Reviewing Right Speech In These Trying Times

This is a review of *Sammavaca* (sah-mah-vah-cah), translated as *Right Speech*. Sammavaca is one of the three aspects of the Virtue aggregate in the Noble Eightfold Path. Classically, this is defined as speech that is truthful, conducive of interpersonal and societal harmony, reliable, beneficial, timely and avoiding self-aggrandizement. Right Speech is, first of all, internal and private, but its public manifestation is essential for participating in society. Buddhism teaches that the development of Awakening from dukkha--distress and confusion—emerges from the virtuous tranquility of a clear conscience, reflected in the manifestation of *hiri* (he-ree)—fear of shame—and *ottappa* (oh-tah-pah)--respect for consequences.

The commentaries describe sammavaca in two ways, as *talk that is to be avoided* and *that talk which is to be cultivated*. Here is a quote from the commentaries reviewing these categories, from the Anguttara-Nikaya:

**NOBLE & IGNOBLE WAYS OF SPEAKING**

Bhikkhus, there are these eight kinds of *anariyavohara* (ignoble ways of speaking).  What are the eight kinds?  The eight kinds are:

the tendency to speak of having seen things that have not (really) been seen;  
the tendency to speak of having heard things that have not (really) been heard;  
the tendency to speak of having experienced things that have not (really) been experienced;   
the tendency to speak of having realized things that have not (really) been realized;  
  
the tendency to speak of having not seen things that have been seen;  
the tendency to speak of having not heard things that have been heard;  
the tendency to speak of having not experienced things that have been experienced;  
the tendency to speak of having not realized things that have been realized.

Bhikkhus, these are the eight *anariyavohara.*

Bhikkhus, there are these eight kinds of *ariyavohara* (noble ways of speaking).  What are the eight kinds?  The eight kinds are:

the tendency to speak of having not seen things that have not been seen;  
the tendency to speak of having not heard things that have not been heard;  
the tendency to speak of having not experienced things that have not been experienced;  
the tendency to speak of having not realized things that have not been realized;  
  
the tendency to speak of having seen things that have (really) been seen;  
the tendency to speak of having heard things that have (really) been heard;  
the tendency to speak of having experienced things that have (really) been experienced;  
the tendency to speak of having realized things that have (truly) been realized.

Bhikkhus, these are the eight *ariyavohara.*

Our internal self-talk effectively creates who we think we are and how the world is. This self-talk is essentially a fabrication based on a lifetime of prior experience. Karma describes any actions based on these fabrications and can either be wholesome or unwholesome. We tend to interpret the speech and actions of others through the filter of this self-experience. In this way, we are socially interdependent in relationships—as we converse, we are participating in co-creation, either directly through interpersonal dialogue or indirectly through our participation in the various medias we interact with.

We have grown up in a consumerist culture, which strongly conditions desire regarding whatever products are being advertised, either materially or in the context of social status, or through fear, regarding whatever we witness through the media that is cruel or otherwise threatening us materially or in the context of social status. In this way, consumer indoctrination fosters self-talk that is self-defining. We are mostly unaware of this conditioning, through the pervasiveness of billboards, commercials, and systemic social biasing such as racism, ethnic and religious prejudice, classism, and other conditioning functions that have been with us from our earliest life experiences. Because of this ever-present reinforcing, we see ourselves and the world through these filters.

This conditioning and our subsequent actions are creating much of the current critical stressors that we are affected by these days. Undisciplined, unquestioned consumerism has manifested behaviors that have despoiled the environment through global warming, soil depletion, poisoning water sources and polluting the oceans. These behaviors have become so routine that we hardly give a moment’s thought to the nature of and the consequences of this karma for ourselves and the following generations, not to mention the wildlife.

Our social environment is also contaminated by greed, hatred, and ignorance, the three primary causes of dukkha. Instead of mindfully listening and investigating the ways the mind is making meaning of what we hear from other people and through the media, we identify ourselves and others through prejudicial narratives related to the color of a person’s skin, what sort of clothing is worn, or other ways conditioning creates societal distress and confusion. This view suggests a variation on Right Speech, perhaps termed as Right Listening, which involves careful critical analysis of what is being presented through the media. This doesn’t just involve the written or spoken word, but also the imagery we are presented with—I watched a commercial recently that showed a beautiful woman smiling, leading against and then driving a battery-powered Cadillac—the overlaid commentary described her as a leader, a trend-setter for society. Aside from the likelihood that those watching the commercial couldn’t afford to buy a Cadillac, the setting creates an idealized view of what leadership is and what constitutes effective environmental responsibility. A core aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path is consideration of Wisdom—the cause-and-effect of our choices and actions—to avoid dukkha and promote liberation of the mind (and the planet) from the consequences of uncritical thinking, which creates an ideal that is unrealistic, but affects one’s self-image.

We are all subject to what contemporary social science terms “confirmation bias”, that is, how prior conditioning fosters overlooking other, perhaps more wholesome, ways of being and acting. This sort of biasing is at the core of the false information that can easily be found online, particularly through the social networks and other media such as YouTube. From a Buddhist perspective, we are afflicted with the hindrance of skeptical doubt; one of the antidotes for this condition is to consult with someone knowledgeable about the how to skillfully counter that doubt. In that regard, I did some research--here are some interesting and useful tips I gathered from the internet on how to be a wiser interpreter of online presentations. I downloaded these references from a New York Times article titled “How To Deal With A Crisis Of Misinformation”, written by Brian Chen, published October 14, 2020:

**Be a Fact Checker**

Get used to this keyboard shortcut: Ctrl+T (or Command+T on a Mac). That creates a new browser tab in Chrome and Firefox. You’re going to be using it a lot. The reason: It enables you to ask questions and hopefully get some answers with a quick web search.

