

# Precepts 6 & 7 of the Ten Cardinal Precepts

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Today we'll look at precepts six and seven of the Ten Cardinal Precepts: 'Not to speak of the faults of others, but to be understanding and sympathetic' and 'not to praise myself and disparage others, but to overcome my own shortcomings.' You can hear by the wording how similar they are, addressing two aspects of harmful speech. The object of number six is the individual's allegedly faulty actions and words, whereas number seven focuses on his or her character as a whole. But of course these two are hard to tease apart.

I would nominate these two precepts as the most difficult to avoid breaking in one's daily life. Let's consider number six first: 'Not to speak of the faults of others.' Anyone who works with other people knows how much fault-finding goes on in the work place. That also means here, at the Center, among the resident staff. It's so easy to see other people's faults, isn't it? We're so much quicker to notice theirs than we are to turn our attention around and see our own faults. We're always at work trying to preserve a palatable image of ourselves. Here 'work' is the key word, since the cause is not just a lack of awareness but an active denial, or disowning of our own faults. Nonetheless, there is an innate intelligence in us that knows, at some level, of this shadow, and will then sometimes relocate it to an 'other.' Talking of the faults of others, then, is a convenient way of disavowing our own faults.

What about the person who seems to bother us far more than anyone else? Who doesn't have such a person in his life—at work, most often,

but also maybe a social acquaintance, or even a family member? Why do that person's faults carry such a charge for us? Rather than mindlessly attributing it to the person's defects themselves, we might wonder whether those very faults are ours, too, but unacknowledged by us. They're too painful to face in ourselves, so when we spot them in another, they become glaring. So it's a good little exercise, I've learned, when you identify someone whom you consistently react to or dwell on negatively, to pose the question, 'Okay, what is it in this person that I might have in myself that I don't want to look at?' It can be quite revealing. And often it's those who annoy us the most who have the most to teach us. At the very least they teach us that we have not mastered these two precepts!

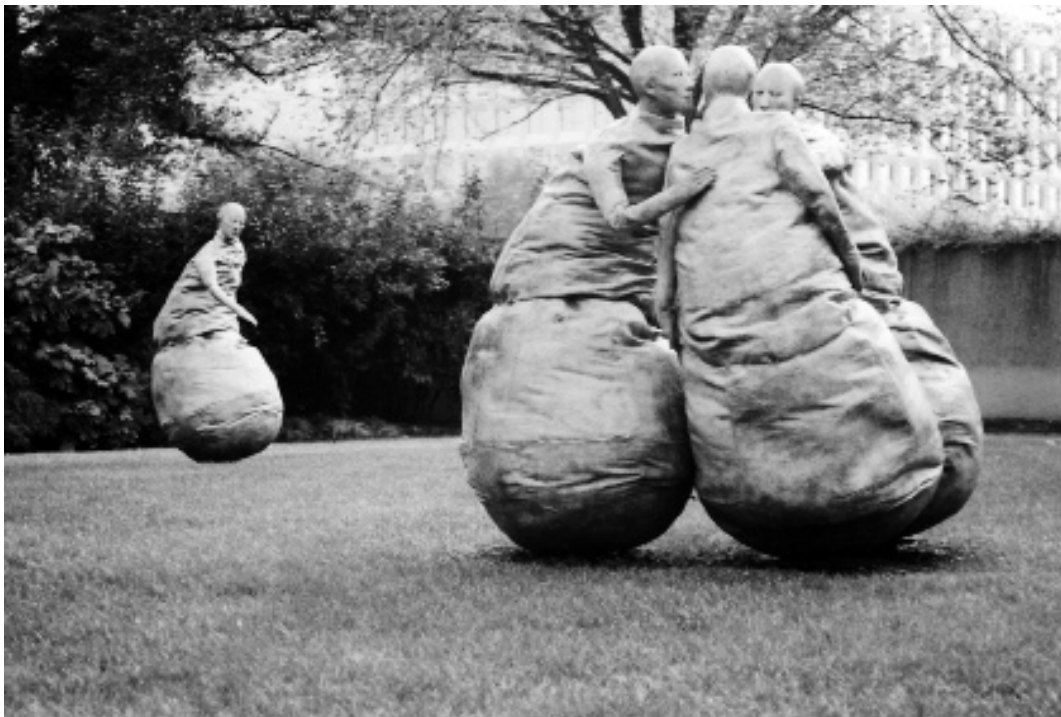
Someone who may have mastered them, though, is the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng. We're told that he once said to his disciple, Shenhui:

I see and yet I do not see.

