

Lesson 3: Power to Think about Speech

PURPOSE

To always strive to acquire truth in speech and to acquire excellent thinking habits.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson students will be able to:

1. Understand the importance of using our power to think in an excellent way.
2. Learn about and apply Socrates' triple filter rule.
3. Distinguish between habits of excellent and non-excellent thinking.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Socrates' Triple Filter Test
- Conversation: Do we need laws?
- Mahatma Gandhi: "Devotion to Truth"

VOCABULARY

- Power to Think: the human ability to understand and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Recall the subject-object distinction and highlight that persons should always be treated as subjects, never merely as objects. Reemphasize the ways in which some societies treat persons as objects and how some treat them as subjects. Discuss some historical violations of human dignity on a social level. Highlight the most critical arguments expressed by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr..

Step 2: Discuss how the power to think is a specifically human power which distinguishes humans from all other beings. Human beings use this power in different capacities: in education, work, personal decision making, action, etc.

Write the definition on the board:

Power to Think: the human ability to understand and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world.

One of the most important uses of the power to think is speech, and it is critical that people use their power to think to inform their speech. This lesson will explore how to best use the power to think when communicating through speech.

Introduce [Socrates' Triple Filter Test](#) and ask a volunteer to read it out loud. Explain that Socrates was one of the first Greek philosophers and a teacher of Plato. Most of the information about Socrates that exists today is drawn from Plato's writings. One of Socrates' most famous statements was: "I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think." Encouraging people to think deeply was one of the signature aspects of Socrates' work as a philosopher, and the Triple Filter Test is an example of that. Once, a student of Socrates wanted to tell him something negative that he had heard about Socrates from another person. Before listening to his student, Socrates wanted the message to go through a "Triple Filter Test". He argued that if the message did not pass the test, it wasn't worthy of being heard.

Ask the students to comment on how Socrates advises people to think about what they are saying and if they agree with it.

After listening to the initial comments, explain that Socrates' triple filter encourages people to use the power to think and to communicate through speech in a way that respects other people's dignity.

a) To have the **truth** in speech, people should check if:

The message is based on facts (or mere opinions, prejudice, appeal to emotions etc.)
The message is from a relevant authority.
The conclusion follows logically.

b) To check whether it is **good** people should:

See if it respects human dignity (or it wants to humiliate, offend...)
See if it promotes excellence or not (for example, if it does not help the person to become better)

c) To check whether it is **useful**, people should:

Determine whether it helps in any way (or if it will make things worse for the person)
Determine if it will bring any benefit to the other person or myself (or if it will do harm)

Step 3: To have truth in speech, people should responsibly use their power to think. The best way to use one's power to think is to acquire the habit of thinking in an excellent way. Just as one's power to choose can be used in an excellent or a non-excellent way, one can use their power to think in an excellent or non-excellent way.

Display the following notions on the board one by one and ask the students to identify which represent habits of thinking in an excellent way and which represent habits of thinking in a non-excellent way:

Listening to different points of view.
Using stereotypes.
Judging based on prejudice.
Making a judgment based on good reasons.
Gathering enough evidence.
Rushing to conclusion.
Considering if I might be wrong.
Being open-minded.
Discarding valid criticism because it makes one feel bad.
Disregarding some opinion because I don't like a person who is saying it.
Being curious.
Being interested in the truth more than in being right.
Taking things for granted.
Asking advice from wise people.
Thinking about the consequences of your ideas and actions.
Being consistent in your positions.
Letting anger blur your judgement.
Arguing that something is true simply because you say so.
Distorting someone's argument.
Accepting valid criticism.
Attacking the person's character to discredit their argument.
Being intentionally ambiguous.
Providing arguments for your positions.
Avoid answering a legitimate question.

When analyzing each example one by one, group them into two columns, like in the table below. Ask the students to explain why they think a habit is excellent or non-excellent.

Habits of excellent thinking	Habits of non-excellent thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Listening to different points of view. » Making a judgment based on good reasons. » Gathering enough evidence. » Considering if I might be wrong. » Being open-minded. » Being curious. » Being interested in the truth more than in being right. » Seeking advice from wise people. » Thinking about the consequences of your ideas and actions. » Being consistent in your positions. » Accepting valid criticism. » Providing arguments for your positions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Using stereotypes. » Judging based on prejudice. » Rushing to conclusion. » Discarding valid criticism because it makes you feel bad. » Disregarding some opinion because I don't like a person who is saying it. » Taking things for granted. » Letting anger blur your judgment. » Arguing that something is true simply because you say so. » Distorting someone's argument. » Attacking the person's character to discredit their argument. » Being intentionally ambiguous. » Avoid answering a legitimate question.

