

The Buddhist Guide to Gossip

By Roshi Nancy Mujo Baker

When we were teenagers, my brother had a funny little routine about gossip. He would begin with “I never say anything about anyone that isn’t good,” and then, leaning over as if to whisper in your ear, he would add, “*and, boy, is this good!*” Usually that was followed by something really juicy. We find this play on words amusing, because we recognize in ourselves the seemingly harmless temptation to speak ill of others and to listen to such speaking. What’s interesting about this precept is that, unlike, say, killing or stealing, it’s about speaking, which doesn’t seem so serious. And yet, the Gatha of Atonement, chanted every morning in Zen communities, reminds us that “all evil karma ever committed by me” arises through “body, *mouth*, and consciousness.” Still, we want to say, how can speaking of others’ faults be as harmful as stealing? After all, as children we learn to defend against name-calling with “Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but names can never hurt me.” But how many of us can say really truthfully “Names can never hurt me”? How many of us are completely free of the effects of the various versions of “name-calling” when it’s aimed at us? And don’t forget, in addition to namecalling, speaking of others’ faults can take many forms—for example, gossip, complaining, putting down, and passing on hearsay, among others. Putting ourselves in the shoes of the one whose faults are talked about or the one who is the subject of gossip, and asking how it feels, can help us see how serious this can be. In the end it can damage whole communities.



As with all the precepts, we can take this one very literally: *Never ever* speak of the faults of another. Or, contextually: *sometimes* it's appropriate to speak of the faults of others depending on the circumstances. Or, from the point of view of Oneness or the One Body, it becomes *non-speaking* of the faults of others. From this point of view, which isn't really a point of view at all, the separation needed for such notions as "faults" or "speaking ill" or even "others" doesn't exist. It is here, too, that the precepts are no longer guiding principles of behavior, but are manifested naturally as our very being. It's interesting to look at a few different versions of this precept not so much to consider these different levels or dimensions but simply to bring out some of its various aspects in our ordinary lives. The Bodhidharma version, as translated by Aitken Roshi, is "Self nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the flawless dharma, *not expounding upon error* is called the precept of not speaking of the faults of others." The late John Daido Looi Roshi's translation refers to this as "*refraining from speaking of others' errors and faults.*" Zen Master Dogen's version is "In the Buddhadharma there is one path, one dharma, one realization, one practice. *Don't commit fault finding. Don't commit haphazard talk.*" Elsewhere Dogen writes "*Do not let them talk of others' errors and faults.*"

Notice what we have here: Not *finding fault*, which suggests that we actually look for faults. Not *speaking of the faults of others*, which, as mentioned above, includes such forms of speaking as gossip, complaining, and passing on hearsay. Not *letting others* do it, which points to our willingness, even eagerness, to listen to such speaking. And not *expounding upon* those faults, which makes me think of the pleasure of shared "analysis" of the behavior of others: in other words, going on and on exercising our great "perceptiveness."

So what are faults, anyway? That's really worth thinking about. We should, of course, include related words such as "failings," "foibles," "defects,"

“weaknesses,” “shortcomings,” and so on. “Foibles” don’t seem as serious a fault as “defects of character,” but talking about them may be just as harmful. But before we get to the talking-about part, notice the moralistic connotation of these words, an assumption that things or people should be other than what they are. Notice the *should* here. When we find fault, not only do we have a preference, but we are ready to reject something, to exclude it from our world and definitely from ourselves. From the perspective of the Absolute, the One Body, Bodhidharma’s “flawless dharma,” this is, of course, impossible or doesn’t even make sense. Not only is the dharma faultless or “flawless,” but nothing can be excluded. There is no “outside.” Within our relative world, however, there are faults, and sometimes, in appropriate ways and appropriate circumstances, they need to be corrected. But often what we think of as faults may not be so at all—especially when whatever it is is not harming others and is just something I reject in myself. “Thank God, I don’t have *her* elbows!” might be an example.

So why do we talk about others’ errors and faults? What’s in it for us? Well, probably a number of things. Sometimes there’s the need for reassurance that I’m right. Or that I’m good. Or that I’m at least not like *that*, whatever “that” may be. It can also be a way of avoiding what I imagine will be a confrontation. It’s an avoidance of telling the truth, of putting truth where it belongs. So in speaking *about* as opposed to speaking *to* someone, we’re failing to honor this precept. And that’s often what we do. We’re afraid. Also motivating us is the need to get someone over to my side about an issue. Most striking of all is the unconscious desire for intimacy with the one to whom I am speaking. But this is a delusion, since it is nothing but false intimacy. In fact, it’s amazing to think that we actually use speaking about the faults of others in order to feel connected. Notice the contradiction, the delusion, here: We use, and even create, separation from one thing or person to overcome separation from another! We are afraid of genuine contact, so we find something or someone to

complain about or gossip about. It occurs to me that the “expounding upon” the errors and faults of others in one of the translations mentioned above is part of this. It means telling stories about, analyzing, enjoying being very “perceptive” with another at someone else’s expense, as if this shared enterprise brings us closer together.

One of the things that my teacher taught me—by catching me red-handed—was not to take hearsay for the truth, and certainly never to pass it on. Sometimes we’re all too eager to make truth out of hearsay. So why do we pass it on? Why do we accept it from someone else instead of saying “That’s just hearsay,” or, at least, wondering whether it’s true? There are often situations in which our judgment, in the best sense of the word, is important and needed. One of the things to be really careful of is that we don’t base it on hearsay. But most important for honoring this precept is to inquire into what motivates us to pass it on.

