

**Non-lying** The fourth precept  
Roshi Nancy Mujo Baker

Lying is something we learn not to do as small children. Aesop's fables and many children's stories teach us about lying. I remember well my mother reading Pinocchio to me, not just as a story but as an amusing warning about the dangers of lying. One of the most famous of Aesop's fables is "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." And then, perhaps when we are a little older, we learn about George Washington and the cherry tree he cut down. The words attributed to the boy Washington, "I cannot tell a lie," were strong medicine for those of us who were his age when we first heard the story. The word fib seems to be used more for the lying we do as children and not for what we do as adults. It actually means a "trivial lie" and comes from the same root as fable. Pinocchio was probably at the fibbing stage, whereas George Washington was clearly conscious of some kind of moral precept. And then, of course, we have Plato's "noble lie" in his Republic, the lie told to the members of various classes of citizens that being in one class and not another was somehow natural and not conventional, not up to us.

The science section of The New York Times ran an article in April 2013 titled "The Lies We Tell in the Exam Room," emphasizing that doctors nowadays are rarely untruthful to their patients, but many easily tell white lies on their behalf. The following Sunday, the Book Review covered a biography whose subject was described as "not above deceit" and as having "bluffed his way into art schools." He and a young friend were described as having "scammed their way down south." So, in addition to the noble lie and white lies, we also have bald-faced lies, scams, swindles, bluffs, and many other failures to tell the truth. Fortunately, we have whistle-blowers, too.

As adults practicing with the fourth precept, we need to not have a narrow view of lying. We are actually surrounded by lying. We not only lie personally to each other and to ourselves but we live in a society full of lies. Businesses lie, politicians lie, governments lie, teachers lie, students lie, doctors lie, patients lie. Imagine if we liars all suffered what happened to Pinocchio. The long noses would probably cause pedestrian traffic problems as well as require a redesign of our homes and workspaces. Perhaps all lying is manipulating situations to our advantage, whether the advantage is protection of whatever I take myself to be or a promotion of whatever I want others to take me to be. Since the word lying can have such harsh connotations for us, perhaps a better term for working with this precept is simply "not telling the truth." When it comes to our personal failures to tell the truth, there are many versions. We need to use our imagination to extend the narrower, more literal meaning of the precept in question to cover much more than we normally think of. We do this in order to find the right version for our own practice and to make the precept come alive for each of us. There is no "one size fits all" here. It is also important not to treat the precepts as moral principles, shoulds and should-nots that are independent of us and thus fodder for our superegos. The next step, after we uncover the various kinds of non-truth-tellers we are, is to welcome and allow them, not suppress or reject them.

The following are some examples of the ways in which we fail to tell the truth: flattery, exaggeration, blaming, complaining, justifying oneself, cheating, making excuses, self-deception; being fake, false, or pretentious; not keeping a confidence, hiding, lacking transparency, insincerity, infidelity, plagiarism, and inauthenticity. I'm sure we can all come up with other examples. In many cases there is some kind of fear that prevents us from being totally honest, fear that we might lose something or someone, or that we might cause trouble and not be able to handle the effects of truth telling. Let's start by looking at one example of a familiar pattern of behavior: promising the goods and not delivering. This, of course, could be a deliberate lie, but it could also be a form of self-deception, if, when we promise, we're doing so simply to remain in the good graces of the other. It could also be that we are habitually not realistic about what we can and cannot accomplish. Connected to these examples is the phenomenon of having an ulterior motive, which is also a failure to tell the truth, sometimes even to

ourselves. And that can result in insincerity, lack of integrity, and inauthenticity. Moreover, when we fail to deliver the goods, we are often tempted to make excuses. Sometimes I'm late getting to work and have a class full of students waiting for me. Often there is a genuine excuse: I'm caught behind a garbage truck on a narrow New York City street for 20 minutes or someone has double-parked on me without leaving a phone number on the dashboard. But sometimes I'm just late and have no excuse. I can remember times when I was tempted to fabricate an excuse and on occasion actually did. Now I'm free enough to just be late.

Another version of not telling the truth is what Zen calls "idle talk," "aimless talk," or "rootless words." This doesn't have to be gossip or speaking ill of another; it can simply be making conversation instead of having a conversation. Often the motive is to make contact or keep contact with someone. This kind of talking is a waste—and, as we will see, "no waste" has a deep meaning in Zen. In addition, in this kind of idle talk we don't take into account the implications down the road of what we say. There was a saying in intelligence circles in Washington, DC, during World War II: "Loose lips sink ships."

In his book about the precepts, *The Mind of Clover*, Aitkin Roshi says that no lying means "no complicity with lies." This refers to a very important failure to tell the truth: namely, the failure to speak up. With all the talk recently about sexual and other forms of misconduct among dharma teachers, it's surprising how little attention is paid to students failing to speak up. This is what my own teacher has called "enabling." This, of course, happens in many other contexts—workplaces, families, schools—and is tied to all kinds of myths around dominant-subordinate structures and our relation to power and authority. It is a very good practice to inquire into our failure to speak up and the enormous fears around it. It is also important to realize that telling the truth can be done without blame.

