

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 2: Exploring Buddhist Practice – The Five Precepts

Week 5: The Fourth Precept – the Principle of Truthfulness

Positive form: With truthful communication, I purify my speech.

Negative form: I undertake the training principle of refraining from false speech.

Pāli: Musāvāda veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

The importance of speech

How we speak shapes the world we live in. Our speech has a strong effect on us, and on other people. Clearly we need some ethical guidelines about our speech. Of course these need to go beyond truthfulness – for example members of the Triratna Buddhist Order take on a total of four speech precepts – but these extra precepts could all be seen as aspects of other ethical principles, such as kindness, that are covered by other precepts. In the Five Precepts – the most widespread ethical formula in the Buddhist world – the need for truthfulness is the one aspect of speech that is singled out and dealt with separately.

Truthful speech is not an elementary, beginners' practice. As we shall see, it is a difficult practice that strongly challenges our usual egocentric approach to life.

The principle of truthfulness

We could define truthfulness as a courageous respect for reality, even when acknowledging and facing up to the truth goes against what we see as our self-centred goals, or when it might cause us discomfort.

So practising this precept is about developing the qualities of straightforwardness and integrity. This means facing and speaking the truth even when this goes against what our ego wants, and so undermining our tendency to give priority to our self-centred desires over reality. This raises an important side-issue – that the precept is about speaking the truth when this is uncomfortable for us, not when it is uncomfortable for other people. People often object to this precept on the grounds that speaking the truth can be unkind, as though our untruthfulness was usually about sparing other people's feelings. In fact, for most of us, most of our untruthfulness is about our own selfishness, and it is this we are trying to tackle. When it comes to speaking the truth about others we need to give priority to kindness, which will involve tact and consideration, although it will usually also include speaking the truth, at the right time. (Sometimes we tell ourselves we are lying to spare another's feelings, when really we are trying to avoid the discomfort we would feel if we told the truth.)

The dangers of untruthfulness

If we distort the truth in our speech we harm ourselves directly, we cut ourselves off from others, and we cut ourselves off from the spiritual community.

Untruthfulness harms us

We harm ourselves, because whenever we distort the truth we make it more difficult to be truthful with ourselves – to face up to reality and see ourselves as we really are – which undermines our whole spiritual practice. We undermine our integrity and sense of wholeness, cutting ourselves off from what is best in us, and alienating ourselves from our higher nature – which some traditions call our Buddha Nature.

Untruthfulness cuts us off from others

Distorting the truth also cuts us off from others. We cannot be in communication with others if we are not telling the truth. If we are untruthful, then what we are communicating is not real – so there can be no real communication. One important aim of ethics is to help us to behave in ways that reflect and increase our sense of connectedness with others. Communication is a powerful way of increasing this connectedness and breaking down the barriers between ourselves and others. By cutting us off from true communication, false speech increases our painful, deluded sense of ourselves as a hard, tight, separate ego, cut off from others and in conflict with the rest of the world.

Untruthfulness cuts us off from the spiritual community

Creating the spiritual community is an important part of our practice. We all need a spiritual community – a Sangha – to get far in the spiritual life. We need to be part of a community of people who share a common aspiration and support each other in their practice. We need friendships where we can be open and honest, with no fear that anything we say will be used against us. This sort of spiritual community can only exist when people trust each other, and trust is only possible when people speak the truth. Lying and distortion inevitably creates distrust. So when we lie or distort the truth in the context of the Sangha we cut ourselves off from the spiritual community, with disastrous consequences for our own progress, and we undermine the spiritual community for others.

The extent of truthful speech

In asking us to adopt truthful speech as an aspect of our spiritual training this precept goes beyond what would normally be called lying. Of course it covers the direct lie, but it also asks us to strive to make our speech give a true reflection of reality, avoiding the one-sided distortions that our ego-centred desires give rise to. This would include, for example, not exaggerating – to make ourselves look good, or important, or interesting, or hard-done-by, or to make others look worse than they are. It would include not putting the spin on events that puts us in the best light, or puts us in the right, or gets us what we want. It would include not looking

for excuses so as to avoid blame, but owning up to our own responsibility. It would include presenting both sides of the story, and not just our own. It would include avoiding all the omissions and false emphases that give a false picture of what really happened, while staying this side of a direct lie. The precept asks us to be openly and courageously truthful as a spiritual practice, not to stick to the letter of any literalistic rule.

The benefits of practising truthfulness

Truthfulness is a demanding practice. Very often we hold a sort of press conference for ourselves through our speech, constantly trying to edit reality to make ourselves look the way we want to be seen. Often we are not even aware we are doing this – we actually believe our own distortions, and we can react angrily if they are challenged. To consciously set out to change these patterns is a difficult but powerful transformative practice. It makes us more aware of our unconscious motivations, improves our relationships with others, reduces our anxiety levels, and brings about a general improvement in our ethical practice, which is reflected in a general improvement in our mental states.

