

**GEMS: THE FREEDOM TO SPEAK WISELY  
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**The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “The offense of uttering even a single derogatory word against the priests and laity who believe in and preach the Lotus Sutra is even graver than that of abusing Shakyamuni Buddha to his face for an entire kalpa.” The Lotus Sutra states, “[If anyone shall see a person who embraces this sutra and try to expose the faults or evils of that person, he will in the present age be afflicted with white leprosy,] whether what he speaks is the truth or not.” Take these teachings to heart, and always remember that believers in the Lotus Sutra should absolutely be the last to abuse each other. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 208)**

This passage comes from the letter “The Fourteen Slanders,” in which Nichiren Daishonin explains the 14 slanders or evil causes — the attitudes that believers should avoid in their practice: 1) arrogance, 2) negligence, 3) arbitrary, egotistical judgment, 4) shallow, self-satisfied understanding, 5) attachment to earthly desires, 6) lack of seeking spirit, 7) not believing, 8) aversion, 9) deluded doubt, 10) vilification, 11) contempt, 12) hatred, 13) jealousy and 14) grudges.

The first 10 are problems in our personal practice, internal problems. They hurt us.

The last four — contempt, hatred, jealousy and grudges — are negative attitudes we hold toward other believers. They are particularly troublesome, because they disrupt the harmonious unity of believers, compounding the gravity of the slander. Thus, holding ill feelings (Jpn *onshitsu*) toward fellow believers will have a detrimental effect on our ability to manifest benefit from our practice. Since all of us have such feelings at times in our practice, the ability to overcome and dispel them is a key component of our faith.

I’ve been familiar with the above passage for many years, but, frankly speaking, it wasn’t until relatively recently that I noticed the part about “whether what he speaks is the truth or not.” According to the Daishonin, even if what we say is true, even if we’re right, it’s still slander to hold ill feelings. To a person like myself, raised to believe in “truth, justice and the American way,” this is a difficult thing to accept and understand.

I believed that if I were speaking the truth, I could say anything to anyone — and not be committing slander. Now I find that the truth, too, can be slander. As the Daishonin says, misfortune comes from our own mouths.

So should we just keep our mouths shut? No. Elsewhere, the Daishonin teaches us that silence is the enemy of the Buddha. So we can’t keep quiet. That wouldn’t be correct. We must speak. We must take action. Still, the fact that we believe something to be true is not enough to justify saying anything we want. The crisis of free speech in America hinges on this point, I believe. The right of free speech must be tempered with responsibility and concern for its impact on others.

I am reminded of a scene from *Jurassic Park*: The mathematician/chaos scientist character played by Jeff Goldblum, after learning that the park scientists have made living dinosaurs, makes a prescient statement like “The question you should be asking is not ‘Can we do it?’ The question you should be asking is ‘Should we do it?’” Similarly, *how* one should speak is the operative question in Buddhism, not simply whether we are right or not. Confirming that we’re right is only a first step, not the final measure.

Title: The Freedom To Speak Wisely

Subject: World Tribune 04/02/99 n.3236 p.2 WT990402p02

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Keywords: Freedom Gems Greg Martin Slander Speak Tribune Wisely World

First Soka Gakkai President Makiguchi, with his value-creating philosophy, replaced the Western virtue of truth (as in truth, beauty and goodness) with gain or value-creation. Why? Because he recognized that truth is for the most part both relative and neutral.

Truth is relative because people observe the same events often in completely different ways. Eyewitness accounts, for example, are notoriously subjective and inaccurate. So, although we may know what we said, what we saw or what we heard and believe this to be the truth, rarely is it the absolute truth.

Truth is also neutral. It just is. In other words, just because something is true doesn't mean that it's valuable in and of itself. For instance, the truth may be that you have a newspaper in your hand right now — but it's what you do with that newspaper that makes all the difference. Hopefully reading this newspaper will bring you some insight and growth. But if you use it to hit someone, to use an extreme example, it becomes a weapon.

Using the truth wisely is what creates value. Wisdom is a virtue; truth is simply a fact. And compassion is the well-spring of wisdom. The Daishonin says that we cannot keep silent, but we must speak wisely if we want to create value. Ultimately, Buddhists see freedom of speech as the freedom to speak compassionately, wisely and responsibly in the creation of value.

*Five in a series*