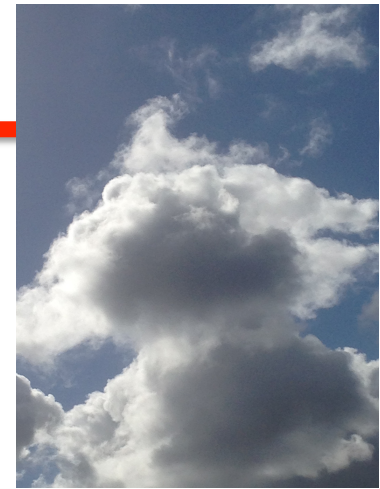


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# Mindful journalism: towards a new ethics of compassion

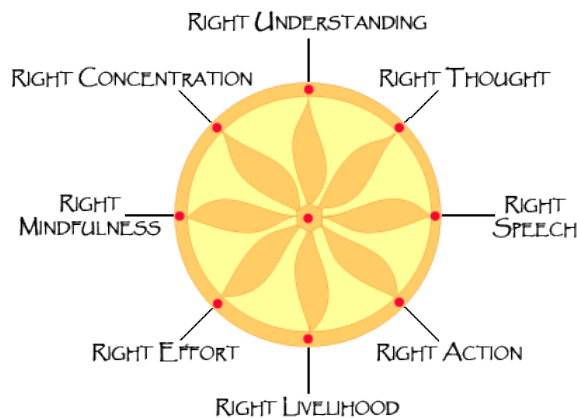


Mark Pearson,  
Griffith University

[m.pearson@griffith.edu.au](mailto:m.pearson@griffith.edu.au)

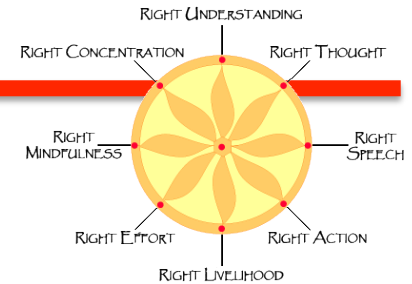
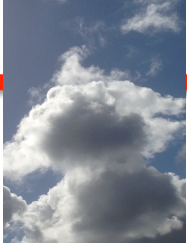
Twitter: @journlaw

JEANZ conference,  
Christchurch, 2014



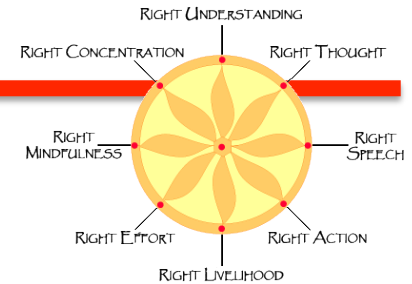
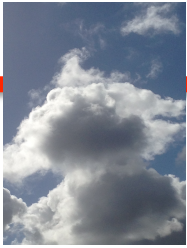
*(Image © 2013 Fo Guang Shan of Toronto)*

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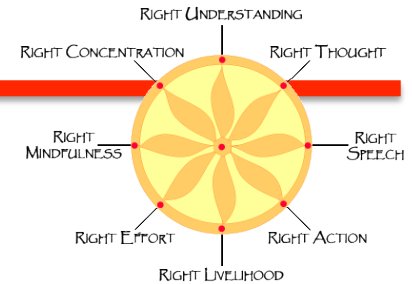
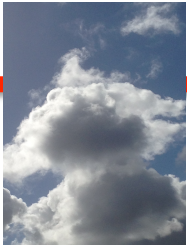
## Background and context

- I am a media law scholar, not a theologian, and identify as a ‘secular Buddhist’ i.e., principles without belief
- My interest stems from research work on media law and regulation, vulnerability of sources, and ‘reflective practice’ in journalism



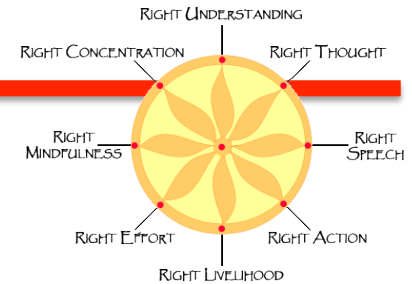
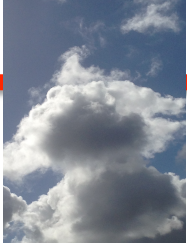
## What Mindful Journalism is not ...