Shenhui: What do you mean by 'see but not see?'

Huineng: Seeing, I constantly see the errors and faults of my own mind. Not seeing, I do not see other people's rights and wrongs, goodness and evil.

These words reflect an exalted state of development, certainly. But we lesser mortals can work at it. It requires, above all, awareness—awareness of what the mind is doing. We can't count on changing anyone but ourselves. This is the essential work of Zen practice: detaching from objects (both self and other), and instead attending to one's own mind. At its most overt it takes the form of facing the wall. Through



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'Last Conversation Piece' by Juan Muñoz, Hirshhorn Museum sculpture garden, Washington, DC.

doing that—on a daily basis—we come to see through the world of phenomena to the mind's very source.

One of the most widely used delivery systems by which to speak of the faults of others is through gossip. It is also safe and easy, since the person who is the object of the gossip is not present. Thus gossip is usually rolled into the type of harmful speech prohibited by these two precepts. But the word offers some room for interpretation. A *Webster's* dictionary defines gossip broadly, as 'idle talk,' 'rumor,' or 'chatter.' To be sure, such talk is at odds with practice in its purest sense. But researchers in social psychology, anthropology, evolutionary psychology, sociolinguistics and social history are now presenting evidence that gossip can have positive values. Originally it was a positive or at least neutral term, deriving from 'God-sibb'—a person related to one in God—a close friend or companion. Sure enough, most of the recent research highlights the useful functions of gossip: facilitating relationship-building and group bonding, reinforcing shared values, and conflict resolution. 'It

is the human equivalent of what is called "social grooming" among our primate cousins," one article said. These findings certainly ring true in view of the fact that so many of us find gossip almost irresistible. Yet spiritual teachers, knowing what a diversion idle talk, chatter, and rumor are from serious practice, have warned against it throughout time.

Only about five per cent of gossip time is devoted to criticism and negative evaluation of others, the research shows. But what a toll this five per cent takes on our peace of mind! In a column of hers, Ann Landers once reprinted an indictment of negative gossip called 'Remember Me?':

My name is gossip. I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious, and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted, the more I am believed. I flourish at every level of society. My victims are helpless, they cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder

you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody's friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never quite the same. I topple governments and wreck marriages. I ruin careers, cause sleepless nights, heartache and indigestion. I spawn suspicion and generate grief. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. Even my name hisses. I am called gossip: office gossip, shop gossip, party gossip. I make headlines and headaches. Before you repeat a story, ask yourself: Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary? If not, 'shut up.'

Because gossip, we're told, can be found in every society and every community, we might suspect that it has an evolutionary basis to it. Even so, that doesn't mean we should indulge in speaking of the faults of others and disparaging others. Although anthropologists recognize that surplus body fat originally had survival value, in more recent human history it has become a threat to health. Similarly, we seem to be wired to mate with many partners as a way to propagate the species, but in most cultures that evolutionary mandate, when pursued through adultery, causes a world of hurt. In the same way, we create unnecessary suffering through violations of precepts six and seven.

As long as we are at war with our own shortcomings we will be quick to find them in others. Conversely, finding ourselves unnecessarily criticizing others points us to shortcomings of our own. But this window into the mind is only opened by noticing ourselves. Before we can curb our impulse to find fault or repeat negative gossip we have to notice it arising. Self-awareness, then, is everything, and that we develop through sitting. Noticing what we're about to say before we say it—that's the pivotal moment. And too often, it's already out of our mouth before we notice. We let fly our gratuitous remarks and then later—a little later or a lot later—we have regrets for having repeated something we don't know to be true or that is simply nasty.