Failure to tell the truth to ourselves is one of the most interesting forms of lying, and this has everything to do with how to work with any of the precepts. Think about the puzzling notion of self-deception. How could we deceive ourselves? Here we might say that there is a failure to face the truth. We look the other way out of shame or guilt or desire to be and to be seen as something we are not. Fully facing, getting to know, and actually welcoming the various kinds of liar that I am gives me a taste of not excluding anything; a taste of no inside, no outside. The more I can do this with no outcome or gaining idea in mind, the more truth-speaking and selflessness can naturally arise. Non-lying spontaneously arises when I'm willing to be with, hang out with, be conscious of, explore, and compassionately accept everything I am in regard to not telling the truth.

Working with the precepts in this way is itself a practice of non-lying. Once I see the best way for me to understand the precept in question, then I can get to know myself in relation to that precept. This is the welcoming part. It is a practice of no preferences, no judgments, no shoulds or shouldn'ts, no ideas of failure. It is a practice of simply accepting what is. The outcome of going deeper and deeper into seeing and compassionately allowing in who we are as "killer," "liar," "stealer," "stingy one," and so on, is that the precepts begin to manifest themselves naturally in our lives. We release our hold on self-preserving and self-aggrandizing and the separation they produce. There is a relaxation, an opening up, a diminishing of judging both ourselves and of others.

Practicing with the precepts in this way gives us some insight into why they are considered the highest teaching in Zen. This is because they are looked at from the point of view (which is no point of view at all!) of One Mind and no separation. Hence, the use of the prefix "non" instead of "not." In the realm of the Absolute or One Mind there is neither lying nor not lying. And here we come to the two great Zen precept teachers, Bodhidharma and Dogen. First, Bodhidharma's version of non-lying: Self-nature is subtle and mysterious in the realm of the inexplicable dharma. Not preaching a single word is called the Precept of Non-lying. Here is another translation: Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous and the dharma is beyond all expression. Not speaking even a single word is called the Precept of Non-lying.

This could be about the Absolute Subject or awareness itself, which can never be an object, and thus nothing can be said of it. But it also refers to the world of manifestation, to the nonconceptual. If we start describing what cannot be described, what is “beyond all expression,” we are, according to Bodhidharma, actually lying!

But we need to be careful here. It is, of course, true that Zen constantly warns us against this kind of “lying.” For example:

Open your mouth—instantly wrong;  
∨ Move your tongue—against the truth . . .

Saying “fire” won’t burn your mouth;∨  
Saying “water” won’t drown you.

(A Zen Forest: Zen Sayings, trans. Soiku Shigematsu)

Attached to words, one loses the reality, Stagnating in phrases, one is deluded.

(Koun Yamada, The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans, case 371)

But at the same time we must not think that Zen is anti-language. It is, after all, a very verbal tradition. Notice that in the last quotation the problem is being “attached to words” and “stagnating in phrases.” The problem isn’t words or phrases, it is our relation to them:

Goso said, “If you meet a man on the path who has accomplished the Way, do not greet him with words or silence. Tell me, how will you greet him?” (case 36)

You should not use words. You should not use no-words.  
Speak at once! Speak at once! (case 43)

(Koun Yamada, The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans)

Master Joshu said he didn’t like to hear the word “Buddha.” When asked how he could then teach, he said, “Buddha! Buddha!” This is to “speak at once,” spontaneously, without dipping into the past, without planning or hoping for the future, without self-consciousness, namely, without a speaker. This is not to be “attached to words” and thus not to “lose the reality.” Reality doesn’t lie. It is we who lie about it, when we are attached to words. This is the kind of speaking Bodhidharma is referring to, a conceptual, delineating, containing, self-conscious kind of speaking, and not the kind of speaking that is pure expression, the same pure expression that is reality itself. A poem by Dogen is about this:

Not limited∨  
By language,∨  
It is ceaselessly expressed;∨  
So, too, the way of letters∨  
Can display but not exhaust it.∨  
(The Zen Poetry of Dogen, trans. Steven Heine)

And this brings us to Zen Master Dogen’s version of this precept: 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. And two more translations: The dharma wheel turns from the beginning. There is neither surplus nor lack. The whole universe is moistened with nectar and the truth is ready to harvest. The dharma wheel unceasingly turns and there is neither excess nor lack. Sweet dew permeates the universe. Gain the essence and realize the truth.

Sweet dew permeates the whole universe means that nothing is excluded from being a manifestation or expression of the dharma. Again, reality doesn't lie. One way this is said in Zen is "Everything preaches the dharma"—even the nonsentient. But elsewhere Dogen tells us, as does the New Testament, that we don't always "have ears to hear": "If you are not willing to hear, the loudest voices could not reach your ears. If you are willing to hear, even the silent voices could reach your ears." So it appears that even our listening can be a form of lying.

No excess or lack. Everything is perfect as it is, permeated with sweet dew. "I'm late," with or without an apology, depending on the circumstances, but definitely without excuses, explanations, or justifications. All of that is extra. Everything manifests the dharma—even my own lying. In practicing with this precept or any of the precepts, can I listen without lying, can I hear the truth, the reality of who I am in relation to this precept or any of the precepts? Can I just allow it, without all the extras of story and analysis? Can I not experience it as shameful or bad, deficient or lacking? Can I not lie to myself about the liar I sometimes am? The more I can do this, the more non-lying will naturally be expressed. No separation between hearer, hearing, and the reality heard.

No separation between speaker, speaking, and the reality spoken about. This is the precept of non-lying.

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