

The View and Practice of Maintaining “Right Speech” in the MI-Student Relationship in Dharma Ocean

Introduction

All of us who are Dharma Ocean meditation instructors, teachers, and administrators have committed ourselves to hold the students in our charge with the utmost integrity and to put their wellbeing and their journeys first. There is a most important aspect in fulfilling this commitment and responsibility, and that is the necessity of maintaining “right speech,” in other words speaking in relation to our students in a way that reflects the self-restraint, sanity, and compassion that we are called to by this lineage and specifically by our Mahayana bodhisattva vows.

In the course of our work with others, because of the intense journeys we are all making and the very great intimacy we enjoy as a sangha, all of us are privy to sensitive information about each other and about those with whom we work as meditation instructors. As MI’s, our students often share things they have perhaps never told anyone else. So how should we handle this information? It is very important, particularly to our MI students, for them to know that what they tell us is going to be held within the integrity of their journey and within the integrity of our commitment to them. At the same time, we know that when we as MI’s feel lost or when a student is in trouble, it is critical that we be able to seek help and collaboration with our mentors and teachers. But all of this raises many questions: under what circumstances is it appropriate to share confidential information? If we do share this kind of information, how should it be communicated and with whom should we talk? And how do we communicate with our students around the view and practice of “right speech?”

The View and Practice of “Right Speech” in the MI Context

The basic principle is that in the MI-student relationship, what is spoken to us within the context of our MI relationship with our student goes no further. This includes, of course, not only the MI interview itself but, more generally, the MI-student relationship as a whole. Obviously, as MI’s, we need to discriminate between factual information about the student, which can be shared, and things that are told to us in confidence.

At the same time—and this is understood by all of us, both MI’s and our students—there are certain important exceptions where it is in the best interests of the student and his or her journey, as well as in the best interests of his or her dharma sisters and brothers, for an MI to share confidential information with others. However, in this case, there needs to be a general understanding among all of us about what

those exceptions might be.¹ There also needs to be the confidence on all of our parts that only those other MI's or staff people who are essential to the conversation will be brought in, and nobody else.

Additionally, should a student explicitly ask an MI to hold a particular piece of information in confidence which the MI later feels must be shared, with for instance, a head teacher, kasang, or senior MI, the MI *must communicate with the student before sharing the information*. For example, suppose a student reports that he or she has a serious eating disorder and asks that no one be told. The MI might feel that that is a reasonable request and agree. But if the student begins exhibiting signs that the disorder has kicked in and is affecting his or her health and the MI feels the need to seek assistance, then he will need to tell the student, to let the student know that he needs to seek input from, perhaps, the desung, a senior teacher or other MI, perhaps one with an experience in eating disorders. Another example would be someone who arrives at a program and reports strong suicidal thoughts, asking that no one be told. In that instance, the MI needs to tell the student right on the spot that that information needs to be shared with the senior teachers and kasung; to do otherwise, would unnecessarily put the student and the sangha at risk.

As MIs we all need to pay special attention to the issue of sharing privileged information unnecessarily or too widely. Our most vulnerable area in this regard has been in programs, when we have group MI meetings and discuss our MI's with the larger group of MI's. It is important that we do this in our group meetings because, though we have our own students, we usually end up interacting with many others; and we need to be informed about other students so we can be as helpful as possible to them.

However, particularly if we find ourselves triggered or stirred up by a student, there may be a tendency to see problems where, actually, there aren't any. Again, if activated by a student, we may talk to others when in fact there is no real need to do so; perhaps we really can handle this by ourselves; and, when we do feel the need to discuss with others, to talk to too many people—whether teachers, kasung, or other MI's—about the situation. To maintain the integrity of our relationship with our students, we as MI's are going to need to be quite vigilant and willing to critique and correct each other. In addition, we need to be constantly developing, both on and off the cushion, our own skills of emotional self-regulation—i.e., of not getting taken over by our positive or negative emotions in relation to the student.

