

“Speaking of Others”

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So, let’s say we get together with an old friend. We start talking about some of the other people in our social circle: the faults of this one, the misdeeds of that one. We then go on to discuss others’ mistakes and negative qualities. In the end, the two of us feel really good because we’ve agreed we’re the two best people in the world! (from Geshe Ngawang Dhaargye)

Doesn’t this make us sound terrible? But who among us hasn’t ever complained about another person? And don’t we feel better afterward? When I look inside myself, I have to acknowledge the truth. Especially in my younger days, when I was very insecure, it was as if I needed to believe that others were wrong or full of faults. It was my negative judgments of others that allowed me to feel right and worthy.

I was first married when I was 20 and divorced seven years later. I was a very young 20 and very unprepared for marriage. For example, I had no idea how to handle my negative reactions to some of the habits and behaviors of my husband. I remember finding solace in a patient and supportive co-worker one summer, as we sat outside at a picnic table during our lunch breaks. I complained, and she listened sympathetically. I returned the favor by listening and responding in kind to her own litany of complaints about her husband. Did it solve any of my marital problems? No. Did it help me to feel better? Yes.

The Buddha taught students to avoid the destructive action of using our speech to create disharmony. “I vow not to talk about the faults of others” is one of the vows of all Zen Buddhist practitioners.

I don’t know about you, but this sounds to me like a very difficult vow to keep. And why should it matter if we talk about other people, anyway?

A critical element of personal and spiritual growth is becoming more and more able to see ourselves clearly. One aspect of ourselves that is important for us to examine is our motivation behind what we say and do. “Why did I say that?”

What was my motivation?" So, we've already talked about speaking critically of others in order to make ourselves feel more worthy, or to justify our complaints.

In the case of my negative comments about my husband, I also needed my co-worker to agree that I was right and that he was wrong. My unconscious motivation was to get "approval" for my feelings from someone else.

How about anger and resentment as motivation for talking about others? Thich Nhat Hanh paints a picture to which I think most of us can relate.

"Suppose you have some kind of internal formation regarding a member of your family or community, and you don't feel joyful about being with that person. You can talk to her about simple things, but you don't feel comfortable talking with her about anything deep. Then one day, while doing housework, you notice that the other person is not doing anything at all, is not sharing the work that needs to be done, and you begin to feel uneasy. "Why am I doing so much and she isn't doing anything? She should be working." Because of this comparison, you lose your happiness. But instead of telling the other person, 'Please, Sister, come and help with the work,' you say to yourself, 'She is an adult. Why should I have to say something to her? She should be more responsible!' ...The shortest way is always the direct way. 'B' can go to 'A' and say, 'Sister, please come and help.' But you do not do that. You keep it to yourself and blame the other person."

How many times have we justified our silence in situations similar to this one? "I shouldn't have to say anything." "I didn't want to make a scene." She would think I was just being a b-i-t-c-h." "It wasn't important enough to make a big deal out of it." "She wouldn't listen anyway." Yet our resentment grows.

Hanh continues, "The next time the same thing happens, your feeling is even more intense. Your internal formation grows little by little, until you suffer so much that you need to talk about it with a third person. You are looking for sympathy in order to share the suffering. So, instead of talking directly to 'A,' you talk to 'C.' You look for 'C' because you think that 'C' is an ally who will agree that 'A' is not behaving well at all."

Let's say that you and 'C' do agree. Suddenly, you and 'C' feel close to each other, and both of you feel some distance from 'A,' who will most likely notice

this. 'A' might be a perfectly reasonable person who would respond to you if you could express your feelings to her. Since you haven't said anything to 'A,' though, she knows nothing of your resentments. She just feels some kind of cooling in your relationship with her, without knowing why. She is 'A' and you are 'B.' 'C' has been brought into the picture now. A triangle has been set up.

Hanh says, "If I were 'C,' first of all, I would listen to 'B' attentively, understanding that 'B' needs to share her suffering. Knowing that the direct way is the shortest way, I would encourage 'B' to speak directly to 'A.' If 'B' is unable to do this I would offer to speak to 'A' on 'B's' behalf, [preferably]...with 'B' present... But, most important, I would not transmit to anyone else what 'B' tells me in confidence. If I am not mindful, I may tell others what I now know about 'B's' feelings, and soon the family or the community will be a mess."

'C' has a great responsibility. (Now, in our example, 'C' is a "she," but that's not to imply that there's any gender divide here. Men and women are equally prone to getting involved in triangles.) 'C' has a tough choice. She has heard someone's secret. 'B' has given her an ego boost. She therefore feels flattered and important, because she knows something about 'A' and 'B' that no one else knows. Maybe she's also concerned about the rift that has developed between 'A' and 'B' and doesn't know how to help.

