



Welcome back to the second week of our online retreat on practicing with the Buddhist precepts in everyday life. In my first talk I introduced the five precepts that are common to all Buddhist traditions. In shorthand they are: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxication. A more positive way of saying them is: “I vow not to kill, but to nurture all life, I vow not to take what is not given, but to practice generosity. I vow not to misuse sexuality, but treat every person with respect. I vow not to engage in false speech, but to speak and listen from the heart. I vow not to intoxicate body or mind of self or others, but to cultivate that a mind that sees clearly.”

Last week I spoke about precept practice in general and about how the precepts are a precious guide for our lives, reminding us that we're not separate from other beings. The precepts are not commandments, they are intentions that we hold inside of our hearts and they come from within. So today I'm going to focus on the precept related to thoughts, speech, and practicing wise speech. I'm probably not the only person who was thinking about wise speech and the lack of it during the presidential campaign. It seems like we've seen a real uprising of false and divisive speech in our society. This is all the more reason to focus on the precept of wise speech.

I want to tell you about one of my great heroes—somebody who practiced wise speech and really spoke from her heart. This was a woman named Fannie Lou Hamer. She was born in Mississippi in 1917 to black sharecropper parents. She was the youngest of 20 children. She started picking cotton at the age of six to help support the family. As an adult in the 1960s, she got involved in the civil rights movement. She volunteered to register to vote and she became a leader in the movement. She suffered tremendous harassment and severe beatings as a result of her activities, but she was undaunted. She was so courageous; at one point she said, "It seems like today you risk being killed if you speak the truth, but if I fall . . . I fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I'm not backing off." Those were her words.



She also had a wonderful, wonderful singing voice. I was lucky enough to hear her sing. She sang all the freedom songs that were based on the old gospel songs. She inspired everyone with her singing. Her signature song was “Little Light Of Mine, I'm Going To Let It Shine.” That song represents to me the essence of speaking from the heart—of wise speech. She was singing from the heart and speaking from the heart. She was speaking her truth and she was speaking with courage, right from her heart. She let her light shine and as she did so she lit the way for other people.

She was really a bodhisattva—by that I mean she was a person who was working for the liberation of all beings, not just for her own liberation. She herself said, “No one is free until everyone is free.” It's amazing that she said those words. That's the essence of the bodhisattva vow. She really knew that she was not separate from others. This must be where she got her courage, because she had so much courage. It's hard to believe how brave she was. I think it was because she knew that she was not alone; because she was connected to everybody else. She was acting with and for other beings.

This understanding is at the root of our precept practice. This is why we all practice: to realize that we're not separate from others, and that we're not practicing just for ourselves. We're practicing for everyone together. When I really know in my bones that I'm not separate from you then it becomes more natural to me to practice wise speech, wise listening, or any of the precepts. Speech is important because almost all of our relations are shaped by language. To be human is to use language. We human beings have this really amazing, miraculous ability.

Think about it: you know you can—just by tiny little movements of your mouth, by clicking tongue against the roof of your mouth, and flapping your lips together, and making these little sounds—change the way your loved ones feel. You can change reality. You can change the world. It's a miraculous tool, language. The practice of this



precept is really, really important. Sometimes it's spoken of this training, "I undertake the training to avoid harmful speech."

The good news is that you can actually train yourself. You can actually change your habits and this is really encouraging. I've found it to be true for myself. For example, I used to gossip more than I do now. By gossip, I mean trading nasty stories about other people. I don't mean talking with one friend about a mutual friend in a caring way, celebrating something they did, or expressing a concern. I'm talking about speaking ill of others. I didn't want to do that anymore. As I continued my practice, I consciously turned my attention to this precept, and decided I wanted to try to stop speaking ill of others. I don't think I was doing it any more than most people, but it just seemed like something I could focus on.

The first step was to notice when I was doing it. When was I speaking ill of somebody? The second step was to stop as soon as I noticed it. The third step was to stop before I did it, before I started gossiping. Now, I rarely say negative things about other people. When I slip I catch it pretty quickly. I haven't perfected this yet, but that's probably because I'm not dead yet. When I'm dead, I hope that I really will be able to stop gossiping, but I probably won't be perfect until then.

So, what we human beings say makes a big difference to other human beings. Each person gets to choose the words that come out of his or her mouth, so it's a big responsibility. Buddha helped us with this responsibility. He gave us four guidelines for wise speech. I'm calling it “wise speech” rather than “right Speech” (which it's sometimes called) because “wise speech” sounds less judgmental to me. “Right speech” makes it sound like you can do it right, or you can do it wrong and it's one way or the other. It's not so cut and dry though. I really like to think of it as a continuum of trying to speak more wisely.



Buddha's four guidelines were that speech should be truthful, helpful, kind, and used at the right time. So before an important conversation with someone you can ask yourself if what you are about to say is true to the best of your knowledge. You can ask yourself if what you are about to say is helpful. If it won't make any difference; if it's just going to be a waste of words, you might as well skip it. Think about how much shorter all of our meetings would be if everyone at the meeting followed this guideline.

You can ask: is it kind? Kind is not the same as nice. We're not talking about making nice. Sometimes the kindest action is to tell someone something that might be a little bit painful for him or her to hear, but they may be glad to hear it in the long run. I myself have had the experience of being called to account by a friend, and told that I had unwittingly done something that hurt another person. It was painful to hear it, but I was really glad to hear it. So, is it kind in the broad sense?