- An attempt to 'convert' you to Buddhism
- An attempt to impose yet another code of practice on journalists
- A bid for the new approach to theory and ethics. (It is *complementary* to deliberative/public/peace/civic/citizen/inclusive journalisms)



## What Mindful Journalism is ...

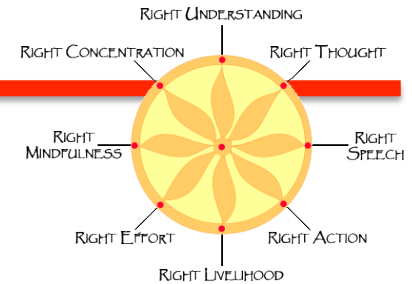
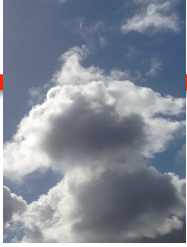
- A lens (or even theory) offering a set of tools for the analysis of journalism
- A moral framework to underpin ethical decision-making in journalism
- A possible tool of resilience for journalists (work in progress)



## Core principles are explained in ...



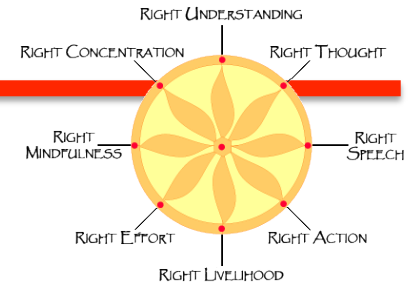
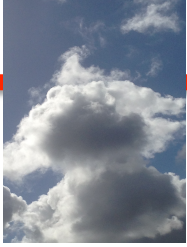
- My short blog on the topic at [journlaw.com](http://journlaw.com)
- My *Ethical Space* article (December 2014)
- Our forthcoming book (Routledge, NY, 2015)



## Core questions we are facing ...

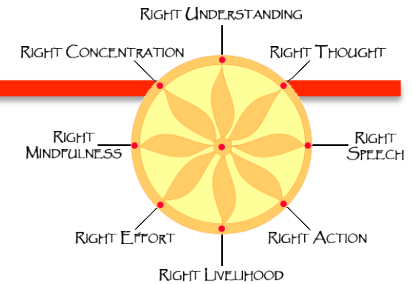
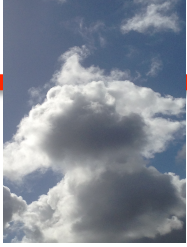
- Can we keep doing journalism?
- Why should we do journalism?
- How should we do journalism?

*Mindful Journalism is most useful for the latter two of these ...*



# Theory and practice...

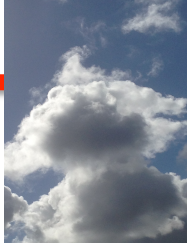
- Communication theories of the press and Libertarian and Social Responsibility systems anchored in Western philosophy and Judeo-Christian religion. Western libertarian model needs revisiting with large scale migration, erosion of mainstream media and Web 2.0
- Leveson and Finkelstein inquiries criticised gulf between public moral standards and media ethics – the lack of a ‘moral compass’



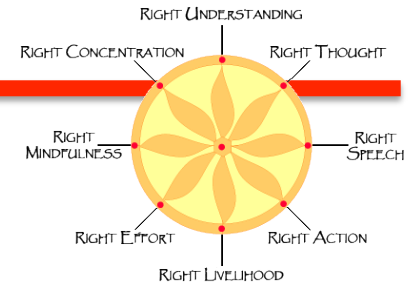
# Why a Buddhist approach?

- All religions offer a moral compass
- Dalai Lama has proposed its secular adoption in *Beyond Religion – Ethics for a Whole World* (2011)
- Western embrace of ‘mindfulness’
- Relative brevity, non-theistic, and lends itself to a behavioural / secular reading





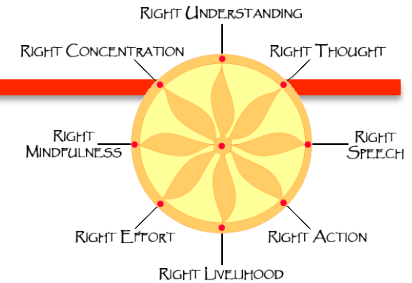
# Gunaratne (2005):