A good screen to apply as we're about to open our mouth consists of two questions: 'Is it true?' and 'Is it useful?' As to the first, do we *know* it's true? Who says it's true? Just because we heard

it, or because we heard it from more than one source, even, doesn't mean it's true. A device some people use to cover themselves on this is to preface the hearsay with, 'I don't know if this is true, but ...' and then they repeat it. This caveat emptor, they imagine, leaves them in the clear, while propelling the rumor onward, with the next person saying the same thing—'I don't really know if this is true, but ...' One of the many things I admired about Roshi Kapleau was his rejection of hearsay. One of my jobs during the years when I was his secretary was to 'keep my ear to the ground,' as he put it, and let him know of goings-on in the Sangha that might be good for him as the Center's Abbot to know about. Once or twice I related to him something I had heard, only to face an unexpected cross-examination: 'You heard it from whom? Did you hear that person say that? Did you see that yourself?' And when I admitted, 'Well, no...' he barked, 'Then I don't want to hear it! Don't tell me this!' No doubt his experience as a court reporter had taught him how unreliable second-hand information is.

Even when the story or information is true, we would do well to consider whether it is useful. Too often it serves no purpose—except to heighten the illusion that that person is fundamentally different from the speaker. Buying into the notion of separation is the closest thing we have in Zen to 'sin.' Speaking of the faults of others may cause no real harm to the other, but on oneself it takes a toll. In violating this precept we fracture our sense of unity with that supposed 'other.' Often we're left feeling sullied. What's more, we're broadcasting the fact that we see ourselves as separate.

Most of the nickel-dime faults I'm aware of among people practicing Zen strike me as less consequential than the reactions to them that arise out of the stain of self-and-other. Furthermore, if the transgressor later owns up to them, his statement of contrition often seems to eclipse the transgression. When a student of mine voluntarily admits to some indiscreet conduct or habit of which he is ashamed, the particular transgression recedes behind the strength of

character he has now shown in confessing it. I think, ‘Okay, this is impressive—someone who can own up to what he did.’ In addition to character, though, the person shows insight: in disclosing the transgression, he is demonstrating that he is disidentified enough with it to put it behind him. Now, I’ve never had anyone confess to something heinous. I suppose if someone admitted that they molest children, or had committed murder, that would be different.

Zazen is the ultimate antidote to the separation that prompts one to break these precepts. Through zazen, little by little we chip away at this sense of standing apart from others, and by doing so dissolve the stubborn habit of finding fault as well as praising oneself and disparaging others. But until we reach that point of purity where the thought doesn’t even arise in our mind, we can deploy these words of Confucius: ‘When you see a good man, think of emulating him. When you see a bad man, examine your own heart.’



Now let’s focus more on precept number seven: ‘I resolve not to praise myself and disparage others, but to overcome my own shortcomings.’ This is something of an extension of number six. Although both emphasize speech, a stricter application of this precept widens the prohibition to include thoughts. Though we might manage to keep our mouths shut and not criticize people aloud, if we’re doing it in our mind it’s hardly a triumph. The core problem here is in judging—others (negatively) and oneself (positively).

There are so many subtle ways we can find to praise ourselves, either in words or in thoughts. And the same goes for disparaging others. But because in the deepest sense there is no ‘other’ apart from oneself, when we disparage a so-called other person we are disparaging *ourselves*. In praising ourselves we are claiming a special status that others don’t share. Hence, ‘I resolve not to praise myself *and* disparage others,’ not *or*. They go together, don’t they? When we praise ourselves, we are implying there is something wrong with the other, and when we disparage

others, we are implying that we’re superior. It’s like a rocker bar; when one side is pressed down the other goes up.

The precepts in their essence are not mere abstractions. They present in words that which must be understood beyond the words. The key determinant is not the person’s action itself but the condition of his or her mind at that moment, not just the words but the spirit behind the words. The legendary eighth-century Ch’an master Chao Chou (Japanese, *Joshu*) famously declared, ‘Most people are used by the twenty-four hours. I *use* the twenty-four hours,’ which on the face of it sounds like a violation of precept seven. But because he had seen profoundly into the illusory nature of self-and-other, in that statement he was not bragging, but rather honoring the enlightened nature of the Self we all have in common.

Nor does one have to have experienced enlightenment to be upholding a precept while ‘breaking’ it in words. Zen training rests on a structure in which some people are charged with the responsibility of correcting others in order to help them, whether in the zendo or on the job. For them to refrain from ‘speaking of the faults of others’ in the literal sense would be neglectful—and even a violation of the spirit of precept six. The same would be true for work supervisors anywhere. So long as the criticism is constructive, and given directly to the individual in the interests of the greater good, it does not violate the spirit of the precept.

