



Tricycle Teachings

RIGHT SPEECH

A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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RIGHT SPEECH

The third step of the Eightfold Path

THE BUDDHA

Right Speech, or *sammavacha*, is the third step of the Eightfold Path, which is the fourth and last Noble Truth preached by Shakyamuni Buddha:

“And what, friends, is right speech? Abstaining from false speech, abstaining from malicious speech, abstaining from harsh speech, and abstaining from idle chatter—this is called right speech.

“And what, bhikkhus, is wrong speech? False speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and gossip: this is wrong speech.

“And what, bhikkhus, is right speech? Right speech, I say, is twofold: there is right speech that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment; and there is right speech that is noble, taintless, and supramundane, a factor of the path.

“And what, bhikkhus, is right speech that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment? Abstinence from false

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speech, abstinence from malicious speech, abstinence from harsh speech, abstinence from gossip: this is right speech that is affected by taints...on the side of attachment.

“And what, bhikkhus, is right speech that is noble, taintless, supra-mundane, a factor of the path? The desisting from the four kinds of verbal misconduct, the abstaining, refraining, abstinence from them in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is taintless, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path: this is right speech that is noble...a factor of the path.”

—Shakyamuni Buddha

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SAY IT RIGHT

How the methods of “Nonviolent Communication” can support our practice of Right Speech.

KATY BUTLER

According to former psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, needs are never in opposition—only our strategies for meeting them are. A number of dharma teachers are finding that Rosenberg’s methods can serve as a support for the Buddhist practice of Right Speech.

It is a midsummer morning and I am meditating with my parents in their living room. At my back my father sits in an armchair, his right shoulder slumped from the stroke that threw him to his knees six months ago. My mother is upright in front of me on her seiza bench, her white hair falling over her shoulders.

I breathe in, making my whole body calm and at peace. The dial of the kitchen timer at my knee turns almost imperceptibly toward zero.

In front of us, sliding doors open onto a deck. Beyond the deck lie the white birches my parents planted thirty years ago and the sloping green Connecticut lawn. My parents are struggling to decide whether to stay here or move into assisted living, and most of my visit home has been spent on the phone with doctors, physical therapists, and lawyers

expert in Medicaid and elder law.

Breathing in a long breath, I am aware that I am breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, I am aware that I am breathing out a long breath. Blessed silence. A fly rock-climbs up the screen door, halts, shifts a front leg, then a back one. My mother suddenly strips off a black flip-flop and lunges forward. Slap! Her flip-flop hits the screen door like a fly swatter. Bzzz bzzz. Slap.

What's wrong with her? This is meditation!

Bzzz. Slap slap. Bzzz.

I'm annoyed, but try out "correct" phrases in my head: *Val, I was hoping for some quiet time . . . Val, would you be willing to . . . ?*

Bzzz. Slap slap.

Val.

A giggle rises as I put a hand on her shoulder and whisper something that isn't exactly Right Speech. She smiles at me and sits down.

I am fifty-three. With both Buddhists and non-Buddhists—boy-friends, brothers, bosses, and carpenters, as well as my parents—I have been trying consciously to practice Right Speech for the past twenty years. Nevertheless, not long ago this family meditation session would have ended in a spat.

My Buddhist teachers have long impressed upon me the "what" and "why" of Right Speech.

"It's all a matter of art and timing," Thich Nhat Hanh once told me. His version of this precept includes an imperative: "Always speak in a way that inspires self-confidence, joy, and hope." I sincerely wanted to be both truthful and kind, but until recently I didn't have a clue how to go about it. I muddled along, tolerating bickering, misunderstanding, and withdrawal, surprised by how often I felt flashes of real anger—at shop clerks and telemarketers, as well as people I knew intimately and loved.

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There is an old friend who still avoids me. There is an electrician who hasn't spoken to me since I left him an angry voice mail about unfinished work. And there are two teenage stepsons I struggle to live with and get to know.

Shortly before Memorial Day two years ago, I grew thoroughly tired of regretting what I'd said, or hadn't said, in situations of discomfort or conflict. Too many times I had noticed something rising—a knot in my heart, a throbbing in my throat, a turning in my belly—accompanied by unspoken words that were a recipe for further suffering. *How rude.*

Doesn't he like me? went the critical inner dialogue whenever my stepson Ryan walked out of the house without saying goodbye. *He is always invading my space* went my mind whenever my partner, Brian, tried to kiss me while I was doing yoga.

The litany continued as I moved through my hours and days: *That was so sexist. He's so mean. That was so dumb of me. She takes and never gives. Why does Ned [my other stepson] have to watch Jeopardy! when I want to cook dinner in peace?* And then, inevitably, I would blurt out something that couldn't be taken back.

On the other hand, being a Buddhist Goody Two Shoes—taking a deep breath, smiling, and trying to see the other person's point of view—often left me feeling that I'd been taken advantage of. After more than two decades of meditation practice, I was tired of my inner struggle between trying to meet a Buddhist ideal and the forceful rising of my still-chaotic inner life.

That was how things stood on the sunny day two years ago when Kathryn, a non-Buddhist friend, came to my Memorial Day barbecue wearing a beautiful straw hat wreathed in flowers. Kathryn is active in the Natural Death movement, and all afternoon, I watched in awe as she fielded baiting questions from a handsome, slightly drunk guest. I can't

remember the words she used, but instead of taking offense, Kathryn responded to him respectfully, without sacrificing her truth or compromising her dignity. She reminded me of an Aikido master—in motion yet centered, calmly melding with her attacker and deflecting his thrusts without harming him.

When I later remarked on how skillfully she had handled him, Kathryn credited something called “Nonviolent Communication” and lent me a book by its creator, a former psychologist named Marshall Rosenberg. She invited me to join a small group—part of a worldwide network accessible through the Center for Nonviolent Communication website, www.cnvc.org—that practices this approach by role-playing situations from their own lives. Later I found out that a number of American Buddhists had already discovered an affinity between Nonviolent Communication and Buddhist practice.

Once a month, we sat in a circle of chairs in someone’s living room, observing and participating in the role play: a boundary dispute with a neighbor; a conflict between two singers in an interracial church choir; the disappointment of a man whose wealthier girlfriend did not take him on her trip to Europe. Slowly I learned to weather my intense emotions and translate my first, fear-driven thoughts into honest but non-confrontational language, scrupulously devoid of blame.

At the simplest level, Nonviolent Communication follows a strict protocol: observing and describing an external situation without judgment, evaluation, or blame; articulating the feelings the situation triggers and connecting them to a basic, unmet need; then making a “clear, specific, do-able request” of the other party or parties in the situation. Crucial to the whole process is learning to listen empathically and to strategize ways to meet others’ needs as well as our own.

Marshall Rosenberg was a clinical psychologist in St. Louis before

he abandoned his practice in the late 1970s to, as he puts it, “give psychology away” by teaching communication skills on a wider scale. Like his mentor, the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, Rosenberg emphasizes an empathic approach, maintaining that one of our deepest human needs is to contribute to others’ well-being, so long as our own needs are not compromised in the process.

Rosenberg’s fascination with peacemaking and effective communication has its roots in his childhood observation of miscommunication and pain. His parents’ marriage was unhappy, and the family moved frequently as his father searched for work during the Depression. In Detroit, their neighborhood was the center of violent race riots in the 1940s; at school, Rosenberg was called names and beaten up because he was a Jew. These experiences, he recalls, inspired him to explore “what happens to disconnect people from their inherently compassionate nature, and what allows some people to stay connected to it even in trying circumstances.”

From his work with civil rights activists in the 1960s, Rosenberg came up with the precise language of Nonviolent Communication, designed to minimize defensive reactions and maximize cooperation. Now based in Switzerland, he circles the globe, training educators, lawyers, clergy, government and law-enforcement officials, and families in crisis; he has taught his method everywhere from inner-city schools to a police station in Israel to prisons in the United States and Sweden. In Marin County, California, where I live, aspects of Nonviolent Communication have been incorporated into court-supervised anger management programs for men accused of domestic violence.

Last spring I took several workshops from Rosenberg, including one held in the Buddha Hall at the San Francisco Zen Center’s Green Gulch Farm. Initially, the prescribed language of Nonviolent Communication

seemed awkward and mechanistic. I remember listening to one woman struggle to string nonjudgmental words together as she practiced asking a family member not to leave the bathroom tap dripping. “Turn off the tap, would you?” came out something like “Yesterday I asked you to turn the water in the bathroom sink all the way off, and when I went in later, I noticed that the tap was still dripping. I also noticed it dripping the day before and the day before that, after I had asked you to turn it off. I don’t know why, it just bugs me. So I’d like to ask if you’d be willing in the future to—”

“Sure,” interrupted the man playing the role of her teenage son. Rolling his eyes, he added,

“Whatever.”

At that point, Rosenberg stepped in. “We all know ‘*Whatever*,’” he said, referring to the barely hidden contempt a teenager can pack into that word. “But what need is he expressing? For autonomy, maybe. And what does turning off the tap mean to her? Could be ‘caring.’ We all have a need for caring. Once they get in touch with their real needs,” Rosenberg continued, “they can figure out a strategy for meeting them. Needs are never in conflict—only our strategies for meeting them are.”

As a Buddhist attuned to the Four Noble Truths, I found this construction of reality based on needs problematic at first. For years I had practiced what the Christians call the *via negativa*—letting go of needs and desires as a path to growth. Needs, in that schema—and in Buddhism as well—are “attachments” that inevitably lead to suffering and unease. I tried to practice radical acceptance and to let go of personal preference, to the point of sometimes not articulating how I felt, even to myself. But after two decades of that approach I was angrier—though less assertive—than I am now.

Nonviolent Communication has led me to the *via positiva*—an un-

derstanding that expressing my needs, without making them into demands, can be as much a path to growth as letting them go. Needs aren't the problem; it is rigidly clinging to a particular strategy to meet them that produces suffering.

I realized that I could meet my need for quiet, for example, by taking a walk alone in the woods or meditating in my study before starting to cook dinner. Holding on to a strategy—insisting, for example, that my stepson turn off the TV—practically guarantees conflict or capitulation, leaving both of us unhappy. But Ned would never have to miss another installment of *Jeopardy!*—and I could cook in peace— if we found a mutually beneficial strategy, such as extending the cable service to the TV set in his bedroom.

This distinction between needs and strategies is one the Buddha himself tacitly acknowledged when he stopped starving himself— abandoning asceticism as a strategy for reaching enlightenment—and gave in to his fundamental human need for sustenance, drinking the yogurt offered by a young village girl. (I like to think it was through this simple human interchange that the Middle Way—the strategy that led to the Buddha's enlightenment—was born.)

On the surface, Nonviolent Communication seems simplistic, little more than common sense. But just as watching one's breath becomes something deeper over time, the practice of compassionate communication can lead to subtle but profound inner shifts. I label myself and others less frequently now, and I have developed a more fluid sense of self and others, one more aligned with the Buddhist view that there is no fixed or independent self.

