle: The Buddha's Authorization of Sharp Criticism, its Rationale, Limits, and Possible Applications

Sallie B. King¹

Abstract

What is Right Speech and how should it be applied in the multiple challenges of social and political life? Examining passages from the Pāli canon shows that although Right Speech is normatively truthful and gentle, the Buddha endorsed “sharp” speech when it was beneficial and timely. He both permitted and modeled direct, sharp criticism of the person whose words or actions were harmful. The monks were taught to use such speech even though it might disturb their equanimity and are seen as having a moral duty to do so. Good moral judgment is needed to determine when sharp speech should be used. Applying the analysis to the question of how Buddhists should respond

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to the harmful words and actions of Donald Trump, the study finds that the norms of Right Speech entail using sharp speech in this case. In responding to supporters of Donald Trump, the study finds benefit in avoiding sharp speech in an effort to build mutual understanding and heal the deep divisions in contemporary American society. An exception is made for hate speech which is seen as needing to be immediately confronted.

Introduction

What is Right Speech and how should it be applied in the multiple challenges of social and political life? Right Speech is one of eight components of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha and is therefore a central, highlighted teaching with respect to behavior. But what exactly does it entail? Furthermore, what guidance might it offer for verbal participation in the political life of one's society in times and occasions of conflict? Since the presidential election of 2016, many American Buddhists have taken to the streets with voices and placards, as well as to their computer keyboards, to speak sharply against the harmful speech and actions of Donald Trump (Lion's Roar), yet Buddhist theory supporting such speech seems to be lagging behind. Many may feel that engaging in such sharp, critical speech could be a bit out of step with Right Speech, as well as their Buddhist commitment and intention to love all beings. Is it possible to defend such speech on the basis of the teachings of the Buddha?

In 2003, Christopher Queen published an important paper titled, "Gentle or Harsh? The Practice of Right Speech in Engaged Buddhism" (Queen). In it, he rightly pointed out that the Buddha's teachings as preserved in the Pāli canon endorse not only gentle speech, but, when merited, harsh speech as well. However, an observer of American Buddhist

discussions concerning how to respond to the crises besetting this country in recent years, notably since the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency, will probably have seen that the great preponderance of advice to American Buddhists from prominent Buddhist teachers and scholars has encouraged the approach of gentle speech and often neglected the possibility of more critical engagement.

Fortunately, the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi has recently issued a very helpful selection of texts drawn from the Pāli canon, *The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony*, that sheds a good deal of light on the subject of Right Speech (Bodhi *Harmony*).² We will base our inquiry primarily upon these texts.

The Buddha's Words on Right Speech

If one were to ask a reasonably well-informed Buddhist, monastic or lay, what the Buddha's teachings on Right Speech are, one would likely be told that they require one to speak the truth. Those better informed might well add that they require one to speak gently and kindly. This, indeed, is the received view on Right Speech in Buddhism—that it must be truthful, gentle, and kindly. Teachings of this nature are frequently found in the Pāli canon and therefore are rightly understood as the Buddha's basic teaching on the subject. Here are two representative texts on “well spoken” speech:

² Citations of this text will be given as: *Bodhi Harmony* and page number(s), followed by the location of the text in the Pāli canon as cited by Bhikkhu Bodhi; the translations are taken from the series of translations issued by Wisdom Publications as “The Teachings of the Buddha Series” and the page numbers following those titles refer to those translations. The translations in the anthology sometimes differ slightly from the translations in the original volumes.