In relationships outside the workplace, too, speaking directly to someone about what you perceive as a fault of his can actually serve to bring you closer together. If your approach is skillful and grows out of faith in the underlying heart-mind that unites you, you are affirming that True Nature rather than betraying it. This is entirely different from carping about someone to a third party, or indulging in underhanded or devious disparagement.

Going outside the letter of a precept, however, takes us into perilous waters. It is all too easy to deceive ourselves, justifying fault-finding as serving the interests of the greater good when in





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fact it arises out of a judgmental mind. For me, one of the trickiest challenges posed by these two precepts arises when I am told by someone that she is considering going to a teacher whom I know to be disreputable. If, for example, the teacher is notorious for seducing his students (or for allowing himself to be seduced by them), what do you say, if anything, to warn the student? If the notoriety is supported by credible reports given to me personally by more than one such victim, I may feel obligated to mention what I know about the teacher, especially if the woman is young and innocent and has directly asked me about him. But even then, my speaking of the teacher's faults leaves a bad taste in my mouth—in addition to possibly leaving the listener disillusioned. Yet if I don't speak up, and the prospective student later suffers at the teacher's hands, I would feel complicit in my 'noble silence.' Fortunately, I have faced this ethical dilemma only a few times.

Judging from my students' input as well as my own experience, violations of these two precepts have a way of coming back to haunt us in the

silence of zazen. During sesshin, especially, we often hear the echoes of our own careless gossip and disparaging remarks from the past, their volume amplified in the relative quiet of the mind. Such memories are painful and sobering—and the best preventive medicine for repeating such careless speech in the future.

An interesting way to look at these two precepts is to see how in violating them we betray the other eight as well. With respect to the first precept, not to kill, in speaking of the faults of others or praising ourselves and disparaging others we are implicitly denying the dynamic nature of the person. Every one of us is a work in process, living, breathing, and—especially through regular zazen—changing. None of us is a static ego entity, yet in disparaging others (or praising ourselves) we are, in effect, repudiating that mutable quality that is our essence, which is itself a kind of killing. At the same time we are, in our minds, depriving those others of their Buddha Nature—their nature to become Buddha, to realize their intrinsic perfection. Thus we are also violating the second precept (not to

take what is not given), as well as the tenth (not to malign Buddha or the other two Treasures) and the fourth (not to lie but to speak the truth). In breaking the sixth and seventh precepts we're also, in a sense, taking out number three (not to misuse sexuality), since such speech is a violation of the person and a denial of our underlying intimacy with him or her; number eight (not to withhold spiritual aid); and number nine (not to indulge in anger), since we are succumbing to hostility. Finally, if we interpret the fifth precept (not to abuse alcohol or drugs) figuratively, as prohibiting anything that excites or otherwise compromises the inherent clarity of the mind, then it includes fault-finding, negative gossip, and disparagement as temptations that are perversely stimulating to most people.

One last story before we end, about this finding others to blame. It's in the form of a rhyming verse by Valerie Cox titled 'The Cookie Thief':

A woman was waiting at an airport one night, with several long hours before her flight.

She hunted for a book in the airport shops, bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book, but happened to see that the man sitting beside her, as bold as could be,

Grabbed a cookie or two from the bag in between, which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene.

So she munched the cookies and watched the clock, as the brazen cookie thief diminished her stock.

She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by, thinking, 'If I wasn't so nice I would blacken his eye.'

With each cookie she took, he took one too. When only one was left, she wondered what he'd do.

With a smile on his face and a nervous laugh, he took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half as he ate the other. She snatched it from him and thought, 'Oh, brother!

This guy has some nerve and he's also rude. Why, he didn't even show any gratitude!'

She had never known when she had been so galled, and sighed with relief when her flight was called.

She gathered her belongings and headed to the gate, refusing to look back at the thieving ingrate.

She boarded the plane and sank in her seat, and she sought her book which was almost complete.

As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise, there was her bag of cookies in front of her eyes!

'If mine are here,' she moaned in despair, 'the others were his, and he tried to share!'

Too late to apologize, she realized with grief, that she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief.

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