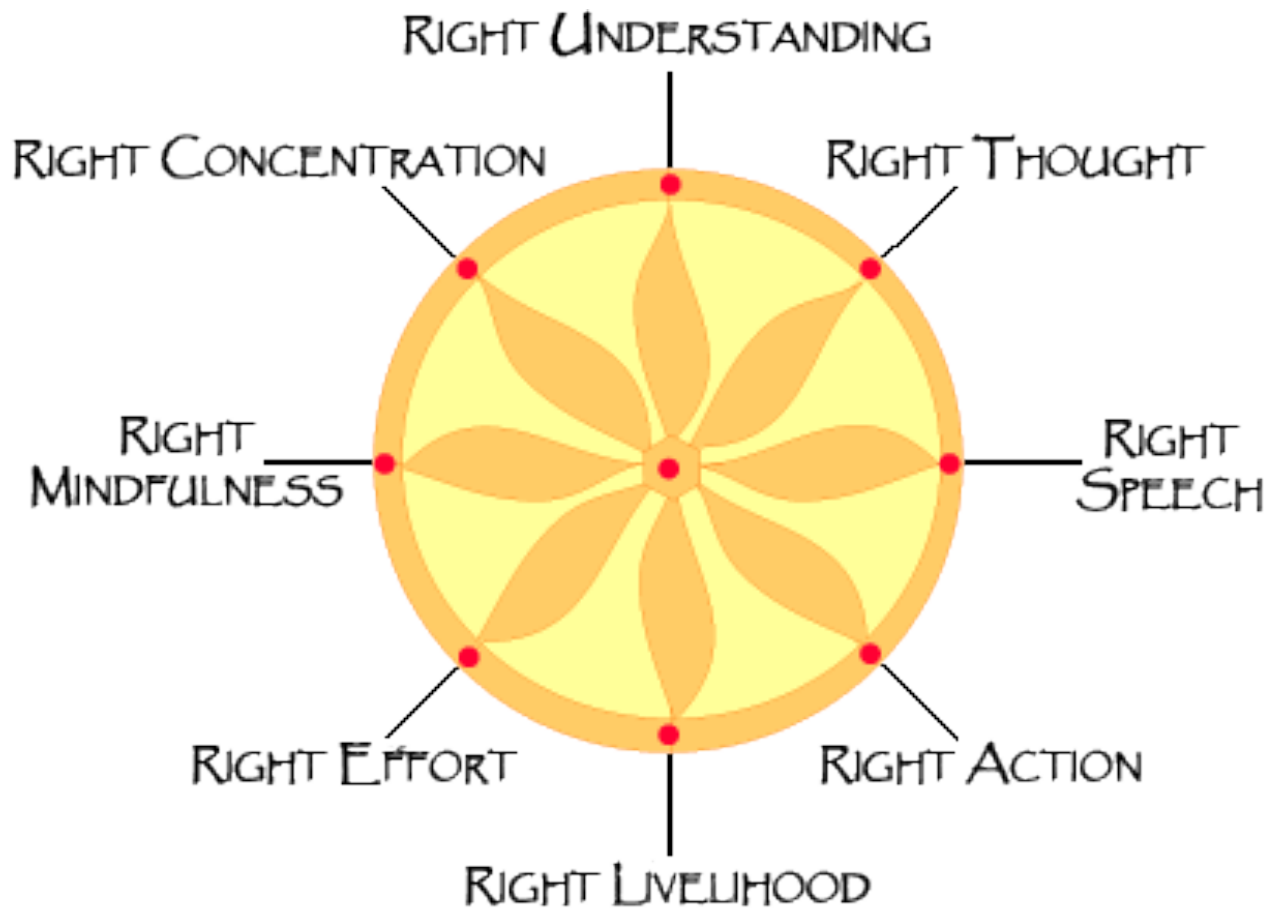
‘The Buddhist *dharma* meant the doctrine based on the Four Noble Truths: That suffering exists; that the cause of suffering is thirst, craving, or desire; that a path exists to end suffering; that the Noble Eightfold Path is the path to end suffering. Described as the “middle way,” it specifies the commitment to *sila* (right speech, action and livelihood), *samadhi* (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration), and *panna* (right understanding and thoughts)’



# News and change

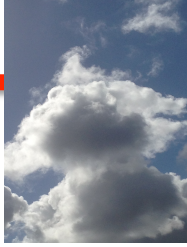


- The basic notion that *dukkha* – suffering / change / angst – is inevitable and that it is caused by craving / desire can inform our very definition of news and our news judgments
- *If change is inevitable, then can a journalism of compassion be aimed at easing that suffering rather than simply identifying it or exacerbating it?*

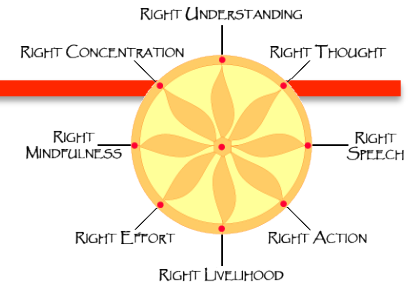


*(Image © 2013 Fo Guang Shan of Toronto)*

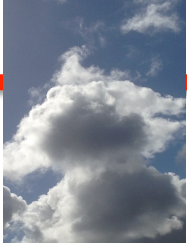
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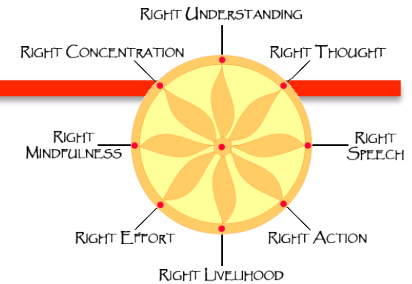
# Relevance?