¹ Here are some representative examples:

1. The student is having an especially difficult time and we feel that we ourselves are in need of additional perspectives and guidance from supervisors or peers.
2. We have taken a course of action with the student and feel a little uncertain as to whether we did the right thing.
3. The student is struggling and we want the MI mandala to know about it so they can be sensitive, supportive, and potentially helpful in relation to what's happening with the student.
4. The student is affecting other students in a program or the program itself negatively and we feel that the MI mandala needs to be alerted to this fact, both for their perspectives and advice, and also so working with the student in question and with other students can be a group effort.
5. We find ourselves exceptionally triggered by a particular student and realize we are not able to be with him or her without overreacting or putting our negativity on them. We feel the chemistry is a set up for failure on both sides. We know we need help.
6. It appears to us that a student has arrived who should not be in the program either due to psychological problems that we are not equipped to handle, a serious health issue, or to a misunderstanding on their part of what the program is.

Before we share privileged information—in other words, what the student has told us in the course of our MI interviews or larger relationship—we need to consider carefully what needs to be shared and what doesn't. In the past, particularly in MI meetings in programs, we seem to have difficulty figuring out just where the dividing line is. For example, sometimes we have tried to share the entire journey of the student, perhaps because we are especially enthusiastic about him or her. But we don't need to do this. Or we may share “juicy” pieces of information with others, although there is actually no need to do so. Or, again, we may share things the student has said about other students or even one of the MI's—and this often happens with negative comments—when there is really no actual reason to stir other people up with this kind of information. In the area of what we communicate, then, special self-awareness, restraint, self-regulation, and thoughtfulness need to prevail.

This does not mean we should overly restrict our communication—perhaps we need to speak with everybody in the program leadership, teachers, kasung, and the entire MI mandala. But, at the same time, often we only need to speak with one or two other people. In these instances, what this means—and this needs to be emphasized to students—is that the commitment to right speech and maintaining the confidences of the student are never broken. What is happening here is that the circle of honoring the student's confidences is simply made wider out of legitimate need; and, importantly, any other mentor or MI included is then also bound by the commitment to honor confidences.

When we consider “right speech” in relation to our students, there is another problem, which is the opposite of talking too much and to too many people. That is the problem, which is also quite common, of not communicating problems, issues, and concerns when we actually need to do so and of not talking to the people who actually need to be included. The reasons for “under communicating” should be obvious. For example, perhaps we are having trouble with a student and may be embarrassed that things are going poorly; perhaps we feel a commitment to the senior teacher or other staff to “handle things” ourselves and are reluctant to admit we are struggling. Or particularly if the problems have arisen because of our own ignorance or ineptitude, we may have trouble admitting this. Or, again, if we are conflict averse as an emotional style, we may not want to admit even to ourselves let alone anybody else, that things are going downhill. We have had a number of situations in the past two years, where staff, MI's, and even members of the protection mandala have noticed behavior that clearly indicates a student is in trouble and even creating obstacles for others, yet they have withheld the information, perhaps hoping it would go away or at least not get worse; and everybody has suffered because of this inappropriate reticence. So a key part of “right speech” is being willing to communicate with our peers the moment we begin to see “red flags.” When we do, often a situation can be addressed immediately and further confusion and harm is avoided, especially for the student in question.

Mahayana Principles of “Right Speech”

This approach to “right speech” emerges from the view of our lineage and from our bodhisattva vow, reflecting a genuine concern for others, a commitment to their wellbeing and their journey, and a willingness always to act on their behalf, rather than our own. The approach and commitment of our lineage are reflected in the four Mahayana principles of right speech. These principles call us to look beneath the specific guidelines mentioned above and to align all of our speech in whatever MI interaction and communication with the genuine altruism and selfless love of the Mahayana.

The foundation of the practice of “right speech” in the Mahayana is, perhaps obviously, absolute and relative bodhicitta. First, we need to remain in deep connection with the natural state, the mind of TGS,

the rigpa, through earth breathing, the body work, and Mahamudra. Second, within the openness of our own unconditioned awareness, we need to allow to blossom the warmth, tenderness, empathy, and compassion of our hearts (relative bodhicitta) and to carry out our work as MI's from within that open, empty field of love. As has been emphasized in our MI trainings and our MI meetings in programs, --our Mahayana practice, the seven limbed training in rousing absolute and relative bodhicitta—must be fresh and alive through our own practice, on a daily basis, in order for us to be able to work in the right way with our students.

