

From: Waking up to what you do
by Diane Rizzetto

FIVE

I Take Up the Way of Speaking Truthfully

When asked, "What is honest speech?" she answered,
"Listen! The brook babbles along the stones."

—from a Dharma talk of mine at the Bay Zen Center

This precept is variously cast as "not lying," "not engaging in false speech," or even, "right speech," but however the precept is stated, it encourages us to consider carefully the very nature of deception, and by doing so, directs us to what is real and true.

Approached with open inquiry into what propels the ways we deceive, *taking up the way of speaking honestly* can help us begin to explore our delusory beliefs and conditioning that prevent us from engaging honestly and wholly in the experience of living. There is an old saying that "a person can't dupe others who hasn't duped himself first." In a world that seems so deeply steeped in all levels and types of deception, sifting through our own forms of deception is

not such an easy task. But by turning our awareness toward uncovering the ways in which we delude others, we can come to recognize a deeper betrayal of ourselves and of truth itself. One of my students rephrased this precept in this way:

I take up the way of honestly facing the distrust, uncertainty and fear that propels my tongue to be disloyal to the truth of this moment.

I sit at my computer wondering how to begin writing about being truthful. I start and stop, trying to find the right words to talk about truth telling. It's two days before the first day of summer and the window to my office is wide open. I turn my attention from my thoughts about truth and deception toward the sounds around me. I stop and listen. In the kitchen downstairs, the water is running from the faucet as my husband prepares his morning tea. A rooster is crowing in the distance—cock-a-doodle-doo! My neighbor is calling her cat, "Here kitty, kitty." And there it is—honest speech. I've told you, to the best of my perception, how it is. It seems so simple. Speaking truthfully is simply telling it how it is—in that moment.

Try it yourself. Put this book down for a moment. Take a few deep breaths, relax, and just listen. Open your ears to what's happening around you and within your own body. Now simply say aloud what you hear. Pretty simple isn't it? Try it with your other senses. Say what you see as you look out the window, as you run your fingers over the cover of this book, as you taste some water in your mouth. That's it. Sound oversimplified? Only in the scheme of our complicated thinking.

When I looked up the word *deception* in a thesaurus, I found at least twenty synonyms for not speaking truthfully.

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Misleading, illusory, and deceiving are just a few, and certainly, deception is not limited to speech alone. We can deceive with looks, gestures, actions. Nevertheless, from the point of view of this precept, which focuses primarily on speech, we can say that not telling the truth can range from a harmless fib like "I'm just on my way out the door," cutting off the telephone solicitor who calls just as we're about to sit down to dinner, to harmful lies to deflect blame and suspicion from our own actions. We can sprinkle part truth with part lie, or we can try to create truth by presenting what we wish were true as if it were fact. Sometimes we lie to prevent others from feeling hurt, like when we lie to a child about something we know will be very painful or when we lie to keep bad news to ourselves so we don't worry loved ones. Sometimes we keep silent and lie by omission, taking the route of indifference. Some of us anguish over the simplest fib while some of us have learned to distrust truth to such an extent that lying has become the habitual way of reacting to events. And there are many variations of deception in between. Finally, deception isn't limited to what we tell others; it also includes what we tell ourselves.

The Certainty Principle

An old Buddhist tale tells the story of Mara, the ancient Buddhist god of ignorance, who shows up whenever it seems he can dupe folks into believing what isn't true.

One day Mara was traveling along the road with some of his attendants and noticed a man doing walking meditation. The man's face glowed with delight. It seems he had just discovered something on the ground in front of him. Noticing the glow lighting the man's face, one of Mara's attendants asked the god what the man has discovered. Mara answered, "It seems he has discovered a piece of truth."

His attendant grew quite excited and exclaimed, "But you are the god of deception, aren't you bothered by the fact that someone has found a piece of truth?"

Mara answered, "I'm not troubled in the least."

"Why not?" asked his attendant.

"Because," Mara replied, chuckling, "No sooner do people discover a little truth than they make a belief out of it."