The Blessed One said this: “Monks, when speech possesses four factors, it is well spoken, not badly spoken, and it is blameless and irreproachable among the wise. What four? Here, a monk speaks only what is well spoken, not what is badly spoken. He speaks only Dhamma, not non-Dhamma. He speaks only what is pleasant, not what is unpleasant. He speaks only what is true, not lies. When speech possesses these four factors, it is well spoken, not badly spoken, and it is blameless and irreproachable among the wise.” (Bodhi *Harmony* 75; *Suttanipāta* III,3; see also *Samyutta Nikāya* 8:5; Bodhi *Connected* 284-85)

Monks, when speech possesses five factors, it is well spoken, not badly spoken, and it is blameless and irreproachable among the wise. What five? It is spoken at the proper time; what is said is true; it is spoken gently; what is said is beneficial; it is spoken with a mind of loving-kindness. When speech possesses these five factors, it is well spoken, not badly spoken, and it is blameless and irreproachable among the wise. (Bodhi *Harmony* 75; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 5:198; Bodhi *Numerical* 816)

Here we see in both cases that truth is a necessity in what is well spoken. In addition, the first passage informs us that well-spoken speech is always pleasant and not unpleasant, while the second passage says that what is well-spoken is spoken gently. This, indeed, is the received view, the normative view; it is what is expected, especially from monastics, but from serious lay practitioners as well.

The Buddha, however, does not always or uniformly encourage this normative gentle and pleasant speech. On the contrary, he sometimes straightforwardly encourages the monks to speak critically:

Monks, possessing five qualities, a resident monk is deposited in heaven as if brought there. What five? (1) Having investigated and scrutinized, he speaks dispraise of one who deserves dispraise. (2) Having investigated and scrutinized, he speaks praise of one who deserves praise. (3) Having investigated and scrutinized, he is suspicious about a matter that merits suspicion. (4) Having investigated and scrutinized, he believes a matter that merits belief. (5) He does not squander what has been given out of faith [i.e., food given as alms]. Possessing these five qualities, a resident monk is deposited in heaven as if brought there. (*Bodhi Harmony* 80; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 5:236; *Bodhi Numerical* 832-33)

This passage introduces a significant qualification to the normative view cited above. Here the Buddha tells the monks that they not only may, but *should* speak “dispraise of one who deserves dispraise,” having first “investigated and scrutinized.” Clearly, speaking dispraise of someone is not going to be regarded as gentle and pleasant speech, either by the one on the receiving end of such dispraise, or by those who hear it. Therefore, while, all other things being equal, gentle and pleasant speech is normative, indeed the expected behavior, when the situation warrants it, the monks are told they should carefully investigate the situation and then should speak dispraise as warranted. In fact, it seems that it is not too much to say, on the basis of Buddhist norms, that they have a moral duty to do so. After all, if they have carefully investigated and scrutinized and found, for example, that someone is speaking untruthfully or harmfully, in a manner, that is, that could harm the Sangha, the lay community, or an individual, they have an implicit responsibility to do what they can to prevent such harm, by alerting or warning the community or individual. This will require them to state clearly when a person is speaking untruthfully/harmfully. Again, the lay community trusts the monks and looks to

them as teachers and moral guides. This requires them to show the community clearly what is right and wrong, what is true and false, and this cannot be done if one avoids naming untruth and harmful speech in the concrete situations, including persons, in which it is encountered.

Note that the Buddha's words in this passage require the monks to speak dispraise of "one who" merits dispraise. That is, the monks are enjoined not only to point to untruthful/harmful speech and call it untruthful/harmful speech, but also to point to the one speaking untruthful/harmful speech and call him/her one who is speaking untruthful/harmful speech. One might feel that this violates the normative directive to speak gently and pleasantly (though, of course, one can speak clearly and strongly when one criticizes, without adding personal invective), but it would seem that clarity—very important in avoiding confusion in the community—requires it.

This might seem to argue against the advice offered by Andrew Olendzki, in a recent article in *Tricycle*, that those seeking to be guided by the Buddha's teachings should not criticize persons, but separate persons from their views or behaviors, criticizing the speech or behavior when merited, but refraining from criticizing the persons who utter or do those things (19-20). He is, of course, correct that the Buddha offered such advice; he cites a Pāli canon text called, "The Exposition of Non-Conflict," in support of this understanding. Here is an example of the teaching from that text:

'One should know what it is to extol and what it is to disparage, and knowing both, one should neither extol nor disparage but should teach only the Dhamma.' So it was said [by himself, earlier in the text]. And with reference to what was this said? . . .

