



## **Communication, Civility, Connectedness**

For practice to do its intended work—helping us awaken increasingly and compassionately to our inter-being with all existence—a prerequisite is cultivating civility and diplomacy in our communications with others.

No wonder so many of Zen's Precepts relate to speech; developing compassionate communication requires reminders to refrain from gossip, dishonesty, elevating ourselves by broadcasting the misdeeds or faults of others, and disparaging those with different views or beliefs. All of these reminders accord with the Primary Precept's imperative to live beneficially, and keep sight of what facilitates realizing our fundamental connectedness.

To recognize the importance of skillful speech, we need only recall the painful feeling of being a target of someone's uncivil or disrespectful remark. Perhaps even now you can feel the body tighten up or quiver as you remember such comments.

Fortunately, even when something unpleasant is said or done, our responses can support unity, civility, and diplomacy. For instance, in the recent World Series, player Yu Darvish, who is Japanese and Iranian, was mocked by a player on the other team,



### **February Sesshin**

Enrollment is now open for the three-day February sesshin (February 16–19). This sesshin will be focused on the training of three essential practices—Hara practice, the koan "What is this?", and the practice of loving-kindness. The practices will be presented consecutively, and each will be given equal time. Because this sesshin will most likely fill up quickly it is recommended that if you wish to attend you apply very soon. All applicants must attend the full three days.

### **Planning for 2018**

The 2018 sesshin schedule is now out. The teachers strongly encourage everyone to look at the schedule and plan in advance which sesshins you would like to attend. The idea is you would then not allow other activities to interfere with your sesshin attendance.

who made a “slant eye” gesture with his eyes and hands. Asked about this immediately after, Yu responded “Nobody’s perfect. That includes you and I. What he did today isn’t right, but I believe we should put our effort into learning rather than accusing him. If we can take something from this, that is a giant step for mankind. Since we are living in such a wonderful world, let’s stay positive and move forward instead of focusing on anger. I’m counting on everyone’s big love.”

We may not know what he meant by the phrase “big love,” yet it is no doubt in harmony with our Zen training, which emphasizes fostering loving kindness and connectedness.

And what about his phrase “wonderful world”? If we cringed upon hearing it, perhaps we’ve lost track of all that’s right in our lives, especially if we’re middle class folks who regard flushing toilets, hot water, and potable water as entitlements.

Ezra and I heard another account of harmonious communication in Paris the day of the French presidential election. A taxi driver asked us, neutrally and cautiously, how we felt about the current state of politics in the U.S. We said a little, and asked him how he felt about the French election. He lit up, responding that he had been Emmanuel Macron’s driver when he was Minister of Economy and Industry. He said Macron always asked him about his family, and how things were going for him, apparently genuinely interested in others.

It’s inspiring when public figures provide such examples, since it can remind us that it’s entirely

The same is true for the 2018 Practice Period. The dates for the Practice Period are September 15–October 13. If you wish to participate in the full Practice Period, note the dates and please don’t schedule any trips or activities during that month that would interfere.

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*It's  
unreasonable  
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possible to avoid falling into defensive words, or going on the attack. We usually regret it later, since it adds harm to the world, and turns our own body and mind into a toxic waste dump. Obviously, sometimes we need to speak strongly, with resolve. Yet this can be done respectfully, rather than resorting to hostility or contempt.

Above all, we must take the first step: being clear that civility has to start within. That's why practice provides specific meditative tools to familiarize us with our own verbal tendencies. For example, we practice with "me-stuff" (or our ego-image)—not for self-improvement, but to deconstruct longstanding patterns that impede connectedness.

Observing the consequences of our "me-stuff" can encourage us to reconnect with our innate generous spirit. We also need to know the difference between reactions and responses: *reactions* are the emotion-laden exchanges that turn up the heat, while *responses* stay closer to the factual situation, with as much kindness and diplomacy as we can muster.

As we see our conditioning more clearly, we see that it's no more than impacted old habits, not "The way I am." Seeing this requires insight into our personal strategies. Examples include withdrawing into passivity, even when we could make a potentially helpful contribution; or believing that we ourselves must be the agent of change: "*Somebody* has to say something—and if I don't, probably nobody will." This one is particularly pernicious, especially if our deep well of core pain and hurt hasn't been addressed regularly with meditative tools. Inevitably we have a backlog of unresolved pain, accumulated

before we came to practice and discovered healing approaches.

Because of the impacted nature of conditioning, grounded in years of unskillful habits of thinking and talking, it's going to take ongoing awareness to see through its fraudulence.

To awaken civility and connectedness in our communications, we can be guided by speech reminders attributed to the Buddha: Is it factually accurate? Kindly intentioned? Timely? Necessary? This last one could wipe out over half of our words.

We can ask ourselves, before speaking, "Am I hot and bothered?" If so, it's best to refrain from responding immediately (and probably unskillfully), and instead turn to interior practice. This helps refresh our intention to refrain from harmful external speech, as well as the addictive tendency to let unskillful thoughts spin relentlessly in our minds.

We can ask also ourselves, before speaking, "Is what I'm about to say truly useful?"

An invaluable daily-life practice, especially in times of discord, is to notice that when we have strong reactions to something said or done by a world figure. It's a red flag—a reminder of our vow to speak harmoniously (not with phoniness). After all, we don't want our obituary to report that our words increased disharmony in the world. It's unreasonable to expect others to be civil if we're not.

Over time, we see the need for an inclusive practice approach, that nurtures kindness and broad-

spectrum awareness. This allows our self-preoccupation to gradually diminish, which in turn helps us understand how Thomas Jefferson could say, "I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, religion, or philosophy, as a cause for withdrawing from a friend."

Sometimes we hear it said, "Really, what can one person do?" Yet throughout history, often one person has made a huge difference—sometimes simply by declining to let habitual patterns escalate when challenging situations occur. This is only possible as we persevere in being guided by our values—those that are aligned with the greater good, rooted in our understanding of our inter-being with all existence.

*Elizabeth Hamilton*