Explain that some bad ideas have very serious consequences. One such example is slavery (the practice of attempting to own other people under forced servitude). Another example is racist ideology, such as National Socialism, racial segregation in the United States or the apartheid in South Africa (these abide by the idea that some races are inferior or superior to others). Historical examples of these injustices include the Rwandan genocide (based on the idea of ethnic cleansing) or different totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union (based on the idea that the individual can be used as means for the state).

Aristotle argues that a small error in the beginning leads to a large error in the end. The practical application of this idea to the habit of thinking in an excellent way is that each person should start practicing habits of excellent thinking in everyday life, in discussions with friends, and on social media. Practicing habits of excellent thinking in small things (even though no excellent thinking is small) naturally leads to great ideas and achievement in the future.

Step 4: Divide students into groups. Have the groups read [Conversation: Do we need laws?](#) and identify each habit as either excellent or non-excellent thinking. The students should point out the specific good or bad habit they recognize in each scenario. After each group has finished analyzing the conversation, ask them to share their analyses with the class. Lead a class discussion about the excellent and non-excellent habits of thinking present in these conversations.

Step 5: Summarize. Focus on [Socrates' triple filter test](#) and its main "ingredients". Remind the students of the importance of developing habits of excellent thinking and repeat once more some of excellent and non-excellent thinking habits.

SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITY

Divide students into groups and ask them to read the speech [Devotion to Truth by Mohandas \(Mahatma\) Gandhi](#). Each group should highlight two or three important ideas from the speech and share their thoughts. Each group should then present their conclusions to the rest of the class.

During the class discussion, the teacher should provide the following quotes:

"All our activities should be centered in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life."

"Without Truth it would be impossible to observe any principles or rules in life...There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech, and Truth in action."

Explain that the goal of thinking is to reach the truth, or that which corresponds to reality. Using the power to think in the best way possible allows people to distinguish between what is true and what is simply apparent, what are decisions and actions we should take, how we should organize society, etc. Using the power to think properly will result in learning new things, solving problems, and making good decisions for oneself and for the larger community (family, class, country, etc.). These habits of thinking in an excellent way will lead to breakthroughs in science and the development of new technologies that can be used to improve human life and development.

Gandhi argues that truth should be the center of our lives, and that it should be found in speech, thought and action. For this reason, this curriculum will focus on how to reach the truth through thought, speech, action, and emotions (which have a real influence on what we think, say, or do).

Socrates' Triple Filter Test⁸

This story tells that, one day, one of Socrates' disciples was quite agitated. He told Socrates that he had met one of Socrates' friends and that he had spoken badly of him.

Socrates asked the man to calm down. After thinking for a moment, he asked him to wait a minute. Before listening to what he had to say, the message had to go through a triple filter test. If the message didn't pass the test, it wasn't worthy of being heard.

As he always did, the Greek philosopher asked his anxious disciple a question: "Are you absolutely sure that what you're going to tell me is true?" The disciple thought for a moment. In fact, he couldn't be sure if what his friend had told him was actually malicious. It was a matter of perspective. "So you do not know if everything he said about me is true or not," said the philosopher. The disciple had to admit that he didn't.

Then, Socrates asked him a second question: "Is what you're going to tell me good or not?" The disciple replied that, evidently, it wasn't good at all. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He believed that what he was going to share with the philosopher would cause him discomfort and distress. Thus, Socrates said to him: "You're going to tell me something bad, but you're not completely sure it's true". The disciple admitted that this was the case.

Then, Socrates asked the third and final question: "Is what you have to say about my friend going to help me?" The disciple hesitated. He really didn't know if that information was useful or not. Maybe it would distance him from his friend, but considering that he wasn't sure whether it was true or not, maybe it wasn't useful at all.

In the end, the philosopher refused to listen to what his disciple wanted to tell him. "If what you want to tell me isn't true, isn't good, and isn't even useful, why would I want to hear it?" he finally told his disciple.

⁸ Socrates' Triple Filter Test, *Exploring your mind*, available at <https://exploringyourmind.com/socrates-triple-filter-test/> (last visited Nov 8, 2022).

Conversation: Do we need laws?

[Instructions: read the conversation and recognize the habits of excellent and non-excellent thinking. Highlight which excellent or non-excellent habit you recognize next to the sentence in which this habit was displayed. You can apply habits from the table below:

Habits of excellent thinking	Habits of non-excellent thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Listening to different points of view. » Making a judgment based on good reasons. » Gathering enough evidence. » Considering if I might be wrong. » Being open-minded. » Being curious. » Being interested in truth more than in being right. » Asking advice from wise people. » Thinking about the consequences of your ideas and actions. » Being consistent in your positions. » Accepting valid criticism. » Providing arguments for your positions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Using stereotypes. » Judging based on prejudice. » Rushing to conclusion. » Discarding valid criticism because it makes you feel bad. » Disregarding some opinion because I don't like a person who is saying it. » Taking things for granted. » Letting anger blur your judgment. » Arguing that something is true simply because you say so. » Distorting someone's argument. » Attacking the person's character to discredit their argument. » Being intentionally ambiguous. » Avoid answering a legitimate question.

