

# The Lost Art of Good Conversation: A Mindful Way to Connect with Others and Enrich Everyday Life

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Cutting through all the white noise, chatter, and superficiality our cell phones and social media cause, one of Tibet's highest and most respected spiritual leaders offers simple and practical advice to help us increase our attentions spans, become better listeners, and strive to appreciate the people around us.

In a world of iPhones and connectivity to social media and email, we are all in constant connection with one another. Then why are so many people feeling burned out, distant from colleagues, and abandoned by family and friends? In this new book from the bestselling author of *Running with the Mind of Meditation*, the Sakyong uses the basic principles of the Shambhala tradition--meditation and a sincere belief in the inherent wisdom, compassion, and courage of all beings--to help readers to listen and speak more mindfully with loved ones, co-workers, strangers, and even ourselves.

In this easy to understand and helpful book, Sakyong Mipham provides inspiring ideas and practical tips on how to be more present in your day-to-day life, helping us to communicate in ways that elevates the dignity of everyone involved. Great for families, employees and employers and everyone who spend too much time on Facebook, Instagram, and feel "disconnected" in our "connected" world, *Good Conversation* is a journey back to basics. SAKYONG MIPHAM is the head of the Shambhala lineage, which is grounded in the power of creating enlightened society in everyday life. With a unique blend of Eastern and Western perspectives, he teaches this way of social transformation throughout the world. In addition, he extends his vision to a number of humanitarian projects in Asia and the West. He is the author of the bestselling titles *Running with the Mind of Meditation* and *Ruling Your World*.

What If We Forget How to Have a Conversation?

One day in the grocery store, I noticed long lines at the automated checkout stations, while three cashier lanes nearby were standing empty. I took my groceries to a cashier, a man in his twenties, and asked him why he thought this was happening. Looking over at the line, where several people were checking their phones as they waited, he said, "Most of those people are young. Apparently, people in my generation just don't much like to talk face-to-face." And I thought, What if we all forget how to have a conversation?

Now, don't get me wrong. Technology is important; it keeps us all connected in a way, and this book is not about putting down your phone. The danger is that while we are more connected now to the whole world than we ever have been before, we are less connected to people in our everyday life. We're having fewer conversations.

Why is this a problem? We all need someone to talk to. It's easy to become isolated. A conversation is based on physical presence, which is rooted in feeling. All our senses are involved. By talking to someone in person, we gain access to specific senses: appreciation, compassion, and love. These are the feelings that connect human beings to reality, which stimulates our intuition and awareness. If we become conditioned to the computer, then we become one-dimensional. We are less deep as individuals and more shallow, predictable, anxiety-ridden, and irritable. By not having conversations, we're forgetting how to feel.

These days some of us avoid conversation altogether because it requires too much attention. We're accustomed to being distracted and we forget how to focus, so we have trouble listening. We may not have time; we're so busy with school or the responsibilities at work or at home. We may see conversation as a superfluous social gesture. And some of us don't know how to talk to people because we've never been taught.

At the same time, we've become more individualistic and opinionated. Because we want something stable that makes sense in the world, we hold on to themes and ideas that are grounding and meaningful. This fixation creates factionalism and polarity. Identifying strongly with our thoughts and emotions, we mistake them for a solid "me," and then defend that apparition against the world. Social media and the news thrive on these elements. Our digital devices give us a false sense of power, creating a high-tech ego that wants to put its fingers in everything. Yet by having fewer face-to-face conversations, we are simultaneously disempowering the very source that can validate our identity: our relationship with other people.

In addition to being individualistic, our modern society is essentially a society of the anonymous. In earlier times--before the explosion in population over the last one hundred years--not having conversations would have been impossible. Not being polite or acknowledging others would have immediate consequences because we would all know one another. Now it is possible to lead a big part of our lives not knowing anyone, or by ignoring everyone. We care more about ourselves and less about others, and our ability to be civil is breaking down.

Civility is based on putting another person at ease. An opinionated, self-centered, and distracted mind cannot imagine putting another first. As a result, long-established norms of civility, such as respect and tolerance for others' views, appreciation of the truth, and embarrassment about shameful behavior, are in free fall. It seems that fewer people say thank you or please or even hold doors open for others. At the same time, more people are using cell phones in restaurants, and swearing in public is common. There is less

consideration for others. It's all about "me." What used to be unacceptable behavior, such as shouting and talking over one another on television or propagating falsehoods, has become commonplace, "normalized," as the standard of social decency erodes.

