



The Fourth Grave Precept: *Not Lying*

Why do we lie? What prevents us from speaking the truth? Not lying, or being truthful, asks us to trust the ground of reality rather than our own ideas and preferences. Since most of us have some trouble with this, we lie.

Sometimes we tell blatant, bald-faced lies. “No, I didn’t eat the cookies.” But more often we lie unintentionally. We exaggerate (“I left you *ten* messages last week.”), or leave out parts of the story, or even selectively remember what happened. Telling lies or partial truths is a defensive reflex, a natural response to our ongoing preoccupation with protecting and defending our sense of self. In this way, exploring the precept of not-lying becomes fertile ground to study the overt and covert ways we play out the greed (wanting to look good), aversion (fear of embarrassment or reprimand) and confusion of the anxious personality.

Prescriptive Level: Don’t Tell Deliberate Lies

Early Buddhist texts describe the impact of telling an intentional lie this way:

“For the person who transgresses in one thing, I tell you, there is no evil deed that is not to be done. Which one thing? This: telling a deliberate lie.”

These strong words reveal the truth that a person who lies deliberately cannot be trusted. If they are willing to lie, who knows what other “evil” transgressions they might stoop to? We know this in our direct experience. Think for a moment about a person who has deliberately lied to you. How do you feel about them? Do you trust them? Are you willing to rely on them? Probably not.

In Zen there’s a saying that, “When a Zen teacher preaches false dharma, his eyebrows fall off.” Like Pinocchio’s nose, this vivid

image captures the negative impact, or karma, of lying. Regardless of our rationale or excuses, lies distort reality and contort us.

Years ago I dated a man who was a chronic liar. He was quite charming and told me when we first met that he had a long history of telling untruths. He spoke as if this was a bad habit long put behind him. This partial truth impressed me. I was moved by his apparent courage and honesty.

Several months into our relationship, his web of lies and excuses grew so thick and convoluted that even he couldn't keep his stories straight. Our conversations became increasingly bizarre and confusing until it was clear the person I thought I knew bore little resemblance to the person I was relating to. At some point, we met at a café to officially end the relationship. Sitting across the table from this man, sipping my latte, I listened in amazement as he continued to spin wild stories and explanations. The longer he spoke, the more he pinned himself into a corner. He knew he was lying, but he couldn't stop. It was like watching someone in the heat of an addiction.

As he spoke, his face and neck broke out in bright red blotches. Like Pinocchio's nose, his body revealed the anxiety and distress he was unable to speak with words. After all these years, I don't remember his name or much else about him, but the image of his blotchy face remains a sharp reminder of the powerful consequences that manifest when we lie.

Lying makes us nervous. Lie detector tests function by checking for the palpable, somatic signs of fear that accompany telling a lie. To avoid the angst and upset inherent in lying, most of us do not lie in blatant, aggressive ways. Rather, our lies are subtle, even unconscious.

Compassionate Level: Not-Harming

At the compassionate level of exploring this precept the emphasis shifts from "don't do it," toward catching on to the *intention* behind our words. For a Bodhisattva, all speech (as well as all silence) is engaged in the service of non-harming. This means that there may be situations in which it is appropriate to lie. If lying

protects, benefits or serves a greater good, then lying may be “skillful means.”

Lying to a thief or terrorist or murderer in order to save innocent lives, is considered justified. The flip side is also true. If speaking untruths to benefit others is justified, then *not* speaking to protect others is also justified. In fact, remaining silent when speaking up would aid another person also violates the spirit of this precept. The decision to speak or not to speak, to tell blatant lies, or lies of omission, hinges on our *intention*: do our words or silence lead to benefit, or to harm?

This is slippery territory. Commonly we defend our “white lies” by insisting that we don’t want to hurt the other person. But more often it’s the case that we really want to protect ourselves. The primary activity of the self is to avoid discomfort and pull for praise. So we need to be careful and honest with ourselves here. When we tell a “white lie,” are we doing it to protect the other person, or to avoid the unpleasant feelings likely to arise if we tell the truth? When we exaggerate or make excuses, usually we are trying to gain kudos, or to maintain a positive image in another person’s eyes.

In navigating this territory, it is useful to distinguish *hurt* from *harm*. Often we confuse the two, claiming we want to avoid harm when in fact we don’t want to face the sting and awkwardness we feel when speaking our truth hurts the other person. Yet, the ability to tolerate short-term hurt frequently contributes to long-term benefit. In fact, *not* saying what’s true often puts off the inevitable, setting a person up for even more pain down the road. But it’s hard for us to stand that heat.