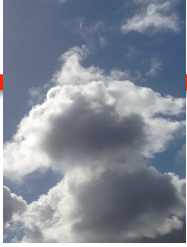
- Each step - understanding free of superstition and prejudice, kindly and truthful speech, right conduct, doing no harm, perseverance, mindfulness and contemplation – has an application to the modern-day practice of truth-seeking and truth-telling ... *by journalists, citizen journalists or bloggers*



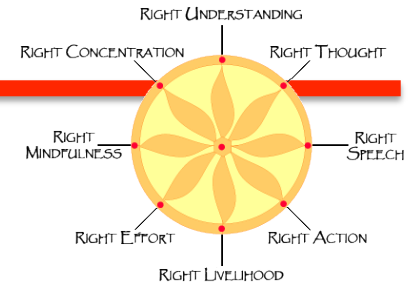
# 1. Right views



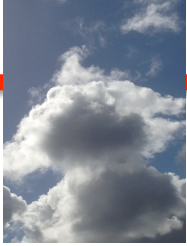
- Pain and suffering (*dukkha*) are part of the cycle of constant change, a fundamental definition of 'news'
- 'Right views' can incorporate a contract between the news media and audiences that accepts a level of change at any time, and focuses intention upon deeper explanations of root causes, strategies for coping and potential solutions for those changes prompting the greatest suffering



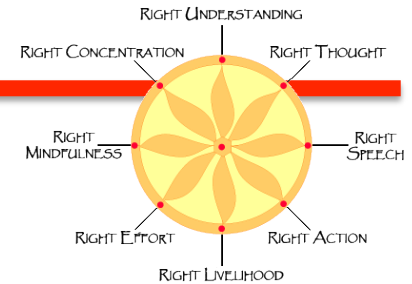
## 2. Right intent



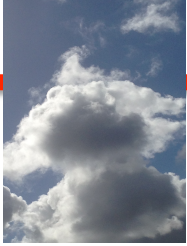
- Journalism as a ‘calling’ – to ‘make a difference’
- Necessitates change in mindset from bringing news ‘first’ in a competitive sense but ‘best’ and most meaningfully to an audience in a qualitative sense



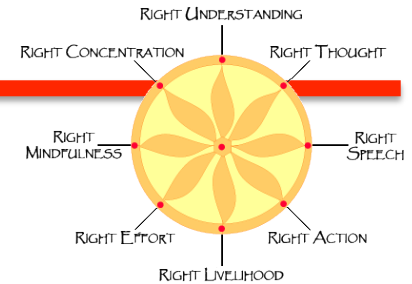
## 3. Right speech



- Truthful and charitable expression are respected in all major religions
- The notion of right speech questions moral premise of celebrity and gossip journalism
- Yet ‘uncomfortable truths’ must be told even if one is engaging in a form of ‘deliberative journalism’ that might ultimately be for the betterment of society and disenfranchised people. For example, experts in ‘peace journalism’ include a ‘truth orientation’ as a fundamental ingredient of that approach (Lynch, 2010)

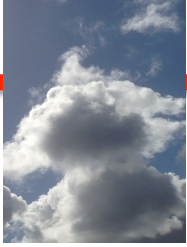


## 4. Right conduct

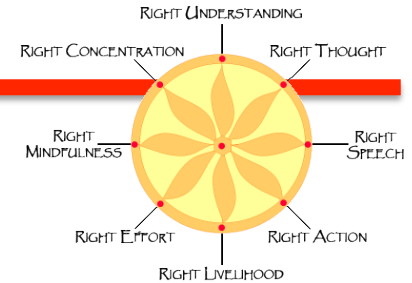


- Five Precepts which prohibit killing, theft, lying, being unchaste and intoxicants (Smith and Novak, 2003)
- Requires one ‘to reflect on actions with an eye to the motives that prompted them’
- Echoes ‘reflective practice’ approach of Schön (1987)
- *Fairfax Media Code of Conduct:*
  - “Would I be proud of what I have done?”
  - “Do I think it’s the right thing to do?”

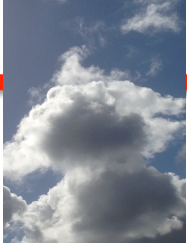




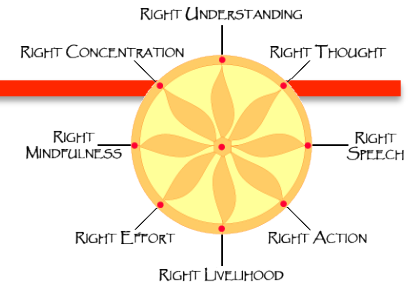
## 5. Right living



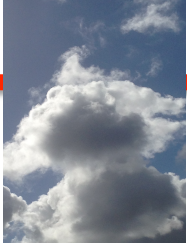
- Buddha identified some occupations incompatible with pure living: poison peddler, slave trader, prostitute, butcher, brewer, arms maker and tax collector
- How does engagement in prying, intrusion and rumor-mongering advance the enterprise of journalism or the personal integrity of an individual journalist who chooses to ply that trade?
- Does this help us distinguish the journalist from the pretender in the blogosphere?