When one does not say: ‘All those engaged in the pursuit of self-mortification . . . have entered upon the wrong way,’ but says instead: ‘The pursuit is a state beset by suffering, vexation, despair, and fever, and it is the wrong way,’ then one teaches only the Dhamma. (*Majjhima Nikāya* 139; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1081-82)³

In other words, in the interest of avoiding conflict, one should not say to another, “you are wrong,” but speak impersonally, saying, “this *path* is a wrong path, for these reasons . . .” This is indeed part of the “speak gently” normative view taught by the Buddha. However, as we have already seen, though the Buddha offered the normative view, he also himself deviated from that normative view when he considered it to be necessary. It is quite evident in the Pāli canon that the Buddha adapted his teachings to his audience and also often chose the wording in his teachings in response to situations that arose. This gives his teachings a kind of common sense flexibility that avoids problems that some ethical philosophies develop if they attempt to adhere too strongly to a moral rule. For example, a moral rule, such as, “Do not lie!” is almost universally recognized, but when faced with a situation that seems to demand a lie (Should you lie if you are hiding a woman and her enraged and murderous husband comes to your door and asks if you know where she is?) almost anyone would recognize that the morally correct thing to do is to lie.

Ethical systems need some flexibility to accommodate such situations. The Buddha’s ethical teachings do not actually rely much upon moral rules, but upon moral principles. A moral rule attempts to tell us what to do in all situations, whereas a moral principle is a moral value that holds out an ideal (such as truthfulness) but allows for moral judgment to determine how it should apply in a particular situation (King 55-63). In the teachings of the Buddha, the ethical principle that transcends all others is

³ Second ellipsis in the original.

simple, straightforward, and intuitive: avoid causing suffering, prevent suffering, ameliorate suffering. If a principle such as truth telling comes in conflict with the principle of preventing harm, the latter prevails. Similarly, if the principle of gentle speech comes in conflict with preventing harm, the latter prevails.

A second passage from the Buddha's teachings authorizing praise and dispraise of individuals sheds further light:

. . . [T]he one that I consider the most excellent and sublime is the one who speaks dispraise of someone who deserves dispraise, and the dispraise is accurate, truthful, and timely; and who also speaks praise of someone who deserves praise, and the praise is accurate, truthful, and timely. For what reason? Because what excels. . . is knowledge of the proper time to speak in any particular case. (Bodhi *Harmony* 81; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:100; Bodhi *Numerical* 480-82)

Again, we note the direct instruction to speak dispraise of persons who deserve it. Here the Buddha adds that the dispraise should be accurate, truthful, and timely. It is no surprise to learn that it must be accurate and truthful, but it is especially noteworthy that it must be timely, because, "what excels . . . is knowledge of the proper time to speak in any particular case." (We note in passing that being "spoken at the proper time" is one of the five factors named above as making a particular speech act "well spoken.") In its original context, this remark is made in response to a wanderer named Potaliya who raised this question to the Buddha while himself opining that, in his (Potaliya's) view,

the one that seems to me the most excellent and sublime is the one who does not speak dispraise of someone who deserves dispraise, though the dispraise would be accurate,

truthful, and timely; and who does not speak praise of someone who deserves praise, though the praise would be accurate, truthful, and timely. For what reason? Because what excels, Master Gotama, is equanimity. (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:100, *Numerical* 481)

The Buddha's demurral to Potaliya's view supports our understanding that the Buddha saw it as important for the monks to give voice to dispraise as warranted, presumably for the correction of the individual meriting the dispraise and also for the guidance of the community. The monks are not even to think that their wish to preserve their equanimity, in their treading of the Path in the direction of nirvana, should be allowed to supersede the responsibility inherent in their roles as teachers and guides, to speak praise and dispraise as merited. This is a strongly emphasized responsibility, indeed.

