

Truth Week 2: Experiential Truth

From Chris

We began our study of truth by looking at truth as the ethical value of honesty in communication. But truth in Dharma practice is also about learning to question and examine how the mind filters and presents experience. Seeing and feeling our way through the layers of our conditioning and the constraints of language, we can access less distorted, more direct experience. We may evolve toward a different relationship with what we conventionally consider “true”.

Language and concepts

We usually think getting at ‘The Truth’ means arriving at some kind of definitive conceptual statement about a situation, when it might be much closer to true to let go of grasping at words and drop into simply recognizing the myriad moments of experience arising and passing *just as they are*.

Of course, we need to use words to communicate and to remember and reflect on our own experience, but we can learn to see through them and hold our views of their meanings more lightly. Words are major elements in the webs of our conditioning, they are nodes in networks of associations with memories, emotions, sensations, desires and fears that are different from person to person. So many arguments and even wars may come down to clinging to different emotional associations with words, especially the more abstract concepts related to love, justice, identity and ownership.

As we discussed in earlier mailings, most ‘things’ turn out to be processes when you look at them more carefully or at different time scales. Language shapes our perceptions, as when we always refer to an “I” who is then assumed to lie behind the natural faculties of seeing, hearing, feeling. Many experiences such as ‘pain’ are more bearable when we allow ourselves to perceive them as changing processes instead of dwelling in our word-association network. Truth unfolds at the edge of the unknown. Experience is more satisfying, less boring, ironically more meaningful, if we learn to let it all in fresh in each moment rather than always dicing it up with our same old verbal cookie-cutters.

When using language to communicate either externally or to ourselves, we can bear in mind that we are using it for some purpose, to have some effect on others, to help us discern or convey something about our experience. The truth is not in the words themselves, but in the ethical nature of our purpose, how deeply we have looked into our experience, how skillfully we use all our modes of communicating, how open and attuned we can be to how our words are affecting others, how generously we can listen to someone else’s attempts to express *their* truth using *their* word-network.

Selective attention and perceptual bias

Through practice, we come to appreciate an even deeper aspect of experiential truth: our own eyes and ears, impressions and images, even 'gut feel' and instinctual behavior are highly conditioned and not necessarily as reliable as we might think. Countless social science experiments have shown that eye- or ear-witness accounts disagree. People filter their input dramatically, as in the experiment where attention was focused on one aspect of a scene and people failed to notice the gorilla walking right through the middle. This of course results in huge societal suffering when individuals are instantly perceived only by their skin color, gender or other culturally conditioned features and then judged through the network of assumptions that gets triggered.

And we limit our own potentials also with desires and anxieties triggered by subconscious (sub-mindful!) associations that seem to take over and drive our thoughts and emotions.

Yet our senses, including our internal bodily and emotional feelings, are all we have to go on. So the lesson from Dharma practice is to begin to notice how all this works, to see where we have emotionally blinding triggers, to learn to not take our first impressions for Truth, but to stay open and observant, holding our beliefs provisionally. As with the classic story of the blind men and the elephant, we also need other people's views to help us fill in the gaps in the big picture of how things are. We can try to slow down and watch the process, so that there is more space between first impressions and any action or conclusion about what is 'True'.

Discerning and opening to bodily truth, emotional truth, perceptual truth

All the above does not mean that we need to reject the impressions of our senses, feelings, thoughts, emotions. They certainly occur! And they sound, look, taste and feel exactly as they do. On the contrary, through practice we can become much clearer about exactly what they are, how they arise and how they may influence what arises next *if not seen clearly*. A great deal of suffering comes from trying to deny or block feelings, sensations and emotions, usually in order to prevent unwanted associations from arising. For example, we might have a chronically constricted chest or throat from not letting ourselves feel old hurts, and this may also block love or joy if that was once a source of rejection. In receiving our own experience and speaking of it with others, we preserve truth as we discussed last week by framing our statements with their origin in experience: 'this is what I think I saw', 'this is how I feel', 'this is what I'm sensing', even 'this is what my mind is believing right now'. But we don't close off inquiry, we continue to refine our understanding, listen respectfully to other viewpoints, and allow the felt-sense of experience to unfold into wordless depths.

Ajahn Sucitto calls his chapter on this parami "*The Fullness of Truth*". We highly recommend this whole chapter. Here's the link again to download a pdf of the whole book:

<https://www.amaravati.org/dhamma-books/parami-ways-to-cross-lifes-floods/>

He describes how all the other Paramis support our hearts and minds and allow us to gradually open to all of our experience, and to wisely discern causes and conditions that lead toward or away from suffering. In a section called "*Clear Awareness is Deep Honesty*", he first describes how ignorance, confusion and avoidance lead to dishonesty with ourselves and others. He then concludes:

"When we look at things in terms of truth, we can acknowledge contact impressions in terms of pleasant and unpleasant feelings: perhaps as familiar, poignant or uncomfortable perceptions and impressions. We can witness skillful, unskillful, compassionate or confused psychological intentions and states of mind, and we can sense whether attention is weak, bright or obsessive. Contact, intention and attention, and all of this kammic stuff are changeable. There are no fixed things, entities or people. But there is an inheritance and potential furtherance of habits and biases. As we see that our world is dependent on contact, intention and attention, we start to take steps to generate bright impressions, based on kindness, compassion and wise understanding."

Finally, here's a fragment of a poem by Rilke:

*I want to unfold.
Nowhere do I want to remain folded,
because where I am bent and folded, there I am a lie.
And I want my meaning
true for you. I want to describe myself
like a painting that I studied
closely for a long, long time,
like a word I finally understood,
like the pitcher of water I use every day,
like the face of my mother,
like a ship
that carried me
through the deadliest storm of all.*