

The Sweet Dew of Perfection Saturates All

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Today I'd like to take a look at the three cardinal precepts that deal with speech. These are not to lie, not to discuss the faults of others, and not to praise oneself.

These precepts have their origins in the Buddha's very first turning of the wheel, the Four Noble Truths. In the Fourth Noble Truth, the way out of suffering, the Buddha expounds the Eightfold Path, and one of its strands is Right Speech. If we wish to free ourselves from suffering we must bring our speech into harmony with that aspiration. We must work towards speaking in ways that do not cause harm to others or ourselves. In these early teachings Right Speech is presented as having five different aspects: abstention from lying, from slander, from abusive speech, from harsh speech, and from idle chatter or gossip. So there are different ways of parsing Right Speech, but the broad points covered are the same; any form of dissembling, aggressive or divisive use of words, and superficial or meaningless speech, are all seen as unwholesome.

This word *unwholesome* is to the point. Words by their very nature enable us to distinguish one thing from another and from the whole—they divide the One into many. As well, they can be separated from the things they refer to—we can talk about a tiger without it actually being in front of us—much safer! These two properties are what make words so useful, and at the same time what make them so dangerous—when we speak there is always the potential to forget the whole picture or the actual picture. We can even speak about what does not exist—to say 'the horns of a rabbit' breaks no laws of language.

We must also keep in mind the intimate connections that exist between how we speak, how

we think, and what we experience. Because these three are so closely related we get them all mixed up. The thing itself often gets obscured by the mental and verbal formations that arise around it. Language is a major factor in our ability to disconnect, to live inside a virtual world of ideas and stories which are no longer in tune with reality. Any evolutionary step the psyche takes, as Jung pointed out, creates new perils. A peril inherent in our highly evolved use of language (as compared with other animals) is that we are equipped with subtle powers of deception. We often mistake our thoughts and words for the truth—we don't see how tenuous their relationship to reality has become.

Robert Aitken-roshi in *The Mind of Clover* talks about the etymological background to the Fourth Precept, not to lie:

The Chinese ideographs *wang-yü* (Japanese *mōgo*) are found in combination in the title of the Fourth Precept, and not commonly elsewhere. The etymological meaning is 'forgetful or neglectful words.' Deriving from this root meaning, the Buddhist and secular dictionaries offer 'a lie, a deliberate lie, wild statements, to tell a lie.' Nakagawa Sōen Roshi used to paraphrase Dōgen Zenji, saying, 'Don't use rootless words.'

That's a very good way of understanding all the precepts on Right Speech: 'Don't use rootless words.' Don't let your words be severed from reality, don't let them be severed from that which goes beyond words. Aitken-roshi continues:

Thus we are cautioned to be loyal to the essence and not so much to be true to others. The by-product of such loyalty is that we *are* true to others, but the inspiration is Buddha-nature.

When this is clear, then the various social and psychological virtues of truth-telling

are illumined. Self-deception, deception of others, cheating, gossip, and carelessness with language are all disloyal to peace in our heart of hearts. Words expressive of that peace are true. Silence expressive of that peace is true.

Later he points out that when we don't hear the silence in somebody's words, we can be pretty sure that they're not telling the truth. When you hear noise, you know something's off.

There are a number of different angles from which we take up each of the precepts. The first is known as the Hinayana perspective. 'Hinayana' here means lesser vehicle. This term does not refer to other schools of Buddhism but rather to a particular way, you could say a rather narrow way, of viewing the precepts, though it is still important to be clear about it. Maybe it's better to understand Hinayana as the literal view—the black-and-white view. This precept then is simply about not speaking falsely in any way: not exaggerating, not embellishing, not telling half the story. When we do this, we diminish ourselves, we obscure our lives, and we also complicate them. Somebody once said that when you start to lie, you really have to have a good memory, otherwise you get into trouble. Repeated lying also diminishes our ability to communicate because we get more and more out of touch with ourselves, as well as more alienated from others. We will tend to be more mistrustful because we assume that others are also devious. So we generate mistrust in our hearts, and of course we generate it in other people's hearts as well.

