

Refraining from False Speech

The Thai meditation teacher, Ajaan Fuang, liked to say, "If you can't have any control over your mouth, how can you expect to have any control over your mind?"

The fact is, you can meditate with the ardency of a Zen monk, you can go on myriad retreats, but if you don't learn to practice skillful speech, you're not going to get very far along the Buddha's path.

It's crucial as you move along the path to grasp the importance of skillful speech, to understand the importance of refraining from false speech, to understand the importance of truthfulness. In cultivating truthfulness, you're asked to examine the ways in which you engage in false speech, the ways you lie. Over the years you may have constructed a barrier between yourself and the truth. You may have built up an immunity to the truth. But as a dharma student developing skillful qualities, you have to engender a willingness to tear down these barriers and practice truthfulness.

Most of us lie in some way, shape or form. We lie to family, friends. We lie in work contexts (in my job as a salesman, lying seemed part of the process, a required function in conducting business). From what I've heard, even statesmen and politicians lie. It would seem that, on a certain level, lying is accepted behavior. It would seem that it's not considered such a big deal. But is it a big deal? Is lying a problem? These are questions we need to ask. These

are important reflections. Are there drawbacks in lying? Does it cause harm? Does it lead us further from the road to happiness?

In cultivating truthfulness, we're asked to be mindful of our speech. We're asked to recognize the ways in which we engage in both blatant and subtle forms of false speech. It might not be hard to discern blatant lies (then again, it might be). You tell your partner you're going to the gym when you're heading to a rendezvous with the person with whom you're having an affair. You tell your boss that you've completed a task when in fact you haven't. You include untrue information on your resume.

For many of us, the main issue isn't blatant false speech, but rather the more subtle kinds of lying. There are many subtle forms of false speech. There are the so-called white lies. You tell a friend you can't go to dinner with him because you're not feeling well, when the truth is, you just don't want to spend time with him. You tell somebody you didn't return her phone call because you never received the call, when in fact you did.

There are the ways we lie by exaggerating. You tell somebody that you've been meditating for six years, when it's been only four. You tell your friend that you've been waiting for her for twenty minutes, but it's been just five minutes. You tell a business associate that you called her office three times, when you called just once.

There are the occasions when we tell purposeless lies. There's absolutely no reason to lie, but you lie anyway. You say you went to the movies on Tuesday, but actually you went on Wednesday. You say that you took the bus, when you took the train.

There are times when our attempts to be humorous lead us to speak falsely. We may be telling a story about another person and, in an effort to be funny, we may exaggerate the truth. Or we may tell a story about ourselves and stretch the truth. We may not think of humor as a

vehicle for false speech, but when we pay attention we see that it often is; we see that lying in the service of “joking” is detrimental, it results in a loss of integrity.

There are many different ways that we might speak falsely.

(Note: it’s false speech only when we lie intentionally; if we unintentionally give false information it’s not considered a breach of a precept.)

As dharma students striving to act skillfully, we make a commitment to truthfulness. Or at least we begin to make a commitment. We begin to move in the direction of truthfulness. For many of us, it’s a significant move. Many of us have had a lifelong inclination to shirk the truth, avoid the truth. In cultivating an earnest motivation to practice truthfulness, we’re taking a major step forward in our efforts to find happiness in our lives.

In practicing truthfulness, we make sincere effort to notice the different ways that we engage in false speech; we make an effort to see the drawbacks in our unskillfulness.

When I discuss the subject of false speech, there’s always somebody who asks: “Isn’t it okay to lie sometimes? Aren’t some white lies okay?” In response, I explain that I can’t answer that question. I explain that it’s up to the student to see for himself. What I know, what the Buddha knew, will take him only so far. He has to find the answer for himself, not by thinking about it, not by ruminating on the ethical vagaries, but by looking at his actions. He has to study the consequences of his actions. He has to see for himself if there are drawbacks when he speaks falsely. He has to see if his lying causes suffering. In particular, if it causes him suffering.

(Sometimes, students ask: “Isn’t it better to lie rather than to tell the truth and hurt somebody’s feelings?” It’s important to remember that the Buddha, most certainly, doesn’t advocate telling somebody the truth if doing so would cause harm; he says, clearly, that we should speak the truth, but that our words, in addition to being truthful, should be useful,

beneficial, an expression of love and compassion. If speaking the truth would be harmful, then the dharma practitioner, rather than lying, should simply refrain from speaking. Brutal honesty is never skillful.)

If you pay attention to the results when telling a lie, even a subtle lie, you may notice an assortment of painful consequences, unfortunate results. You may notice agitation in your mind. You may notice that you're afflicted with painful mental states, such as remorse or shame or worry. Bringing awareness to your body, you may detect contraction, dis-ease. In short, you may see that you're suffering.

As you examine the consequences of your false speech, you may notice that you feel a loss of integrity, self-esteem. You don't feel good about yourself. You might've been motivated to lie by the idea that it would strengthen your position, but now you feel a certain weakness.

Before speaking falsely, you might've thought that lying would improve your connection with the person you were going to lie to, but after lying you may feel a diminishment of connection, you may feel separation.