In our interviews with our students, as long as we rest in the open, empty love of the heart, we will see them without bias; we will experience them from their own side; and we will be able to feel appreciation and love for them, and find wonder at who they are. And we will be able to discover the right approach to helping them. Guidelines and external commitments are important but, in the end, it is the spontaneous love and wisdom of the heart that are able to find the right way. When we discuss our students with our peers, we must similarly remain within the soma, and not exit into the disconnection of our judging, thinking, critical left-brain.

Right speech in the Mahayana consists of four “virtuous actions”: not speaking untruths (lying), not sowing discord (running down other people, splitting), not indulging in aggressive speech (coming out of anger or resentment) and not gossiping or filling up the space with mindless chattering, in other words not engaging in unnecessary talk. How might these play out as basic underlying values guiding our speech as MI's? You will see that they tend to go together: once we cross one of these boundaries, we are probably crossing others as well.

1. *Not speaking untruths*—this means that, in our conversations with our MI mentors and peers, we strive to present a balanced and disinterested picture of our student. In other words, we do not distort, slant, or bias what we are presenting based on our own emotional attitudes toward the student, especially but not only our negative ones. And we do not distort, slant, or bias what we are presenting based on our desire to get ourselves off the hook or present ourselves in the best possible light.
2. *Not sowing discord*—speech is always potentially political, meaning geared to our own self-interest. We always need to ask ourselves, in my presentation, am I trying to turn my mentor or peer toward or away from the student? If toward, do I have some investment in the person I am talking to liking the student or perhaps overlooking something more negative? If away, on some level do I want the other person to think poorly of the student, perhaps because I am having an especially difficult time with him or her or am feeling disliked?
3. *Avoiding harsh speech*—Does my speech in relation to the student genuinely reflect an attitude of non-aggression, of complete acceptance and openness toward him or her? Or is it distorted by my own aggression, by anger, resentment, or judgmentalism?
4. *Not engaging in unnecessary talk*—To repeat what was said above, we need to ask ourselves, what is the minimum that needs to be communicated in this situation? Am I in some way saying more than is needed out of an attempt, perhaps, to fill up the space, enthrall others, or entertain myself?

Conclusion

Please keep in mind that these guidelines should not unduly inhibit talking about our students with others. As MI's, we are endlessly puzzled by, intrigued, in love with, and triggered by our students. As Rinpoche used to say, "we have a family business and our business is people." It is our blessing and our good fortune to meet with and appreciate such each other so deeply. Of course we are going to talk about what is most important in our lives!

But, at the same time, there is this critical issue of the need for right speech in relation especially to our students (and the rest of the sangha and sentient beings as well!). These guidelines and limitations are meant to apply strictly only to confidential information communicated within the framework of the MI-student relationship and within the need for confidentiality.

In fulfilling the call for confidentiality and integrity in our relationships with our students, we are certainly asking a lot of ourselves, certainly calling ourselves to a high standard. To fulfill the guidelines and principles outlined here, we have to have a pretty high level of mindfulness and self-awareness; we have to be willing to continually examine and reexamine ourselves ruthlessly and provide feedback to one another. And we have to be engaging in our bodhicitta practice in an ongoing way. This is not a small thing, especially given the way the world around us largely operates.

But the stakes are high both for ourselves and others. In order to make their journeys fully and with confidence and trust, our students need us to maintain this level of integrity in our relationships with them. And we ourselves always need a clear and accurate mirror in which to see where we are being blinded by our own ignorance or neediness or resentment. Once I asked Rinpoche how I could be a stronger person in the dharma; he said, simply, "put more energy into being an MI." Indeed, acting as an MI for others greatly accelerates our journey because we are 100% on the spot and are called to the highest level of selflessness and availability to others on the path; and because when we fall short the feedback is immediate and usually quite painful. The mirror of the MI relationship is, in truth, immaculate. In other words, being called to fulfill the principle of confidentiality with our students is a unique opportunity not only to help others, but to deepen and intensely speed up our own journey.

By checking the box on the enrollment screen, you acknowledge you have read and understand the view of Right Speech as a guiding principle of your work with students.