Note: some habits may occur more than once. Not all habits from the table are necessarily present in the conversation.]

CONVERSATION:

Mike, John and Lucy were on their way to school when Lucy started talking about the documentary she saw last night.

Lucy: Last night I saw what horrible things Nazi Germany did to people they didn't like. All people are equal in their worth, I don't see how they could think anything different.

John: I agree. Something like that should have never happened.

Lucy: Yes, it all happened because one man enforced a law and made other people act that way. People were punished if they refused to cooperate. Laws don't do us any good. I wish there weren't any laws.

Mike: I don't think this conclusion is right.

Lucy: What? So, you don't mind that laws tortured people?

Mike: That's not what I am saying. Let me explain. I just think the situation is more complex than that. Although those were really bad laws, laws, in general, are not useless. For example, given that we are vulnerable and the altruism of others is limited, we cannot survive without rules prohibiting the free use of violence; so such rules are necessary.

John: Why do you always have to stand out and be special? Can't you agree with everyone just once?

Lucy: I see what you mean by that, Mike, but how do you explain that precisely the laws didn't protect people, but they incited violence?

Mike: Yes, you are right. As I said, laws are not without flaws, but I don't think the idea that all laws should not exist is something we should agree with. The laws should be made in a way that persons are put before the laws. Laws exist for the persons and not the other way around. It's not that people exist to follow the laws.

John: Ok, so you are saying that each person should act according to his or her private standards. In that way, no one can impose their standards through laws.

Mike: I think there should be a consensus which standards we should implement as laws. That's why we have different declarations which say that the human dignity of every person is to be respected in every way. Therefore, laws should be made in a way that recognizes human dignity and protects each person's rights.

John: You are just trying to be smart in front of us. We are not in school yet. You can't get an A from us.

Lucy: Ok, I know what I said and what I saw yesterday, but how can we guarantee that leaders of countries will follow some objective standards and not their private ones?

John: I think that everyone should follow their own standards. There is no one truth that everyone should follow. Everyone who doesn't think this way obviously needs to educate himself more and stop being so rigid and try to impose their opinion. Great philosophers would all agree.

Mike: Aren't the subjective moral standards the most problematic thing here? Isn't relativizing objective standards such as human dignity, the reason why these laws passed in the first place?

John: I know what I believe and this is that laws only limit people, they prevent us from being truly free.

Mike: Lucy, to be honest, I don't have all the answers. I think we should ask our history or ethics professor to help us with this problem.

John: I don't see a need for that, I believe I am right and nothing can change it.

Lucy: I thought of another problem with your opinion on this, Mike. What should the people do once this or any other immoral or unjust standard is enforced as law? For example, laws allowing slavery or racial segregation.

Mike: I know this is a problem. I guess what we should do is practice habits of excellent thinking in order to determine which laws are just before bringing them. But, if our leaders enforce unjust laws which don't respect human dignity, then I believe we shouldn't follow them, but we should work to change them.

Lucy: OK, maybe this makes sense. Maybe a complete absence of laws could lead to chaotic behavior. So maybe my views are wrong, but still, I can't say I completely agree with you. I definitely need to do more research. I think there is a potential of misuse in all of this.

Mike: Definitely, but it can't be any better if there are no laws. I think that just laws can help us to know what is right and wrong. They also hold us responsible for our actions. And they protect the most vulnerable among us, those who cannot protect themselves. These are all good things we shouldn't easily discard.

Lucy: I guess you are right, I will think about it more thoroughly to consider everything that you were saying.

John: Ok, our class starts in one minute. We can finish the discussion later.

Conversation – Answer Key for the teacher

Mike, John and Lucy were on their way to school when Lucy started talking about the documentary she saw last night.

Lucy: Last night I saw what horrible things Nazi Germany did to people they didn't like. All people are equal in their worth, I don't see how they could think anything different.

John: I agree. Something like that should have never happened.

Lucy: Yes, it all happened because one man enforced a law and made other people act that way. People were punished if they refused to cooperate. Laws don't do us any good. I wish there weren't any laws.

Mike: I don't think this conclusion is right.

Lucy: What? So, you don't mind that laws tortured people? [Rushing to conclusion.]

Mike: That's not what I am saying. Let me explain. I just think the situation is more complex than that. Although those were really bad laws, laws, in general, are not useless. For example, given that we are vulnerable and the altruism of others is limited, we cannot survive without rules prohibiting the free use of violence; so such rules are necessary. [Providing arguments for your positions. Making a judgment based on good reasons.]

John: Why do you always have to stand out and be special? Can't you agree with everyone just once? [Disregarding some opinion because I don't like a person who is saying it.]

