

The Impact of Lying

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So thinking about what to talk about today just seemed like somehow to, maybe for my sake, just to say something that touches on my heart's ache around the war in Israel and in Hamas that started yesterday. And I was not going to talk about it directly, talk about something else that I associate with a response to it. But that's kind of, you know, sitting on my heart, least because I have distant relatives who live in Israel. I have friends who have relatives in Palestine. And so this idea that it affects, you know, people in all directions is kind of a big thing. And the way that these things kind of ripple out into the world, out into generations to come, it's very painful to consider the consequence of these kinds of fights and wars.

And then there's so much these wars in the world. I mean, there's, it's been going on for a very long time, wars around the world. But we have big ones. We have Ukraine and Syria and Myanmar. And one of the, considered one of the big armed conflicts is the drug wars in Colombia, in Mexico. Many, many people are dying there every year. And the way that such conflicts trigger rage in people, anger, that just perpetuates the very thing that maybe they're trying to stop. It perpetuates conflict, perpetuates the justification of violence.

And so, you know, and so to sit in the... In Buddhism we talk about the middle way. And then often we kind of find the middle way, meaning between extremes of all kinds of things. And so in terms of conflict, a very impactful, kind of a middle way that happened many years ago now at IMC, when we were in Palo Alto. There was a horrific murder of a young girl. And the murderer was sentenced to death in California. And so we had a discussion about the death penalty. And there were different sides. Maybe he had talked. But it was just an open discussion around it. And when we got near the end of the discussion, this person stood up and said, well, I find myself on both sides. Because both my parents were murdered. And it was by one of my close relatives. So for him, for that person, it was like, oh no. I think he was maybe in favor of the death penalty, but that meant for his relative. So he was kind of stuck in the middle of this.

And for me, that kind of middle way of holding both in one person, both sides, and the pain of that. And so how do we find a way in the middle way? How do we find a way that doesn't continue divisions? How do we find a way that creates peace more than more war? So it starts, I think, in simple ways. It's one of the ways that it starts is by living a life where we don't lie. And this is one of the first spiritual teachings that we think that the Buddha taught to his son, Rahula.

And so I was thinking about this teaching last night and this morning, so I thought I would share it with you. And so what many people don't know is that Buddha had a son. And by the time that his son was

about seven years old, six or seven years old, he apparently was mostly under the care of his father. And we don't usually think of the Buddha as a father. And we think of him as a monastic who's quite removed from kind of parental responsibilities. We don't know much about how he was a father, but his son came, joined, became what was called the novice monk. And so then lived that life until he grew up and when he continued, when you're around 20 years old, you're allowed to ordain as a full monk. So he was a novice for 15 years, 13 years, and then became a monk.

And at some point in the son's youth, maybe he was still pretty young, it seems that Rahula told a lie. That's the only way you can, this story makes sense. And so the Buddha, I think they finished having their, they go out every morning with a bowl in order to collect alms for the food they're going to eat that day. I think somehow maybe they're just close to finishing their meal. They'd washed their bowl. Each monk is supposed to clean their own bowl, usually. And so they were sitting there and then the Buddha said, "You see how little water is left in this bowl here?" And Rūpa said, "Yes." And the Buddha said, "The monastic life of someone who deliberately lies is as trifling or as worth as much as a little bit of bowl in this water." So I can imagine his son gulped. He's been busted.

But the Buddha doesn't stop at that. He says, he threw that little bit of water out of the bowl. And then he said, "The monastic life of someone who deliberately lies..." Oh no, he says it a little differently. I'll say it this time. "The monastic life of someone deliberately lies and has no shame about it is like this ball which has no water in it. There's no substance in it, nothing in it." And then he goes on to say, again, he says something like, "If you turn the ball upside down," so that to really get the last little drops fall out or something. He said, "The monastic life of someone who deliberately lies but has no shame about it is like this bowl that's upside down." And in the fourth time, he says, he picks up the bowl and he says, "See, it's all, it's empty now of anything at all." And the Buddha said, "The monastic life of someone's deliberate lies, but has no shame about it, is hollow and void, just like this bowl is." So I imagine that was three big gulps.