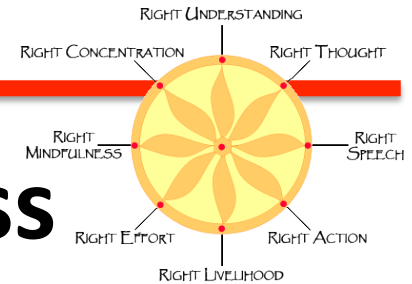
## 6. Right effort



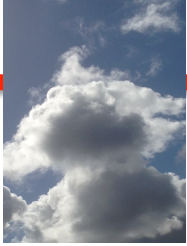
- Normally meant in a spiritual sense – a steady, patient and purposeful path to enlightenment
- But in journalism? Institutional limitations and pressures threaten a journalist's commitment to an ethical core, requiring the 'right effort' to be maintained at a steady, considered pace through every interview, every story, every working day and ultimately through a full career.



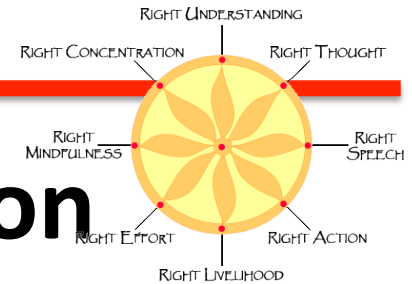
## 7. Right mindfulness



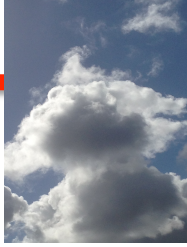
- ‘Witnessing all mental and physical events, including our emotions, without reacting to them, neither condemning some nor holding on to others’ (Smith and Novak, 2003).
- Pausing to reflect with compassion upon implications of actions upon others – sources, other stakeholders particularly the vulnerable, the effects upon their own reputations as journalists and the community standing of others, and public benefits ensuing from this truth being told in this way at this time.



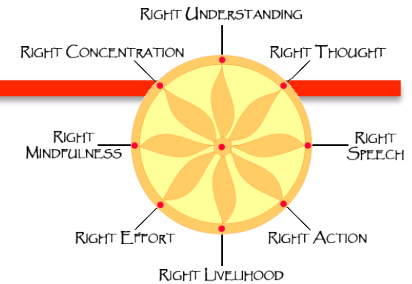
## 8. Right concentration



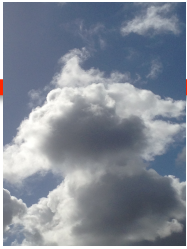
- Being 'in the zone' with clarity of purpose
- Producing important reportage and commentary within tight deadlines, paying regard to stakeholders and to the broader public interest
- It is in this moment that it all comes together for the mindful journalist – facts verified, comments from a range of sources attributed, competing values assessed, angles considered and decided and timing judged
- All within a cool focus amid the noise and mayhem of a frantic newsroom or a chaotic news event



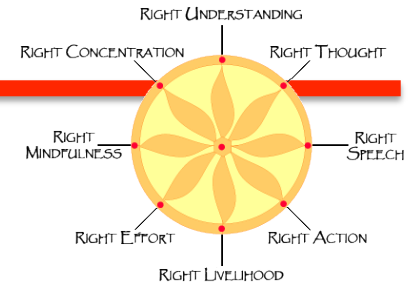
# Focus: Right speech



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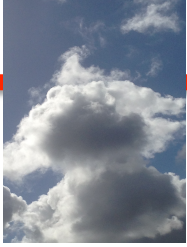
# Right speech in the negative



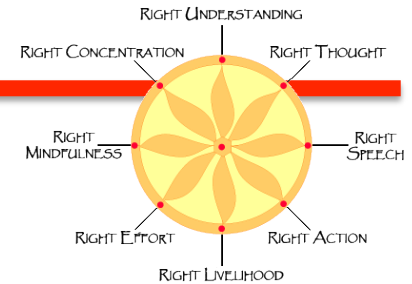
Buddha reported to have said in the *Magga-vibhanga Sutta: An Analysis of the Path*:

“And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, abstaining from divisive speech, abstaining from abusive speech, abstaining from idle chatter: This, monks, is called right speech. (Bhikkhu, 1996).”