The daily practice of “translating” my first judgmental thoughts into pure observation has brought more clarity to my inner life. On a good day, my emotions are no longer problems to be suppressed or meditated

away, but a source of useful information—the vapor trails of my unmet needs.

Last Christmas morning, when my stepsons left the house without saying goodbye while I was making breakfast pancakes, I felt crushed and insulted. In the vocabulary of Nonviolent Communication, however, “insulted” is not a feeling; it’s a tangle of emotions—surprise, sadness, and anger in this case—thoughts, expectations, and interpretations: *What did I do wrong? Don’t they like me? They shouldn’t treat me like that. Their father should discipline them more. Teenagers are so rude.*

Silently, I rephrased my inner dialogue to describe the situation factually, articulate my feelings about it, and identify the unmet needs: *When the boys walked out the door without saying anything, I was surprised and disappointed because I had assumed we would all have breakfast together on Christmas morning. My needs for contact, celebration, and respect weren’t being met.* Through Nonviolent Communication I was, in effect, practicing a meditation of disentanglement, teasing out the individual strands of thought and feeling that had arisen in a jumble, like snarled wool.

Later, when the four of us talked around the dinner table about our blended-family holiday angst, I learned that the boys had had longstanding plans to see their mother and exchange Christmas gifts. I understood their feelings of divided loyalty and their need to connect with her, and made a mental note to discuss their holiday plans in advance next year. I asked Ryan to routinely say hi and goodbye to me when he comes and goes. He does that now, and it’s made a huge difference in my daily comfort.

When I first started practicing Nonviolent Communication, I saw it primarily as a way of putting the right words in the right order to get what I wanted. Last spring, when Ryan announced that he’d like to leave

his mother's house and move back in with us for the summer, my main goal was to figure out how to keep my study (formerly Ryan's bedroom) without antagonizing him or looking bad. I got lost in self-justifying and self-attacking thoughts about whether or not my needs should trump his: *I'm the adult, after all—but am I being selfish? He's got another bedroom at his mom's, and I need my space—but what am I doing to his relationship with his father?*

Once I managed to couch my need as something anyone might want—a little nest of my own in my home—my inner critic fell silent. Instead of insisting on my way, I found myself truly listening to Ryan and seeing his point of view; his needs began to matter as much as my own. I considered the possibility of renting an office outside the house. It turned out that Ryan wanted to move back mainly because he had a summer job across town and figured that his father would be more likely than his mother to drive him to work. In the end, he decided to stay at his mother's, but we gave him a ride when he needed one.

Nonviolent Communication doesn't solve every outer and inner conflict. But it softens and illuminates them, bringing to light hidden assumptions in my thought and speech. I am remapping my inner landscape now. What I used to call selfishness or stubbornness I reframe as a need for autonomy. What I called codependence I now describe as my need to contribute to the lives of others. What I called a fear of intimacy

I now characterize as a need for private time.

On a spiritual level, I no longer see Nonviolent Communication as a technique for getting what I want but as a practice—a middle way between quietism and activity, acceptance and action, love and assertion, the bodhisattva ideal and human vulnerability. Nonviolent Communication complements Buddhist teachings with a language and approach that allow me to be gentler with myself and others, without sacrificing my inner truth.

And how is Nonviolent Communication working out down here on the ground? Last spring, in negotiations with an insurance company over a car accident, I left on good terms—and with a \$16,500 settlement, \$11,500 more than predicted by the lawyers who refused to take my case. My two-week visit with my parents last summer ended without a single bruising fight, even though we talked every day about death, disability, and money. As for *Jeopardy!*, I'm getting used to it. While I cook, I even find myself shouting out some of the answers.

HOW IT WORKS

Nonviolent Communication—called “a language of compassion” by its creator, Marshall Rosenberg—is a method for resolving conflict by expressing needs without blame or criticism, then listening and responding empathically. The basic steps are these:

- Observe the situation upsetting you and describe it in language free of judgment. Avoid labeling of yourself or others. (“What’s wrong with her?” might be, in NVC parlance, “Five minutes after I rang the bell for meditation, my mother began slapping at the fly.”)
- Understand that external events are only a trigger for, not the cause of, your inner reactions. Take responsibility for your emotions. Instead of saying “You made me so mad,” try “After you said that, I felt irritated and sad.” Identify your precise feeling. NVC characterizes feelings as emotional states plus physical sensation. “Eager,” “angry,” and “satisfied,” for example, fit that definition. “Betrayed,” “ignored,” and “misunderstood” do not; they mix emotion, description, and assump-

tion, and include a judgment about another's intentions.

- Connect your feelings with the needs that were unfulfilled in the situation. ("I felt irritated when I heard the TV because I need silence.") NVC acknowledges not only universal human needs like air, food, and exercise, but also complex needs like creative expression, respect, and love.

- Follow up with a specific do-able request. ("Would you be willing to turn off *Jeopardy!*?") Avoid vague generalities, as the other person will have no way of knowing exactly what new behavior will satisfy you. To avoid sounding reproachful, ask for what you want, not what you don't want.

- Listen carefully to the other person's response and to the feelings and needs their words are expressing, even indirectly. ("But *Jeopardy!* is my favorite show. It's how I unwind after work.")

- Empathize with the other person's feelings and needs. Repeat back what you think is being said, without sounding patronizing or all-knowing. ("I'm guessing that you might be annoyed at my request to turn off *Jeopardy!* because you need a way to unwind.")

- Differentiate between universal human needs and pet strategies for meeting them. The need for love and reassurance is universal, but wanting a particular person to say "I love you" right this minute is a strategy and may meet with opposition.

- Brainstorm strategies that meet everyone's needs. NVC assumes

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that needs are never in conflict but that the strategies for meeting them often are. (I came up with four strategies: I could wear earplugs or meditate in my room while *Jeopardy!* is on; I could watch *Jeopardy!* with Ned; Ned could use headphones; we could extend the cable service to the TV set in Ned's room.)

- Be willing to take no for an answer. The difference between a request and a demand lies not in the sweetness of your speech but in whether or not you subtly punish anyone who says no.

RIGHT SPEECH IN ACTION

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) contains no religious language, but its emphasis on peacemaking, mindfulness, and nonjudgmental awareness complements Buddhist practice. Interest in NVC is growing among Buddhists across America, especially on the West Coast. Here are some of the ways they are applying its principles:

- Prison dharma: Lucy Leu, a former college professor who is a student of Vipassana, teaches mindfulness and Nonviolent Communication at Twin Rivers Prison in Washington state and through The Freedom Project, a Seattle-based program for ex-offenders. "It's easy to say May all beings have peace of mind when I do metta practice abstractly, in a ritualistic way," Leu says. "But it's different when I am in the presence of one embodied human being. Nonviolent Communication allows for an authentic external connection even when there is disagreement."

- Mindfulness retreats: Lyn Fine, an Oakland, California-based Zen teacher in Thich Nhat Hanh's lineage and a member of his Order of In-

terbeing, has incorporated Nonviolent Communication techniques into Buddhist retreats in Israel and New York City. She also finds NVC helpful in her relationship with her mother. “It’s not that she and I necessarily use NVC language,” Fine says. “But it’s part of an invisible perspective that permeates and helps deepen our relationship. And generally, when something pops up and I feel angry or scared, I now ask myself internally: What am I needing here? What is my request?” Fine belongs to an informal network of Buddhists who study Nonviolent Communication in the San Francisco Bay Area (see www.baynvc.org).

- The Zen Peacemaker Order: Nonviolent Communication is now part of the core curriculum of the Zen Peacemaker Order, whose members integrate spiritual practice with service in the world. Sensei Robert Joshin Althouse, a Zen teacher and executive director of the Peacemaker Order, is currently working toward certification as an NVC trainer. Cooperative, compassionate communication skills can help activists avoid “getting righteous and angry and creating as much trouble in the world as they’re trying to heal,” Althouse says.

- San Francisco Zen Center: NVC’s creator, Marshall Rosenberg, was one of only a handful of non-Buddhists invited to teach in the Spring 2002 “Buddhism Unfolds” lecture series at the Zen Center’s Green Gulch Farm in Marin County. NVC role-playing practice sessions are now held informally among students at Green Gulch and Tassajara Mountain Monastery, as well as at the organization’s City Center in San Francisco.

Jane Lazar, a Nonviolent Communication trainer before she became a Zen student three and a half years ago, leads workshops at City Center, Green Gulch, and Tassajara. “For me, NVC and Buddhism are both challenging and life-giving practices, and they work synergistically,” she

says. “Nonviolent Communication has given me a lens through which I can guess at the immediate causes and conditions of another’s pain, no matter how threatening their expression of it may feel.” NVC allows her to express herself authentically without making the other person wrong, she adds. “It’s not always so simple to do in the immediacy of an exchange, but I’m usually so happy with the increased intimacy that occurs in even my most awkward attempts. Buddhist practice, on the other hand, is training me to have the presence and patience to be quiet and listen to the authentic message beneath the judgment or blame I hear in another or myself.”

Lee Lipp, a clinical psychologist who works in SFZC’s outreach, diversity, and prison meditation programs, started practicing Nonviolent Communication earlier this year. She calls NVC “an expression of Avalokiteshvara [Bodhisattva of Compassion], who listens to the sounds of the world,” adding that “it’s an awareness practice—of the present conditions that we’re observing, of our relationship to what we’re observing, and of the feelings and needs that arise that ask for compassionate acceptance.”

- Teacher-student dialogue: Author and Zen teacher Ed Brown, a practitioner of Nonviolent Communication for over a decade, often draws on its methods in working with Zen students. “I may point out the difference between observation and evaluation, and say something like, ‘Would you like to try saying what you’ve noticed without evaluation?’ NVC has a very dharmic quality,” he adds, “in its emphasis on ‘At such and such a time, this is the state of things; this is what I observed.’”

Brown, whose most recent book is *Not Always So*, a collection of lectures by his teacher, the late Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, has found different aspects of the NVC process valuable at different times. Now he’s

concentrating on empathy. “If someone has a problem, I tend to think, ‘Oh, no, that’s my fault; I am to blame; I need to do something to make everything okay again.’ So I’ve been working on being able to say, ‘Oh, you’re disappointed that didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to,’ instead of mistakenly assuming responsibility for others’ feelings.”

- The Buddhist Peace Fellowship: “People new to NVC can end up overfocusing on the formulaic steps and missing the heart behind them,” says Diana Lion, director of the Berkeley, California-based Peace Fellowship’s prison project. A practitioner in both the Vipassana and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, Lion teaches Nonviolent Communication at San Quentin Prison. “When I teach prisoners, I think a lot about how to use the ideas and the meaning without alienating people by saying the equivalent of ‘You’re talking wrong.’ I talk in the language that the prisoners use. I might say, ‘You don’t want to be put in a box; now let’s extend that to how you’re talking about other people.’”