So in my imagination of this, because we don't know what in the text, the Buddha didn't say this in a harsh way or an angry way. But he also didn't let it go unnoticed that his son had lied. He was, as a parental way, addressing this directly. And I think one of the things that's important here is that this word for shame, I think in the modern English, in California at least, that's a difficult word, shame. And it's very heavily loaded, And many people struggle with this word shame and a tremendous amount of pain and suffering and self-criticism around this word, which much of it, which is very unnecessary. But there is a place for a certain kind of healthy remorse, certain kind of healthy, having a bad conscience about what you're doing, what you've done. And without that, we're not going to correct for ourselves.

We're not going to get the message. Boy, I really blew it. I really made a mistake. And so some kind of feeling of something is off here. And exactly how we should call this in English, I went to dictionaries yesterday and wondered, is there another word besides shame that we could use? I wonder, could we

use disgrace? Doesn't feel disgrace. that work better? Or some of the dictionaries the word "laja" in Pali and also Sanskrit can also mean bash, dictionaries say bashful, embarrassed. And that doesn't seem quite right either. Someone deliberately lies but doesn't feel bashful

. Embarrassed might work, but that kind of, you miss kind of the ethical feelings of this is something unethical here that happened.

So regardless, you know, there's that would emphasize that. So it isn't that he deliberately lied that that was a problem. What was the problem was he felt no regrets, no remorse. He didn't feel like, he didn't recognize he'd done something that was off. That's what was the real thing. Because if you recognize that you've done a deliberate lie and have some kind of remorse, some kind of shame, then there's a possibility of doing something about it, making a corrective. And we'll get to that.

And for a monastic, the idea of a monastic life in Buddhism, in Buddhism in general, is more a life than it is a philosophy. It's a way of living. The Dharma is a way of living. And it's kind of most represented by monastic life for the monks and nuns, because that's, they're giving themselves over entirely to living a Dharma life. That's the whole idea. And sometimes it might look that the monastic doesn't do much, but actually they're busy all day long. Meditating, being honest, not being greedy, you know, just kind of being of service, processing their challenges in the monastery. I mean, it's really, you know, it's a way of kind of being immersed in the Dharma life all day long. It's quite a wonderful thing, and it's also kind of non-stop.

So if someone wants to really live that life, you can do it in daily, in household life, and outside the monastic life as well. But in monastic life, you're constantly reminded to do it. Stay close to the truth. Stay close to the heart of what monastic life is about in Buddhism, heart of what Dharma is about, and that is non-harming. It's a dedication to not causing any harm, both in the world around us, but also to ourselves. And that's part of the reason why, you know, the Four Noble Truths that address suffering and the end of suffering suffering. It's so central because suffering is just another word for harm. And the ending of suffering is the ending of whatever we're doing in ourselves, whatever psychological processes we have that contribute to our suffering is what we're overcoming. We're changing with the Four Noble Truths. So to discover how not to even harm ourselves.

And then to understand that there's an intimate connection between not harming ourselves and not harming others, not harming others and not harming ourselves. You can't really do one without the other. And that this is what the heart of the Dharma is about, is finding that possibility. It's not necessarily easy, but I've still remained tremendously inspired by this. And I feel like like it's a guiding principle for my life, that this is the life I want to live, a life of non-harming.

And so here is Rahula, deliberately lying, and which is a cause of lying causes a tremendous amount of harm. It's harmful for the person who lies and harmful the person, for the society, the community that has to live with those lies. It creates divisions. It creates hurt when the lies come out. It creates mistrust when people discover they've been lied to. The person who does lie, the reference point for

the impact it has on the liar that the Buddha has, I think, or Buddhism provides us, is maybe something like what it was like for you to sit and meditate today. Or maybe some today, maybe you didn't have a good meditation. But maybe at some point in your life, maybe you had a meditation where you felt particularly calm and centered, peaceful, and felt kind of like, "No, I'm really in touch with myself. I'm arrived. I'm here. I'm not thinking about other things, other concerns. I've arrived. I'm here. I feel peaceful and good."

