

A BUDDHIST APPROACH OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM FOR A SKILLFUL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study skillful communication, especially in modern society by analyzing what is related to verbal action taught by Buddha in Pali Canon and Socially Engaged Buddhism. Therefore, the article will focus on two main objectives which are: (1) analyze the definition and significants of skillful communication, and (2) Socially Engaged Buddhism's approach to creating and maintaining skillful communication. To achieve its goal, the article has collected data from the Tripitaka and the practical experiences of the Socially Engaged Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh from his academic books. Besides, the collection of interview information from scholars makes it more practical. This article also suggests practical actions and thoughts in applying Socially Engaged Buddhism in creating skillful communication. As a result, apart from mindfulness being the main key in skillful communication, loving speech and deep listening are also factors that create and maintain skillful communication.

Introduction

Communication is the art of expressing the vividness of human life through communication. But today, mass communication technology develops, forms of communication through devices and technology applications become more popular. People gradually limit face-to-face communication with each other, instead of sending audio or text messages without having to care about the listener's attitude. Although this method of communication is very convenient, there are still many problems that arise. Face-to-face communication is difficult, indirect communication is even more difficult to honestly express the feelings and attitudes of both the speaker and the listener. Thereby, communication problems arise such as conflict, misunderstanding, wrong information, non-cooperation, indifferent attitude between the communicating parties. They are seen as manifestations of unskillful communication. In today's modern society, because unskillful communication has created conflicts between religions, between ethnic groups, and between countries, resulting in wars breaking out everywhere. To limit the effects of mindless communication, people need to communicate effectively and skillfully. First of all, we need to understand what unskillful communication is. There are many different interpretations of skillful communication, people often judge only on the achievement of their communication goals. But a skillful communication is evaluated based on the attitudes of the participants in the conversation, the content of the story, its both positive and negative effects. Furthermore, Buddhism focuses on avoiding arising suffering by communication, helping others to overcome arisen sufferings, and establishing peace and harmony through communicating with each other. Those are the reasons why the Buddha advised people to observe the fourth precept of telling lies and practice right speech among eightfold paths. By deeply understanding the definition of unskillful and skillful communication, we can together create constructive conversations and cultivate good values in society. It is easy to build but to maintain and develop skillful speech for everyone is important. According to the Buddha, the mind is our chief master which directs each person's actions and words. So, to maintain skillful communication, mindfulness should be present in participants' minds while both talking and listening. Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh from socially engaged Buddhist tradition has suggested the practice of “loving speech and deep listening” to not only create skillful communication but also establish the positive habits for personal verbal action.

Objectives of the Research

1. To analyze the meaning and significance of skillful communication in daily life.
2. To approach skillful communication by the socially engaged Buddhism.

Definition of the Terms Used in the Research

1. **The Buddhist Approach** refers to the approach from both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism is combined, especially from the practices of Socially Engaged Buddhists. It is suggested by the researcher to create skillful communication among people in society.

2. **Socially Engaged Buddhism** refers to the involvements of Buddhists in society and its problems. It is a typical modern type of Buddhism which is employed and practiced by master-Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh.

3. **Skillful Communication:** refers to the ethical and beneficial of communication for both listeners and speakers. intelligent communication, avoid the harmful effects of wrong speech. It is evaluated according to ethical standards through the concept of Buddhism.

Research Methodology

This is qualitative research which consists of two ways of getting data, as follows:

1. Documentary sources:

The article was conducted by collecting data from both primaries of scripture based on the Pali Canon. The secondary sources from the research work on linguistics and communication as well as Socially Engaged Buddhism's concepts and practices from Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh writings.

2. In-depth Interview

Furthermore, the data also comes from the in-depth interview with several Buddhist scholars who are Buddhist monks and laypeople from Buddhist studies institutes and plum village meditation practice center. They are (1) Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suvin Raksat, Lecturer of Mahamakut Buddhist University., Thailand; (2) Ven. Thich Phap Niem, Senior lecturer at Thailand Plum Village International Meditation practice center, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh's disciple; (3) Ven. Thich Pham Kham, director of Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism (Plum village Hong Kong), Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh's disciple.

