

The Fourth Precept: Abstinence from False Speech

The fourth precept reads: *Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech." False speech is defined as "the wrong volition with intent to deceive, occurring through the door of either body or speech, arousing the bodily or verbal effort of deceiving another." The transgression must be understood as intentional. The precept is not violated merely by speaking what is false, but by speaking what is false with the intention of representing that as true; thus it is equivalent to lying or deceptive speech. The volition is said to arouse bodily or verbal action. The use of speech to deceive is obvious, but the body too can be used as an instrument of communication — as in writing, hand signals, and gestures — and thus can be used to deceive others.

Four factors enter into the offense of false speech: (1) an untrue state of affairs; (2) the intention of deceiving another; (3) the effort to express that, either verbally or bodily; and (4) the conveying of a false impression to another. Since intention is required, if one speaks falsely without aiming at deceiving another, as when one speaks what is false believing it to be true, there is no breach of the precept. Actual deception, however, is not needed for the precept to be broken. It is enough if the false impression is communicated to another. Even though he does not believe the false statement, if one expresses what is false to him and he understands what is being said, the transgression of speaking falsehood has been committed. The motivation for false speech can be any of the three unwholesome roots. These yield three principal kinds of falsehood: (1) false speech motivated by greed, intended to increase one's gains or promote one's status or that of those dear to oneself; (2) false speech motivated by hatred, intended to destroy the welfare of others or to bring them harm and suffering; and (3) false speech of a less serious kind, motivated principally by delusion in association with less noxious degrees of greed or hatred, intended neither to bring special benefits to oneself nor to harm others. Some examples would be lying for the sake of a joke, exaggerating an account to make it more interesting, speaking flattery to gratify others, etc.

The principal determinants of the gravity of the transgression are the recipient of the lie, the object of the lie and the motivation of the lie. The recipient is the person to whom the lie is told. The moral weight of the act is proportional to the character of this person, the greatest blame attaching to falsehoods spoken to one's benefactors or to spiritually developed persons.

The moral weight again varies according to the object of the lie, the person the lie affects, being proportional to his spiritual qualities and his relation to oneself in the same way as with the recipient. And thirdly, the gravity of the lie is contingent on its motivation, the most serious cases being those with malicious intent designed to destroy the welfare of others. The worst cases of false speech are lying in a way that defames the Buddha or an arahant, and making false claims to have reached a superior spiritual attainment in order to increase one's own gains and status. In the case of a bhikkhu this latter offense can lead to expulsion from the Sangha.

Source: Taken and adapted from "Going for Refuge & Taking the Precepts", by Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 1 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel282.html> .

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