And you're unlikely to turn to the person next to you when you open your eyes and just lie about something. (laughs) If you did, I think you'd just feel so awful inside. Something inside of you that had been built, had been kind of settled into while you're meditating, suddenly has been squashed, has been closed, like something in your heart closes with that lie. Or as tension builds up, Or you might kind of start getting calculating. Well, if I say this lie, then I'll have to be careful. And someone once said that it's better to be honest, because then you have less to remember. Because if you tell a lie, you have to remember it. And then do it again.

And so the impact it has on the liar, from the Buddhist point of view, is said to be huge. For someone who chronically lies, chronically tense, chronically fighting with everything around their life. They're so agitated, they don't see the impact it has. But it does have an impact. And the impact is huge. And so, if the dedication of a life is to not cause harm, like it is for Rahula being a novice monk, then, you know, of course, not just the Buddha as a father, but also as a guide for training people that life, he has to say something.

So he said these things about the bull, and then he went on to say, make an analogy for this, for lying, that uses a war analogy. And I think it's quite evocative to use this analogy when you consider all these wars that we have in our society, and the people who are warring, the people who are constantly fighting and arguing and and hating other people, that way of life for some people to be that way. So the story is that, you know, the Bradley tanks of ancient India were elephants. And they had these big war elephants that were trained to fight. And they were trained to stay tame and, and tame and I guess calm enough to go into the middle of battles so that the people sitting on top of them could fight, you know, in the middle of battle from this height. And then also, I guess, they were also fighters, these big tusks and legs that could kick and stuff.

And so, the Buddha talks about there was this elephant that was well trained and knew how to fight and was trained to go into any situation, any kind of battle, and to do whatever was needed in order to fight. And so, recognizing this, then the charioteers, the elephanteers, would take them into battle. And in fact, the elephants were so well trained that they would just do exactly that. They just fight non-stop, do whatever it took to fight, up until the point where they got killed. And so that's the example he gives. And we probably see people like this in our lives, who don't stop for anything. And then the Buddha says, someone who tells a deliberate lie, there's no evil they're not capable of doing. So that the elephant is no killing they're not willing to do once they've been trained that way.

So that's the kind of dramatic contrast for this idea impact lying has. So I could imagine that Rahula is thinking twice now about what he did, if in fact he lied. And so he's getting, you know, the Buddha has gotten his attention around this. Then the Buddha switches gears and he gives Rahula some teachings. At first he asks the question. He said, "What is the purpose of a mirror?" And Rahula says, "The purpose of a mirror is reflection, so you can see yourself in the mirror." In the same way, the Dharma is a mirror, where we reflect in. And how do you see, how do you find mirror? By reflecting on your actions. If you want to reflect, you know, look at your actions to see, if I do any act, physical act through my body, through my words, or through my mind, does it or does it not cause harm in the world? Does it not cause harm to self or others? That's the Dharma question he's offering the Buddha.

You should reflect on everything that you do, all actions you have, and reflect about whether or not they cause harm. That's a tall order to go around with that question all the time. And does that mean that we're going to be busy? Remember I said monastics have a busy life? They're not sitting around. they're busy kind of monitoring themselves. And that's part of the purpose of mindfulness, is not just to be calm and manage with our stress, but part of the purpose of mindfulness in the teachings of the Buddha is to be able to monitor ourselves enough to see, is what we're doing in body, speech, and mind, is it afflictive or not? Does it cause harm or not? Does it cause stress or not in ourselves and others?

And some people could be quite uninterested by this aspect of Buddhism, because it's much more interesting to talk about great states of meditative absorption, the bliss and the calm, and bliss out. And if it's not so great to do meditation, like these tremendous states of meditative absorption, but I'll just do psychedelics, you know, for a good time. But in fact, what the Buddha is suggesting is, yes, in Buddhism we have wonderful states of meditation that can be attained, but that's not the point, to have those states. The point is to have an ability to really track ourselves to be able to live a life of harmlessness. The result of that is a tremendous inner peace. So that's the reward from being able to do that.

But what means to that is to have this self-reflection of body, speech, and mind. Think about it. Don't go through your life not mindful. Don't go through your life mindful without questioning what was the impact, what was the consequences of what I've done here. So this kind of reflection, constant reflection. So then the Buddha says, if you're going to do something in body, speech, or mind, before you do it, reflect. Is this going to cause harm in any directions, myself or others? And is what I'm going to do, is it wholesome with good consequence, or is it unwholesome with detrimental consequences? So afflictive just means harm. So does it cause harm or not harm?