Also in this passage, the Buddha points us in the direction of moral judgment, indicating that, after investigation and scrutiny, knowing that an individual is speaking untruthfully or harmfully and is thus deserving of dispraise may not be enough to warrant speaking dispraise of him or her. One must apply judgment in order to discern when is the "proper time to speak." Some times may be right and other times may be wrong to say the same thing. For example, the "proper time to speak" will usually be before more harm is done, rather than after foreseeable harm is done.

The Buddha gives further advice on using moral judgment in the very same text, "The Exposition of Non-Conflict," discussed above:

It was said [by himself, earlier in the same talk]: 'One should not utter covert speech, and one should not utter overt sharp speech.' And with reference to what was this said?

Here, monks, when one knows covert speech to be untrue, incorrect, and unbeneficial, one should not utter it.

When one knows covert speech to be true, correct, and unbeneficial, one should try not to utter it. But when one knows covert speech to be true, correct, and beneficial, one may utter it, knowing the time to do so.

Here, monks, when one knows overt sharp speech to be untrue, incorrect, and unbeneficial, one should not utter it. When one knows overt sharp speech to be true, correct, and unbeneficial, one should try not to utter it. But when one knows overt sharp speech to be true, correct, and beneficial, one may utter it, knowing the time to do so.

So it was with reference to this that it was said: ‘One should not utter covert speech, and one should not utter overt sharp speech.’ (Bodhi *Harmony* 81; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1083-84)

Here the Buddha nuances the normative teachings—that he himself had given at the beginning of the same talk—that covert speech (speaking in a hidden manner) and sharp speech are to be avoided. That is, he began by saying that generally speaking, and when no other factors alter the situation, one should speak openly, so that everyone can hear, hiding nothing, and one should speak gently and pleasantly. Moral situations, however, can be complex; in some cases, many factors must be taken into consideration and weighed before one determines how to behave. In such cases, it may be that the moral person will need to speak covertly or sharply. How does one know when it is correct to do so? Assuming that what one is saying is true, the Buddha here advises that one’s decision should hinge upon whether or not one’s contemplated covert speech or overt sharp speech will be beneficial.

It is not difficult to think of examples that make the Buddha’s intent clear. Given that covert speech is acceptable in the Buddha’s ethical

teaching when it is true, correct, and beneficial, let us consider how it might apply in other times and cultures. Perhaps a person is suffering from a mental illness and it will be helpful to discuss that illness with his family members, but harmful to discuss it with him, at least at this time. Perhaps one is part of a group attempting to (nonviolently) undermine the power of a corrupt government; obviously, group members would need to speak covertly with other group members about their plans. In such cases, we may interpret the Buddha as implying, one “may (morally) utter” such covert speech, “knowing the time to do so,” i.e., when it is best for the individual(s) in question, or when relevant factors are optimal. However, says the Buddha, it is best to avoid covert speech whenever it is not beneficial.

In the case of overt sharp speech, the key again is whether that speech will be beneficial: “when one knows overt sharp speech to be true, correct, and beneficial, one may utter it, knowing the time to do so.” Perhaps one is a monk and one of one’s disciples has misunderstood the Dharma and is misrepresenting it to others. The Buddha himself did not hesitate to rebuke monks with this failing quite sharply. Perhaps one is a caregiver and is taking poor care of one’s charges; here, too, a rebuke might well be in order. Let us again take it as a given in the Buddha’s ethical teachings that overt, sharp speech may be necessary in some situations. Let us also bear in mind the fact that the Buddhist tradition has from the earliest days recognized the special power and importance of speech among human beings by singling out speech from all other actions and assigning it karmic weight, forming a triad of factors capable of engendering karmic consequences alongside thought and action in general. Today we speak of “speech acts” in recognition of the fact that speech has power; it can change reality. For example, an insult changes the relationship between two people, as does a declaration of love. Again, a political speech may attract or repel listeners, who may decide to vote for or against a candidate on that basis. People may be moved to dedicate themselves to a

cause, or join a new religion, give up their vices or indulge in them with gusto after hearing speech.