The content of the interview focuses on two main questions: (1) the meaning and significance of unskillful communication, (2) how to approach socially engaged Buddhism to create and maintain skillful communication?

Research's Findings

1. The Meaning and Significances of Skillful Communication in Daily Life.

Communication is simply the act of transferring information and understanding from one place, person, or group to another. There are two main kinds of communication: verbal communication, and non-verbal communication. However, many ways or channels can be used to transfer the content. This study on skillful communication focuses on two main things: (1) the first is the meaning and (2) the second is the significances of skillful communication.

a. Meaning of skillful communication

Communication is defined as the exchange of information among human beings. Therefore, the important issue is what is the nature of the information content to be conveyed? According to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suvin, there are two main types of content: one is content that builds relationships in communication, another one is content that is harmful to members of the communication. Communal content could be expressed in many forms such as text, writing, images, sounds, and words. One peaceful content could bring happiness while a harming one can harm many people.¹ In Buddhism, the way to avoid harmful speech is the practice of right speech and having meaningful speech. Therefore, skillful communication could be understood as right and beneficial speech.

Among different ways of communication, spoken language through is considered to have a strong and direct impact on the listener. Behalf speech or conversation is very sensitive in society. Therefore, we have to be careful with our verbal actions which the Buddha had taught as the fourth precept of restraining from telling lies. Keeping the fourth precept is that each person must do right speech and eliminate wrong speech. Rights speech is also a part of the Eightfold Path which is the teaching that leads to the liberation of suffering and attaining real happiness. In the ancient time when there was not any advanced and modern technology, people had two main

¹ Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suvin Raksat, interview by Ven. Nguyen Anh Tuan, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand, 24 July, 2021.

ways to express what they want to inform, that are spoken language and bodily action, or verbal and physical actions. Spoken language is the best way to express and exchange information correctly, properly, as well as conveniently. Most human conflict and violence also come from the wrong speech of people. The paper also mostly focuses on human speech or conversation than other channels, but it also indicates the solution for having a virtuous expression by others type of communication. Even though right speech plays important role in, but right speech is not all, other practices also could be recognized as “skillful communication”.

The Buddha said: "what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and idle chatter: This is called right speech."² So, wrong speech is the opposite object of right speech or they are lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter.

In addition, from the view of socially engaged Buddhism, wrong speech is the kind of lacks openness and does not have understanding, compassion, and reconciliation at its base.³ The problem of violating the precept of speaking falsely comes from the act of "wrong speech". There are many originations of the wrong speech, it may come from the fundamental factor as three poisons of anger, ignorance, and greed. They are the main causes of wrong speech, but there are minor reasons for wrong speech such as wrong views, arrogance, misunderstanding, etc. However, the Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh explains that wrong speech not only comes from the verbal action of speech by mouth but also comes from the way to listen in our daily communication in very circumstances. What he explains as “unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others”.⁴

Communication takes place in harmony and peace which doesn't cause any harm to both sender (speaker) and receiver (listener) as well as one who may be related or not related to that communication. Furthermore, communication could benefit both in material and mental development which will bring one to successfully gain a happy life. It provides knowledge and wisdom for those who are involved. A communication could change a negative mind into a positive one, which could reduce all of the negative thoughts and emotions of the people. Communication

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³ Nhat Hanh Thich, “*The Art of Communicating*”, (New York: Harper Collins Publisher Inc, 2013), p. 27.

⁴ Ven. Thich Phap Niem, Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh’s disciple, interview by Ven. Nguyen Anh Tuan, Thailand Plum Village international Meditation Practice Center, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand, 07 August, 2021.

could keep the personal physical and verbal actions away from evil and forward to moral life. They all can be defined as "skillful communication".

“Unmindful speech” or “unskillful verbal act” already had been taught by the Buddha when he taught Ven. Rahula for his telling lie in the Sangha. The Buddha has explained to Rahula that:

*"Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I want to perform — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or both; it would be an unskillful verbal act with painful consequences, painful results, then any verbal act of that sort is unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... It would be a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then any verbal act of that sort is fit for you to do."*⁵

That is the way the Buddha request his disciples to examine before starting saying anything. Then, he also requests us to be mindful all the time of conversation and after the conversation, we have to analyze what we have talked to others whether is harmful to ourselves and others or not.