But there are occasions when lying might be necessary or compassionate. Here we move from the Hinayana, or literal, understanding to the Mahayana, or 'great vehicle' perspective. From the Mahayana standpoint we take into account the greatest good for the greatest number—compassion comes into play in a way that means that things are not always so black-and-white. Here's a story that illustrates this principle:

A soldier was rushed back home from the front because his father was dying. An exception was made for him because he was all the family his father had. When he walked into



Tom Kowal

the intensive care ward he suddenly saw that this semi-conscious old man with tubes coming out of him wasn't his father. Someone had made a colossal mistake and rushed back the wrong man.

'How much longer does he have to live?' he asked the doctor.

'Not more than a few hours. You've only just made it.'

The soldier thought of this dying man's son, fighting God-knew-where thousands of miles away. He thought of the old man holding on to life in the hope of being with his son one last time before he died. Then he made up his mind. He leaned forward, held the old man's hand softly, and said, 'Dad. I'm here. I'm back.'

The dying man clutched at the hand offered to him. His unseeing eyes opened to scan the surroundings. A contented smile spread over his face and remained there until he died about an hour later.

So was this soldier lying? On the surface of it he was. But he was doing so in the service of a deeper truth. He was the catalyst for this man's letting go, and he was embodying the truth that really we're all related, deeply related. In those last minutes, for this dying man, the soldier was his son.

The third way of looking at these precepts is from the perspective of Buddha Nature, the view that goes beyond lying and not-lying. And this story illustrates that perspective as well, because when he took the old man's hand, we can be fairly sure that the soldier didn't have any thought in his mind about lying or not lying; he was just connecting with another human being. If we can act out of a place where there is truly no thought, then there's no one lying. We have to be very careful here and not use this teaching to justify any kind of self-serving deception (in which case of course there would be a thought of self in the mind, however unconscious).

When we work on the precepts in dokusan, there are two more perspectives we explore, known as Bodhidharma's One Mind Precepts, and Dogen's Master Rujing's Teaching on the Precepts. Bodhidharma's verse is as follows:

Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous
In the Dharma that is beyond all expression.
Not speaking even a single dead word
Is called the precept of refraining from not
speaking the truth.

'In the Dharma that is beyond all expression...'
We can't ever fully express this inconceivably wondrous Dharma. Any attempt to describe it will limit it. One of the enduring frustrations of being a teacher is having to talk about the inconceivable. So in effect the teacher is always lying. Always the words fall short. That's the nature of words and the nature of the job.

One of my favorite stories about this is told by Master Xuedou. Once there was a teacher who didn't give a single teisho for a whole sesshin. One of the monks complained that he had wasted his time, saying 'I don't expect the teacher to explain Buddhism; it would be enough to hear the two words "Absolute Truth."' The teacher

heard of this and said, 'Don't be so quick to complain. There's not even a single word to say about "Absolute Truth."' Then he gnashed his teeth and said, 'It was pointless to say that!' Another adept overheard him and said, 'A fine pot of soup befouled by two rat droppings!' Master Xuedou then adds his own comment, 'Whose soup doesn't have one or two droppings in it?'

An alternative translation for the third line of Bodhidharma's verse is, 'Not preaching a single word is called the precept of refraining from not speaking the truth.' This is something the Buddha actually said about his own teaching career. He said that in all his forty-nine years of teaching, he had not uttered a single word. He had not said a single word because there was no thought of self or other in his mind when he spoke. It was just an outpouring. There were of course also times when he taught by remaining silent.

Master Rujing's teaching is as follows:

From the beginning the Dharma-wheel has
turned, with nothing in excess and nothing
lacking. The sweet dew [of perfection]
saturates all. Everything is true, everything is
real.