Katy Butler trained at the San Francisco Zen Center in the 1980s and was ordained into Thich Nhat Hanh’s Tiep Hien order in 1991. A former reporter at the San Francisco Chronicle, she lives in Mill Valley, California.

3

SKILLFUL SPEECH

By working with the lay precept on speech,
we can learn to say the right thing at the right time.

ALLAN LOKOS

Years ago, when I began traveling the Buddha's path, I was surprised by the emphasis placed on the practice of skillful speech. The Buddha considered the way we communicate with each other to be so important that he taught the practice of skillful speech alongside such lofty teachings as skillful view, thinking, action, and mindfulness as a pillar of the Ennobling Eightfold Way.

The Buddha saw that we are always engaged in relationships, starting with that most significant relationship: the one with ourselves. On the cushion we notice how we speak to ourselves—sometimes with compassion, sometimes with judgment or impatience. Our words are a powerful medium with which we can bring happiness or cause suffering.

Skillful speech begins by refraining from lying, slander, profanity, and harsh language. We should avoid language that is rude, abusive, disagreeable, or malicious, and we should abstain from talk that is foolish, idle, babble, or gossip. What remains are words that are truthful, kind, gentle, useful, and meaningful. Our speech will comfort, uplift, and inspire, and we will be a joy to those around us.

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The pillar of skillful speech is to speak honestly, which means that we should even avoid telling little white lies. We need to be aware of dishonesty in the forms of exaggerating, minimizing, and self-aggrandizing. These forms of unskillful speech often arise from a fear that what we are is not good enough—and that is never true. Honesty begins at home, so the practice of skillful speech begins with being honest with ourselves.

The Buddha cautioned against gossip because he saw the suffering that this kind of unskillful speech causes. There is an old Hasidic tale of a villager who was feeling remorse for the harm his gossip had caused his neighbor. He went to his rabbi to seek advice. The rabbi suggested that he go to town and buy a chicken and bring it back to him, and that on the way back he pluck it completely. When the man returned with the featherless chicken, the rabbi told him to retrace his steps and gather every one of the scattered feathers. The man replied that it would be impossible; by now the feathers were probably blown throughout the neighboring villages. The rabbi nodded in agreement, and the man understood: we can never really take back our words. As the Zen poet Basho wrote:

The temple bell stops but the sound keeps coming out of the flowers.

Gossip is defined as speaking about someone who is not physically present. It doesn't matter whether what is said is positive or negative. If the person is not there, it is gossip. If we have to speak about someone who is not present, we should speak of them as if they were there. An exercise that I do once or twice a year is to designate a specific period of time—a week or a month—when I do not speak about anyone who is not present. I find that my voice gets quite a rest, and the part of my ego that believes I do not gossip gets quite a jolt. Every time I do the exercise I

find that the effects of this awareness practice are with me for weeks, and even months, afterward. When I start to speak about someone, a little reminder beeps in my mind: “Don’t gossip.”

A word about teasing—don’t! Teasing is always at someone’s expense and often hurts more than the person being teased lets on. Simply stated, teasing causes suffering. The same energy used to create a tease can be used to create an honest compliment.

Skillful speech has a communicative partner called deep listening. No matter how unskillful their speech, people are often trying to communicate something hidden beneath their words. What does “Daddy, I hate you!” really mean from a child in the midst of a temper tantrum? What does “Now that you’re dating Robert, you have no time for me” mean from an old friend? These angry comments express a desire for more attention. When we listen deeply, taking time to breathe, we can avoid a conditioned reaction that could cause suffering and instead respond compassionately to what is beneath the harsh words. We can comfort our child with our love or assure our friend that she is important to us and that we will try to spend more time with her.

At times noble silence is the most skillful speech. For several years I facilitated a weekly sangha. The sangha rules were that no one commented on anything that was said by another member during the discussion period. We didn’t even say, “I agree with Bob,” or “My sister went through the same thing.” All we did was listen. Over time, we realized how often our minds were busy preparing a response when we thought we were actually listening. Knowing that we would not respond dramatically changed the way we listened.

One evening a young woman joined us, and during the discussion period she shared with the group that she had just lost her 37-year-old husband to cancer. Over the ensuing weeks, when she spoke we often

could not understand her words through her heavy sobbing. Sometimes our eyes also filled with tears as we listened but did not comment. To witness a person pouring her heart out and going through such suffering while feeling as if we were offering her nothing felt strange.

Then one day she told us that she had left her various support groups because she was receiving exactly what she needed from our sangha. We were allowing her to experience and express her pain without judging or offering quick fixes. We were present for her, bearing witness to her sorrow, holding her in silent compassion. Being truly present for another is the greatest gift we can offer. Sometimes people need to be sad, and noble silence can be truly ennobling.

When we consider skillful speech today, we must also consider a phenomenon that did not exist in the time of the Buddha: email. With the popularity of the telephone, we became a people that, for the most part, abandoned the practice of letter writing. What a perfect recipe for unskillful speech: a people long unpracticed at thoughtful letterwriting now equipped with the technological capability to churn out one quick email after another. Writer beware!

The most important step in developing skillful speech is to think before speaking (or writing). This is called mindfulness of speech. Few things can improve the nature of our relationships as much as the development of skillful speech. Silence offers us, and those around us, the spaciousness we need to speak more skillfully. When we speak with greater skill, our true self—our compassionate, loving self—emerges with gentle ease. So before you speak, stop, breathe, and consider if what you are about to say will improve upon the silence.

Allan Lokos is an Interfaith minister, meditation teacher, and author. He is the co-founder and director of the Community of Peace and Spirituality and the founder and guiding teacher of the Community Meditation Center in New York City.

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THE BUDDHIST
GUIDE TO GOSSIP

NANCY BAKER

When we were teenagers, my brother had a funny little routine about gossip. He would begin with “I never say anything about anyone that isn’t good,” and then, leaning over as if to whisper in your ear, he would add, “*and, boy, is this good!*” Usually that was followed by something really juicy. We find this play on words amusing, because we recognize in ourselves the seemingly harmless temptation to speak ill of others and to listen to such speaking. What’s interesting about this precept is that, unlike, say, killing or stealing, it’s about speaking, which doesn’t seem so serious. And yet, the Gatha of Atonement, chanted every morning in Zen communities, reminds us that “all evil karma ever committed by me” arises through “body, *mouth*, and consciousness.” Still, we want to say, how can speaking of others’ faults be as harmful as stealing? After all, as children we learn to defend against name-calling with “Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but names can never hurt me.” But how many of us can say really truthfully “Names can never hurt me”? How many of us are completely free of the effects of the various versions of “name-calling” when it’s aimed at us? And don’t forget, in addition to namecalling, speaking of others’ faults can take many forms—for example, gossip, complain-

ing, putting down, and passing on hearsay, among others. Putting ourselves in the shoes of the one whose faults are talked about or the one who is the subject of gossip, and asking how it feels, can help us see how serious this can be. In the end it can damage whole communities.

As with all the precepts, we can take this one very literally: *Never ever* speak of the faults of another. Or, contextually: *sometimes* it's appropriate to speak of the faults of others depending on the circumstances. Or, from the point of view of Oneness or the One Body, it becomes *non*-speaking of the faults of others. From this point of view, which isn't really a point of view at all, the separation needed for such notions as "faults" or "speaking ill" or even "others" doesn't exist. It is here, too, that the precepts are no longer guiding principles of behavior, but are manifested naturally as our very being. It's interesting to look at a few different versions of this precept not so much to consider these different levels or dimensions but simply to bring out some of its various aspects in our ordinary lives. The Bodhidharma version, as translated by Aitken Roshi, is "Self nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the flawless dharma, *not expounding upon error* is called the precept of not speaking of the faults of others." The late John Daido Looi Roshi's translation refers to this as "*refraining from* speaking of others' errors and faults." Zen Master Dogen's version is "In the Buddhadharma there is one path, one dharma, one realization, one practice. *Don't commit fault finding. Don't commit haphazard talk.*" Elsewhere Dogen writes "*Do not let them talk of others' errors and faults.*"

Notice what we have here: Not *finding fault*, which suggests that we actually look for faults. Not *speaking of the faults of others*, which, as mentioned above, includes such forms of speaking as gossip, complaining, and passing on hearsay. Not *letting others* do it, which points to our willingness, even eagerness, to listen to such speaking. And not

expounding upon those faults, which makes me think of the pleasure of shared “analysis” of the behavior of others: in other words, going on and on exercising our great “perceptiveness.”

So what are faults, anyway? That’s really worth thinking about. We should, of course, include related words such as “failings,” “foibles,” “defects,” “weaknesses,” “shortcomings,” and so on. “Foibles” don’t seem as serious a fault as “defects of character,” but talking about them may be just as harmful. But before we get to the talking-about part, notice the moralistic connotation of these words, an assumption that things or people should be other than what they are. Notice the *should* here. When we find fault, not only do we have a preference, but we are ready to reject something, to exclude it from our world and definitely from ourselves. From the perspective of the Absolute, the One Body, Bodhidharma’s “flawless dharma,” this is, of course, impossible or doesn’t even make sense. Not only is the dharma faultless or “flawless,” but nothing can be excluded. There is no “outside.” Within our relative world, however, there are faults, and sometimes, in appropriate ways and appropriate circumstances, they need to be corrected. But often what we think of as faults may not be so at all—especially when whatever it is is not harming others and is just something I reject in myself. “Thank God, I don’t have *her* elbows!” might be an example.

So why do we talk about others’ errors and faults? What’s in it for us? Well, probably a number of things. Sometimes there’s the need for reassurance that I’m right. Or that I’m good. Or that I’m at least not like *that*, whatever “that” may be. It can also be a way of avoiding what I imagine will be a confrontation. It’s an avoidance of telling the truth, of putting truth where it belongs. So in speaking *about* as opposed to speaking *to* someone, we’re failing to honor this precept. And that’s often what we do. We’re afraid. Also motivating us is the need to get some-

one over to my side about an issue. Most striking of all is the unconscious desire for intimacy with the one to whom I am speaking. But this is a delusion, since it is nothing but false intimacy. In fact, it's amazing to think that we actually use speaking about the faults of others in order to feel connected. Notice the contradiction, the delusion, here: We use, and even create, separation from one thing or person to overcome separation from another! We are afraid of genuine contact, so we find something or someone to complain about or gossip about. It occurs to me that the "expounding upon" the errors and faults of others in one of the translations mentioned above is part of this. It means telling stories about, analyzing, enjoying being very "perceptive" with another at someone else's expense, as if this shared enterprise brings us closer together.

One of the things that my teacher taught me—by catching me red-handed—was not to take hearsay for the truth, and certainly never to pass it on. Sometimes we're all too eager to make truth out of hearsay. So why do we pass it on? Why do we accept it from someone else instead of saying "That's just hearsay," or, at least, wondering whether it's true? There are often situations in which our judgment, in the best sense of the word, is important and needed. One of the things to be really careful of is that we don't base it on hearsay. But most important for honoring this precept is to inquire into what motivates us to pass it on.