Someone recently remarked to me that he was quite surprised to find out that the more he explored deception, the

more he longed for a clear explanation of the truth. He realized not only did he look for it as a child from his parents, as a student from his teachers, in his profession as a scientist, but also now he realized that he continued his search for the truth in his meditation practice. What's more, he said, he found his own children and his own school students looking to him to provide all the answers. He realized that he and his students were striving for certainty. Certainty is seductive. It makes us feel safe and comfortable. But also, it lulls us into compliance and deadens our inquiry and questioning, lures us deeper into the dream of self. Without it, we might feel like that trapeze artist, hanging between bars. But grasping it, we swing back and forth, ignoring the ever-changing nature of people and events swinging in and out of our lives.

The Buddha said, "Do not believe what I tell you. You must find it out for yourself." I can tell you I hear the sound of a rooster crowing cock-a-doodle-doo in the distant neighbor's yard, but what do you hear and how do you speak what you hear? What is Truth? When asked, "Where is the Great Truth?" the Zen master answered, "It just moved." Truth won't be pinned down. Truth will not be pinned down with the word *the*. How do we pin down the moment? Truth defies definition because it's changing so quickly that as soon as we've tried to grasp it, we've lost it. But it is not only ungraspable; in the words of another Zen master, Truth is also *unutterable, beyond expression*. So, Truth cannot be grasped, written down, or explained in a lecture or a book. This is why it can seem so illusive and distant to us. In a certain sense, then, every time we open our mouth to speak, we have strayed into deception because we have attempted to speak something that cannot be communicated. Yet, communication is inescapable. We do have to speak. Sometimes we even have to speak untruths.

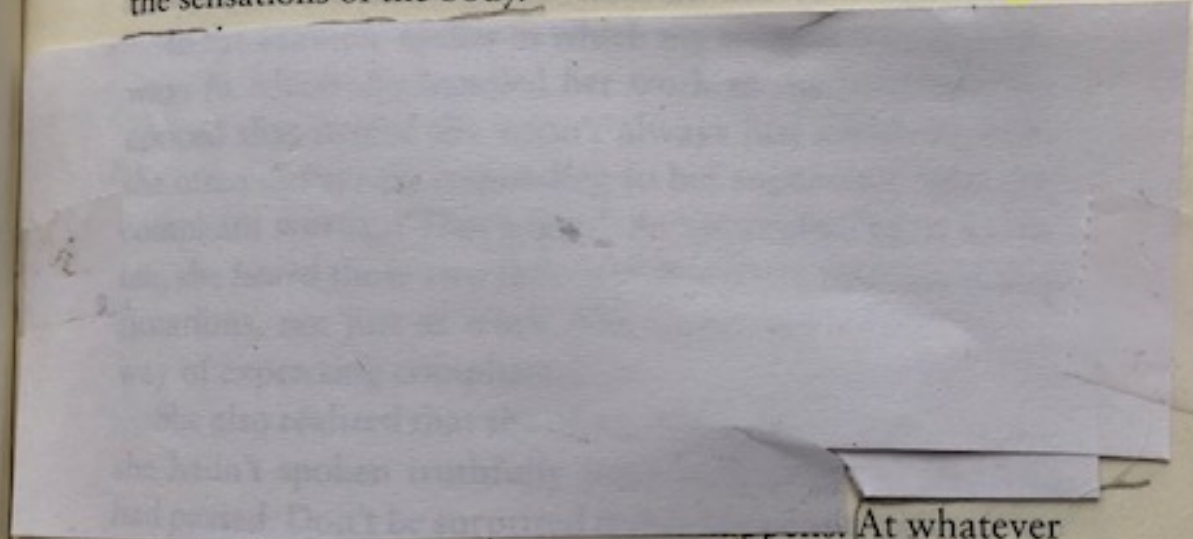
So where does that leave us? If your lover or partner asks if you'll be there for him in the future or if he becomes ill, can you say, "If I really were to speak the truth, I can't say I'll love you in the next moment, let alone if you get sick and need me to take care of you. If I were to be honest with you, I can't even say for certain if I'll feel like sticking around tomorrow morning"? Yet we do have to respond to our partner's question. How do you suppose it would settle with your partner if you just remained silent? Would it be wise to tell a five-year-old, "I really can't say for certain that mommy or daddy will be here to take care of you while you grow up"? When do you lie intentionally? Do you reveal the hiding place of innocent people trying to escape ruthless killers? How do we know when to keep silent and when to speak truthfully?