Lastly—you can ask yourself: is this the appropriate time to say this? This is an important one that is sometimes neglected. Is it the right time for you and is it the right time for the other person? It's not a good idea, for example, to just blurt out something you need to say to a person when he first gets up in the morning, before he's had his or her cup of coffee. I had a roommate for some years that taught me that she didn't appreciate it when I suddenly launched into a conversation about some issues about dish washing in the kitchen, for instance. Instead, she taught me to say to her, "I have some questions and issues I'd like to talk with you about having to do with sharing the kitchen. When would be a good time for you to talk about it?" That made it much more comfortable for both of us. So this is something to consider.

On the other hand, don't use bad timing as an excuse not to talk about something difficult. You don't necessarily need to have completely gotten rid of your cold, or you don't necessarily have to wait until it's a sunny day to raise the subject. Wise speech is not just a matter of avoiding harmful speech. Wise speech is also a matter of using



encouraging words, especially in work situations. You tend to speak much more quickly when someone makes a mistake than when someone does something really well.

When I was working as an editor at a magazine, I learned that it was a good thing to say to my colleagues and coworkers, "Gee that was really great, what you did." It helped and it felt good to say it, too. You can do this with your family members or in any relationship. My daughter-in-law has instituted a great practice like this in their family of four. Every Saturday evening they hold a family meeting. They begin by going around the table, and each person (including the four-year-old) tells the other three something they appreciate about each family member.

This precept is sometimes translated as “not-lying.” It's a really good thing to try not to lie, but it's not always advisable not to lie. The precepts are not, as I've been saying, absolute rigid rules to hold literally at all times. We have to keep them with a heart of compassion. If you're helping a refugee who's fleeing persecution in his native country, for example, you may actually choose to lie to certain agencies or pursuers about the person's whereabouts. On a lighter note—what if your mother starts wearing her hair in pigtails at the age of 80, asks you how you like it, and you think it looks sort of ridiculous. This happened to me. I said, "Well mom, to tell you the truth I don't really think it looks age-appropriate." She laughed and she told her friend, "Susan said my pigtails are not age-appropriate." I could see that I had really hurt her feelings because she kept repeating it to people. I noticed that other people said that they thought her pigtails were charming. I then realized that if I weren't her daughter, I probably would have thought her pigtails were charming. In retrospect I think it would have been wise speech on my part to say, "Mom, I think it's great that you're wearing your hair in pigtails. It's very gutsy of you."

We don't keep the precepts literally. We keep them with compassion. The partner to wise speech is receptive listening. If you can't do one, you probably can't do the other.



Because we don't cultivate listening very well in our culture we really have to work on it. You know how good it feels when somebody really listens to you? The Dalai Lama has a great quote about listening. He says, "When you talk you're only repeating what you already know. When you listen you might learn something."

So when you're the listener give the other person your full attention; look them in the eyes. You might lean toward them a little bit so that you're listening to them with your body as well as your ears. Don't anticipate what they're going to say. Don't think about what you're going to say when they stop talking. Practicing wise speech is really a deep exploration because when I vow to speak the truth it means I have to ask myself what the truth is. Is there such a thing as the truth? When I start to pay attention I realize that there isn't such a thing as the truth. There's only what I know as my truth.

The Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that every person has a piece of the truth, but nobody has the whole truth. We have to keep that in mind. We have to remember that other people might have a different piece of the truth than we have. The way I can help myself to speak what the truth is, as I know it, is to speak from the heart. This is so important and so essential—I hold the intention to speak from the heart and this is how I get closest to the truth. I speak as if every sentence begins with silent words, “what I really want to say is,” and then I go on from there out loud. You might try this.

Each one of us has our own particular voice unlike anybody else's voice. It's remarkable really. You can recognize a person's voice on the telephone; nobody else talks like that person. Even Gautama Buddha must have had his own particular voice. His disciples would have recognized his voice on the telephone, too. I wonder what his voice sounded like.

So, wise speech means speaking from your heart with your own voice. When you try to speak in someone else's voice from someone else's framework with someone else's



language (even someone you really admire) you can run into trouble. This has been my experience. It's so important to ask yourself: is this authentic? Am I speaking in my own authentic voice? Is this *me* talking? It takes courage to speak from the heart. The word ‘courage’ comes from the Latin word for heart, which is core. Courage comes from the heart.

Cultivating wise speech means cultivating courage for big and little occasions. It takes courage to speak up for justice. It takes courage to tell your roommate you broke his favorite teacup. It takes courage to tell your elderly mother that you don't feel safe about her driving anymore, and you think she needs to stop. In fact, I hope when it's time for me to stop driving I realize it. If I don't then I hope someone who cares about me tells me bravely that it's time for me to stop and I hope I'm able to hear them.

I have four specific practices related to wise speech to share with you, four ways that you can focus on wise speech. There are many other ways, I am just suggesting four ideas. They are: one, don't say anything negative about someone who isn't there; two, use every opportunity to tell people what you appreciate about them; three, listen without interrupting; and four, don't indulge in gloom and doom conversations that just spiral ever downwards. Here's an optional homework assignment for this week: why don't you take up one of these four practices in the coming week and see what happens?

Let's take up the practice of wise speech this week. Let's take up the practice of speaking the truth, as we know it, from our hearts. Remember to say, “What I really want to say is...” and then speak your truth. When we make a mistake (as we are completely bound to do now and then) let's forgive ourselves and move forward with renewed intention. The heart of precept practice is really about what happens when we go astray. What do we do then? It's not about what happens when we do everything right—that's the easy part. I vow not to engage in false speech. I vow to speak and listen from the heart.