It's worth thinking back on how much many of us got off on speaking about what we imagined to be the errors and faults of our last president. The speaking was about his faults, as if we knew what they were. It's a long way from national policy to the actual character of somebody. One of the reasons we do this is frustration and maybe even fear around political issues. It's as if our concern is completely misplaced. So we speak ill of someone. That's all we are able to do, so we imagine. It's important in our laughing, joking and sometimes incredibly serious putdown

of this human being, or whoever our latest demonized public figure is, that we ask ourselves why we're doing this. What could be done in its place? What is there that we actually know, and what is there that we actually do not know? It often takes courage to find out the truth.

Speaking of someone else's errors and faults is, of course, sometimes appropriate and necessary. I teach, and it's part of my job. I teach in a small institution where there is a great deal of personal contact with students and enormous opportunity to help them grow. A job for any teacher is to give some kind of critical feedback. It's difficult in the beginning to learn how to do that. It's something, again, worth thinking about. How do we give critical feedback? Our fear of not being able to do it, our ineptitude, is one of the things that can make us talk about the person in question in a fault-finding way. The rejecting, polarizing aspect of my thinking can be so subtle here. I once had the intention to speak to my teacher about something that was causing disorder in the sangha, and someone who prided herself on knowing much about the dharma, or at least about how to behave with teachers, said, "Oh, you can't do that." I followed her advice, and I have regretted it ever since. When I look back on it, I see it as such an interesting failure on my part. There are two things that might not occur to us in regard to this precept. One is that the "speaking" here is not just speaking out loud, not just speaking to another. It's the speaking that goes on in our heads. The judging that goes on in our heads. It's amazing. Some people walk around judging everything all the time, particularly when it comes to other people's faults or what we imagine to be faults. All of us do this some of the time. It involves having preferences and rejecting, wanting to exclude. This is connected to the second thing, our relationship to our own faults. Do we do our best to ignore our own faults altogether? Or are we painfully aware of them and

want to get rid of them, to exclude them from the reality of what is? The ego, by definition in the business of separation, imagines it can change itself through more separation by excluding parts of itself from reality. We then find these faults in others and do our best to disidentify from them through speaking ill of others.

So how can we work with this precept? The main thing to work with is my relation to my own faults. Can I befriend them or compassionately allow them? Choose your own language. The main thing is not to suppress them, act them out, or blame others. Disowning our faults or even just disparaging them only piles separation onto separation, which creates disorder not only in our local sangha but in the whole world. We can see that Plato understood this well when he tells us in his *Republic* that harmony in the state is a function of harmony in the soul. One of the translations of this precept says “Don’t commit haphazard talk.” This means practicing mindful speaking. It makes me think of the saying “Loose lips sink ships” from World War II, another version of creating disorder, or worse. There is mindful listening as well, and Dogen’s “not letting others” speak of faults. This means that part of my honoring this precept is helping others honor it. Useful here is a rule in a seminar I once participated in—not to complain to anyone who can’t do something about what you’re complaining about and not to accept a complaint unless you can do something about it.

In those circumstances in which it is appropriate and important to speak about someone’s errors and faults, or, better yet, *to* that person, how can we do it? The same way we do it for ourselves— it’s no different. No preferences, no judgments, completely welcoming, accepting what is, compassionate allowing. They are then no longer faults in the sense of something that needs rejecting. Dogen suggests that in practicing kind speech we remember how we speak to children. As adults we can learn

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something about speaking to each other from noticing how we naturally speak to children. Another thing we can practice is always asking ourselves about the suffering of the other. What kind of suffering is the other experiencing? When there are really grave faults involved, there's some kind of suffering. Even with small faults, suffering is always there.

One practice is to take the person you reject the most, the one whose supposed faults you have the most temptation to talk about, and concentrate on that person's strengths, perfection, true nature, and similarities to you. Always remember the famous saying of the Roman playwright Terence: "Nothing human is foreign to me." Or "There but for the grace of God go I." If we can really cultivate that feeling, that spirit, it helps to change the world.

We can undergo a complete change of perspective and discover even in a relative way what it's like to include that which we are wanting to exclude, split off, put down. Muriel Rukeyser has a beautiful example in her poem about cockroaches:

ST. ROACH

For that I never knew you, I only learned to dread you,
for that I never touched you, they told me you are filth,
they showed me by every action to despise your kind;
for that I saw my people making war on you,
I could not tell you apart, one from another,
for that in childhood I lived in places clear of you, for that all the people I knew met you by
crushing you, stamping you to death, they poured boiling
water on you, they flushed you down,
for that I could not tell one from another

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only that you were dark, fast on your feet, and slender.

Not like me.

For that I did not know your poems

And that I do not know any of your sayings

And that I cannot speak or read your language

And that I do not sing your songs

And that I do not teach our children

to eat your food

or know your poems

or sing your songs

But that we say you are filthing our food

But that we know you not at all.

Yesterday I looked at one of you for the first time.

You were lighter than the others in color, that was

neither good nor bad.

I was really looking for the first time.

You seemed troubled and witty.

Today I touched one of you for the first time.

You were startled, you ran, you fled away

Fast as a dancer, light, strange and lovely to the touch.

I reach, I touch, I begin to know you.

When we see that the universe is One Body, that there is no such thing
as exclusion or inclusion, then we begin to know it all!

This is the precept of not speaking of others' faults.

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FAMILY DHARMA: RIGHT
SPEECH RECONSIDERED

BETH ROTH

The Buddha was unequivocal about the importance of how we employ our human capacity for speech and verbal interaction. Right Speech, also called Wise Speech or Virtuous Speech, is speech that gives rise to peace and happiness in oneself and others. Right Speech is one of the Five Precepts for ethical conduct, along with protecting life and not killing, taking only what is freely offered and not stealing, using one's sexual energy in ways that do not harm oneself or others, and refraining from the use of intoxicants to the point that they cloud the mind. The Buddha taught that ethical conduct is the foundation of meditation practice, and is also the ground upon which our life and our spiritual journey rest. The Buddha called these precepts for ethical conduct "The Five Gifts," because by undertaking these trainings we offer a supreme gift to other beings and to ourselves: the gift of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression.

In addition to being one of the Five Precepts, Right Speech is also one of the components of the Noble Eightfold Path, along with Right View, Right Intention, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Here again the word

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“Right” is not a moral judgment to be contrasted with bad or wrong, but means “leading to happiness for oneself and others.” The Noble Eight-fold Path is a path to liberation, which is described as happiness, inner peace, and freedom from suffering in this lifetime. It is also the path that releases us from future rebirths into realms of suffering.

The Buddha was precise in his description of Right Speech. He defined it as “abstinence from false speech, abstinence from malicious speech, abstinence from harsh speech, and abstinence from idle chatter.” In the vernacular this means not lying, not using speech in ways that create discord among people, not using swear words or a cynical, hostile or raised tone of voice, and not engaging in gossip. Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to say only what is true, to speak in ways that promote harmony among people, to use a tone of voice that is pleasing, kind, and gentle, and to speak mindfully in order that our speech is useful and purposeful.

Right Speech is a mindfulness practice. By undertaking this practice, we commit to greater awareness of our body, mind, and emotions. Mindfulness makes it possible to recognize what we are about to say before we say it, and thus offers us the freedom to choose when to speak, what to say, and how to say it. With mindfulness, we see that the heart is the ground from which our speech grows. We learn to restrain our speech in moments of anger, hostility, or confusion, and over time, to train the heart to more frequently incline towards wholesome states such as love, kindness and empathy. From these heart states Right Speech naturally arises.

The practice of Right Speech requires that we attend to karma, or the law of cause and effect. We repeatedly observe that different kinds of speech create different kinds of results. Using speech in certain ways assures suffering, while speaking in other ways creates happiness. There

is a Tibetan prayer that says, “May you have happiness and the causes of happiness. May you be free of suffering and the causes of suffering.” When we understand the workings of cause and effect, we can appreciate how profound this prayer is.

The teaching about Right Speech assumes imperfection. Our “mistakes” are a vital part of our learning. We need to lie, exaggerate, embellish, use harsh and aggressive speech, engage in useless banter, and speak at inappropriate times, in order to experience how using speech in these ways creates tension in the body, agitation in the mind, and remorse in the heart. We also discover how unskillful speech degrades personal relationships and diminishes the possibility of peace in our world.

Because Right Speech figures so prominently in the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, we know that what we might call Right Listening, as the complement to Right Speech, is also very important. But what exactly is Right Listening?

Webster’s dictionary defines ‘listen’ as “to pay attention to sound” and “to hear with thoughtful attention.” Yet effective listening means paying attention to more than just sound, and therefore requires that we use more than just our ears. As we are increasingly able to bring mindfulness to ordinary human interaction, we find that listening means attending to our physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions, as well as to the voice, facial expressions, gestures, pauses, underlying meanings, and rich nuances that accompany the spoken words of others. This type of listening is what Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh calls “deep listening.” It is what physician Rachel Naomi Remen calls “generous listening,” what Buddhist teacher and Hospice trainer Joan Halifax calls “listening from the heart,” and what the Quakers call “Devout Listening.” Like any other mindfulness practice, Right Listening is both a skill and a way of being. In her book *The Zen of Listening*, Rebecca Sharif writes, “Listening

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is one of our greatest personal natural resources, yet it is by far one of our most undeveloped abilities.”

Right Speech has been, for me, the most difficult of the Five Precepts, and the trickiest aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. Everyday life, whether at home, at work, or in the community, offers endless opportunities for bringing mindfulness and compassion to the arena of verbal interaction with others. And despite many years of practice, it remains a formidable challenge to have Right Speech and Right Listening prevail in our family environment.

When my children Emilio and Claudia were little, we successfully used communication tools that I had encountered doing group work and conflict resolution with adults. Family meetings, a talking stone, and the commitment not to interrupt one another facilitated our communication. However, as my children grew, both speaking and listening became increasingly challenging, especially when we attempted to address unskillful behaviors or conflicting points of view. I realized that we had to more consciously create the conditions for Right Listening, for without the capacity to listen deeply, all the Right Speech in the world was of little use.

About the time Emilio entered sixth grade, a combination of influences, including what he aptly named “raging hormones,” converged at once. Suddenly it was much more difficult for him to listen to what I wanted to say. It became equally difficult for me to tolerate his unwillingness to listen. And of course, the more conflicted our points of view, the more impossible was our communication. The patience, respect, and mutuality we had enjoyed for years disappeared. The speaking and listening skills we had so carefully cultivated were replaced by mistrust, impatience and defensiveness. Time after time, I would approach him in what I thought was an open and friendly way, employ what I thought

was Right Speech, and find myself face-to-face with a being I barely recognized. Within seconds, I would be left staring at my son's back as he stormed out of the room, arms flailing in the air and a stream of incomprehensible sounds pouring forth from his mouth.