- lying
- divisive
- abusive
- idle chatter
- speech that does harm to self or others

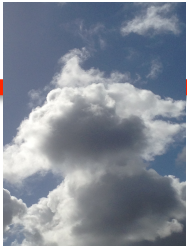


# Right speech in the positive

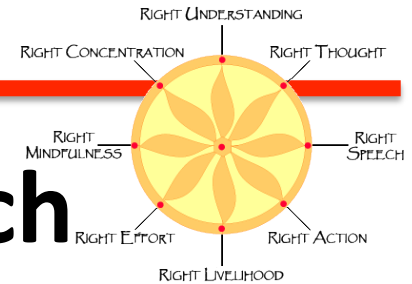


*Vaca Sutta* (Bhikkhu, 2000): Buddha identified five qualities that render a statement “well-spoken, not ill-spoken ... blameless and unfaulted by knowledgeable people”. / “It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will” (Bhikkhu, 2000).

- correct timing (or in season)
- truthful and factual
- affectionate
- polite
- beneficial
- pleasant and soothing
- worth treasuring (significant and memorable)
- reasonable
- circumscribed
- reinforcing other teachings (or moral values)
- with good-will (or ‘right intent’, another step in the path)



# Rules of Right Speech



In the *Abhaya Sutta* on right speech, the Buddha addresses Prince Abhaya:

[1] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

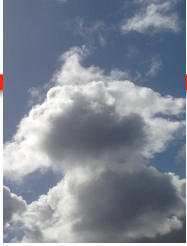
[2] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

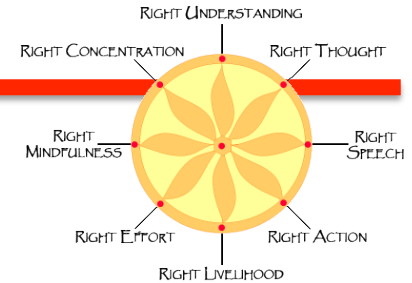
[4] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

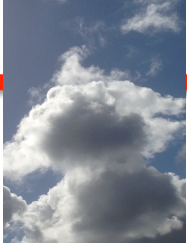




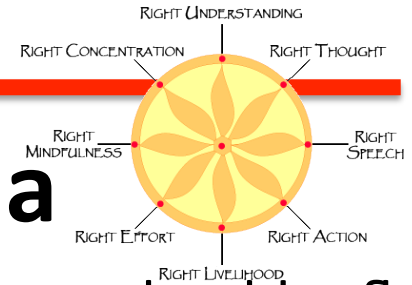
# Right speech / right mindfulness



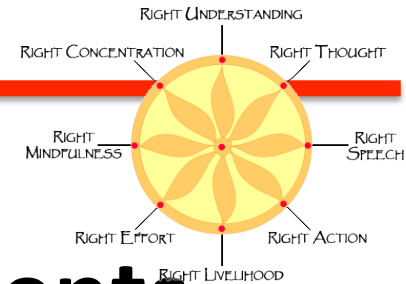
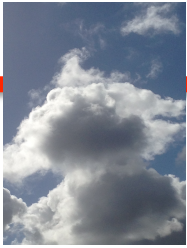
- ‘Witnessing all mental and physical events, including our emotions, without reacting to them, neither condemning some nor holding on to others’ (Smith and Novak, 2003).
- Pausing to reflect with compassion upon implications of actions upon others – sources, other stakeholders particularly the vulnerable, the effects upon their own reputations as journalists and the community standing of others, and public benefits ensuing from this truth being told in this way at this time.
- Cf. Donald Schon’s ‘reflection in action’



# Dialogue with Rahula



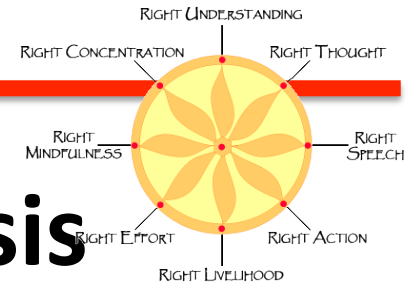
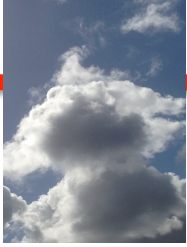
“Whenever you want to perform a verbal act, you should reflect on it: 'This verbal act I want to perform — would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful verbal act, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to [these things] then any verbal act of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful verbal action with happy consequences, happy results, then any verbal act of that sort is fit for you to do. While you are performing a verbal act, you should reflect on it: ... Having performed a verbal act, you should reflect on it...” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2006).



# Case study 1:

## *Perth Now* race comments

- (c) ‘...until these young people gain the respect and gratitude of all races then they will continually be thought of as violent and criminals, can’t keep using the same excuse forever, everyone else has to gain the publics [sic] respect, why in the hell should that exclude aboriginals?’ [Comment 102 of 114 posted by annoyed of perth 1”50am July 12, 2008]
- (d) ‘...now ‘the elders grieve’. Where were they when the little kids needed supervision late at night’ RIP criminal and poor little boys.’ [Comment 91 of 114 posted by Marion of Perth 5:37pm July 11, 2008]
- (f) ‘...criminal trash like these young boys’ [Comment 66 of 114 posted by Kylie of 1:59pm July 11, 2008]
- (h) ‘Let em [sic] all fight and kill each other i [sic] say!’ [Comment 51 of 114 posted by Unreal! Of Perth 12:09pm July 11, 2008]
- (j) ‘...I doubt the families will ever be able to behave themselves at the funeral’ [Comment 36 of 114 posted by John of 10.52am July 11, 2008]



# Case study 1: Analysis

Two categories under the schema might apply, given the impossibility of proving the fact or truth of opinions.