Losing civility in our daily life, we further lose touch with our capacity to feel. We become genuinely confused about the fabric of reality and social norms, destroying peace within ourselves and others. And before we know it, we're participating in the creation of a world where there's more paranoia and less security for the mind and heart.

This is what is happening in the world today. We are at a dangerous crossroads because when we lose feeling, our exchanges with others lose value. As we gain speed, our relationships become more superficial. As we become more isolated and opinionated, our respect for others decreases. We can't hear them anymore. When this happens, we lose both civility and intimacy. By this, I don't mean romantic love but kindness, the ability to be open and honest with another, to be vulnerable, to be heard.

Life is then defined by the feeling of emotional and social separation--"us" versus "them." We don't really want to interact with others, or we want to interact only with those who agree with us. Maintaining this separation in order to keep out others takes extreme vigilance. This causes stress. It creates fear. We are fighting the natural flow of life.

Great artists use painting, sculpting, or music as their medium for bringing imagination into the world. Likewise, by opening up a conversation with another person, our inspiration has a channel to express itself. It is an art because it transmits feeling. Art brings beauty and meaning into our lives. Beauty is a sense of totality, or wholeness.

It has been said that a dark age is characterized by mass amnesia, in which our consciousness thickens and we forget our art. Then, after a while, we even forget what has been lost. Because language is one of the most subtle and sophisticated aspects of humanity, we must practice the art of good conversation. Simply put, if we don't use it, we will lose it, devolving back into more primal states of being.

From a meditative point of view, the art of conversation is an engagement in mindfulness and, therefore, being present. Mindfulness is the act of noticing. It is not engaging in like or

dislike: it is paying attention to being alive. Mindfulness begins with awareness of feeling.

In Hinayana Buddhism, good conversation is right speech: not lying, not slandering, not causing disharmony, not gossiping. In Mahayana Buddhism, it is the open heart and mind that comes from the way we consider how others feel.

From a tantric perspective, good conversation is expressing the mandala principle, where everything is interrelated in a total vision of reality. Just as we are connected to the elements--wind, water, earth, fire--we are inextricably linked to other people.

From the Confucian point of view, good conversation is engaging in social harmony: balancing yin and yang. From the Taoist perspective, it is engaging in the Way, which increases longevity. In terms of civility, it is demonstrating good decorum and manners.

In the warrior tradition of Shambhala, conversation is related to windhorse. Wind is the notion of movement, energy, and expanse. Horse is the notion of riding that energy. The image of windhorse represents being brave and connecting to the inherent power of life. Good conversation is knowing what to accept and what to reject, and engaging with kindness and compassion, which are the seeds of happiness because they take us beyond ourselves. Rather than categorize these as courtesies or spiritually oriented practices, we can make them center-stage attributes of our lives simply by training our minds in this art.

Our minds are neutral and we can direct them in any way we want. The words we speak come out of our intention. In fact, we are already training our minds all day, every day. However, unintentionally we are training them to get angry, jealous, fearful, and fixated. With these unhealthy emotions, we build a wall of stress that separates us from others. When we are polarized by opinion and hardened by stress, we can't feel.

Ultimately, at the basis, the mind is fundamentally good. Good means that there is an opportunity to take the mind beyond the distortion and torment of emotions. We can actually live a life where we are not continually aggravated by negativity, discursiveness, or misunderstandings about how happiness comes about.

It is time to reconnect--to synchronize the mind and heart--in order to find peace, in order to find home, the truth of reality that we have been seeking since the beginning of time. When we know our own goodness, we feel more embodied and ready to engage in an enlightened society, which begins with two people, "just you and me." From the ground of conversation arises the magic of our relationships, enriching everyday life with a built-in sense of enjoyment. A good conversation increases our life-force energy and changes our lives by connecting us heart to heart with another person wherever we may be.

## Reflection

With whom do you speak face-to-face? Is your conversational ability keeping up with your technological sophistication? Or is your social conduct becoming more abrasive? Are you losing heart?