Let us consider how all this might be applied to our present time and culture, specifically, the crisis facing American society in 2017. Bearing in mind the power of speech, together with the Buddha's various teachings on Right Speech, what would be the proper response of a Buddhist in this crisis? How might the Buddha's conditional endorsement of overt, sharp speech apply or not apply in this case? Here we have a situation in which a person with the potential of causing great harm to many people—indeed, to the entire planet and all its inhabitants⁴—and with many traits of a potential despot, has come into extraordinary power, using hate speech and fear-mongering to do so. In response, many people in America—many of its elected leaders, its media, its comedians, its civil society leadership, and its ordinary citizens—speak out publicly, in great numbers, again and again, naming and denouncing every harmful action or untruthful speech act, as well as actions and speech acts that tend towards tyranny, naming and sharply criticizing the individual who said and did them. Should Buddhists be part of this?

Let us consider what the power of such speech on the part of the citizenry is, and whether it is beneficial. To this author, the power and benefits of such speech are clear. Such speech helps to create a situation in which the actions and speech of the potential tyrant do not become normalized, people do not become habituated to them or inured to them, but are strengthened in their efforts to resist them, both mentally and in practice, knowing that others are resisting as well. Here covert speech will not do, nor will gentle and pleasant speech. Clearly, avoiding criticizing the individual, the potential despot, while criticizing his behavior, also will not do. Not only are the individual and his speech and acts inseparable in practice, but the individual himself, insofar as he is an elected official

⁴ With the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement.

and as such has the power that comes with that office, is the problem and thus needs to be held responsible for his deeds. The more powerful the individual in question is, and the greater the likelihood that misuse of that power will occur and continue without (nonviolent) intervention, the clearer it is that (nonviolent) intervention is needed to attempt to prevent harm. Here only overt, sharp criticism of the individual and his speech and actions will do. As far as timeliness is concerned, the “proper time” to speak out, sharply and critically, will be early and often, the more so, the greater the threat of harm.

Let us consider the context of public, political speech. It is a fundamental principle of political science that governance rests upon the consent of the governed. When individuals in a society are sharply at odds with their governmental leadership, it is important for them to know that others in their society are at odds with it as well. Public, critical speech is what lets others know that they are not alone in their disapproval. Moreover, large scale, repeated, public critical speech in itself changes the power dynamic in the country. It dramatically lessens the power of the would-be despot when individuals and groups in the country publicly repudiate his words and actions and criticize him. This greatly reinforces their readiness to resist or disobey when resistance or disobedience is required. Without compliance, the would-be despot is dis-empowered. The greater the number of people who repudiate him, the greater is the dis-empowerment. This indeed is a major benefit to be gained by overt, sharp speech, uttered at the right time. According to the Buddha, when overt, sharp speech is true, correct, and beneficial, it should be uttered. In principle, then, such speech would be ethically correct for those who follow the Buddhist path to engage in, in a situation such as we are considering.

Let us return to the words of the Buddha. We have seen that the rule of thumb in judging when one is justified in uttering overt, sharp speech is that there should be benefit in uttering such sharp speech. The

Buddha himself did not hesitate to denounce in strong language those who engage in harmful speech, as is recorded in the Pāli canon:

Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single person who is acting so much for the harm of many people, the unhappiness of many people, for the ruin, harm, and suffering of many people, of devas and human beings, as the hollow man Makkhali.⁵ (*Anguttara Nikāya* 1:33; *Bodhi Numerical* 119)

Makkhali Gosāla was a contemporary of the Buddha and leading teacher of the Ājīvaka school. The *Dīgha Nikāya* “ascribes to him the doctrine of non-causality . . ., according to which there is no cause for the defilement or purification of beings, who have no energy, self-control, or capacity for free choice.”⁶ The Buddha considered this doctrine to be disastrous since it robbed people of any motivation to engage in spiritual practice, which, according to the theory, could have no possible causal efficacy in altering one’s spiritual/existential condition. In the Buddha’s view, this causes extreme harm to anyone who takes the teachings to heart by taking away even the possibility of effort to develop spiritually. He here assails not only this doctrine but the man who teaches it, describing him as “hollow.” This sharp, public, critical speech is justified because it is an effort to warn people away from an idea that could harm them gravely—and from the man who is spreading it around.

