

Noble Conversation

An Introduction to a Study Guide

"This is the purpose for conversation, this is the purpose for consultation, this is the purpose of apprenticeship, this is the purpose for lending ear: the liberation of the mind through non-clinging."

This quotation from chapter 12 of the "Parivara", the appendix to the *Vinaya*, is obviously not talking about ordinary conversation. It's talking about the ideal type of conversation among meditators, the very opposite of idle chatter:

Abandoning idle chatter, one abstains from idle chatter. One speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. One speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal.

Several passages in the Canon list ten ideal topics for such conversation: modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge and vision of release.

The purpose of the Study Guide is to illustrate each of these topics with passages from the Canon, and to provide meditators with the incentive to integrate conversation of this sort into their practice. There is some overlap between the topics listed here and those listed in two other study guides: *Recognizing the Dhamma* and *The Ten Perfections*. Thus some redundancy has been inevitable, but wherever possible material unavailable in those two guides has been included.

The first passage included here, in addition to listing the ten ideal topics, also lists topics that monks and serious meditators should avoid, ranging from politics and food to theories about the creation of the world. The Commentary qualifies this list, saying that if one discusses these topics in a way connected with Dhamma — for example, pointing out the ephemeral nature of political power so as to engender a feeling of dispassion for it — then that would count as right speech, and an aid to the liberation of the mind.

"I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying in Savatthi at Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. Now at that time a large number of monks, after the meal, on returning from their alms round, had gathered at the meeting hall and were engaged in many kinds of bestial topics of conversation: conversation about kings, robbers, and ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women and heroes; the gossip of the street and the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity, the creation of the world and of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not.

"Then the Blessed One, emerging from his seclusion in the late afternoon, went to the meeting hall and, on arrival, sat down on a seat made ready. As he was sitting there, he addressed the monks: 'For what topic of conversation are you gathered together here? In the midst of what topic of conversation have you been interrupted?'

"Just now, lord, after the meal, on returning from our alms round, we gathered at the meeting hall and got engaged in many kinds of bestial topics of conversation: conversation about kings, robbers, and ministers of state; armies, alarms, and battles; food and drink; clothing, furniture, garlands, and scents; relatives; vehicles; villages, towns, cities, the countryside; women and heroes; the gossip of the street and the well; tales of the dead; tales of diversity, the creation of the world and of the sea; talk of whether things exist or not.'

"It isn't right, monks, that sons of good families, on having gone forth out of faith from home to the homeless life, should get engaged in such topics of conversation, that is, conversation about kings, robbers, and ministers of state... talk of whether things exist or not.

"There are these ten topics of [proper] conversation. Which ten? Talk on modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge and vision of release. These are the ten topics of conversation. If you were to engage repeatedly in these ten topics of conversation, you would outshine even the sun and moon, so mighty, so powerful — to say nothing of the wanderers of other sects."

(Anguttara Nikaya, 10.69)

The Contents of the Study Guide includes the following topics:

- Modesty
- Contentment
- Seclusion
- Non-entanglement
- Persistence
- Virtue
- Concentration
- Discernment
- Release
- Knowledge and Vision of Release

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