Developing awareness

To practice truthful speech we have to be aware of our speech. We have to be mindful when this can be most difficult – when we are interacting with other people, with all the reactions and emotions this involves. Often we are not really very conscious of our speech, or of the volitions behind it. So a lot of the time our dishonesty slips by unnoticed, and once some time has passed we may begin to believe our own distortions. But if we consciously decide to tell the truth, then we have to watch ourselves, we have to ask ourselves, as we speak, “Is this true?” This makes us more conscious of our mental processes, and forces us to examine the stories we tell ourselves. If we do not take up the training rule of truthful speech as a conscious practice, then we run the risk of staying in a fog, never becoming aware of the way we twist the truth to suit our own purposes. In which case it will be very hard for us to make any spiritual progress.

The Eight Worldly Winds

Most of the time we distort the truth to get what we want in some way. One useful framework for looking at the way we do this is the ‘Eight Worldly Winds’. These are four pairs of positives and negatives that tend to govern our egocentric responses to the world – we constantly try to get as much as we can of the ‘positive’ side of each pair, and avoid the negative.

The Eight Worldly Winds are:

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| Gain (of money and possession) | versus | loss |
| Praise or approval | versus | blame |
| Pleasure or comfort | versus | pain or discomfort |
| Fame or status | versus | loss of fame or status |

The worldly winds are the ego's scorecards, which determine whether it thinks it is doing well or badly in the game of life. Normally we distort the truth in the service of winning one or another of these games. We want to gain money or goods, and to avoid losing them. We want to be praised or liked, and to avoid blame. We want to have comfort or pleasures, and to avoid discomfort. And we want to increase our importance in other people's eyes.

Because our tendency to distort the truth is so directly related to our self-centred motivations, the practice of truthful speech helps us to recognise our egotistic patterns, and to go beyond them. If we are consciously practising this precept, then over and over again in our daily interactions we will be confronted with the fact that we very much want to distort the truth for some self-centred reason, but that our ethical guidelines warn us against this. Usually the motive for untruthfulness will be connected with one of the Eight Worldly Winds, for example we will want to avoid blame or to make someone like us. Our practice of the precept will blow the whistle on this motivation, and we will be led to confront our unconscious volitions. Then, instead of doing what we usually do, we can take the skilful, creative option.

If we really take on this precept in a courageous way it can be a radical and transformative practice, because it tackles our unconscious egocentricity in a large number of everyday situations, making us aware of our real drives and helping us to confront them. The Eight Worldly Winds are so much part of our motivation that we may be tempted to distort the truth almost all the time when we are interacting with other people, so that practising this precept gives us a very fruitful way of bringing our practice into our daily life.

We can reinforce the way truthful speech makes us more aware by involving other people, and asking them to help us. They may point out to us when we drift away from the truth, which will have very positive effects on our mindfulness! Our spiritual friends can hold a mirror up to us, which can sometimes allow us to see our own untruthfulness clearly for the first time.

Better relationships

As we begin to practice the fourth precept more consciously we may also notice that our relationships improve. We start to be more genuine, revealing more about ourselves, and letting some of our defences down. People tend to like us more when we stop hiding behind a mask and reveal our vulnerability. And as we become more open, so others become more open with us. Over time the quality of our friendships can become deeper and more satisfying, and our whole life becomes richer and more rewarding as a result.

People value and respond to integrity. As we practice truthfulness people realise that we can be trusted. And because truthfulness allows real communication, people are much more eager to befriend people who practice truthfulness than those who don't.

Less anxiety

Practising truthful speech often helps us to feel more at ease, and less shy and anxious around other people. When we distort the truth to create an unreal image of ourselves, we fear that people will see through the mask we have created to the real person we are trying to hide. This can cause a sense of shyness, and an underlying anxiety in our interactions with others. Being more open and straightforward allows us to let go of this anxiety. We find that if we reveal ourselves more as we really are, people do not respond with disapproval – in fact they actually like and accept us far more.

A general improvement in ethics

Finally, if we seriously take on a practice of truthfulness we will probably find that our whole practice of ethics will improve, including areas that at first sight seem to have nothing to do with speech. For example we might realise that we have not been honest with the tax man, or that we have not been honest with some important person in our life, and that if we are going to speak the truth from now on we will not be able to carry on the deception, and need to sort the situation out. So our commitment to honesty will help us to tackle the legacy of past unskilfulness. This has the effect of reconnecting us with our sense of integrity, and putting us more in touch with our higher self. The process may cost us some money, or make us eat humble pie – of course the ego hates the idea of either – but this may be just what our spiritual life needs!

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that distorting the truth has a harmful effect on us? Why, or why not?
2. Think of one occasion when you distorted the truth over the past week. What was the motivation for this? Can you relate your motivation to one of the 'Worldly Winds'?
3. Which pair of 'Worldly Winds' affects you most strongly? How does it affect your speech?
4. Do you agree that practising truthful speech helps to reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence? Why, or why not?

Suggested exercises

1. Own up and apologise for a distortion of the truth you have made over the past week. Notice the effect this has on your relationship with the person concerned, and tell the group about it.

2. Consciously take on the training principle of not distorting the truth this week, noticing under what circumstances you find this difficult, and its effect on you. Report back on your experiences.
3. Involve someone you trust and are close to – or more than one person – in helping you to practice the fourth precept. Ask them to point out when your speech distorts what really happened – and notice your reactions to this!