

## The Right to Speak Right



The topic of freedom of speech has been much in the news in recent years. On one hand, there are those who view the freedom of speech as an inalienable sacred right (especially when it comes to their own speech...) that should not be infringed upon by other people, institutions, governments or corporations, regardless of the consequences or content of what one says. On the other end of the spectrum are those who want to “cancel” any form of speech that does not comply with prescribed rules or opinions, going to the extreme of claiming that an opinion in itself can be an act of aggression, whether it was meant as such or not. As usual, we human beings tend to go to the extremes, dividing ourselves into parties, instead of looking for a middle way. Unfortunately, both these extremes in the long term may lead to the loss of the freedom so aspired to.

As usual, it is interesting to note that the topics we find so contemporary, were also issues preoccupying our predecessors here and on other lands; in fact, we find the topic of speech discussed and explored in various philosophical traditions. For example, right speech is one of the steps in the Buddhist eightfold noble path, defined in the *Magga-Vibhanga Sutta* as “Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter”. In the Hindu legal text, *Manusmṛiti*, it says “Speak the truth, and speak favorably. Do not tell the truth if it is not favorable. Also, do not tell an untruth (although) it is favorable. This is the eternal *dharma*.” This perhaps is a source of a very useful anecdote usually (and doubtfully) attributed to Socrates, in which Socrates recommends using three filters before one speaks: **is it true? is it good? And is it useful?** (social media will probably collapse if we relied on these filters...) Socrates himself in Plato’s *Apology* says that before speaking he would listen to an inner voice, his *daimon* (perhaps his conscience?) which will tell him whether he is about to act wrongfully. On another part of the world, the Ancient Egyptians found speech a very powerful force, one that could make realities spoken about, manifest. And in the old testament book of *Proverbs* (17:28), we find: “Even a fool, when he holds his peace, is counted wise: and he that shuts his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.” There are many other sources we can cite, but what is clear is that these varied, universal, sources all point out that it is important to reflect about what right speech is.

The solution to this dilemma is not so much about policing and criticizing “wrong” speech, nor is it about speaking mindlessly, without thinking of the consequences of what we say, but rather teaching and educating about the responsibility of speech and what does right speech entail.



The freedom of speech (like any other freedom) also entails responsibility. Without the responsibility of speech, the freedom of speech will lead to its own demise. The freedom of speech integrated with education to the right speech is the bridge that will allow us to preserve the freedom of speech for posterity.