## The Art in Conversation

When I told my wife that I was writing a book on conversation, she laughed. Even though I do my best as a conversationalist, she is superior by far. In fact, her ability to have a conversation is truly an art and delight, whether it be with a family member or a complete stranger.

After we married, she would enjoy having a conversation while we sat to have tea. As much as I tried to be fully engaged in what was happening, when the conversation meandered, I

would sometimes think, I wonder when she is going to get to the point? After some time, I came to the realization that not all conversations need a point. Our conversations were not about making a deal, bargaining, or hearing a lecture. Nor was this meaningless chatter. It was a time to be present for each other, an opportunity for everyday intimacy. Talking and listening are essential pieces of a good and healthy relationship. By having this simple time to be together drinking tea--exchanging stories and thoughts and making each other laugh--we were celebrating our special connection. That connectivity is really the heart of all conversations and relationships.

In order to have good conversation, we must appreciate its artistic elements. This art has to do with easing the minds of others, creating valuable and genuine interactions. It is an art of interchange. Through seemingly superficial talk, we reveal our good qualities, and bring about someone else's good qualities. It also indicates control of our emotions when celebrating beauty and grace. It lays the ground for gratitude and respect. It is a warrior practice of kindness using words.

Like the brush on the surface of a canvas, conversation is an image created by words being etched into a mutual consciousness. It is a fluid dance, each word a movement to which the other responds. There is an underlying flow of joy and appreciation as the partners engage in combining words to create a mutually visualized image that can touch the core emotional elements that make us truly human. It engages our minds, our senses, our intelligence, and our imagination. Through conversation we can feel our hearts melt or our eyes water.

Conversation moves from simply communicating practical bits of information, to celebrating human interconnectedness, to expressing the inexpressible. We can use it to ask questions, which shows our curiosity and intelligence. We can share our knowledge and understanding, our imagination and fantasies. We can also tell stories--colorful descriptions of events that have occurred in our lives or the lives of others. We can use it to deceive--deceiving or misleading others--or we can use it to tell the truth, verbalizing the essence of something. We can explain something in finer detail, further clarifying the truth. We can tell jokes to alleviate stress, pain, and boredom, bringing levity to the situation and expressing insight or a critique. We can use poetic language to express what is ultimately inexpressible, connecting speech and heart.

Each time we speak with someone, there is an arc of conversation, which is the journey of an interaction. A conversation can be short and poignant, or long and meandering. In some cases, we know from the beginning how the conversation will play out. Another

aspect is the scope of the conversation, the breadth--experiences and knowledge it might touch upon--which depends on who we are with and where we are. The scope could be simple and specific, or vast and all-encompassing. The quality of the conversation has to do with its depth. An example of shallowness could be a sense of obligation, while a deep conversation would be much more profound. Some may be deeper and purposeful, while others may be lighter and simple. In terms of its character, the conversation might be seamless or fragmented. The texture might be smooth or coarse.

A smooth interaction with another has a feeling of synergy--moving from topic to topic with all the ideas being expressed cleanly. A coarse conversation feels bumpy or rough. The connection between ourselves and others feels out of balance. There are interruptions, with many points of contention. But conversations are always changing. A friendship might begin with smooth conversation but, as years pass, become more difficult. Conversely, we could have adversarial conversations with someone that get easier over time.

Even brief moments of conversation can rescue us from being isolated and self-centered. They bring us out and help us engage with the world, connecting with the matrix of human thought. Conversation is a reflection: "I think spring is here." "Oh, yes, the sparrow on my balcony was singing this morning." "Does that mean he's courting?" "Yes, the best song wins the mate." "Really?" It's not necessarily what we're talking about, it's how we talk about it that affects us. It's about the caring within the words. As we are drawn out of ourselves, we become more other-centered. And this is the key to conversation, to appreciate the one in front of you, which creates a moment of happiness for both.

All the same, some conversations can drag and at times you may find yourself thinking, Hurry up! Get to the point. If you're just waiting for the dance to be over, it's not really artful or appreciative. While the other person may be self-centered, the onus falls on you to slow down and remember to be patient. Of course, in certain settings you have to get to the point quickly. If you're driving down the road, for example, you need to know whether to turn left or right. However, even in a short and pointed exchange, there is always the possibility of feeling the...

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