[2] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

Also, the repeating of the wrongful speech of others is unacceptable under Buddhist doctrine, as detailed in the *Saleyyaka Sutta* above (Thera, 1994):

‘He speaks maliciously: he is a repeater elsewhere of what is heard here for the purpose of causing division from these, or he is a repeater to these of what is heard elsewhere for the purpose of causing division from those, and he is thus a divider of the united, a creator of divisions, who enjoys discord, rejoices in discord, delights in discord, he is a speaker of words that create discord. ‘

# Case study 2: The abducted child

## DOCS urges fugitive mother to return



Home alone: NSW deputy chief Ken Thompson, in Andrew's room, is reassured to know his son is still alive but distressed by his absence. Picture: Alan Pryke

Caroline Overington

THE head of the NSW Government's international kidney response team has urged Sydney businesswoman Melinda Stratton to return to Australia with her four-year-old son before she is caught by Interpol or foreign police.

Ms Stratton, who is the wife of NSW deputy chief Ken Thompson, fled Australia with her son, Andrew, last April, sparking a family court battle.

Mr Thompson has launched an international campaign with police, placed on a list of wanted individuals and has offered an airfare to find the wife.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has issued a letter, written by Ms Stratton on January 15. It is the first known contact she has had with Australia since she took Andrew.

Ms Stratton said she had heard about Mr Thompson's campaign to track her down but would not



All smiles: A family portrait

return because she had lost faith in the Family Court system.

In a letter to Ms Stratton sent to her last known email address and her family members the kidnapping response team offers a second opinion on custody matters from an independent expert who is fully recognised by the Family Court of Australia.

It says the expert "will be appointed in full consultation with the mother".

The process can be started with (Ms Stratton) putting forward the names of experts she considers would be suitable," it says.

The letter says Andrew should be returned voluntarily. If not, "it is quite likely the mother and child will be located through other means".

"A life constantly on the move is not in Andrew's interests," it adds. "When families cannot reach agreement in custody matters, the judicial process is the only way to resolve the issue."

Child welfare expert Freda Briggs of the University of South Australia said mothers often feel as a last resort that they did not intend kidnapping.

"Melinda's son will have been traumatised by the fact that he was removed from home, his toys, his friends and relatives very suddenly and severely and taken to a country with a differ-

ent language." Professor Briggs said "if they are located, the child will be subjected to further trauma. From other recent cases, he is likely to be literally snatched from the mother by police in the early hours of the morning and placed in a secure detention centre."

"He will be deprived of contact with his mother before being put on a flight to Sydney accompanied by strangers. He could be then placed in foster care - again with strangers and sent to a new school or kindergarten. He may have as many as four foster homes before the case is resolved in the Family Court."

"If the mother returns with him she can be arrested... which won't help him at all."

"Mothers who run with their children are usually caught because it is difficult to change your identity, especially if you have no money. They leave their cars, bank accounts, possessions, relatives and supporters behind and can't contact them because

they believe that federal police will be tapping their phones and emails."

Ms Stratton has made several enquiries about Mr Thompson, which she strenuously denies.

He provided The Australian with a letter from the NSW Department of Community Services' Joint Investigation Response Team which says he has no case to answer.

"As you are aware, information was reported to DOCS regarding your son and Andrew was interviewed as a result of this interview," the letter says.

"The police are suspending this matter... and DOCS/IRI are closing this case (and) will not be having further contact with your family."

Mr Thompson said it was reassuring to know that Andrew was alive and well.

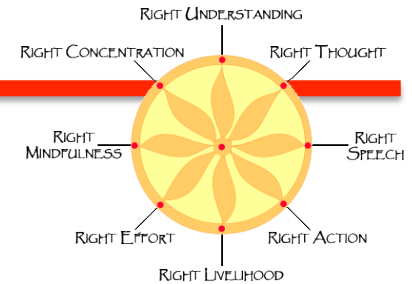
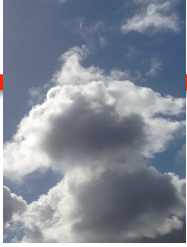
"I know she will be caring for him, feeding him, clothing him, sheltering him, but I believe she is doing him emotional damage," he said.

If they are located, the child will be subjected to further trauma. From other recent cases, he is likely to be literally snatched from the mother by police in the early hours of the morning and placed in a secure detention centre. He will be deprived of contact with his mother before being put on a flight to Sydney accompanied by strangers. He could be then placed in foster care - again with strangers and sent to a new school or kindergarten. He may have as many as four foster homes before the case is resolved in the Family Court.