Here Rujing presents the other side. Bodhidharma was reminding us that this Dharma is beyond all expression. But at the same time the Dharma is expressing itself all the time. Everything is proclaiming the Dharma. The hum of the traffic. The squawking of the birds. The wind rattling the zendo windows. We can open our ears to these teishos that are happening all the time. To really hear them is to drink sweet dew. Even our lying and dissembling are the truth. When we lie we reveal our duplicity, our divided mind. We can learn to hear that too.

While the case against lying is fairly straightforward, we may feel a little more doubtful about Precepts Six and Seven, gossiping and boasting—how much harm do they really do? In Buddhism, ethical choices are not just based on whether a thought, word or action harms other beings, though that's certainly very important, but also on whether or not they disturb

the mind's essential peace, which in turn affects whether they help or hinder us in seeing things as they are. The primary false notions we have are thinking that we live in a world that is permanent, relying on conditioned phenomena for our happiness, and imagining that we have a separate self. Breaking these two precepts reinforces in particular our sense of a separate self, and prevents our seeing that from the very beginning the Dharma wheel has turned perfectly, with nothing that shouldn't be there and nothing missing.

Another criterion for judging whether an action is wholesome or not is to look at our motives. The Buddha once said, 'O bikkhus, I call the motive to be the deed.' What is the mind state out of which an impulse comes? The analogy given is the contrast between the way a surgeon uses a knife and the way a murderer does. Both individuals cut, but with very different results due to different motives. There are two aspects to this difference. The surgeon's desire is to help, to heal the person, but that desire is also backed up by years of training in how to do that effectively—in other words, a great deal of skill. Contrast that with the murderer, where there's both the desire to harm, and a lot of delusive thinking. The killer may well think that killing is going to be of benefit him in some way but it is in fact unskillful in the extreme.

We can apply this test to the precept against speaking of others' faults. What is the intention? There are many times in our work, in family situations, in Zen training, in the world of legal affairs, when we do have to talk about somebody's faults. But if that speech is coming out of an impulse to help or protect then we're not breaking the precept. We apply the Mahayana yardstick of the greatest good for the greatest number. But if our talk comes out of self-aggrandizement, spite, or other types of ill-will, then the precept is being broken and the results will be harmful. As Head of Zendo in Rochester I saw over and over again the corrosive effect of people talking to third parties about someone's 'faults'—in other words, things they didn't like in the other person. So often the informa-

tion would get back to the person talked about, and even if it were true the manner of hearing the criticism would block communication with the person who had the complaint. Paradoxically, a fairly common motive for minor forms of speaking of others' faults can be as a substitute for real intimacy. If you share your aversions with someone it can create a false sense of togetherness, a kind of fake community. A lot of gossip comes out of that place, but it actually undermines community.

It is important to understand that the law of karma, the law of cause and effect on the moral plane, is essentially a psychological law. Causes shape their effects, so if you have thoughts that are greedy or hateful or delusive, they're going to generate words and actions that bear the stamp of those states of mind. And those actions and words will tend to reinforce the three poisons in you and in others, and generate more of them. And, as long as our thoughts are based on a sense of self and other, then they are also going to generate insecurity, fear, anxiety, tension, and so forth. Repeated over time the thoughts become habits of mind. The deep unconscious thought/feeling complexes that underlie the habits are reinforced. I came across a statement in an article about neuroscience that puts this very clearly: 'Neurons that fire together wire together.' This is the teaching of Buddhism, that we lay down pathways in the brain, and these pathways are what shape our character. This teaching is set out in the very first chapters of the Dhammapada:

Our life is shaped by our mind. We become what we think. Suffering follows an evil thought as the wheels of a cart follow the oxen that draw it. Our life is shaped by our mind. Joy follows a pure thought like a shadow that never leaves.