The Buddha also articulated fairly concrete criteria that laypeople could use to help determine when a monk deserved to be censured and no longer treated as a monk:

Monks, when a monk possesses eight qualities, lay followers, if they wish, may proclaim their loss of confidence in

⁵ Thanks to Bhikkhu Bodhi for drawing this example to my attention.

⁶ The attribution is found in *Dīgha Nikāya* 2.20 and *Itivuttaka* 53–54 (*Bodhi Numerical* 1615).

him. What eight? (1) He tries to prevent laypeople from acquiring gains; (2) he tries to bring harm to laypeople; (3) he insults and reviles laypeople; (4) he divides laypeople from each other; (5) he speaks dispraise of the Buddha; (6) he speaks dispraise of the Dhamma; (7) he speaks dispraise of the Sangha; (8) they see him at an improper resort. When a monk possesses these eight qualities, lay followers, if they wish, may proclaim their loss of confidence in him. (Bodhi *Harmony* 157-8; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8:88; *Bodhi Numerical* 1236)

We have here a catalogue of offenses that justify laypeople proclaiming “loss of confidence” or *appasāda* in a monk, meaning “they need not rise up from their seat for him, or pay homage to him, or go out to meet him, or give him gifts.” (Bodhi *Harmony* 204) In other words, they censure him and, in effect, no longer recognize him as a monk. Listed offenses are: causing or trying to cause direct material harm to laypeople (1 and 2); harming laypeople psychologically and socially with speech (3); harming individuals and society by dividing people from each other (4); and demonstrating a lack of morality and integrity, along with a lack of respect for the moral and spiritual life and the institutions that support it (5-8). Applying this thinking again to our own time and place, the thinking here might perhaps be interpreted as: these eight qualities and behaviors are outside the norms of acceptability for important leaders; those manifesting them may rightly be considered as disqualified for their posts. If it were permissible to remove the references to monks and laypeople, and put government officials and citizens in their place, we would have a list of offenses that merit overt criticism and censure of that government official by the citizenry, and recognition that such officials do not belong in office.

Let us return to Andrew Olendzki’s advice, based upon the Buddha’s teachings and noted above, that one should try to criticize wrongful

words and behavior, but avoid making one's criticism a criticism of the person. I have argued above to the contrary that there are times when direct, strong, personal criticism is necessary. I believe that such criticism is certainly necessary in the case of elected officials whose speech and behavior harms and insults people, and who lack integrity and morality, but does this judgment also apply, in a democracy, to those whose votes enabled the official to take office and who continue to support such an official? Is it appropriate to criticize them, much as one criticizes the official they support? Another quotation from the Buddha gives us guidance on how to think through this issue:

“While you are training in concord . . . some monk might commit an offense or a transgression . . .”

“Then it may occur to you, monks: ‘I shall be troubled and the other person will be hurt; for the other person is given to anger and resentment, and he is firmly attached to his view and he relinquishes with difficulty; yet I can make that person emerge from the unwholesome and establish him in the wholesome. It is a mere trifle that I shall be troubled and the other person hurt, but it is a much greater thing that I can make that person emerge from the unwholesome and establish him in the wholesome.’ If such occurs to you, monks, it is proper to speak.

“Then it may occur to you, monks: ‘I shall be troubled and the other person will be hurt; for the other person is given to anger and resentment, and he is firmly attached to his view and he relinquishes with difficulty; and I cannot make that person emerge from the unwholesome and establish him in the wholesome.’ One should not underrate equanimity toward such a person. (Bodhi *Harmony* 149-150; *Majjhima Nikāya* 103; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 848-52)