'C' has several potential motivations for telling others about the situation between 'A' and 'B.' She feels important because of the privileged information she has to share. Also, because 'B' has shared her feelings with 'C,' 'B' has also spread anxiety about the situation to 'C'. 'C' is now suffering, and she may feel compelled to share the story with others because she can't tolerate the anxiety she feels.

Let's call the first person whom 'C' might tell, 'D.' And let's take a look at the picture on the cover of our order of service. What do you think is going on here? Who is who? ... So it's 'C' telling 'D'? And what do you think D is going to do? (Response: "Tell everyone else.")

'C' may be asking others, "What can we do?" And pretty soon the whole community is running around with their hands in the air, saying, "What can we do?"

When 'C' talks to 'D,' 'E,' 'F' and 'G,' and they continue to spread what they've heard, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "The community will be a mess."

'C' has a great responsibility because she has the power to make choices. One may feel more comfortable, but it can lead to a damaged community. Her other choice may not feel as comfortable. But by encouraging 'B' to take the direct route and talking to 'A,' and offering to go with 'B' if necessary, 'C' may be making a significant contribution to the health of the community.

Another motivation for talking about others' faults is envy. We want to be respected and appreciated as much as they seem to be. By tearing them down, we somehow believe that we will look better.

I've noticed a recent trend in the art of putting down other people behind their backs. I admit that I've been guilty of it myself. It's psychoanalyzing others. We might make comments like, "Oh, he's borderline," or "she's narcissistic" as if we have some kind of authoritative insight into their heads. Now, if I think to myself, "I think this person has an anxiety issue," in this case I'm trying to understand where the other person is coming from and my motivation is to develop more compassion for that person. But if we're going around telling other people our pop diagnoses of this person or that person, it's usually a way of making ourselves feel superior.

What motivates our speech is often unconscious, until we learn to take the time to reflect and be honest with ourselves.

"What are the results of speaking of others' faults?" asks Buddhist nun Thubten Chodron. "First, we become known as a busybody...I am cautious of people who chronically complain about others. If figure if they speak that way about one person, they will probably speak the same way about me, given the same conditions."

Second, if the person whose mistakes we publicized finds out who spread the word, we will have to deal with them. Sometimes people who've been hurt by

gossip will retaliate by telling others about our faults, not exactly mature, but “in keeping with our own actions.”

Third, some people get stirred up when they hear negative things about someone else. “For example, if one person at an office...talks behind the back of another, everyone in the workplace may get angry and gang up on the person who has been criticized.” This can set off backbiting and cause factions to form. Does this sound like an environment where you’d like to spend time?

Fourth, are we happy when our mind is focused on others’ shortcomings? No; of course not. But it’s a mental habit that can be hard to break. For some people, obsessing about other people and their faults can be a way to avoid having to identify and address their own issues. Sure, focusing on other people’s faults may give us some temporary satisfaction, maybe a feeling of smugness, but certainly not happiness.

“The opposite of judging and criticizing others,” says Chodron, “is regarding their good qualities... This is a matter of training our minds to look at what is positive in others rather than what doesn’t meet our approval. Such training makes the difference between our being happy, open and loving or depressed, disconnected and bitter... The quality of our own lives...depends on whether we find fault with our experience or see what is beautiful in it.”

We all want the same things. We want to have our positive aspects noticed and acknowledged. We want to feel cared for and respected. As we learn to focus more on the positive qualities in others and in ourselves, we may still see the imperfections, but we do so with a gentler mind.

This change in our mental focus can be very helpful in breaking the habit of speaking of the faults of others. Instead, our spiritual practice can be speaking with kindness and compassion. When we acknowledge another person’s positive qualities, it may make them feel happy, and it makes us feel good. And we’re spreading positive energy.

A few years ago, Chodron was teaching a class, and she gave her students a homework assignment: praise someone they didn’t like every day. The next week, one man reported his experience. He chose a particular colleague. But on

the first day, he couldn't think of a single positive thing to say to him, so he made something up! But from then on, the colleague was so much nicer to him that all of a sudden it was easy to see his good qualities and speak about them.

An experiment we could all try is to say something kind or positive to a person or about a person every day for a week. Let's see what happens. We may find that it makes us much more aware of what we say and why. It will get our minds focused on a sort of treasure hunt: looking for the good qualities in people! And it has the potential to enrich our relationships tremendously. As the Vietnamese saying goes, "It doesn't cost anything to have loving speech."

And it doesn't take anything except an open mind and a willing spirit to bring kindness to our lips, and with the act of speaking, bring more love and happiness to everyone around us, and, ultimately, to ourselves. It's amazing what one drop of compassion can do.