Lucy: I see what you mean by that, Mike, but how do you explain that precisely the laws didn't protect people, but they incited violence? [Being open-minded. Being curious.]

Mike: Yes, you are right. As I said, laws are not without flaws, but I don't think the idea that all laws should not exist is something we should agree with. The laws should be made in a way that persons are put before the laws. Laws exist for the persons and not the other way around. It's not that people exist to follow the laws.

John: Ok, so you are saying that each person should act according to his or her private standards. In that way, no one can impose their standards through laws. [Distorting someone's argument.]

Mike: I think there should be a consensus which standards we should implement as laws. That's why we have different declarations which say that the human dignity of every person is to be respected in every way. Therefore, laws should be made in a way that recognizes human dignity and protects each person's rights. [Being consistent in your positions.]

John: You are just trying to be smart in front of us. We are not in school yet. You can't get an A from us. [Attacking the person's character to discredit their argument.]

Lucy: Ok, I know what I said and what I saw yesterday, but how can we guarantee that leaders of countries will follow some objective standards and not their private ones? [Listening to different points of view. Being interested in truth more than in being right.]

John: I think that everyone should follow their own standards. There is no one truth that everyone should follow. Everyone who doesn't think this way obviously needs to educate himself more and stop being so rigid and try to impose their opinion. [Letting anger blur your judgment. Arguing that something is true simply because you say so.] Great philosophers would all agree. [Being intentionally ambiguous.]

Mike: Aren't the subjective moral standards the most problematic thing here? Isn't relativizing objective standards such as human dignity, the reason why these laws passed in the first place?

John: I know what I believe and this is that laws only limit people, they prevent us from being truly free. [Avoiding to answer a legitimate question. Discarding valid criticism because it makes you feel bad.]

Mike: Lucy, to be honest, I don't have all the answers. I think we should ask our history or ethics professor to help us with this problem. [Seeking advice from wise people.]

John: I don't see a need for that, I believe I am right and nothing can change it. [Arguing that something is true simply because you say so.]

Lucy: I thought of another problem with your opinion on this, Mike. What should the people do once this or any other immoral or unjust standard is enforced as law? For example, laws allowing slavery or racial segregation.

Mike: I know this is a problem. [Accepting valid criticism.] I guess what we should do is practice habits of excellent thinking in order to determine which laws are just before bringing them. But, if our leaders enforce unjust laws which don't respect human dignity, then we probably shouldn't follow them.

Lucy: OK, maybe this makes sense. Maybe a complete absence of laws could lead to chaotic behavior. [Thinking about the consequences of your ideas and actions.] So maybe my views are wrong, but still, I can't say I completely agree with you. [Considering if I might be wrong.] I definitely need to do more research. [Gathering enough evidence.] I think there is a potential of misuse in all of this.

Mike: Definitely, but it can't be any better if there are no laws. I think that just laws can help us to know what is right and wrong. They also hold us responsible for our actions. And they protect the most vulnerable among us, those who cannot protect themselves. These are all good things we shouldn't easily discard. [Being consistent in your positions.]

Lucy: I guess you are right, I will think about it more thoroughly to consider everything that you were saying. [Being open-minded.]

John: Ok, our class starts in one minute. We'll have to finish this later.

Mohandas Gandhi: Devotion to Truth⁹

The word Satya (Truth) is derived from Sat, which means “being”. Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why Sat or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God, than to say that God is Truth.

Devotion to this Truth gives us the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centered in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life. When once this state in the pilgrim’s progress is reached, all other rules of correct living will come without any effort, and obedience to them will be instinctive. But without Truth it would be impossible to observe any principles or rules in life.

Generally speaking, observation of the law of Truth is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But we in the Ashram should understand the word Satya or Truth in a much wider sense. There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech, and Truth in action.

But Truth is the right designation of God. Hence there is nothing in everyone following Truth according to their own lights. Indeed, it is their duty to do so. Then if there is a mistake on the part of anyone following Truth, it will automatically be set right. For the quest of Truth involves tapas – self suffering, sometimes even death. There can be no place in it for even a trace of self-interest. In such Selfless search for Truth nobody can lose their bearings for long. When they take the wrong path and stumble, they are redirected to the right path. Therefore the pursuit of Truth is true bhakti (devotion). It is the path that leads to God.

How beautiful it would be, if all of us, young and old, men and women, devoted ourselves wholly to the Truth in all that we might do in our waking hours, whether working, eating, drinking or playing, till dissolution of the body makes us one with Truth? God as Truth has been for me a treasure beyond price. May God be so to every one of us.

⁹ Truth by M.K. Gandhi, *Mahatma Ghandi Center*. At James Madison University, available at https://www.jmu.edu/gandhicerter/wm_library/gandhiana-truth.pdf (last visited Nov 8, 2022).