The right could be understood as beneficial speech. Because, as what has been mentioned above, a right speech provides useful and truthful information, as well as never hurts other people. Finally, skillful communication could be gained by applying the Buddhist teaching on “right speech”. Apart from four main types of right speech as the main meaning, skillful communication plays its significances in daily life.

b. Significances of skillful communication

1. Preserve and respect the truth: in today's life, the value of honesty is extremely precious. For various purposes, people can destroy the truth without any hesitation. The concept

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shows that speaking truthfully is an integral part of skillful communication. A person who lies gives the wrong knowledge and information or intentionally misrepresents what is true is not a person with skillful communication. Upholding and respecting the truth is an indispensable condition for people to practice skillful communication, on the other hand, the practice of skillful communication contributes to preserving the truth in daily life.

2. Provide accurate and useful information: not only telling the truth, but skillful communication also helps us to be selective in exchanging information in many different areas of life such as education, economy, politics, culture, religion, etc. A person with good skillful communication only gives and sends to the listener accurate and useful information that helps others.

3. Building positive relationships: Based on the characteristics of skillful communication, we can see that skillful communication can create and maintain good social relationships. Communicating with a gentle demeanor, politeness, sincerity, and discipline are good factors for building long-term relationships. People with skillful communication will have all those elements. Furthermore, meeting and interacting with people with skillful communication methods will bring many benefits and respect for each other through the expression of truth in their stories will create really beautiful relationships.

4. Limiting conflicts and contradictions that lead to social problems: most of the problems of conflict and contradictions are often caused by misunderstanding in further sowing or lack of skillful communication then the arising of anger is inevitable. When anger is present, the seeds of conflict and contradiction also arise and require resolution by actions and words lacking politeness and compassion. According to Most Ven. in modern society, the main cause of conflict between people stems from the way they communicate with each other. Because skillful communication is an act of beneficial and compassionate words, it will limit the arising of unnecessary conflicts in social communication. Moreover, to resolve conflicts and heal the broken relationships must be through verbal communication.

5. protect and maintain peace in society: In human society, communication not only helps to exchange information but also plays an important role in helping people live together in harmony and peace. Debates, inaccurate words that hurt each other always lose peace in society. A lie, a harsh word will create suspicion and enmity between people. All these things gradually

lose the peaceful and harmonious life. On the contrary, when practicing skilled communication or in other words, mindful communication will help preserve and develop peace and harmony in society.

2. To Approach a Skillful Communication by The Socially Engaged Buddhism.

The approach of Socially Engaged Buddhism to pursuit skillful communication could be based on three main elements: a skillful speaker, a mindful content, and a skillful listener. There are some practices and pieces of advice from socially engaged Buddhism for each element to build skillful communication.

1. A skillful speaker:

The Buddha had taught that: “Bhikkhus (Monks), there are these three kinds of persons found existing in the world. What three? The one whose speech is like dung, the one whose speech is like flowers, and the one whose speech is like honey.”⁶ The last two kinds of speakers are the person who speaks truthfully and always speaks what benefits others. So, a skillful speaker should follow these two kinds of speech. The Buddha also has taught that to have rights speech which will not cause any suffering for us and others when we carefully consider our speech, five things must be considered, as:

“Do I speak at the right time, or not?”

Do I speak of facts, or not?”

Do I speak gently or harshly?”

Do I speak profitable words or not?”

Do I speak with a kindly heart, or inwardly malicious?”⁷

According to a famous socially engaged Buddhist master -Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, to avoid our unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others” we should perform the practice of “*loving speech and compassionate listening*”.