As a panel member during the New Ventures West coaching certification process, I am often reluctant to say what I see for fear of hurting another person. It would be so much easier not to speak, to gloss over the surface and let everyone go home happy. Certainly there would be less agitation and upset for *me*. But when I lack the guts or capacity to hang in there with the intensity of another person’s potential hurt, everyone misses out. A prime opportunity for powerful learning is lost.

Still, this is tricky. In addition to continually checking our intention, we also need to be sensitive to *timing*. Just because something is true, doesn’t mean we should necessarily say it. The Buddha described that even if something is true and beneficial, if it

isn't kind we need to carefully consider if this is the appropriate opportunity to speak—or not.

Before we speak, it is useful to pause, reflect and wonder: is it true? Is it beneficial? Is it kind? These guidelines can help us clarify our intention, and prevent verbal harm. Yet guidelines aren't meant to be hard, fast rules. As long as we are human, there will be gray area. This is good news, preventing us from getting locked into robotic, rigid behavior. Discerning whether or not to speak demands that we show up. We can't rely on "rules" to tell us what to do. We have to be there, open, awake and fully present, allowing the dynamism of the situation to reveal what's appropriate in the moment.

Ultimate Level: Trusting Reality

The inclination to lie exposes our faith, or lack of faith, in "things as they are." Can we really trust reality? Do we trust it enough to rely on what's true, rather than continuously tweaking our experience to conform to our personal preferences?

In response to the precept of not lying, Dogen writes:

*The dharma wheel has all-inclusively turned.
There is no excess; there is no deficiency.
One complete moistening of sweet dew
bears fruit as actuality and truth.*

When we fully meet our life, all-inclusively (with "no part left out," as Suzuki Roshi used to say) there's no need to add or subtract anything. Beyond the narrow confines of the fussy, anxious self, reality is always completely sufficient. From this place of appreciation and wonder, our words "bear fruit." What we say becomes part of the fabric of reality itself, rather than a commentary or tag line superimposed on top of it.

When someone speaks the truth, it inspires us. Those who speak the truth despite personal pain or difficulty offer powerful models of courage and virtue. Gandhi, a great disciple of truth once said, "We must care for the truth in front of us more than for consistency." Long after his death, Gandhi's life (as his message) bears this out, continuing to inspire us today.

Like Gandhi, Socrates lived and died for the truth. Confronting the sophists and establishment of 5th century Athens, he used language to challenge popular convention and help his students wake up. Socrates engaged the young men of Athens in dialogue, questioning and upending their fixed views and beliefs. Dedicated to revealing the truth by unraveling their flawed or partial understanding, he never offered a set doctrine or truth of his own. For him, the process of questioning—not landing on an answer—was an exercise in truth itself.

Socrates' dedication to the truth was so firm that he literally died for it. After being accused of corrupting his students (daring to provoke the establishment is always dangerous!), he was sentenced to death. Rather than fleeing, as most people hoped and expected him to do, he chose to drink poison hemlock. And while he is long gone, the inspiration of his life and death lives on.

From the ultimate perspective, the precept of not lying asks us to trust the truth of reality above all else. This means committing ourselves to the display of life and death unfolding, without flinching when our own comfort or well being is at stake. While we may not be willing to give up our life for the truth, we can follow Socrates' example of trusting the ground of our actual moment-to-moment experience, refusing to land on a solid, unarguable position. Instead we can come to see that every truth is partial; that ultimate truth resides beyond words and language.

The opening lines of the seminal Daoist text from China, the *Dao de Jing*, state: "The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name." These lines reflect the understanding in Asian culture that ultimate truth cannot be pinned down with words. The Japanese, for example, are suspicious of people who speak with too much conviction. Pushing too hard or over-explaining reeks of defensiveness. Traditionally Zen teachers reveal only a third of what they understand, allowing their students to hang out and grapple with the unspeakable. This stands in stark contrast to the American standard where politicians and professors alike frequently overstate or "sell" their position and point of view.

As Westerners, we may fear that if ultimate reality continually lingers beyond language, we will be left groundless, insecure, and reluctant to speak at all. In fact, the opposite is true. Realizing that

anything we say is inherently partial and incomplete frees us to speak without undue concern about being “right.” Released from the need to defend and argue our point of view allows us to speak with greater ease and less clinging.

When we speak honestly, each of us expresses our unique part of the truth. If we hold too tightly to our part, we miss the contribution of others. But if we refuse to speak, we deny others our perspective and deprive reality of its full expression. It is only when each of us courageously speaks our limited, incomplete truth that completeness manifests. Coming together each voice brings into being a chorus of robust wholeness no one of us can create alone.