But the second criteria was, is it wholesome or unwholesome? Means that in doing it, is it nourishing? Is it wholesome? Is it healthy for my whole psychophysical system to do it? Is it healthy for our society? Is it beneficial for the people around us? Nowadays, just yesterday, this weekend I think, or maybe you

saw it too, that there are studies that parents who yell at their kids growing up are impacting the kids similarly to what it's like to be physically hitting young children. Children being hit and being yelled at have similar kind of impacts on their trauma growing up, their sense of abuse growing up.

So how important it is not even to yell at people. And you know, mean words to people is not wholesome if the person is being mean. It's also not helpful for society, what goes on around us. So there's a criteria, Buddha offers this criteria. Is it healthy for you to do this? Is it healthy for others in the long term? So not just right now, but in the long term. So I've told this story many times of yelling. Not yelling at my son, but I used my, I called it my strong voice. [laughter] And it was rarely used. But it was kind of like, you know, something that every other thing wasn't working in terms of the behavior the kid was doing.

And so finally I just had to use my strong voice, I said. So it was kind of deliberately thought about and considered. It wasn't like just suddenly screaming. And I would just say in a very strong, stern voice, "No." And that was effective. Okay, okay. Okay, good. Until I heard exactly the same voice of my older son using the same thing to his younger brother. And then I said, "Oh no, what have I done?" And I never used a strong voice again. That way, find other ways to, you know, to deal with parent issues.

So then he said, before you do it, then the Buddha said while you're doing, saying something, doing something, or even mentally your thoughts around something, you should be reflecting, thinking about, tracking yourself, monitoring yourself. Is this causing harm now? And sometimes we only know about what's causing harm once we start. Because like some of the people we're talking to, we're involved in, we don't know what will affect them. Something that is innocuous for one person because of their background is very harmful, causes a lot of pain for someone.

And so sometimes we have to track and pay attention in the moment and not just treat everyone like they're ourselves. And think, just because I can say that and this has no impact on me, it might have a huge impact on someone else who has a... has a, you don't know their background and what they've been through. So while you're doing it, it's important to track, pay attention. And is it causing harm to yourself, to others? Is it healthy for yourself? Is it healthy for others? What are the long-term consequences of this?

And if you find that it's unhealthy and afflictive, then the Buddha said you should stop. Don't do it. Just stop, just stop what you're doing. And then the last one is interesting. Then he went through it again and he said, "After you've done something, you should reflect on the same way. But after you've done it, if you discover that yes, it hurt someone, it was harmful, yes it was unhealthy and it had deleterious long-term consequences, then you should go find someone that you respect, a wise person that you respect, and tell them what you did."

And I want to use the word confession, because that has a heavy load in some people in the West. I think that the translations sometimes use confession, but the Pali word does not mean confession, because they were Buddhists, not the people who use confession. And so it simply just says, you want

to go and acknowledge what you did. It's more like an acknowledgement of what you did. And so I'll read it to you. And this is maybe for some people the most difficult thing to want to do. Oh here, here, this translation is different. It says, "You should lay it open."

That's a nice expression, "lay it open." Just be open about it. Put it out there. "Lay it open to your teacher or your wise companions in holy life." Oh, here's the word "confession." So again, maybe I'll skip it because it's not, the Pali doesn't mean like the way we associate, what we associate with the word. So, "Having said it, revealed it and laid it open, you should then undertake restraint in the future." So we do make mistakes. We do cause harm. There are intentional, unintentional ways in which we hurt people.

And to lay it open to someone makes a big difference because it's kind of like when you say it out loud, you're not squirming around it, you're not kind of pretending it's not there, you're not kind of like trying to belittle it, or also you're not holding it by yourself. Sometimes when we hold our sense of guilt by ourselves all alone, it tends to build unnecessarily big. There's way too many people, and this is why the word shame is so difficult, even for me to use it here today, because so many people have this private shame that they carry with them all the time.

