

no impetus to begin or to continue along the path.

The second step, *samyak samkalpa* in the original Sanskrit (*samma samkappa* in Pali), is sometimes translated as right resolve and sometimes as right thought. The latter is how the early Chinese Buddhist translators rendered *samkalpa*, using two characters that each have the radical for heart-mind and mean “thinking” or “pondering.” The Chinese translation was probably made under the influence of Theravadan sources of interpretation. Examples of right thought from traditional Theravadan sources include wholesome thoughts, thoughts of nonattachment, thoughts of loving-kindness. Our thoughts influence our actions, the next three steps on the path, for better or worse; and keeping our thoughts pure prepares our minds for the meditation practice that constitutes the three steps after that. And, completing the cycle, our meditation practice fosters the wisdom that are steps one and two. So, given the overall structure of the noble eightfold path, there is good reason to translate *samyak samkalpa* as right thought.

But there is another tradition, Mahayana and the spirit of the bodhisattva ideal, which interprets *samyak samkalpa* as right intention, or right aspiration, or right resolve. This translation is justified from both a scholarly point of view and, more important, from the point of view of our practice. To see why, let’s first look at the Sanskrit word more closely, keeping in mind that in Sanskrit, as in most languages, a given word can come with a rather wide range of meanings depending on the context in which it is used.

The word *samyak*, an adjective applied to each of the eight steps, means “complete, perfect, correct, right.” *Samyak* also occurs in the Heart Sutra in the phrase “*samyak sambodhi*,” which can be translated as “perfect, complete enlightenment.” (For some reason this phrase is left in Sanskrit in both the Sino-Korean and English versions of the Kwan Um School of Zen’s Heart Sutra).

The *sam-* prefix in *samkalpa* is the same as in *samyak*. *Kalpa* here (no relation to the better known word *kalpa* meaning an eon) signifies an act, especially an act of the mind or, more commonly, the will. If *samkalpa* means “thinking” it is something like the English use of the word in expressions like “I think I will do this,” meaning “I’ve made up my mind to do this,” conveying a considered intention rather than dreaming up ideas or even thinking good thoughts. The prefix *sam-* adds an intensive force, so *samkalpa* means a strong mental or volitional act—not just an ordinary thought or a wish, but rather a firm commitment, a resolute decision.

And adding *samyak* to *samkalpa* strengthens its meaning even more. This is no ordinary thought or decision or resolution that we have in the second step of the noble eightfold path, but a complete (*samyak*) commitment (*samkalpa*) on the order of great vow. It is the “fierce determination, resolute practice” that is the literal transla-

tion of the Sino-Korean *yong maeng jong jin* (an intensive meditation retreat, sometimes poetically paraphrased as “to leap like a tiger while sitting”). It sums up the essential spirit of the four great vows, in which we pledge to reorient our lives on every level toward wisdom, compassion and bodhisattva action. And we find it in its simplest, most direct form in the very first sentence of the Temple Rules: “You must first make a firm decision to attain enlightenment and help this world.” This injunction contains the three major divisions of the noble eightfold path. The firm decision comes first.

This kind of intense, total commitment might at times seem difficult to the point of being overwhelming. Zen Master Ko Bong said, “You should practice as if your hair were on fire.” But unconditional resolve actually clears away a lot of obstructions, imagined and real, and creates a sense of freedom, a bright, liberating energy that can sustain us through any difficulty. When our mind is truly made up and we are all in, we naturally “only go straight” and “just do it” and “try, try, try for 10,000 years nonstop” as Zen Master Seung Sahn often put it. And this leads to a snowball effect, the energy mass getting larger and gaining momentum as it rolls down the path. It’s up to us to get the ball rolling. When we recite the four great vows first thing every morning that is just what we are doing.



Right Speech

Zen Master Bon Shim (Aleksandra Porter)

Words do not have a fixed meaning. The meaning of words depend on the context: who is speaking and who is listening, the underlying tone. Let’s go back to the roots and remind ourselves what Buddha taught about right speech.

Buddha divides correct speech into four elements:

- Refraining from false speech
- Refraining from harmful talk
- Refraining from unkind, rude talk
- Refraining from gossip

Telling the truth

One who is speaking the truth is dedicated to it, reliable, trustworthy, not deceiving other people. Such a person never consciously lies for self or others’ gain, or any other reason. He teaches his son, the young monk Rahula: “Rahula, do you see the remaining water in the bowl? This is the spiritual achievement of someone who deliberately lies.”

Pouring out the remaining water from the bowl, Buddha said, “In this way, the one who lies is erasing all of his spiritual achievements. Do you see now this empty

bowl? Like this bowl, the one who lies without feeling ashamed is just spiritually empty, without any moral ground.”

Then Buddha flipped the bowl upside down and said to Rahula, “Do you see this bowl now? In the same manner the one who lies flips his spiritual achievement upside down cannot grow.”

It is said that in training toward enlightenment one can break any vow except that of telling the truth.

The vow of correct speech (telling the truth) is simply about relying on what is real, not delusional, about relying on the truth gained by wisdom and not about fantasies that emerge from desires.

Refraining from harmful talk

Harmful talk is one of the most serious moral misbehaviors and it creates damaging karma, so it is extremely important to refrain from unkind, rude and sarcastic talk.

The opposite of harmful talk is speech that comes from a caring and compassionate mind. It elevates the spirit of connection and oneness. We ought to pay attention to how we speak and communicate with more patience for the weaknesses of others, keeping in mind our own imperfections and respecting different opinions and views.

Refraining from gossip

Gossip has the power to destroy relationships. It has the power to tear a community apart. Speaking idly may not cause harm. However, the habit of being thoughtless about speech can lead to indulging in gossip.

There is a story from Buddha’s time about this. It is in one of the oldest sutras, the Hemavata Sutra. In it, the deceitful minister Vassakara goes to the Vajji kingdom at the direction of King Ajatasattu, who wanted to overthrow the kingdom. There, Vassakara befriends the ruling Licchavi princes, whose strength was their harmony. After gaining their trust, he slowly broke their bonds of friendship. He did this by whispering harmless phrases into their ears, for example, “Have you taken your meal? What curry did you eat?”

When other princes saw this, they would ask what Vassakara whispered. Each prince told the truth about what Vassakara said. However, none of the other princes would believe it because it had no real meaning. Why would Vassakara whisper that? Each thought the others were lying. Eventually, they began to speak ill of each other and then to mistrust each other. When the harmony was broken, Ajatasattu was able to conquer the kingdom.

Our practice leads us to speak what is appropriate and beneficial. This natural harmony arises from sincere practice. Then it’s possible to perceive our own mind and then see others’ minds. Strong practice supports clear vision and guides clear speech.



Right Action

Ja An JDPSN (Bogumila Malinowska)

Can you take a day off from correct action?

Ultimately, a Zen practitioner cannot take a day off, a minute off or even a second off from right action, but practically, if she were to take a day off, then her job would be to perceive this and return to the correct moment, which means being present 100 percent and facing in the right direction.

What is correct action? Correct action is about being in the moment correctly. It’s about keeping a correct situation, a correct relationship and a correct function. It is not an easy task to do this 24/7. Usually, the human mind goes somewhere. We are often not aware of this, and by starting meditation we become able to see our mind and how it works. It is hard and intensive work to bring the mind to the present moment again and again.

Inside work and outside work

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to talk about inside work and outside work. Inside work or action means keeping a clear mind and being present; outside work means helping others. That was his style. By connecting inside and outside a human can become one. Zen Master Seung



Photo: Nick Gershberg