It’s worth thinking back on how much many of us got off on speaking about what we imagined to be the errors and faults of our last president. The speaking was about his faults, as if we knew what they were. It’s a long way from national policy to the actual character of somebody. One of the reasons we do this is frustration and maybe even fear around political issues. It’s as if our concern is completely misplaced. So we speak ill of someone. That’s all we are able to do, so we imagine. It’s important in our laughing, joking and sometimes incredibly serious putdown of this human being, or whoever our latest demonized public figure is, that we ask ourselves why we’re doing this. What could be done in its place? What is there that we actually know, and what is there that we actually do not know? It often takes courage to find out the truth.

Speaking of someone else's errors and faults is, of course, sometimes appropriate and necessary. I teach, and it's part of my job. I teach in a small institution where there is a great deal of personal contact with students and enormous opportunity to help them grow. A job for any teacher is to give some kind of critical feedback. It's difficult in the beginning to learn how to do that. It's something, again, worth thinking about. How do we give critical feedback? Our fear of not being able to do it, our ineptitude, is one of the things that can make us talk about the person in question in a fault-finding way. The rejecting, polarizing aspect of my thinking can be so subtle here. I once had the intention to speak to my teacher about something that was causing disorder in the sangha, and someone who prided herself on knowing much about the dharma, or at least about how to behave with teachers, said, "Oh, you can't do that." I followed her advice, and I have regretted it ever since. When I look back on it, I see it as such an interesting failure on my part. There are two things that might not occur to us in regard to this precept. One is that the "speaking" here is not just speaking out loud, not just speaking to another. It's the speaking that goes on in our heads. The judging that goes on in our heads. It's amazing. Some people walk around judging everything all the time, particularly when it comes to other people's faults or what we imagine to be faults. All of us do this some of the time. It involves having preferences and rejecting, wanting to exclude. This is connected to the second thing, our relationship to our own faults. Do we do our best to ignore our own faults altogether? Or are we painfully aware of them and want to get rid of them, to exclude them from the reality of what is? The ego, by definition in the business of separation, imagines it can change itself through more separation by excluding parts of itself from reality. We then find these faults in others and do our best to disidentify from them through speaking ill of others.

So how can we work with this precept? The main thing to work with is my relation to my own faults. Can I befriend them or compassionately allow

them? Choose your own language. The main thing is not to suppress them, act them out, or blame others. Disowning our faults or even just disparaging them only piles separation onto separation, which creates disorder not only in our local sangha but in the whole world. We can see that Plato understood this well when he tells us in his *Republic* that harmony in the state is a function of harmony in the soul. One of the translations of this precept says “Don’t commit haphazard talk.” This means practicing mindful speaking. It makes me think of the saying “Loose lips sink ships” from World War II, another version of creating disorder, or worse. There is mindful listening as well, and Dogen’s “not letting others” speak of faults. This means that part of my honoring this precept is helping others honor it. Useful here is a rule in a seminar I once participated in—not to complain to anyone who can’t do something about what you’re complaining about and not to accept a complaint unless you can do something about it.

In those circumstances in which it is appropriate and important to speak about someone’s errors and faults, or, better yet, *to* that person, how can we do it? The same way we do it for ourselves— it’s no different. No preferences, no judgments, completely welcoming, accepting what is, compassionate allowing. They are then no longer faults in the sense of something that needs rejecting. Dogen suggests that in practicing kind speech we remember how we speak to children. As adults we can learn something about speaking to each other from noticing how we naturally speak to children. Another thing we can practice is always asking ourselves about the suffering of the other. What kind of suffering is the other experiencing? When there are really grave faults involved, there’s some kind of suffering. Even with small faults, suffering is always there.

One practice is to take the person you reject the most, the one whose supposed faults you have the most temptation to talk about, and concentrate on that

person's strengths, perfection, true nature, and similarities to you. Always remember the famous saying of the Roman playwright Terence: "Nothing human is foreign to me." Or "There but for the grace of God go I." If we can really cultivate that feeling, that spirit, it helps to change the world.

We can undergo a complete change of perspective and discover even in a relative way what it's like to include that which we are wanting to exclude, split off, put down. Muriel Rukeyser has a beautiful example in her poem about cockroaches:

ST. ROACH

For that I never knew you, I only learned to dread you,
for that I never touched you, they told me you are filth,
they showed me by every action to despise your kind;
for that I saw my people making war on you,
I could not tell you apart, one from another,
for that in childhood I lived in places clear of you, for that all the people I knew
met you by
crushing you, stamping you to death, they poured boiling
 water on you, they flushed you down,
for that I could not tell one from another
only that you were dark, fast on your feet, and slender.
 Not like me.
For that I did not know your poems
And that I do not know any of your sayings
And that I cannot speak or read your language
And that I do not sing your songs
And that I do not teach our children
 to eat your food

or know your poems

or sing your songs

But that we say you are filthing our food

But that we know you not at all.

Yesterday I looked at one of you for the first time.

You were lighter than the others in color, that was
neither good nor bad.

I was really looking for the first time.

You seemed troubled and witty.

Today I touched one of you for the first time.

You were startled, you ran, you fled away

Fast as a dancer, light, strange and lovely to the touch.

I reach, I touch, I begin to know you.

When we see that the universe is One Body, that there is no such thing as
exclusion or inclusion, then we begin to know it all!

This is the precept of not speaking of others' faults.

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