I consulted other parents, as well as professionals, and was assured that my son was exhibiting normal adolescent behavior. I was told that our relationship was undergoing normal developmental changes. Yet I experienced my son's behavior, my own frustration, and the deterioration of our relationship as acutely painful. I was certain that something far more skillful and productive was possible. I was determined to search until I found it. Thus began a long process of experimentation in Right Speech and Right Listening, a challenging and creative process that continues to evolve, always yielding a combination of frustrating setbacks and fruitful rewards.

A pivotal realization came to me a few months after this destructive pattern first appeared. Emilio's behavior was so reactive and extreme, I felt like I was being attacked. Thus, it had to be a response to him feeling attacked. Clearly, we had to address this underlying problem. I needed his help to figure out how to change my approach so that he felt safe and not threatened.

In a calm moment, he agreed to talk with me about our communication problems. He confirmed that he felt criticized and attacked when I tried to talk with him about conflicts or difficulties, however small. We agreed I needed to change my strategy so that he might remain open to what I wanted to say.

Over the course of a few weeks, we discussed a number of "preliminaries" that could help set the stage for more skillful interactions. Emilio said that rather than launching into a difficult subject, he wanted me to tell him what I wished to talk about, and then ask him when would be

a good time to discuss it. This was a reasonable and intelligent request, which I readily honored. We agreed that if he didn't want to talk about a particular topic when I presented it to him, it was his responsibility to propose a time to talk, and it needed to be scheduled for within a few days of when I approached him. I proposed that when we discussed a difficult topic, he could decide whether to respond immediately to the issue raised, or think it over and respond in a few hours or a few days. He liked this suggestion. He said that knowing he didn't have to reply right away freed up more attention for listening, decreased the sense of emergency about problems, and allowed him time to come up with a more thoughtful response.

In subsequent conversations we talked about his defensiveness during difficult interactions. I explained that because defensiveness is an automatic reaction that almost everyone exhibits, we are easily tricked into believing it is necessary and useful. And while it might serve a limited function when we face threats and enemies, in conversations with loved ones defensiveness precludes effective communication. Emilio said he would feel less defensive if he could better trust my intention. I assured him that my intention was to improve our communication and nourish our relationship, rather than criticize him or exercise parental authority. We talked about how I could demonstrate this intention. He asked that I introduce a potentially difficult conversation with a reminder like "I love you Emilio and I hope we can together resolve a problem that has come up." We agreed that he could use the same preliminary techniques whenever he wanted to talk with me about something that I might not want to talk about.

Having established these guidelines, we began to address how to remain open when we feel the impulse to shut down. I gave Emilio examples of how I use my attention, directed internally, to counter my re-

sistance in conversations with adults. For example, I consciously feel my breathing, attempt to relax tightness in my body, and try not to formulate my response while the other person is speaking. I asked him if he could come up with five such strategies that might work for him. A few minutes later he handed me two small paste-it notes, upon which he had written in miniscule print the following ten ideas: breathe, remind myself that I'm not being punished, try to relax, try to open my body to your words, don't wave my hands around or roll my eyes or mutter, be aware of where my hands are, don't interrupt or say sarcastic things like "I didn't do that," "So what?" or "What's the problem with that?," leave a short silence before responding to what you say, count to five slowly inside my head, and answer you at another time or another day.

I was happy that we had gotten this far, and over the course of the next few months there was a definite improvement in our ability to speak and listen to each other. Yet communication continued to break down with some frequency, and thus we continued to explore ways to improve the situation.

I attempted to put the communication issues that Emilio and I were experiencing into a larger context. I talked with him about how important and complex listening is, and how the inability to communicate with patience and respect not only damages interpersonal relationships but also contributes to the many problems threatening our world. I told Emilio that if we could continue to improve our communication, it would not only benefit our relationship, but would likely serve each of us in all present and future relationships as well. I said that in my experience, listening to something I don't want to hear is completely different from listening to something I find pleasing. Emilio readily agreed that what I call "listening under stress" indeed requires additional skills.

To better illustrate this point, we invented a listening "game." I

gave Emilio four blank index cards, and asked him to write four sentences that he would be happy to hear me say to him. This was easy. He wrote: “Emilio, your teacher says you’re doing an excellent job in school.” “We’re going to pick up our puppy Luna.” “We’re going to Virginia to visit your cousins.” “You’re really doing well in Capoeira!” (Capoeira is an Afro- Brazilian martial art that he was studying at the time). When he finished, I gave him four more index cards, and asked him to write four things he would not want me to say to him. He seemed a bit puzzled, so we talked about what kinds of things most people do not want to hear. He said, “criticisms and put-downs.” I added that most people react just as defensively to hearing another person say something they don’t agree with as they do to personal criticism. With this hint, he quickly wrote his next four sentences: “How come your bedroom is so small?” “The middle school you’re going to next year is a horrible school.” “Border Collies are the worst breed of dogs.” “I heard that your sister was adopted in Bolivia. Why wasn’t she adopted in the United States?”

Next I asked him to write four neutral sentences. This proved more challenging, and I offered examples of the kinds of things that might be neutral. He then wrote: “I think it’s going to rain.” “Dad’s planting grass in the backyard.” “Claudia is sweeping the kitchen floor.” “Last night’s rain flooded the trail by the river.”

By this time Emilio was wondering what we were going to do with the index cards. I said I would read them to him one at a time, so that he could feel his reactions to the different kinds of statements. I asked him if I should read the four sentences in each category together, or read all the sentences randomly. He replied, “Random,” so I shuffled the cards before placing them face down on the carpet. I read them aloud one by one, pausing in between for Emilio to feel his reaction to each sentence.

Not surprisingly, for the different negative statements, Emilio re-

ported, “I’m closed up inside and don’t want to hear it, “ “My muscles are tense,” “My feelings are hurt,” “My chest is tight and rigid,” “I make myself hard inside,” “I want to interrupt and tell you to shut up,” “My reply feels stuck in my throat,” and “My skin feels hot.”

In response to positive statements, Emilio noticed, “Flickers of happiness rise up in my body,” “There’s a lot more life inside,” “I feel space inside, like a big gate swinging open,” “My muscles are soft and relaxed,” “My body feels energetic, like it wants to suddenly move,” and “There’s joy in my mind and heart.”

In response to the neutral statements, Emilio said his body, breath, and heartbeat felt relaxed but not excited, and that he had to try harder to notice these physical sensations.

Emilio was surprised by how many reactions he had to the sentences, given that he himself had written them a few minutes earlier! His observation highlighted how challenging it is to control our reactions when we don’t know what’s coming. We talked about how reactive thoughts, emotions, and sensations happen to everyone. I said that being more aware of these reactions enables us to know ourselves better, to create a little space in which to decide what we want to do or say, and thus to more consciously choose our behavior.

In a subsequent conversation Emilio and I came up with another idea for how to keep communication open. We bought a special notebook for writing about things that needed to be discussed but that we didn’t want to talk about. I joked that this was our pen pal book. We agreed upon guidelines for how we would use this book. We predicted it would more likely be me initiating written communication with him, but that either of us could initiate communication. We would keep the book in a neutral place, and the person who wrote an entry would place the notebook inside the doorway of the other person’s room. It was the

responsibility of the recipient to offer a response within 24 hours. The notebook we purchased for this purpose had a small blank area on the cover for a student to write their name. I asked Emilio what he thought we should name our book. He replied, “I love you Emilio’ Pen Pal Journal,” and then wrote this title on the cover of the book.

We’ve had this notebook for about two years. It’s not nearly full, and we could have benefited from using it more frequently. But without a doubt, it has served us both well. It has entries and responses from each of us. In addition to written text, Emilio’s color drawings of his body illustrate his emotions and physical sensations. His sketches of his brain show how his mind feels when he’s struggling to control his speech or behavior, and his line charts demonstrate how rapidly his anger rises. We have each clarified misunderstandings and explained why we acted with impatience or disrespect. We have each offered apologies, requested forgiveness, pardoned transgressions, and declared our love and caring. I’ve occasionally laughed out loud while writing my entries or reading Emilio’s. I’ve also wept, at times from sadness, at other times from the bittersweet happiness of love and connection.

Of course, there continue to be times when communication is impossible. I approach Emilio with a friendly heart and do my best with Right Speech, but within seconds, or maybe a few minutes, the conversation abruptly ends. He marches out of the room, and we both feel hurt, frustrated, and angry. I struggle to remain calm and not exacerbate the situation with reactivity I will later regret. My strategies of feeling my breath, naming my thoughts and emotions, or reciting compassion or equanimity phrases help, but not enough. I’ve told myself for years to not take it personally, but it’s been hard to figure out how not to take it personally. I needed something else that could help me in the moment of difficulty, a strategy to decrease my identification with a self who is

being mistreated. I finally found what works for me. It is a pause for one conscious breath, and then the simple phrase said silently to myself, “This is the nature of adolescence.”

I don’t know why these particular words are so effective for me. This phrase has become a powerful ally in my effort to retain some measure of acceptance and balance in times of conflict with my son. Flare-ups still occur, and they are upsetting, but they are less upsetting and less personal than they used to be, and we recover from them more quickly and more easily.

Emilio and I have come a long way, and there’s plenty of room for improvement. That’s why Right Speech and Right Listening are life-long mindfulness practices. I am reminded of a quote by hospice worker Christine Longaker. It’s from her chapter in an anthology called *The Wisdom of Listening*, edited by Mark Brady. She writes, “You must listen with your whole being, not just your ears. Listen with your body, your heart, your eyes, your energy, your total presence. Listen in silence, without interrupting. Fill any spaces of silence between you with love.” The moments when I can listen like this, to my children or to anyone else, are rare. Yet these words inspire me with a sense of possibility, and for this I am grateful.

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RIGHT SPEECH FROM
A TIBETAN BUDDHIST
PERSPECTIVE

A taste of liberation

ROGER JACKSON

It is difficult to characterize Tibetan Buddhist views of right speech in a simple manner, but certain points do come up repeatedly in texts, in lectures, and in everyday life. In Tibetan ethics, four acts of speech to be avoided provide a fairly comprehensive definition of non-virtuous verbal behavior.

Lying, says the influential Indian philosopher Vasubandhu, is discourse in which, knowing one thing to be the case, you assert something else, and your assertion is taken by another person to be the truth. It is the most egregious and universally condemned of the negative acts of speech, because it is deeply subversive of the trust on which human relationships and communities are built.

Slander is speech whose purpose is to incite divisions among people. You tell your friend something about person X or group Y, and whether your words are true or false, or your friend likes Y or doesn't, if the effect is an increase in his or her hostility toward Y, then slander has occurred. The Gelugpa master Pabongka Rinpoche adds this caveat: "Some people

consider doing these things to be a good quality, but they are not. Divisive speech causes great harm, and so can't be right."

