

Some thoughts on Wise Speech guidelines for EBMC teachers

From: **Mushim Ikeda** <mushim@eastbaymeditation.org>
Date: Tue, Jan 9, 2018
Subject: Skillful means in teaching at EBMC: avoiding trauma triggers
To: Arisika Razak

Thank you for such a thoughtful and heartfelt email, Arisika.

Here are some basic guidelines in preliminary form, from my point of view only -- there may be other viewpoints that are different from my own -- we may want to develop this into a document at some point:

As teachers at East Bay Meditation Center, we have all signed Ethics Agreements. We have made a commitment to teach in a way that creates the least amount of harm possible, while at the same time conveying the deep, liberative spiritual truths from our wisdom traditions with integrity and to the best of our abilities. We have made a commitment to be community builders, which means we try to skillfully facilitate when we teach in order for people to feel connected to a strong Sangha, or spiritual community, and in order for people to feel they are empowered and encouraged to co-create the conditions for a resilient community in which resources are shared freely in an environment of respect and cultural sensitivity.

Because EBMC's mission is to serve underrepresented communities which have been targeted for oppression, many or most of the people who come to EBMC have a history of trauma. This might be true of most people who come to any meditation center, because human life can be challenging and full of suffering. In the case of the communities EBMC serves, the people who show up when we teach often have had lifelong experiences of intergenerational and collective trauma as well as individual experiences of trauma.

As EBMC teachers, we therefore strive to think deeply before speaking, and then to speak as mindfully as possible, in referring to any topics that might trigger a posttraumatic stress reaction in anyone who is listening to our Dharma talk / spiritual presentation. These topics might include:

- Rape and sexual molestation

- Domestic violence
- Overt violence perpetrated on vulnerable communities, such as youth of color; transgender folks; undocumented immigrants; homeless people; people living in poverty, etc.
- War
- Weapons of any sort
- Colonial invasion and occupation
- Genocide
- Killing animals / factory farming of animals / cruelty to animals
- Abortion
- Torture
- Harassment and bullying
- Suffering caused by misgendering others; not supporting their right to self-identify their gender
- Capital punishment / Death Sentence
- Natural disasters linked to global climate change
- And more

As EBMC teachers, we try to find ways to talk about unexamined power and privilege and structural violence (such as racism, classism, transphobia) in ways that uplift, empower, and encourage people to gain confidence in their strength to help to create communities of safety, respect, and well-being for all. **This is not about self-censoring or avoiding painful topics altogether.** We can trade notes and best practices on how to skillfully find avenues of access into acknowledging suffering with the intention to heal it, and without causing the listener to feel overwhelmed and "flooded" by trauma-based memories and sensations.

As an example, a teacher might say "acts of violence in the Israel-Palestine conflict" and refrain from saying, "suicide bombings and rapes in the Israel-Palestine conflict."

We cannot control what others will feel or experience when we speak. However, we can do our best to follow the Buddha's teachings on *samma vaca*, [Right Speech](#) (wise speech) whenever we speak, in our role as teachers, at EBMC and elsewhere. This is part of the responsibility of teaching and part of the ongoing practice of developing to become better teachers. We will, inevitably, make mistakes, and sometimes cause harm in unintended ways, and it is also sometimes true that even one word, said within a context that 59 students in a class will understand and feel okay with, may have a strong negative impact on the 60th person. We can't teach while feeling we're walking on eggshells. Nor can we simply erase any negative impact our actions, including our speech, have caused, by making a blanket statement asking for forgiveness at the end of each talk, although asking for forgiveness can be a standard and beneficial ritual at the end of some Buddhist teachings. As with so much else in life, we commit to a journey of learning and growing, practicing cultural humility, being open to feedback, and cultivating compassion to ourselves as we encounter the inevitable cycles of praise and blame.

Mushim

AN 5.159

PTS: [A iii 184](#)

Udayi Sutta: About Udayin

translated from the Pali by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.159.than.html>

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Kosambi, in Ghosita's Park. Now at that time Ven. Udayin was sitting surrounded by a large assembly of householders, teaching the Dhamma. Ven. Ananda saw Ven. Udayin sitting surrounded by a large assembly of householders, teaching the Dhamma, and on seeing him went to the Blessed One. On arrival, he bowed down to the Blessed One and sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Ven. Udayin, lord, is sitting surrounded by a large assembly of householders, teaching the Dhamma."

"It's not easy to teach the Dhamma to others, Ananda. The Dhamma should be taught to others only when five qualities are established within the person teaching. Which five?"

"[1] The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak step-by-step.'

"[2] The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak explaining the sequence [of cause & effect].'

"[3] The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak out of compassion.'

"[4] The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak not for the purpose of material reward.'

"[5] The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak without hurting myself or others.'^[1]

"It's not easy to teach the Dhamma to others, Ananda. The Dhamma should be taught to others only when these five qualities are established within the person teaching."