The Buddha's advice here, among other things, indicates that one should not be confrontational *in situations where confrontation will do no good, i.e., where it will not be beneficial*, but will only produce anger and resentment. This point calls up an important part of the situation in which Americans find themselves today. It is much reported that American society is deeply divided into two groups who differ in geographic location, in education, in social class, in way of life, in religion, in media viewing habits, in political views and much else (DelReal and Clement). Moreover, these two groups in American society scarcely interact at all, do not understand each other, and do not like each other very much. It is widely acknowledged that one necessary element in transforming the root causes of the present crisis is to overcome the divisions in American society, or to find a way for Americans to understand each other across the gulf that separates them. To this end, the two groups need to talk with each other in such a way that the mutual alienation is decreased, whether informally or under the auspices of groups dedicated to promoting such dialogue, and that seek to help Americans come to understand each other and find common ground.⁷ In this situation, sharp, critical speech clearly will be counterproductive and is therefore contraindicated, no matter how much individuals might disagree with each other.

I believe that much of the current advice of American Buddhist leaders urging Americans to speak gently and kindly is spoken with the objective in mind of healing the divisions in American society. Here, I believe, is where Andrew Olendzki's advice to separate criticism of harmful views from those who hold them, criticizing the former but not the latter, is very well taken. Here we also can see the usefulness and importance of the Zen Peacemakers' advice to spend time in non-judgmental not-knowing, (Glassman et al.) advice that promotes avoiding criticism of the other "side," while instead listening and attempting to discern the motivations

⁷ For example, see "Better Angels," <https://better-angels.org/>.

and intentions, the wishes, fears, and angers in what one is hearing, recognizing that one does not, in fact, know what these are. Here also belongs Thich Nhat Hanh's revised version of the fourth lay precept, not to lie. It reads:

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small. (Thich Nhat Hanh 4)⁸

Like Olendzki's and Glassman's advice, this advice advocates a form of Right Speech (and listening) that is well suited to the bridge building that is needed to overcome the divisions in American society.

I have argued above that it is necessary that overt, sharp speech be spoken publicly in response to Donald Trump's harmful speech and actions, but I do not believe that this kind of speech will be of use in the effort to overcome the gulf separating the two mutually alienated groups in American society. Why, though, should there be a difference between

⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh's wording for his revised precepts (which are at present called Five Mindfulness Trainings) have changed from time to time; other versions can be found on the internet.

speech directed at Donald Trump and speech directed at those who support him? The answer is simple: timeliness and benefit. An American president is able to do a great deal of damage, very quickly. Such a president needs to be stopped (nonviolently), in order to avert harm; sharp, critical speech is an essential part of that process of nonviolent stopping. Such a president's supporters, however, need to be understood, in order to attempt to heal the root causes of such a president being elected. This takes longer and requires avoiding sharp speech.

There assuredly is a place for overt, sharp speech, but it is not all places. Similarly, there is a place for gentle speech, but it is not all places. Where to draw the line? One reasonable place to draw a line, and the one emphasized in this paper, is between the public speech of elected officials and that of ordinary citizens attempting to understand each other. Another line is crossed with hate speech and/or advocacy of violence, no matter who does it. Hate speech is a dangerous, slippery slope that easily incites or escalates into acts of violence. On the Buddha's criteria of timeliness and benefit (preventing suffering), it should be confronted immediately. In less dire circumstances, ultimately it will be up to moral judgment to decide when it is time to listen and when to speak, when to condemn a view one encounters and when to try to dig into its genesis, guided, as always, by the concern to prevent suffering, and by "knowing the time to speak."⁹

In conclusion, let us return to a point with which we began: many American Buddhists may feel that their engaging in sharp, critical speech against the harmful speech, actions and presidency of Donald Trump could be a bit out of step with their Buddhist commitment and intention to love all beings. On the contrary, if the present analysis is correct, insofar as these things and this person entail both imminent and present harm

⁹ For some understanding of the gestation of the thinking of even some of those who call themselves neo-Nazis, see McCoy.

to many persons, *not* to speak out sharply and critically against these things and the person who says and does them would be contrary to their Buddhist commitment and intention to love all beings. Even Donald Trump himself benefits from such actions, as such sharp, critical speech is no more than teachings and correctives for speech and behavior outside minimum standards of morality and decency.

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