Abusive speech involves speaking harshly to another being: Addressing someone directly, you either speak in a threatening tone or criticize the other person for real or imagined faults. When the other person's feelings are hurt by your outburst, the act is complete. Like lying and slander, abusive speech is nonvirtuous because it sows discord between people.

Idle gossip, strictly speaking, is discussion of any topic that is not related to Buddha-dharma. "These days," Pabongka notes ruefully, "we monks discuss many things when a large group of us gets together in the monastery grounds: the government, China, India, and so on. This is idle gossip." So, too, are discussions of non-Buddhist treatises. "Idle gossip," he concludes, "is the least of the ten nonvirtues, but it is the best way to waste our human lives."

Tibetans and we ourselves may recognize all too much of our verbal behavior in these accounts; the definitions of the vices are clear, and the rationales for their censure understandable. Yet for Tibetans, as for us, a purely behavioral notion of verbal morality leaves certain questions unanswered. What is the status of the white lies that protect or benefit other beings without harming anyone? Is it slander to speak ill of a corrupt employer or a dishonest (or even incompetent) politician? Is it abusive speech to "speak truth to power" or shout at a child about to run into traffic? Is it always idle gossip to discuss the worldly concerns that humans share: politics, art, sports, love, food, or money?

Even the more conservative Nikaya admits that the moral weight of a vice (or virtue) is contingent on the subject object, nature, intention, manner, and frequency of the act. It is worse, for instance, to lie continually to your parents than to gossip idly with your friends just once. Nev-

ertheless, all nonvirtuous behavior is essentially negative and definitely to be avoided.

With the Mahayana and Vajrayana, however, the behavioral ethic of the Nikayas begins to shift toward an ethic of intention. As illustrated by the *Lotus Sutra's* parable of the burning house—a wise old man lures his endangered children from a burning house with promises of animal carts he is not going to give them (intending to give them better ones)—a lie may not be nonvirtuous if it is motivated by discerning compassion. Indeed, in Mahayana and Vajrayana, the moral weight of an action comes to inhere primarily in the intention behind it, not the behavior involved. The door is thereby opened to the beneficial lie, the altruistic critique, the expression of righteous anger, and even, perhaps, discussion of topics not overtly related to dharma.

All these are exercises of a bodhisattva's skillful means. Their acceptance reflects a sophisticated recognition that moral judgments must take intention into account. At the same time, an ethic of intention, too, leaves unanswered questions. If the motive is the only true measure of morality and the thoughts of others are invisible to us, how can we tell that the lie or the slur we just heard was well- or ill-intentioned, permissible or condemned? If we cannot judge others by their behavior, how do we know who among us are the bodhisattvas and who the charlatans? A *pure* ethic of intention seems as prone to moral relativism as a *purely* behavioral ethic to superficial legalism.

This may be why, although Tibetan Buddhists consider themselves Mahayanists, and often have held their “crazy” tantric saints in high regard, they tend to fall back on behavioral norms where the motive behind and act remains in doubt. Yes, a true bodhisattva may speak “non-virtuously” if it serves the spiritual interests of others, but how many true bodhisattvas are there? More to the point: Can you, or I, be so cer-

tain that *we* are bodhisattvas, our motives pure, our discernment sufficient to encompass the situation in which we plan to “speak with skillful means”? Occasionally, perhaps; but most of the time, the answer is no.

Intention does matter, and sometimes we do have both the wisdom and compassion to see that an outwardly “nonvirtuous” act of speech is required, so Tibetan Buddhism does leave the door ajar for the beneficial lie, the appropriate personal or political critique, the relation-building discussion of nondharmic matters. But most Tibetans, whether lama or layperson, would probably agree that, day in and day out, we cannot do better than to model ourselves on the Buddha, striving to speak words that are truthful, conducive to harmony, pleasantly uttered, and about things that, in the final analysis, have the single taste of liberation.

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7

RIGHT SPEECH IN
MARRIAGE

SUSAN PIVER BROWNE

I love the concept of idiot compassion. Just as being truly compassionate doesn't mean always being sweet and nice (sometimes it means being cold, harsh), being truly honest doesn't mean speaking your thoughts and feelings as they arise. Other awarenesses and intention must be at work—and a recognition that the truth is not solid. This is especially so in a marriage, where speech can so easily be used against one's partner—or against the world, from the security and privacy of the bedroom.

AVOID LYING

What is abstaining from lying in marriage? If idiot compassion is true compassion's lobotomized cousin, so idiot honesty is cousin to true honesty. Abstaining from lying doesn't mean speaking your thoughts and impulses as they arise; it means being aware of the presence of certain feelings in yourself, your beloved, and the space you occupy. In the Taoist sense, being in this flow can cue you about when and how to speak skillfully, with as few or as many qualities as possible. In this sense, tell-

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ing the truth requires such precise awareness.

When you know the truth, it may not be so hard: It's then a matter of fortitude, and of choice. It's not so easy when the truth is not perceptible. The truth shifts—frailty, courage, loveliness, and stupidity are in every moment. As such, there may be only pretending to know something about the truth—even trusting that there is no truth. Therefore the injunction—not to tell the truth—but to avoid lying.

At the same time, to be in an impassioned relationship, the truth must speak. It's my experience that there is tremendous synchronicity between truth and passion. Desire flourishes on the edge. Its opposite is rest. Truth—trying for truth of self, of other, of the moment—means working with the edge. For those who are inspired by passion, it means staying alive on the deepest levels.

AVOID ABUSIVE WORDS

I've known people who hurl epithets and use insults and aggression to make a point, to clear space, to be heard. My family didn't do that. It's easy for me not to do those things with my husband, no matter how provoked. What my family did do—and what it's hard for me not to do—was create abusive silence. There is the silence of refraining from saying something hurtful out of a sense of gentleness. And there is the silence of *fuck you*. Is this abusive speech? I think so.

AVOID IDLE CHATTER, SLANDER

I immediately think of jealous territoriality, of clearing space around oneself as a way of preventing the closeness of others who may threaten the couple—very female. The lover has the ear of the beloved in a very

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special way. No matter what front is presented to the world, married couples, it seems, have intimate, before-bed moments of conversation about work, the car, and other people, whatever. In these moments it is so easy to influence the beloved's responses with tiny remarks: "He is just after money," "I think she may not like her job." This quiet creation of one viewpoint of people and events must be approached with great care and without the intention of dividing the beloved from his own thoughts, his own approach, out of fear.

On the other hand, one of the great joys of marriage is the dissection of thoughts and responses deemed too small or intimate for others to hear or for which only the beloved understands the context: "Her haircut made me think of that lampshade at your mother's house." Sharing that intimacy, a history spiced by a tiny (or enormous) dram of laughing together at someone else, provides a strange, uneasy comfort. But no one is to be used as a tool for our own comfort, without regard for their humanity.

AVOID GOSSIP

It's painful to learn that holding a mutual thought about someone else, no matter how small, can be a tremendous unkindness.

Once, I was the victim of gossip so horrible and strong that I almost believed it myself. It had such life that I spent a lot of time examining my circumstances to see if it might not be true. The experience really sucked. Eventually, I realized that its genesis was attributed to just such tiny remarks blended and compounded. Some extant energy met the force of unkindness and combined to create a very painful situation. I vowed never to gossip again. And, with some notable failures, I've pretty much stuck to this. When my beloved gossips to me, I hear and try not

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to respond or add to it. I try and make some genuine remark that could recontextualize the person's actions or vibration in a more benign light. When I am compelled to gossip, I *try* to prevent myself. It is hardest of all with my husband. I want the moronic pleasure of maliciousness and high-toned judgment of others, with the one who holds me in the highest regard. The S&M of ego.

In the end, for me, it boils down to something a wonderful friend once told me: If the intention is good, then it doesn't matter if the result manifests in the heaven or hell realm.

Susan Piver Browne is a Buddhist teacher and the New York Times bestselling author of six books, including *The Hard Questions* and the award-winning *How Not to Be Afraid of Your Own Life*. Her latest book is entitled *The Wisdom of a Broken Heart*.

8

RIGHT LYING

Can a lie be right speech?

LIN JENSEN

The call came from Enloe Hospital at 3:30 on a fall afternoon. A Japanese Buddhist woman, Chinatsu, was dying. I would find her, I was told, in Room 302 of Enloe's oncology ward. Her family had gathered and had asked for me to come. I had been the hospital's designated Buddhist spiritual caregiver for several years but had never before been told to hurry if I wanted to see the patient alive.

At the hospital, I took the elevator to the third floor, only to discover that Chinatsu had died a few moments earlier. A ward nurse informed me that the family was waiting for me. Down the hall, I found 20 or more family members and friends packed into a small waiting area. A young man in a suit and tie greeted me with a bow and held open the door to a room where another dozen or so family members were gathered. When everyone from the waiting area had squeezed in behind me, there were close to 40 of us pressed tightly around the dead woman's bed.

The young man serving as my guide whispered to me that most of those present were Shin Buddhists. I took it that he was suggesting how I should proceed, but I'm a Zen Buddhist and have only slight familiarity with Pure Land practices. My first instance of wrong speech that afternoon, I suppose, was a lie of omission: I didn't admit to my shortcom-

ings but instead tried to figure out what was best to do under the circumstances. When it comes to lying I'm not at all sure that I know when it's best to lie, or even whether or not it's ever best to lie. Nonetheless, I put on my *rakusu* (the traditional bib-like garment that represents a Zen monk's robes), clasped the palms of my hands together, and set out to make the best I could of what little I knew of Shin Buddhist ceremonies.

Seeing this, everyone grew still, and an air of expectancy settled over the room. Less than an arm's length from me lay Chinatsu. Although her body had been ravaged by the cancer that had killed her, I could see that she was still a beautiful woman in her late forties or early fifties. In my years as the senior Buddhist chaplain at High Desert State Prison in California, where most of my students were Shin Buddhists, I had learned a few Shin practices. And so I prayed that Amida Butsu—Amida Buddha, ruler of the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss—would take Chinatsu into his care so that she might reside in the Pure Land, the cherished destination of all devout Shin Buddhists.

Understand, I don't have any belief in a Pure Land. In truth, I have no belief (or for that matter, disbelief) in an afterlife of any sort. Zen is not a repository of belief, either positive or negative, relying instead on the circumstances of the moment to dictate what needs to be done without imposing any preconceived intent on the situation at hand. The only pure land I know of is the dirt under my feet. So my prayer for Chinatsu's deliverance was, I suppose, a great falsehood, although my intention in offering it was not false. Or was it? Was I simply trying to save face and not appear unqualified? If so, then my patched-together prayer was a falsehood of the most self-serving sort. But if I was saying this prayer because 30 or 40 grieving family and friends were depending on me to perform an essential cultural ritual— and because, like it or not, I was the only spiritual caregiver the hospital had to offer at the

time—then I'm not certain what sort of falsehood I was engaged in. I said some other prayers more or less of my own invention, and everyone seemed satisfied.