If we look to the precept as a formula to shape our speech, it will fail us when we are faced with a choice of using words in such a way so that they will best serve life. If we hope our speech meets the reality of the present, we have to face the uncertainty of the future. What was true yesterday may be false today and has no guarantees for tomorrow. Any of the precepts can only serve us to the extent that they can help us face the truth of our actions from moment to moment. The moment of choice—to distort or not to distort—that is where our practice begins.

THE PRACTICE

Begin your practice of this precept by observing the ways in which you do not speak truthfully. Remember to keep the observing stance of the science researcher, paying close attention to when you find yourself distorting truth. You might try by limiting your inquiry to specific situations where

you think you may find yourself engaged in deception, but you may also keep it broad. The key is to *listen* to yourself as you speak. I mean *really* listen to the words, the tone of your voice, the pauses and silences, at work, at breakfast with your partner, at the supermarket, in the doctor's office. There is no specific place to do this part of the practice. Just do it. You might be surprised that even if you don't look for ways you deceive, but keep an open ear to deceptive words, voice inflection, and body language, you might still find quite a bit. Remember, the invitation goes out only to the observer, not the judge. And if she does show up anyway, then we just put her in her place, nodding *Hello judge*, then turn the attention toward observing the sound of the voice, the sensations of the body.



At whatever point in time you wake up to the fact you've not spoken truthfully, that moment is your point of entry into the precept. The event can be as recent as three seconds ago or as long ago as several days. In this early stage, you're just trying to discover the reactionary patterns—under what conditions distortion takes place, so as a point of reflection, it doesn't matter if the beacon light goes on before, during, or after you have distorted the truth. For example, my student began noticing that not only did she not speak up at work,

but also she often went into silence when she had a disagreement with her partner or one of her kids. The beacon of light was revealing a much wider reactionary range.

Once you've identified a few typical situations, you're ready to inquire a little deeper. Now, at whatever point you realize you've engaged in a deception, turn your awareness inward and feel your body. Are there any sensations like heart pounding, dry mouth, blushing, or a sinking feeling? See if that sensation wants to name itself as guilt, shame, fear, or whatever. Don't demand an answer. Just invite it. Notice what sorts of thoughts are present and notice if they string together in a story line. What is that story? *I'm bad. I'll never get this. I'm found out. What will they think? How can I cover this?* Are you thinking of further deceptions to cover the last deception? The mind might be racing pretty fast at this point. It's not necessary to catch all the thoughts. Just one. Then just repeat it to yourself: "Having a thought that . . ." You've just spoken truthfully! Don't try to change anything. The purpose is to simply bring the attention to what you're experiencing and be honestly in its presence.

If you do this for some time, over quite a few occasions, you'll begin to notice that the lens of your awareness grows stronger and quicker. It's as if we begin to move backward on the line so that the beacon or stoplight goes on a lot quicker as you engage in a deception. One of my students reported that he felt he hardly ever communicated without deceiving in some way. People often report that they think they're engaging more often in the reaction, when in fact, they are just waking up to how often they do it. This can be a difficult time when our self-judging guilt mind takes over. But we handle the judging mind as we do any other thought/emotion/body reaction. Label. Feel. Breathe and move on.

It is at this point that it is useful to engage the precept as a stop sign that says "Stop before you proceed." Just to stop the action is not enough, however. Saying to yourself, "I'm not going to speak deception in this situation" is useful to a certain extent, of course, but leaving it there will not drive you into a deeper understanding of the falseness of your beliefs. So stop the action, but then begin the inquiry. The stop brings us to the dead spot so that we can fully experience the moment of Just This.

Awareness deepens within the pause. You are between the bars on the trapeze, just before speaking (or not speaking). You are in the dead spot. It is right here that the deception is unveiled by delving further into the experience. It is important to keep in mind the spirit of the Zen riddle here. You are not demanding an answer, but rather suspending in open inquiry into the question: What's the worst thing that could happen if I spoke the truth here? The question is put forth but then released. It's as if you send out a probe into the darkness and simply are open to what eventually is revealed. The real power is in the questioning, not in the answering.