

## Words as Moral Practice

by Lisa Hoffman

I was dining with a group of friends who are all Zen priests and priest candidates. Conversation turned to another priest who wasn't there and became critical and "catty." I began to join in the fun, but soon felt uncomfortable, so I stopped talking. No wonder the Buddha taught about speech in so many different ways. Gossip, for example, is simply too pleasurable and too easy to slide into. Even after I stopped contributing to that conversation, part of me wanted to continue.

At home later in the evening, I had to smile about the dinner discussion because each of us, either at lay or priest ordinations, had accepted the 16 Bodhisattva Precepts. They are a practical commitment to kindness, addressing sexual harm, intoxication, ill will and other actions that do or can inflict suffering. And three of them specifically address speech: *to refrain from false speech; not to slander; not to praise self at the expense of others*. These particular precepts could not be clearer, and they are the essence of Buddhist morality, which is causing no harm. So, why are they hard to honor?

I believe intimacy is at the heart of these teachings. There is the authentic intimacy that grows when the words I use are from an inner foundation of integrity, trust and kindness. And then there is a sort of faux intimacy that is created by the false speech of gossip, which creates a temporary feeling of connection that I notice disappears when the words stop. How could it be any other way? Gossip tends to be an equal opportunity activity that leaves few people out. So how could there possibly be a basis of trust? And, while gossip is certainly fun and creates a kind of energy, it is always at someone's expense. Everyone, including the person who is not there, pays a price. I think the only way I can choose not to gossip is to be painfully aware of that price.

My teacher, Darlene Cohen, wrote in a recent Shambala Sun article called No Harm in a Little Gossip, Right? about her investigation into the topic, "The first thing I noticed was that if you wish to stop hurting people, it unfortunately entails renouncing a feeling that you enjoy, and replacing it with your wish to stop doing harm...That's easy to say, but it's really hard to do."

And it *was* hard for me to stop engaging in that dinnertime conversation, even when consciousness arose that I was causing harm and breaking my vows. It required effort to stop talking. Although I immediately felt clear and grounded, I also felt a bit less connected with my dinner companions, and some little part of me was disappointed. This was the false intimacy that gossip can create and is so easy to crave.

There are so many ways to avoid intimacy through what we say -- or don't say. For me, that's what the precept of *refraining from false speech* suggests. But, it's easy to confuse the Buddha's teaching of compassion with refraining from telling hard truths, like when pain arises within a relationship, or some other difficult issue needs to be addressed. Avoiding these conversations creates distance because a false foundation begins to grow and easily becomes a pattern. So many of us learn to keep things nice in our families of origin, and this karma can dictate how we approach relationships throughout our lives unless it is transformed. How does this transformation happen? It starts with becoming aware of when my behavior conflicts with

my values. It continues with the conscious choice and mindful effort to bring them into alignment, to choose connection with myself and with others.

Robert Aitken, in The Mind of Clover, writes: "We learn to be intimate with ourselves and each other through the practice of truth." Intimacy isn't always easy or comfortable. For me, Aitken is pointing to the transformation that skillful truth-sharing can spark within each of us and in our friendships and primary relationships. And, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh offers guidelines based on the Buddha's teachings for determining when it's time to tell the truth: Is it truthful, helpful, kind and well-timed? Sometimes confronting a difficult issue with a friend is the kindest action we can take.

The Dalai Lama says, "My religion is kindness." This quote always evokes a feeling of peacefulness in my heart. The speech precepts also cultivate such peace. Though it was momentarily difficult to refrain from the gossip-fest over dinner, when I did my heart became quiet and settled. Slander and praising self over others also cultivate turmoil in the heart, because I am enveloped in negativity along with those I am disparaging. I leave them no room to be anything other than my projections; I have placed them in the prison of my opinions and my point of view. And if the only way I can feel good about myself is by putting you down or eclipsing you, the prognosis for our hearts is not so great.

When we are tempted to bash someone else verbally, or compare ourselves with another to find that person wanting, the Buddhist teachings of impermanence, emptiness and interconnectedness is profoundly helpful. My opinion about someone else is exactly that: a thought that will arise and dissipate like a puff of smoke. I have the power to reinforce it through my thoughts and words or let it pass to naturally dissipate. That puff of smoke dissipating can be a symbol of the emptiness of thoughts and feelings. Because there is no separation between me and you, when I disparage you I harm both of us. So what is my touchstone when the siren song of gossip, slander or self aggrandizement calls?

Aitken writes: "We return again and again to intimacy when we drift into discussing the faults of others."

I truly believe that our deepest yearning is to connect with others, and we often simply need to learn how to do so with skill, grace and kindness.

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