There are some people who feel shame just because they breathe. You know, just, they've never done anything wrong, but just that somehow they're, they were born wrong. So they carry the shame with them. We feel that way. But when we do some cause harm in the world, to carry the guilt, to carry the shame privately and alone

, sometimes can be very difficult and kind of the tension can build and in some ways even make it worse for ourselves, continues the harm.

But you lay it open to someone else who's wise, who will receive it well, who's not going to make you feel shame, or not make you feel, who's not going to belittle you or be angry with you, is a really healthy thing to do. And then you're accountable a little bit. Then, you know, if you really commit yourself to not doing it again in the future, you know, oh, you know, my wise friend, you know, knows what I did before. And their eyebrow's gonna go up if they see me do it again. I don't want that to happen.

Or now I know that I'm accountable to someone, so maybe they'll call me on it. Or maybe we need to have more conversations to understand better what was happening to me, what's going on for me. A wise friend will aid you with respect, with kindness, and honesty in order to find a way with what happened. So that's what the Buddha has said to his son. After he, you know, lying is not good. It's not good for someone who wants to live the monastic life. Lying deliberately with no sense of shame, no sense of remorse, no sense of conscience.

And this is how you should live this life. You should live this life monitoring yourself, being reflective. Some of you might think this is a headache now, to go around monitoring yourself all the time about your actions. But just like with learning how to practice mindfulness, after a while it becomes second

nature. It's like riding a bicycle. If you had to always be learning to ride a bicycle from scratch, every day of time you ride a bicycle, why would anybody ride a bicycle?

But you learn the bicycle and then it becomes easy. Look, no hands. And it becomes kind of second nature. You can do all kinds of things while you're riding a bike, even talking on the phone. And so the same thing, this monitoring of ourselves that mindfulness does, become second nature, you're carried with you all the time. And it's such a beauty. It's like a treasure to have this. It's a gift to be able to attract yourself.

And to monitor yourself in this ethical way, or not causing harm, is also a tremendous gift. Because then we become a gift for society. Our society needs a lot more examples of people who live a harmless life. And to live a harmless life that is not silent when there are problems in this world. So the Buddha was not silent when his son lied. And whether you think this was good parenting or not, that's an open question. But he wasn't silent. He wasn't just sitting there, like, meditating, pretending nothing happened. He addressed it directly.

And I'm pretty sure the Buddha was doing the very thing he was talking about doing. Before, during, and after speaking to his son this way, he reflected, "Will this be afflictive, harmful, or not to say it this way? Is this a healthy thing for myself and for him? And will it have good consequences or bad consequences in the future?" So, you know, so this monitoring, always this monitoring going on. And so his son stayed in the monastic life. And when he was about 20 or so, he became enlightened himself.

And then continued living this life, the monastic life, apparently to the end of his life. So this importance of ethics or life of non-harming is a good thing to remember when we have so many examples people who are causing harm. And where the heart, you know, and sometimes these cycles of harm and violence, it's hard to know, chicken or egg, where did it begin? Who's responsible? But it's easy to see how it just keeps going, these cycles. And this Palestinian and Israeli cycles that have been that have been going on for so, so long. You know, from a distance it looks so unnecessary.

Something's not working. And so exactly what kind of self-reflection is needed is hard to know. It's what to say from a distance is hard to say. But this idea of the middle way that cares for everyone involved has compassion for everyone involved, is looking for the best for everyone involved. So what's most beneficial, what's healthy for everyone involved? That is the way forward, I feel. And without that, I think there's not much hope. We'll just continue the cycles on and on forever.

Thank you. So we have about five minutes before we normally would stop, and then we'll have the tea that will be set up, and you're welcome to, you're invited to stay and hang out. It's a wonderful time to meet people and have community. But in this last five minutes, maybe it'd be nice to turn towards maybe a couple of people next to you, maybe little groups of three, and just say hello and introduce yourself.

Some of you might be new here for the first time. It's nice to be welcomed. And the way it works here at IMC, even if you're new here for the first time, at least for today you belong here. So you can welcome

the people who've been here for years. You're on equal footing that way. And then if you want to share something about this talk, anything at all that struck you, you're welcome to talk a little bit. And then at some point we'll go have our tea. So please, thank you. And you don't have to stay if you don't want to, but it's... look around to make sure everyone has a little group.