So we can generate vicious cycles through our greed, anger, and delusion. But equally we can generate virtuous cycles. Since all of this is conditioned, it can be turned around, and through our generosity, and love and wisdom, we can generate positive actions and words, which then

generate peace and joy, and the benefits that come from them. If we understand all of this then we'll come to see why we have to be so careful about our speech even when on the surface it may not seem to cause any direct harm.

Not discussing the faults of others and not praising oneself and disparaging others are really two sides of the same coin. The first puts the emphasis on other, on our judgmentalism, while the second puts the emphasis on self, on our tendency to favor ourselves and to look more kindly on ourselves, but the key thing here is the same delusion of self and other.

From a psychological point of view, you could say that what these two precepts are pointing to is the problem of the shadow. As we form a self-image, which we all do, there are parts of ourselves that we reject and try to push into the background. That's part of the mechanism of creating an 'I'; we identify with the bits about ourselves that we like, and we try to distance ourselves from the bits we don't like. A shadow is the perfect image for this process. Just as our solid body casts a shadow on the ground, so our solid ego-image, which requires that we view ourselves narrowly from a certain angle, casts this dark doppelgänger made up precisely of what we don't see, of what we don't care to shed a light on. But just like the shadow, we can't get rid of it by fleeing it—it has this annoying habit of following us wherever we go, however hard we try to run away. However much we would like it to not be part of ourselves, it is, and it bears the exact shape of our ignorance.

One of the primary ways we keep the shadow at bay is by projecting it onto others. That way we can maintain a conversation with it while imagining that it isn't a part of who we are. Jungian psychologist Robert A. Johnson said, 'To honor and accept one's shadow is a profound spiritual discipline.' Ironically the breaking of these two precepts around gossip and boasting is pretty common among people who have taken up a spiritual discipline. It's understandable. We take up a spiritual practice because we want to be better than we think we are. We want to be good people, good Zen students, and that can

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Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering.

Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope.

I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain, and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure.

I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break.

I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

—THICH NHAT HANH

make us feel bad. We feel unhappy with certain parts of our personality, and so we end up focusing on the faults of others as a way of avoiding that acute discomfort with ourselves.

Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh points out that the other side of Right Speech is Deep Listening, Compassionate Listening—learning to really listen to what other people are saying, even if they might be saying it angrily. The archetype for this is Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, whose Sanskrit name, *Avalokiteshvara*, means, ‘Hearer of the Cries of the World.’ To truly be heard is itself healing. Just that; to really be heard. Certainly I’ve seen this many times. Someone may start off relating something, full of agitation and tension and pain, and if they can really be heard, at a certain point, there will be a sudden shift, and all that tension will drop away, and they’ll see a way forward that they hadn’t seen before. Thich Nhat Hanh comments that when somebody is not listened to, when they have no avenue for being heard, then they’re like a bomb ready to go off. He was saying this in the mid-eighties, but how relevant this point is to us today. It can help us to understand why there are so many suicide bombers in our world—literally, bombs ready to go off. It points to a failure in our world to listen to the pain of others, to hear that pain. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, ‘If only it were so simple: If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, if it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and

destroy them. But the line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?’ Actually this notion that we have to destroy a piece of our own heart is the problem. We don’t. All we have to do is recognize in others that other side, the so-called ‘good,’ and to own in ourselves the ‘evil.’ To keep it together, to hold both sides, that’s our job; to hold both sides. When we do that we won’t feel the need to go on and on about other people’s faults, or to trumpet our own good deeds at every opportunity.

Master Dōgen put it very succinctly in the *Tenzo Kyōkun* (*Instructions for the Cook*), ‘A fool sees himself as another, but a wise man sees others as himself.’ When we allow the critical mind free rein we regard even ourselves as an ‘other’ chronically at fault, eternally lacking. This habit is deeply painful and clouds all our relationships. But we can overcome that split and practice radical acceptance of ourselves and others just as we are. When we do that we are drenched in sweet dew.

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