Japanese Shin Buddhism teaches that deliverance to the Pure Land is a grace bestowed on anyone who sincerely chants Amida Butsu's name. At the prison, I had run into considerable resistance among the Shin Buddhists when I tried to teach them meditation, which they thought useless, because for them salvific power lies solely in the recitation of "Namo Amida Butsu," Amida's vow. Since Chinatsu could no longer chant on her own behalf, I thought maybe we would all feel better if we chanted for her, to help her on her way to the Pure Land. And so I began chanting "Namo Amida Butsu." My guide seemed especially pleased with this, and he took over leading the chant as the whole room joined in. I chanted along with them until, as if by a signal, they all stopped at once. In the absence of sharing any belief in what we were chanting, I voiced a genuine wish that their hopes for Chinatsu's deliverance to the Pure Land would be realized.

Afterward, I asked if anyone wanted to say something to Chinatsu. A few did, speaking in Japanese and sometimes, as a courtesy to me, in English as well. Then a woman wearing a soft blue cap worked her way toward me from the rear of the group until she stood opposite me on the other side of the bed. "I think Chinatsu would like you to say something about God," she said firmly. A few others murmured assent. It was only then that I saw, partly hidden in the folds of Chinatsu's gown, a tiny cross strung around her neck. The woman lying dead before me was not a Pure Land Buddhist but a Christian! It was an absurd moment. I could only surmise that the Shin Buddhist practitioners in the room had let me carry on because they preferred that Chinatsu be sent to the Pure Land rather than to a Christian heaven. I might just as well have

conducted a Zen ceremony, I thought. Still, if they wanted me to say something about God, that I could manage: fourteen years of childhood attendance at Trinity Episcopal Church in Orange, California, had given me enough Christian liturgy to get by.

And so I began with a few prayers of the sort Reverend Hailwood might have offered in the Trinity sanctuary all those years ago. I recited the Lord's Prayer, the Twenty-third Psalm, and the Apostle's Creed, which affirms God as the maker of heaven and earth, the virgin birth of His son, and the resurrection of the body and life everlasting—not a word of which I still subscribed to. This was the last and, perhaps, most blatant lie of that afternoon in Room 302. But despite my disbelief, the familiar words rolled out of me, over Chinatsu, and gathered around us like a rising mist from ancient seas of past beliefs. I couldn't keep my eyes dry.

In the end, both the Pure Land Buddhists and the Christians seemed content with the ceremony. They wouldn't let me go until they'd taken up a collection as an offering for my services. I left the hospital with a pocket stuffed with cash—and ambiguous feelings about what I'd done. Or not done.

In the Pali canon, the Buddha defines right speech: "Abstinence from false speech, abstinence from malicious speech, abstinence from harsh speech, abstinence from idle chatter: this is called right speech." As an ethical guide, I treasure this as much as anything ever said on the subject. But when, exactly, is speech false? False to what, or to whom, and by what measurement of falsehood? When does the truth become harsh or malicious? These are real questions for which the Buddha provides us with no precise answers.

At one point in his teaching on abstaining from false speech, the Buddha describes a truthful person as one who "never knowingly speaks a lie, either for the sake of his own advantage, or for the sake of an-

other person's advantage, or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever." In Room 302, the temptation to lie for the sake of my own advantage, or the advantage of those gathered in the room, was virtually unavoidable. But is advantage what's really at stake when a lie is told to spare a person's feelings or ease a difficult time for someone? If anyone stands to benefit from a lie, it seems to me that the intention behind the lie, as well as the nature of the benefit, must be weighed. The Buddha's teaching on right speech is offered in the light of his teaching on right intention: our choices of speech and action, he said, should be consonant with an intention of selflessness, kindness, and harmlessness. If I'm torn between truth and falsehood, I have to ask myself if the choice I'm leaning toward would be self-serving or selfless, harsh or kind, harmful or harmless. Only then can I know what's best to do.

One of the Buddhist inmates I'm teaching at High Desert State Prison wrote me recently about "white lies." He had been studying and practicing the Buddha's teachings on right speech and wondered if he had broken the precept. Another inmate had read him a poem and asked how he liked it. My student didn't like it much at all: he thought it was too moralistic and obvious. But his fellow prisoner had been working on the poem for weeks, and so my student said what he thought the poet wanted to hear, praising the poem's wholesome message and ignoring the poet's lack of skill. But he was troubled about the lie he'd told.

We tell this sort of lie all the time, in the service of not hurting someone's feelings. Once my mother, as she was leaving the house for lunch with friends, asked me, "How do you like my new hat?" Mother was a beautiful woman, but the hat looked awful on her. She was clearly pleased with her new purchase, however, so I said, "You look great, Mom." A lie, yes, but what was the truth at that juncture? What about the truth of simple affection for my mother and concern that she have a

good time at her luncheon? My guess is that her lady friends didn't think the hat was flattering either, but according to Mother she received compliments on how good it looked on her. The downside of this, of course, was that my mother, convinced that the hat was a winner, began wearing it everywhere she went. I was relieved when she found another hat that actually did look good on her.

Surely the precept "Do not lie" is to be honored in a spirit of truthfulness rather than in a rigid adherence to fact. Right speech isn't a matter of telling "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." We cannot say definitively, "This is a lie" without consulting the intent, and probable consequence, of what is spoken. Zen rests on seeking the heart's consent, and it does so because the truth or falsehood of what we say resides in the totality of the circumstances and not in whether or not the words are consistent with the facts. For one thing, in the world of facts, there's generally more than one fact that bears on what is best to say in any given instance. There's the fact that I wasn't qualified to conduct a Pure Land ceremony— and the fact that if I hadn't done so, no one else would have. There's the fact that the inmate's poem was without merit—and the fact that he had spent half a year making it as good as possible. There's the fact that Mother's new hat was unflattering—and the fact that she was so pleased with it. And in all these, there's the truth of the heart, a truth that resolves the contradiction between the teachings of right speech and the most obvious of lies. The heart's truth makes a marriage of opposites.

In the languages of the West, heart and mind are separated. Heart relates to feeling and mind to intellect, and in matters requiring judgment, intellect is perceived as more reliable than feeling. In the Chinese and Japanese languages, however, the character for "heart" is the same as the one for "mind." You can't even think "heart" or "mind" without

simultaneously thinking of the other; there is only “heartmind.” Likewise, in Zen the heart’s truth and the mind’s truth are one and the same, arising from an undivided self whose being is inseparable from the living moment. It is within this inclusive wholeness that the Zen ethic of right speech resides. To speak truly, one must engage with, and depend upon, the accidental and unforeseen circumstances of the living moment. No outside guide will suffice. The best we can do is show up for the event, heart and mind. Yet simply showing up without prescribed guidelines may seem like slender support for practicing right speech: without rules to go by, we’re at the mercy of momentary judgment that might well be flawed—and often is. But even with rules, could we ever get it exactly right? Does anyone imagine that applying even the most commendable precept would guarantee the right response?

Ethical rules are, at best, provisional. George Orwell, in his classic essay “Politics and the English Language,” lays down six rules of good writing. The first five have to do with metaphor, brevity, passive and active constructions, and jargon, but the sixth is “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.” Orwell speaks pure Zen when he frees the writer’s pen from compliance with preconceived rules. Orwell knew that you can’t write solely by rules, and we can’t speak solely by them either. When it comes to right speech with its injunction forbidding lying, what’s needed is an Orwellian rule of exclusion, a rule that frees the heart to determine when it might be best to lie—perhaps something like “Tell any lie rather than speak some pointlessly damaging truth.” There’s no Buddhist rulebook to tell us when and how to do this, which is perhaps why Zen insists that we shoulder the responsibility on our own.

This matter of truth and falsehood isn’t as simple as lie or don’t lie. Each situation must be considered in the context of the moment, and

nothing absolves us of responsibility for the consequences of what we say. While there have been times when I've lied and deeply regretted it, there have also been times when I've just as deeply regretted telling the truth. Years ago, as a teenager, I worked on my father's turkey farm in California. Nearly all his farmhands had been part of the Depression-era exodus from dirt-poor Oklahoma and Arkansas. One year, Father received a letter from Ikle, a young man in Denmark, where my father was born. Ikle wanted to come and study modern methods of turkey production under my father. He arrived and went to work, but the other hands and I noticed with some irritation that he was spared the hardest and dirtiest jobs. What angered us more, however, were Ikle's complaints about his salary: it was twice what the other farmhands were earning.

One morning, I ran into my father in the hallway between his bedroom and the bathroom. I was in work boots and jeans on my way to the fields, and Father was in pajamas and slippers. The hallway was so narrow that neither of us could pass unless the other stepped aside. I refused to move. Confronting him, I said, "The men are angry about the wage you're paying Ikle." "He's only here for a few months," my father countered. "The point is," I shot back, "he's not just another Okie. He's your Danish countryman, and you're ashamed to pay him what you've been paying the other hands all these years."

Father's face froze, and I watched him getting ready to tell me I was wrong and how dare I question his judgment. Then suddenly he crumbled, and the energy seemed to drain out of him. I had spoken the truth, and he knew it. But what had it served? What was the point of being right if the consequence was the pain of a man cornered in a hallway in his pajamas, humiliated by his son?

Still, despite the vengeful or self-serving truths we sometimes tell, truth remains a beautiful thing—the only thing that liberates us from

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the falsehoods ego fabricates in the service of its own cause. Truth-telling reports things as they are, not as we wish they were. If we indulge the human propensity to understate, exaggerate, and alter facts for whatever comfort or false security a lie might accord us, we forfeit our capacity to see reality clearly, and see only a world of our own invention. So there are compelling reasons that one of the basic precepts of the Buddhist path is the vow to tell the truth and not lie. But the real truth is the truth of the inborn Buddha, the one who transcends all rules and invariably speaks and acts with a wisdom tempered by kindness.

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9

THE TRUTH
ABOUT GOSSIP

If you don't have anything nice to say...

BHIKSHUNI THUBTEN CHODRON

Have you ever gossiped about someone, then regretted it for years, unable to apologize because you lost touch with the person? That's me. So Rosie Knox, wherever you are, I apologize for all the horrible things I said about you in sixth grade. And while I'm at it, I apologize to all the hundreds if not thousands of people I've hurt with selfish speech. And I apologize to myself for filling my mind with nasty thoughts and creating the karmic causes to be the object of others' gossip in the future. Where did I ever get the idea that gossip would make me happy?

Gossip has many allures; otherwise we wouldn't enjoy doing it. It has entertainment value, and anyone can participate. But what exactly is it that makes us tingle with excitement when using wrong speech? Do we think we'll shine brighter by exposing another's faults? Or that we'll bond with others through maligning a common outsider? Or will we be empowered, especially if we feel oppressed by someone in authority? These so-called advantages of unskillful speech need to be investigated

further.