Loving speech: it is correct to encourage people to always tell the truth to observe the fourth precept. But sometimes telling the truth can be difficult. The truth must make harmony and

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peaceful conversation, if after listening to our speech, listener easy to get angry and anxious, that is not a mindful speech. The truth sometimes must be spoken in such a way that, after hearing us, people can accept it. That is loving speak. Speaking in a way that helps others recognize the suffering inside themselves and in you, is loving speech. Sometimes, using wrong and impolite words also make the listener have a wrong perception. We have to be mindful of using words in our communication. The loving speech also means sharing useful information, wholesome teachings, and knowledge to develop good and virtuous potential inside the listener. Speaking what helps to prevent conflict and misunderstanding of the listener. All of them are defined as “loving speech”.⁸

Moreover, apart from those factors, the Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh also provides several practices of truthful speech to create a truthful society, they are:

- Relieving suffering and promoting reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations.
- Speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope.
- When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak.
- I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations.
- I will practice Right Diligence to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear that lie deep in my consciousness.⁹

To complete the above exercises it is important for the speaker is to eliminate the bad thoughts that cause unmindful speech and to always remain mindful before and while speaking. Mindfulness here is very important, it helps people see what is good or bad in the speaker's mind, then it will also help prevent bad thoughts from leading to a conversation lacking harmony and peace.

2. A beneficial content:

⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, Art Communication, op.cit.,.

⁹ Nhat Hanh Thich, *For A Future to be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life*, (Miami: Read How You Want publisher, 2008), p. 52.

We have to be careful with what we say. Because what we say cannot be erased or taken back. Then what should we say and what should we not say to perform skillful communication. The content of the dialogue will be what we give and also the foundation for what we will receive from the listener. As for what should not be said, the Buddha made a clear generalization in the content of the fourth precept. They are lying stories or untrue stories, double tongues or divisive stories, abusive content, and idle chat. Those kinds of speech come from **truthfulness**. If we send out useful content, content with compassionate and intellectual energy, what we get back from the listener is an attitude of reverence, respect, and gratitude. But if the listener only receives unhealthy content and has no value for nurturing compassion and wisdom, what we get in return is anger, hatred, and negative reactions from both words and actions from the listener. In addition, the bad content that should be removed in communication can be mentioned as conflicting information, the growth of the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion; content that creates divisions in relationships and wars; unethical and cultural content such as information related to depraved cultural products. So, the content must originate from **loving-kindness** and **peace**. Apart from these two kinds, communication's content must be **useful** for both speaker and listener. Instead of sending only non-meaningful stories and useless information, the speaker must select the useful content to talk about to not only respect the audients but also provide let them get some beneficial messages and knowledge after listening.

3. A skillful listener:

Compassionate listening or deep listening: Deep listening must start from ourselves. Deep listening ourselves is going back to listen and understand our suffering brings about the birth of compassion and love. If we take the time to listen deeply to our suffering, we will be able to understand it.¹⁰ Then we can understand others' suffering while communicating with them. That is the way to overcome our bad emotions when we hear somethings are unwanted. Because of compassion by understanding their suffering we easily forgive their harmful speech to us and continue listening to their story. With mindfulness, we listen without any advice or criticism until the end of the conversation. Because sometimes they just need to share their problem, they need a listener than an advisor, just reply to them when they need. According to the explanation by Most Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, listening is also a physical consumption. It means what we listen to

¹⁰ Ibid

somehow directly affects and nourish ourselves.¹¹ Receiving unvirtuous things day by day those outside elements become yours. It will be very dangerous if listeners don't aware of what we should listen to and learn through the communal conversation. Mindfulness must be presented all the time with a person who practices deep listening. In this case, listening to others' stories is not enough, listeners also investigate and select what is useful to keep and remove the useless contents. A skillful listener also has to create and maintain positive talks and beneficial communication from those who are virtuous teachers, those who teach only good things which can help other people to live a happy and peaceful life.

Conclusion

Communication is not only the transmission of information or the expression of emotions, but it is also a factor that builds and protects good relationships in human society. Skillful communication helps to protect the truth and bring about civilized and peaceful society. Because it helps to limit the unfortunate things that happen in social relationships, and at the same time develops good characteristics in each individual. Three conditions are posed to each of us, which is to become a "skillful speaker", and "skillful listener" through practicing loving speech and deep listening from socially engaged Buddhism. At the same time, choosing "beneficial content" is the third factor to creating skillful communication. Finally, to practice skillful communication, the first step we have to do is always be mindful while we are communicating.

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