It's important to remember that the results of your actions may not be immediately apparent. Initially, speaking falsely might not seem problematic. But if you watch, you may see that over time painful consequences manifest, sprout up like weeds in an abandoned lot. The pain grows, elongates, twists, interweaves. Eventually you're strangled by feelings of dis-ease. The results of unskillful actions may prove more damaging than, at first, they might've seemed. This is part of the law of karma. Actions have short term and long term results. In practicing truthfulness, you're asked to perceive the long term results of speaking falsely. The harmful outcomes of your lying may be long-lasting. You may feel repercussions days, weeks, years afterwards. You can probably think of an example of when you told a small lie, recalled it years

later, and felt definitive pain. Perhaps in high school you told a friend you got an A on your English paper, when, in truth, you got a C. A small lie, but for the next thirty years every now and then the thought of that lie has entered your mind and you've experienced a pang, a dissonant vibration. It shows the enduring power of false speech. Even small lies have far-reaching effects.

Another facet of the law of karma suggests that small actions may yield big results. A small act of lovingkindness may lead to deep happiness. And a small lie, in the long run, may bring about notably damaging results. You tell your friend a subtle lie, it causes a fissure in your friendship, the fissure gradually lengthens, widens, like a crack in the foundation of a building, and the friendship eventually disintegrates.

The law of karma also indicates that certain actions may bring unexpected results. You lie in an interview for a job, and, consequently, you get the job. You become entrenched in the job and stay with it for years, decades. But you're not cut out for the work. As the years go on, you get further and further away from fulfilling your deepest wishes for yourself in terms of your life's work.

The dharma student, practicing truthfulness, looks closely, recognizes the drawbacks in lying, the different shapes the drawbacks take.

Before she speaks, the dharma student reminds herself that her actions will have consequences, short and long term. When she's thinking about lying, she remembers what she's learned, what she's seen, what she knows from her own experience, about the drawbacks in lying.

When you're not truthful in speaking with others, you impair your capacity to be truthful with yourself, about yourself. This is a profoundly damaging consequence of false speech. If

you lie to others, you'll lie to yourself. When you lie to others, you condition an atmosphere of deception in your mind. As your lies add up, the atmosphere gets thicker and thicker, like thick heavy pea soup fog. Your ability to see the truth becomes severely hindered. As a result, when you act unskillfully you'll be likely to deceive yourself. You'll tell yourself that your actions won't lead to suffering. Or you'll tell yourself that it's okay to act the way you've acted. Or that what you did wasn't that bad, wasn't unskillful. Or you'll simply ignore your actions, pretend nothing happened.

When the quality of truthfulness isn't well developed, we lack the ability to be honest with ourselves.

In the "Instructions to Rahula," the Buddha begins his teaching by talking to Rahula about the importance of truthfulness. He takes a dipper filled with a small amount of water, shows Rahula the few drops of water, says:

"Rahula, do you see this little bit of left-over water remaining in the water dipper?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's how little of a contemplative there is in anyone who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie."

The Buddha's message is clear: if we don't develop the quality of truthfulness, we're not going to be able to develop the path, we're not going to get far along the road to true happiness. We'll remain mired in unskillfulness.

The Buddha goes on to say:

"In the same way, Rahula, when anyone feels no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil, I tell you, he will not do. Thus, Rahula, you should train yourself, 'I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest.'"

It's said that the Buddha, before he became the Buddha, developed the skillful qualities, but, like all of us, wasn't perfect, wasn't always successful. At times he failed in his efforts. With one exception. There was one skillful quality that he practiced unfailingly: truthfulness. What the story implies is, in seeking the happiness the Buddha found there are going to be times when you'll struggle, when you'll make mistakes, but if you can be truthful about it, you'll be okay, you'll progress along the path. The Buddha, as a Bodhisatta, made mistakes. But he was truthful about it. As you strive to develop generosity, ethical conduct, renunciation, and the other skillful qualities, there are going to be times when you'll slip up, fail. But it's only a problem if you're not truthful about it. When you're truthful, you give yourself an opportunity to grow. It's how you grow. You grow by making mistakes, being truthful about your mistakes, acknowledging that your unskillful actions lead to suffering, and, in turn, changing, purifying your actions, out of compassion for yourself. It's important to learn to be truthful with yourself about your actions, all your actions, physical, verbal, mental. The Buddha's path, like any authentic spiritual path, requires rigorous honesty. Nobody, of course, likes to look at their unskillfulness, their mistakes, their faults, their failures. But it's necessary. It's necessary to develop the skill of truthfulness.

Again, we're not talking about judging ourselves. In looking truthfully at our unskillful actions, we relinquish self-judgment; instead of judging ourselves, we recognize that our actions

have brought about suffering. We examine our actions objectively, the way a grocer inventories his stock: he counts the cans of peas on his shelves, but doesn't comment, editorialize, criticize ("These are the worst peas I've ever seen!"). As dharma students, we take inventory: we identify whether our actions are unskillful or skillful, whether they're leading to suffering or the end of suffering.

It's not about self-judgment; self-judgment is action informed by aversion. It's about compassion. Looking truthfully at our actions is an act of compassion.

We develop the skillful quality of truthfulness out of compassion for ourselves. Because we have a wish to come to the end of suffering.

As always, it's a process. As we move further along the path, we gradually make more effort to be truthful. We develop a desire to practice truthfulness. The spirit that Thoreau describes in *Walden* begins to resonate:

"Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."

from *The Skill of Living*.....

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