

The Perfection of Truth

Without a commitment to truth there is no Buddhist path. Dharma is a synonym for truth and Dharma practice is synonymous with living a life of truth. In Buddhist mythology this point is emphasized in the story that in his many lifetimes of training to become the Buddha, the Buddha-to-be, never lied. While there are stories of lifetimes when he transgressed the other ethical precepts, his dedication to truthfulness was unwavering.

One of the primary characteristics of a psychologically or spiritually mature person is that they never lie to themselves. Being honest with oneself is a prerequisite to personal growth and a genuine liberation of the heart. This is so important that it is safe to claim that an absolute truth in Buddhist practice is that it is *never* o.k. to deceive oneself.

Truth brings inner peace by overcoming the conflicts and turmoil we carry within our own minds. Truth can bring an inner security that frees us from being neurotically defending, apologizing, hating or hiding ourselves from ourselves. Truth can also help overcome conflict between people as we have seen with the profound work done by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Truth is not the same as a fact. Most facts contain no power whereas truth does. Mahatma Gandhi expressed this in coining the term *satyagraha* or "the power of truth." Inspired by Gandhi, Martin Luther King translated truth as "soul," rendered *satyagraha* into English as "Soul Power" and then used this concept to fuel the American civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's.

A variety of forces come together to give truth its power. One is the force of inner purity that can only be expressed and found in truth. Another is the confidence that comes with knowing what is true. Another is the strength of the good intentions that hopefully stand behind speaking the truth. Still another is the way that truth can make reconciliation and forgiveness possible. And finally there is the impact of the many beautiful qualities of heart released when truth helps liberate us from fear, hatred or greed.

If anyone has doubts about the power of truth, I recommend they attend an AA meeting. Since its inception in the 1930's it is possible that AA has saved more lives than any other spiritual tradition. And it has done so by insisting that alcoholics tell the truth. From admitting their powerlessness over the addiction to making a careful moral inventory, alcoholics learn how to release themselves from their compulsions.

Buddhism also uses truth as a way to find release from clinging and the suffering that ensues. The most succinct teaching for this is that of the Four Noble Truths. These are not meant to be truths in the sense of a creed that a Buddhist must believe is "The Truth." Rather they are pragmatic truths about process much like how it is true to say that if you cut yourself deeply with a knife you will hurt and if you keep the wound clean you optimize the chances of healing the cut. The Four Noble Truths is the Buddha's way of saying 'if you cling or grasp to anything, you will suffer; if you let go of that clinging, that suffering will end.' The Four Noble Truths have no value in the abstract. They are statements about suffering and the release from suffering that are to be verified through direct experience, specifically by discovering how to be directly honest about our suffering and its causes.

It is because of this need for personal honesty that Buddhist practice is dependent on cultivating mindfulness. In fact, mindfulness is sometimes defined as the practice of

being (or trying to be) honest about what is happening in the present moment. The awesome freedom and profound peace that the Buddhist path moves toward has nothing to do with how much we know, who we know, how rich, smart, or beautiful we are, or who admires or even loves us. Rather, this path has everything to do with telling ourself the truth and in doing so becoming someone who is a true person.

Through mindfulness that we can discover truth that is deeper than words and beliefs. And it is these truths which will transform our character, our deepest sense of being. For it is not enough to have a harmony between what we say and what we do. What we say and do can be in harmony with who we are. If we don't become someone who is true, there is no peace or freedom. When we become a true person, peace is not something we have, it is who we are.