Gossip can mean many things, from benignly shared information about someone not present to false rumors insidiously spread, to idle chitchat about someone's personal life. The question to ask is: What is our motivation when we talk about others? From a Buddhist perspective, the value of our speech depends principally upon the motivation behind it.

When talking about others is motivated by thoughts of ill will, jealousy, or attachment, conversations turn into gossip. These thoughts may seem to be subconscious, but if we pay close attention to our mind we'll be able to catch them in the act. Many of these are thoughts that we don't want to acknowledge to ourselves, let alone to others, but my experience is that when I become courageous enough to notice and admit them, I'm on my way to letting them go. Also, there's a certain humor to the illogical way that these negative thoughts purport to bring us happiness. Learning to laugh at our wrong ways of thinking can be therapeutic.

Let's investigate to see if we've had any of these thoughts. By unearthing them, we can check if they're accurate or not. Do any of these examples sound familiar?

- "I'm so angry! I can't believe that Gloria promised to help me on this project and then called today with some limp excuse for why she couldn't come. Wait until I tell my friends about Gloria's latest act of rudeness!" Armed with this assumption, we can talk for hours about all the awful things Gloria has done. We're acting on the belief that venting our negative emotions and stirring others up will resolve our frustration with Gloria. Is that true? Often we have a problem with one person, but instead of working it out with her, we unload our negative feelings

on our friends. If they side with us—and they should because, after all, that’s why they’re our friends—then we can sit back and feel like a victim, blaming Gloria for the bad feelings between us. Strange how ego finds making ourselves into a victim so comforting. If we can’t communicate directly with that person—maybe she’s a superior—why spend energy maligning her? Rather, why not turn our attention to doing something to improve our situation?

- “Larry is such a jerk, and everyone agrees. I’d never act like he does.” Motivated by the thought “If he’s so bad, I’m so good,” we’ll go on and on about how unfair the world is that such a jerk gets the good opportunities, while we, who embody unrecognized talent, are ignored. How does complaining make us feel better? How odd it is to attempt to prop up our esteem by badmouthing others.

- “I’m going to tell the managers that Stella only offered to take on the job because she’ll have her assistant do all the work while she gets the raise. Maybe if they know this, they’ll consider me for the job instead.” Jealousy is often the motivating factor when we use our speech to create factions at the workplace. There’s never a dull moment when our envious mind is out to get someone, dethroning her and installing ourselves in her place. Are we successful in getting the positive recognition we seek when we create dirty politics and stir up discord in our workplace?

- “I’ll just tell everyone that Pat made the mess of our little do-it-yourself remodeling project. Then I won’t have to accept responsibility for how I botched up.” Bringing people together by sharing a condescending attitude is a strange way to bond with others. Do we feel good about ourselves when we do this

- “Ted really hurt my feelings after how much I trusted him. I’m going to get even by telling his secrets to others. Then he’ll have a taste of his own medicine!” How can intentionally harming another living being make us feel better? Instead, it usually results in our losing our self-respect.

On first hearing, the above examples may seem a bit crude. “Who, me? I wouldn’t speak like that!” ego innocently purrs. Or if we do recognize those negative habits of speech, our mind says, “That’s because everyone else talks like that.” But if we look inside ourselves with the searchlight of a sincere wish to become a better person for our own and others’ benefit, we will locate our own less-than-likeable motivations. When have we had those motivations? When have we gossiped about others? Initially, this kind of internal research may be extremely uncomfortable. After all, who likes to admit their faults? It’s much more interesting to address others’ defects. But that is precisely the point: what is it we’re avoiding by looking outward instead of inward? What are we achieving by holding up a magnifying glass instead of looking in a mirror? By ignoring, rationalizing, denying, and justifying our nasty motivations and unkind behavior we feel worse in the long run, not better. A tremendous sense of relief comes when we can be honest about what we’re thinking, feeling, saying, and doing. We take responsibility for our actions without feeling guilty about them because we don’t attach a big-ego “I” to them as in “I’m such a bad gossip.” By admitting our mistakes without exaggerating them, we’ll begin to clean them up. We’ll feel better about ourselves; and because our behavior toward others will change, their responses to us will transform as well.

How do we begin to notice these motivations? This is where daily meditation practice is essential. Some quiet time alone each day to review our thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds is essential for a healthy lifestyle. For example, when we wake up, we generate our motivation for the day: “Today, as much as possible, I won’t harm anyone verbally or physically or even with my thoughts. As much as possible, I will help others in whatever big or small way presents itself. And I’ll keep the long-term motivation of becoming enlightened for the benefit of all beings in my heart.” Starting the day with a conscious intention like this transforms all our interactions during the day. In the evening, we again sit quietly and evaluate our day: “How did living according to my motivation go?” When we see shortcomings, we apply one of the Buddha’s teachings to transform our motivations and actions. We rejoice at the thoughts, words, and deeds that kept true to our morning motivation.

Doing a silent retreat each year makes it easier to notice all the impulses we have to speak. Then we can investigate—“Why did I want to say that?”—and increase our awareness of habitual mental and verbal patterns. Also, a time of sustained intensive meditation helps us practice re-forming our motivations, emotions, and thoughts.

Clearly seeing the disadvantages of any harmful action halts the mind that wants to engage in it. For example, consider how gossiping hurts others’ feelings and causes dissension among people. When others discover that we’ve been gossiping about them—and they usually do—they may defend themselves or retaliate, causing us further problems. Even if they don’t react, they cease trusting us. And we all know that trust takes time to reestablish.

The disagreeable effect on others notwithstanding, how do we feel about ourselves when we gossip? Depending on the situation, we may initially feel that a weight has been lifted from us, that we have been vin-

licated, or at least that we've covered our rear end. But those feelings are false and ephemeral, for if we are sensitive to what is going on inside of us, we realize that we don't feel good about ourselves. If we speak in this way repeatedly, we usually wind up with a bad case of low self-esteem. I'm a firm believer that our self-esteem is related to our ethical behavior. In other words, the first casualty of our speaking or acting with a harmful motivation is ourselves.

Thinking about the karmic effects of gossip throws cold water on quickly-moving lips. A complete negative karma—one with an intention, action, and completion of the action—brings four karmic results: an unfortunate rebirth, a similar experience happening to us, the tendency to do the action again, and residing in an unpleasant place. I, for one, have enough problems as is. Why should I create more for myself by mistakenly thinking that gossiping will bring me happiness? Furthermore, this negative karma will obscure my mind, making liberation and enlightenment more distant. Why would I do that to myself if I wish myself well? Being aware of the disadvantages that gossip brings both now and in the future helps us to drop the negative emotion fueling it as if it were a burning coal. When we're really serious about avoiding gossip, we try to prevent the circumstances for gossip by choosing our companions carefully and being heedful of the topics we discuss with them. I do prison work, and one of the inmates commented to me that he's noticed how idle talk usually leads to harsh speech, lying, disharmony, and malicious gossip. He may start out talking about sports, current events, or what was for lunch, but if he's not alert, the topic eventually turns to someone else's faults. His solution is to keep the chats short. That way he is friendly with others without staying around long enough for his own or another's negativity about a third person to bubble up.

Sometimes we find ourselves chatting with a group when someone

starts gossiping about someone who's not there. We notice the urge to jump in and express our resentment too, but, mindful of the negative repercussions, we restrain our speech. Still, we know that we have to do something about our resentment, so later we meditate on patience and forgiveness. When we work with our hostile emotions in a suitable way and transform them, the impulse to release them through gossiping won't arise. In the meantime, instead of following our urge to gossip, we can turn our internal focus to our breath or we can recite a mantra such as *Om mani padme hum*, the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

What can we do when we don't wish to gossip, but the people we're speaking with are really into it? The easiest solution, of course, is simply to leave the conversation, either quietly slipping away or excusing ourselves in order to do something else. But sometimes the situation doesn't allow that. So we could say, "It seems people have issues with Ralph. How about talking with him directly about the problem? But first let's spell it out in a less blaming way so that he'll be able to hear you." Another skillful option is to change the topic; this can usually be done rather easily and unobtrusively. In that way, the group can bond, but not at another's expense. Later on, when we're alone with the gossip instigator, we could say, "It sounded like you're pretty upset. What's eating you?" and in this way invite him to discuss his feelings, rather than someone else's behavior. This can help him find another way to look at the situation so that his anger doesn't destabilize the harmony of the group.

Sometimes we find ourselves on the other side of this situation: we're really upset with someone and need to discuss it. So we approach a close friend and explain, "Something just happened between me and Sally. I'm angry and need some help dealing with it. Can you listen and help me?" In other words, we make it clear to ourselves and to our friend

that we want to talk about ourselves, not bad-mouth Sally. By taking on our own anger, we avoid gossip. We also don't put our friend in the uncomfortable position of having to side with us in order to maintain the friendship. Our friend can listen and reflect back to us what we're feeling, which helps us to calm our mind. Or, if we're open, she may even be able to help us look at our own part in the incident. In this way, our friend becomes a true friend, someone who helps us live ethically.

I've found that the best antidote to gossip is deliberately and consistently meditating on the kindness of others and cultivating loving-kindness toward them. Sit down sometime and reflect on everything others have done for you since you were born. Start with your parents or another kind adult who fed you as an infant. Think about all the people who contributed to your education, all those who encouraged you to exercise your talents, and all those who supported you through ups and downs. It's truly amazing how much others have done for us. When our minds become convinced that we've been the recipients of a tremendous amount of kindness in our lives, the wish to speak ill of others vanishes. Instead, we become happy to talk about others' good qualities, virtuous activities, accomplishments, and good fortune. Then not only is our own mind happy, but everyone who speaks with us becomes happy as well. The goodness in our hearts overcomes any wish to gossip.

Imagine having conversations in which we talked about people's good qualities and accomplishments behind their back. Think about it: wouldn't it be fulfilling in a completely positive way? Speaking about how others helped us, praising their talents, rejoicing in their dharma practice, admiring and aspiring to cultivate their good qualities—speaking about all of these uplifts our mind, creates the positive karma of right speech, and helps spread happiness in the world.

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: RIGHT SPEECH

SEVEN TIPS FOR GIVING UP GOSSIP

1. Recognize that gossip doesn't undo the situation you're talking about. It only puts in motion another situation based on negative feelings.
2. Know that comparing yourself to others is useless. Everyone has his or her own talents. In this way, give up jealousy and the wish to put others down.
3. Be aware of and transform your own thoughts, words, and deeds rather than commenting on those of others.
4. Train your mind to see others' positive qualities and discuss them. This will make you much happier than gossiping ever could.
5. Forgive, knowing that people do harmful things because they are unhappy. If you don't make someone into an enemy, you won't want to gossip about him.
6. Have a sense of humor about what you think, say, and do, and be able to laugh at all of the silly things we sentient beings carry out in our attempt to be happy. If you see the humor in our human predicament, you'll be more patient.
7. Practice saying something kind to someone every day. Do this especially with people you don't like. It gets easier with practice and bears surprisingly good results.

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: RIGHT SPEECH

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