

Words Have Power

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Recently, I found these words in an article from BCA, from Rev. Kodo Umezu, Bishop of BCA, entitled "The Buddha Does Not Discriminate". Please put your hands together in gratitude for these words of Shinran Shonin.

"In reflecting on the ocean of great shinjin [the Buddha's mind and heart], I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young." (Collected Works of Shinran, p. 107)

Rev. Umezu continued, "We live our lives relying on our unenlightened minds, but Shinran Shonin has told us how truly precious we all are in the eyes of the Buddha . . . that all people are equal in the eyes of the Buddha. Let us humbly turn to the caring call from the Buddha's True and Real Realm of Equality. Let us live our lives respecting and caring for each other on a journey to the realm known as the Pure Land."

These words resonated for me, especially since I had already chosen today's topic of "Words Have Power." What Rev. Umezu said, as I interpreted it, was that we are all equal, that we are all OK, that we are all on the same level. That is the way I have always thought of Buddhism we are all in this life together, on the same level of humanity. If we believe in the interdependence and equality of all life, then we need to be careful how we treat all people around us. This talk actually came about, partially, because of an incident at a bon dance this summer in which two of us were scolded, in the middle of the music and the dancing, for not doing the proper move. Really???

After I got over my mad and my hurt feelings, I said, "There's a dharma talk in that!"

Every week we say the words of the Golden Chain. As Rev. Muneto taught us in May, the words to the Golden Chain came about as a way to help us remember the guidance of the 8 Fold Path. The words remind us of how to treat others: "I will try to think pure and beautiful thoughts, to say pure and beautiful words, and to do pure and beautiful deeds." It is so easy to say these words and so difficult to follow consistently, daily. I like the idea that we say "I will try . . ." because it indicates that while we set a goal for ourselves to think and say pure and beautiful words, we may fall short, sometimes more frequently than we would like, at least that is true for me. That doesn't mean we stop trying or that we can say anything we want. Kindness needs to always be our guide. Do our words radiate kindness? Or do our words radiate thoughts less than kind? As Buddhism suggests, we need to look inside, to become more self-aware, to know what is truly in our heart.

As we know, the rest of that sentence from the Golden Chain is this: "knowing that on what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness but also that of others." When I first moved here to Hawaii and recited the Golden Chain I realized that BCA and Hawaii have slightly different versions. In BCA, the Golden Chain did not have this last part about what I do affecting the happiness or unhappiness of others.

Initially, when I saw this difference, my first reaction was, “What? Are you kidding me? I realize I am responsible for my own happiness . . . I get that! But now you tell me that I am responsible for the happiness or unhappiness of EVERYONE? Really? I thought . . . there must be some mistake here. I can’t be responsible for EVERYONE! I am barely responsible for myself, for goodness sake! Well, I obviously didn’t understand it in the right way the first time I heard it. I guess I am a slow learner, but I finally got it. It doesn’t mean that I have to make them happy, in a traditional way. It does mean, however, that my behavior, my words, can and do affect other people and how they feel. My words can be soft and kind or they can be harsh and biting. That is up to me. I can pass on kindness to others or I can hurl daggers of anger at people. I get it now. I am responsible for other’s happiness or unhappiness by what I say and how I say it and how I treat others. I am not responsible for how they interpret my words but I am responsible for my behavior. When we choose to send out kindness, we make the world a better place. Isn’t that part of what life really is all about? If we choose, instead, to send out daggers of anger or disrespect, we add to the world’s turmoil and unhappiness. We always have a choice. We are in charge of the thoughts we have and the words that come from our mouth. Dr. Mark Unno said “Life is a journey of great compassion.” Buddhism is compassion; let’s be sure we show it to everyone we encounter, not just those we like or agree with us. We have a mutual responsibility to be kind and compassionate. There is a song which I think expresses these thoughts well. It is a song by Tim McGraw called “Humble & Kind”: The words from the song are about kindness, compassion and interdependence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awzNHuGqoMc>

As I thought of the responsibility we have for others, I was reminded of a story I heard many years ago about what words can do to others. The story involves a backpack. Imagine that we all walk around with a backpack hanging on our shoulders. As young children, our backpack is relatively empty and we are able to run and skip easily and feel so good about ourselves. As we go through life, we hear negative comments (“you’re really dumb”, “why are you here?” “You just don’t get it.”). Every time we hear a negative comment or experience anything we perceive to be negative (striking out during a baseball game) a rock is added to our backpack. A few rocks are not a big deal; we can keep going with just a little bit of weight. But as we go on our way through life, we may get more and more rocks in our backpack; some as small as pebbles and some as large as a boulder. We often forget that we can, at any time, put the backpack down and take control, taking out the rocks. With the idea of a backpack in mind, we need to be careful of the words we use with others, knowing that any negative words or attitudes we have will add to the other person’s backpack. If we reflect back on the words of Shinran that I shared at the beginning of this talk, we might ask “Why?” Why would we speak ill to others if we are all equal? If we are all equal, we are not above others; nor are we less than others. Respect for each other is fundamental to Buddhism. Dr. Jeff Wilson said “We need to have doors and not barriers.” Words can close doors and create barriers if we use disrespectful, negative

words. At the same time, thoughtful words can open doorways and build bridges between people. And Dr. Mark Unno adds, “Don’t just recite the details, live the concepts.” Let’s live our lives in the dharma, following the guidance of the Golden Chain and the 8 Fold Path.

Let me end with the words of the Buddha: “When words are both true and kind, they can change the world.”