

The practice of freedom

Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi stresses the importance of free speech but emphasises the Buddhist idea of "right speech".



The fight for freedom begins with freedom of speech, says Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This was one of a series of manifestos demanding a more outspoken world in the [40th anniversary issue](#) of [Index on Censorship](#). The essay was published here in January 2013. Read more on the situation in 2017 in Myanmar [here](#).

The gift of speech is the most effective instrument for human communication. The ability to communicate enables us to establish links across time and space, to learn to understand different civilisations and cultures, to extend knowledge both vertically and horizontally, to promote the arts and sciences. It also helps to bridge gaps in understanding between peoples and nations, to put an end to old enmities, to achieve detente, to cultivate new fellowships.

Speech allows human beings to articulate their thoughts and emotions. Words allow us to express our feelings, to record our experiences, to realise our ideas, to push outwards the frontiers of intellectual exploration. Words can move hearts, words can change perceptions, words can set nations and peoples in powerful motion. Words are an essential part of the expression of our humanness. To shackle freedom of speech and expression is to cripple the basic right to realise

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our full potential.

Can freedom of speech be abused? Since historical times, it has been recognised that words can hurt as well as heal, that we have a responsibility to use our verbal skills in the right way. What is the “right” way? The Ten Commandments include an injunction against bearing false witness.

Misusing the gift of speech to deceive or harm others is generally seen as unacceptable. Buddhism teaches that there are four verbal acts that constitute “tainted failure in living”: uttering deliberate lies for one’s own sake, for the sake of others or for some material advantage; uttering words that cause dissension, that is, creating discord among those united and inciting still more those who are in discord; speaking harshly and abusively, causing anger and distraction of mind in others; indulging in talk that is inadvisable, unrestrained and harmful.

Modern laws reflect the preoccupations of our ancients. Perjury, slander and libel, incitement to communal hatred, incitement to violence, all these are indictable offences in many countries today. The recognition of the negative consequences of misusing our gift of speech has not however been matched by an awareness of the detrimental effects of stifling free speech.

It is most generally in societies where the plinth of power is narrow that freedom of speech is perceived as a threat to the existing order. When speaking out against existing wrongs and injustices is disallowed, society is deprived of a vital impetus towards positive change and renewal. Censorship laws that ostensibly protect society from iniquitous influences generally achieve little that is positive. The most usual result is a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that strangles innovative thought.

It was only in the 20th century that freedom of expression began to be recognised as a basic human right. Today, freedom of speech and expression remain tenuous or even unknown in many nations that are signatories to the UN’s declaration of human rights. As in the distant past, it is those in positions of power and influence who stand against the freedom to articulate common grievances and aspirations.

It has been rightly pointed out that what is most important is not so much freedom of speech as freedom after speech. Through long years of authoritarian rule, members of the movement for democracy in Burma have been punished for speaking out in protest against violations of human rights and abuses of power. The few who spoke out were articulating the silent protest of the many who had been cowed into submission. To stand as a few against the juggernaut of power is not hard. It was the solidarity of like-minded people, at home and abroad, that strengthened our advocates of freedom of speech.

An advocate of freedom of expression is necessarily also a practitioner. The basic law for those who want to defend freedom of expression is that they must demonstrate their commitment by practising what they preach. When we speak out for our right to freedom of speech, we begin to

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exercise it. When we write about our right to freedom of expression, we begin to practise it. There can be no theoretical advocacy of these freedoms, there can only be practical, practising advocacy.

Aung San Suu Kyi is leader of the National League for Democracy. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Published on: January 31, 2013