

Truth: An Introduction to Honesty
by Chris

Commitment and devotion to the truth is a vitally important foundation for our practice. In our mailings, we will look at the Paramis of truth from these points of view:

- Honesty: a sincere practice of not intentionally deceiving ourselves or others. Learning to examine and hold lightly what we think we “know” on the level of views and opinions.
- Experiential truth: devotion to deepening our ability to sense/feel/know clearly what’s happening in the flow of our experience (mental, emotional, physical) in a way that is less obscured by old habits, wants, beliefs and anxieties.
- Dharma truth: coming to see for ourselves some deep levels of truth about experience in general-- what leads to suffering and what leads to freedom and open-hearted ease.

Of course we don’t approach these sequentially. They interweave and deepen together. We have some preliminary acceptance of the Dharma view that the way to relieve suffering is to look within at our own minds, so then we begin to learn to see some of our motives and behaviors and their results more clearly. As we do, we gain clarity and confidence, we’re more wisely motivated, and able to be more open and honest with ourselves and others.

This week we’ll look at basic Honesty.

Honesty begins with oneself. As we quickly see once we start looking, the conditioned mind may throw up all kinds of excuses, rationales and fantasies in service of our habits of trying to get what we want, avoid the uncomfortable, feel secure in our opinions, and protect our self-image and how others see us. Then there may be issues such as addictions that we are deeply invested in denying. The practice of mindfulness gradually gives us the wisdom and inner balance to take these things less personally, to be able to recognize these habits and strategies as such and at least acknowledge *to ourselves* that they are arising from motives other than truthfulness. We can stop deceiving ourselves about their nature, even though the habits may be slow to transform. We will look more at this process when we take up the topic of experiential truth.

Sylvia Boorstein writes “To perfect my Truthfulness, I need to be able to tolerate seeing clearly all of who I am and all of what is happening. I need to not feel ashamed or afraid. If I pay attention calmly and steadily, my mind will be unbiased and its secrets will reveal themselves to me in an honest, gentle way. I will not be distressed. The pleasure I’ll experience by not hiding from myself will inspire me to create the intimacy of nonjudgmental, gentle honesty with everyone.”

We can call on the Paramis of Energy, Patience and Wisdom to see that hiding from ourselves and maintaining false images is a waste of energy. We can patiently cultivate a love of seeing

clearly, trusting in the wisdom that its safer and better for our long term well-being not to identify with our delusions than to cling to them.

The Buddha held truth telling in the highest regard. After his son Rahula had apparently told a lie, the Buddha told him “When one is not ashamed of telling a deliberate lie; there is no evil that one would not do. Therefore, Rahula, you should train thus: I will not utter a falsehood even as a joke.”

We are currently witnessing the fraying of our social fabric as this fundamental ethical principle is more and more blatantly ignored. Consider the great value you probably place on friends and sources of information that you trust to have some serious commitment to the truth. Let yourself feel in your heart your aspiration to be one of those trustworthy people.

There is also an important difference between telling a deliberate lie and feeling compelled to speak everything on our minds, even if it feels true at the time. It’s easy in the heat of emotion to justify venting one’s judgements in the name of telling the truth. The Buddha offered these guidelines for wise speech, only the one of which is strictly about truth: "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will."

One psychologist distinguishes what he calls *fitting-in*, *dumping* and *communicating*. *Fitting-in* is repressing and censoring our own feelings and thoughts for the sake of social/relational conformity (a form of intention to deceive, to disguise what we really feel). *Dumping* is when we just vent our emotion-laden views on others as a sort of one-way firehose without consideration for how it is being received. *Communicating* is when we use the principles of wise speech and genuinely wish to convey something to another, which includes sensing how it lands and wise listening to the response. Our practice of honesty with ourselves through awareness and deep listening gives us the internal space and clarity that helps to relieve the sense of repressing or deception when we choose not to speak everything we think. This in turn relieves the pressure to need to dump and opens the space for genuine communication and greater intimacy.

The Buddha on preserving the truth in speaking about views and beliefs

In one sutta (MN95), a Brahmin student asks the Buddha about those people who say of their traditions “only this is true, anything else is wrong”. The Buddha replies that there are five bases for various views that may turn out to be either true or false. These five are faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation and reflective acceptance of a view [we could add read, felt, saw on the internet etc. etc.]. He explains “Something may be fully accepted based on [any of these], yet it may be empty, hollow and false, but something else may not be fully accepted based on [any of these], yet it may be factual, true and unmistakable.”

The student then asks “In what way is there preservation of truth?”

The Buddha answers “If a person has faith (for example), he preserves truth when he says: ‘My faith is thus’; but he does not yet come to definite conclusion ‘only this is true, anything else is wrong’. In this way there is the preservation of truth. But as yet there is no discovery of truth.”

The student, of course, then asks about the discovery of truth. We will take up this topic in our future discussion of Experiential Truth and Dharma Truths.

This technique of bracketing or qualifying our statements can be applied in emotional sharing, or talking about confusing situations. “This is one aspect of how things feel to me right now...”.

Reflections:

1. What has been your history with truth? What did you learn about being truthful growing up in your family? What meaningful teachings have you received about truthfulness? What personal experiences have influenced your attitude toward being truthful? What is your attitude and beliefs about being truthful?
2. How would you assess the strength of your commitment to being truthful? What are the conditions that make it easier for you to be truthful? Under what circumstances is your commitment to truthfulness compromised or challenged? When do you believe it is ok to not be truthful?

Practices:

For a day or two this week, watch carefully over your speech and work hard to only speak what you are confident is truthful. Do your best to avoid 1) exaggeration, 2) repeating as if true things which you have heard or read but don't actually know for yourself, 3) the common lies of everyday conversation (e.g. saying ‘fine’ when you are not when some asks how you are, an instance of *fitting-in*), 4) notice any other instances of *fitting-in*, *dumping* or *communicating*.