It’s all part of an exercise that Ms. Byron calls lateral reading. While reading an article, Step 1 is to open a browser tab. Step 2 is to ask yourself these questions:

* Who is behind the information?
* What is the evidence?
* What do other sources say?

From there, with that new browser tab open, you could start answering those questions. You could do a web search on the author of the content when possible. You could do another search to see what other publications are saying about the same topic. If the claim isn’t being repeated elsewhere, it may be false.

You could also open another browser tab to look at the evidence. With a meme, for example, you could do a reverse image search on the photo that was used in the meme. On Google.com, click Images and upload the photo or paste the web address of the photo into the search bar. That will show where else the image has shown up on the web to verify whether the one you have seen has been manipulated.

With videos, it’s trickier. A [browser plug-in called InVID](https://www.invid-project.eu/tools-and-services/invid-verification-plugin/) can be installed on Firefox and Chrome. When watching a video, you can click on the tool, click on the Keyframes button and paste in a video link (a YouTube clip, for example) and click Submit. From there, the tool will pull up important frames of the video, and you can reverse image search on those frames to see if they are legitimate or fake.

**Choose Your News Carefully**

While social media sites like Facebook and Twitter help us stay connected with the people we care about, there’s a downside: Even the people we trust may be unknowingly spreading false information, so we can be caught off guard. And with everything mashed together into a single social media feed, it gets tougher to distinguish good information from bad information, and fact from opinion.

What we can do is another exercise in mindfulness: Be deliberate about where you get your information, Mr. Adams said. Instead of relying solely on the information showing up in your social media feeds, choose a set of publications that you trust, like a newspaper, a magazine or a broadcast news program that has demonstrated journalistic responsibility, and turn to those regularly. Mainstream media is far from perfect, but it’s subjected to a standards process that is usually not seen in user-generated content, including memes.

The article suggests using a fact-checking website that the author regards as reliable. Here is the URL: <https://leadstories.com/how-we-work.html> The site is named LeadStories. I reviewed it and it seems to have some useful online tools to use.

As a psychotherapist, a core part of my interventions involved encouraging clients to use mindfulness to apply what is called *cognitive behavioral therapy*, which involves monitoring irrational internal self-talk that distorts subjective experience and is associated with anxiety and depression. For example, the belief that one must always be right and perform perfectly is irrational, but much of contemporary social expectation is organized around such distorted beliefs. My clients were trained to mindfully notice such distorted thinking and substitute more rational self-talk such as “I don’t have to always be right and everyone makes mistakes, so I can too”.

There are several inventories available that list irrational beliefs or schemas, along with suggestions for countering them. The ability to identify them and let go of the urgent impulsivity associated with them requires non-reactive self-awareness, and mindfulness of breathing practice cultivates these skills. A resource that I have used and recommended for reading about a psychological approach to Right Speech is “Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart” by Tara Bennett-Goleman, a psychologist and meditation teacher. The book is well-researched and includes various categories of cognitive distortions and how to use mindfulness to cultivate more wholesome self-talk.

How can regular mindfulness meditation practice offer some clarity, discipline and confidence in how we are interpreting and responding to current life circumstances? I just referred to one above, that is, seeking out a trustworthy source—I regard the New York Times to be conscientious in checking out their published articles.

* Use mindfulness and investigation as resources that can be applied as you absorb the information. Pay attention to how you are responding emotionally to the stimulation. One of the well-researched “hooks” that advertisers, propagandists, trolls and spammers use is to create a headline or image that stimulates some sort of emotional response, and then fill in some plausible copy that has a history of getting a lot of attention. Note how your body is tensing up and the characteristics of your emotional state. I frequently monitor these reactions in myself as I watch commercials on TV; they are cleverly designed to grab your attention and to make you want something or, in the case of current events, to make you anxious. I have trained myself to notice the stirred up physical, emotional and mental train of experience to inform myself as to how the hook operates and then how to see through the manipulation and cultivate a more grounded quality of Right Speech for myself.
* Remind yourself that everyone is subject to greed, hatred and delusion, including those who create and broadcast the misinformation. Learn to cultivate insight and compassion in regard to the ignorance and delusional quality of what is being presented—you are witnessing suffering. This provides an antidote to anger.
* Be alert to the distortions that are presented as facts. One of the things I consider when watching commercials is how unrealistic or distorted the images and ideas are. If you buy some “new, improved” product you will be more satisfied with “whiter teeth” or be surrounded by beautiful, happy people if you drink the advertised beverage.
* Educate yourself as to the consequences of your lifestyle on others around us and the environment. Much current conflict relies on a misperception of liberty and freedom, without regard for consequences. The most damaging application of this misperception over the last few years is disregarding the wearing of masks or social distancing, which fosters the spread of covid-19. Another consideration are the consequences that result from indiscriminate burning of fossil fuels—the increasing average temperature readings all around the world, which create abnormal and destructive weather events. These sorts of issues involve our socially normative speech that seems to take such behaviors for granted. The talk of next week that focuses on Right Action will review these areas more thoroughly.