If the mother returns with him she can be arrested ... which won't help him at all.

**Schema analysis:**

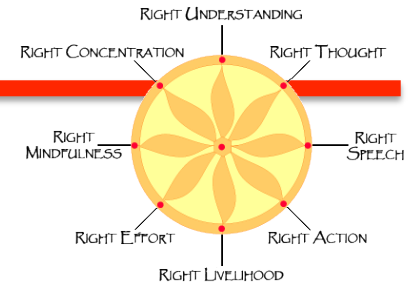
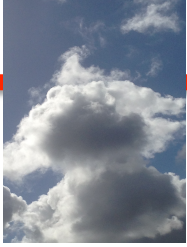
[2] "In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them."



## Reflecting in action. How often do we:

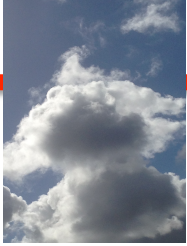
- Think about thinking?  
(metacognition)
- Feel about feeling? (empathy)
- Think about feeling? (compassion)

*Routine meditation can involve each ...*

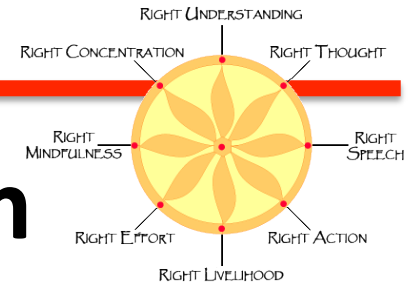


## Such meditation/pause might:

- Allow compassion in reporting
- Help find focus in chaos / conflict (courage under fire)
- Build resilience to deal with trauma
- Perspective: the organic place of news in the much bigger picture - #firstworldproblem

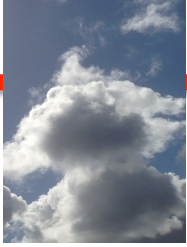


# Mindful Journalism

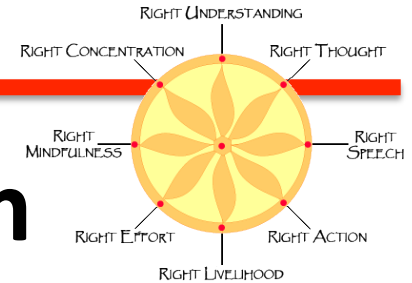


- US journalist Doug McGill (2008) has proposed the use of Buddhist ethics to create a ‘journalism of healing’ and a ‘journalism of timely, truthful, helpful speech’.
- Some might find a moral compass in the ‘right speech’ step of the Eightfold Path by which to measure their words to tell necessary truths with reflective compassion.
- It might also offer media ethics researchers a useful schema by which to weigh the morality of reporting in journalism and Web 2.0 professional communication.

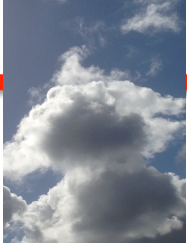




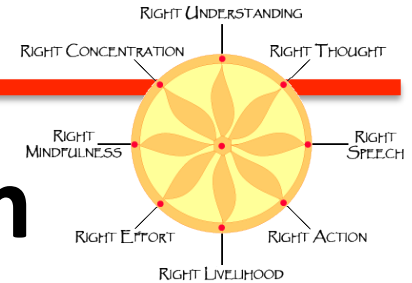
# Mindful Journalism



- Basic teachings of one of the world's major religions/philosophies can offer guidance in identifying a common – and secular - moral compass that might inform our journalism practice as technology and globalization place our old ethical models under stress
- In a global, multicultural and instant publishing environment the challenge is to find models that might inform our reading of codes of ethics and serve as a moral compass



# Mindful Journalism



“Utopian”? This was framed as a potential shortcoming of the book, but I would argue that it is an overwhelmingly positive attribute. In the midst of dismal outlooks for the future of mainstream journalism, we believe we have illustrated the application of an idealist – perhaps even “utopian” – roadmap for journalists to draw upon when confronted by an ethical dilemma or career-shaping decision. Gunaratne recently explained to me that scholars trying to denigrate Buddhism have used the “utopian” tag previously. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of Buddhism – and, by implication, of mindful journalism - because it actually proposes an aspirational set of normative ethical guidelines with the expectation that few people might actually achieve them. This gap between the norms and our traits, or actual performance, is what is known as *dukkha* (suffering), the key trait of life that the Buddha identified as a feature of existence. Striving for the ideal offers the opportunity to reduce that gap, thus decreasing the suffering experienced by ourselves and others impacted by our actions. I suggest that a journalism aspiring to the relief of suffering – a mindful journalism – is the kind of journalism one should expect of a noble profession.