

## Paramis: Truth

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So on Friday here we had our Dharma practice day on the topic of truth, what's not just truth, but the perfection of truth, at one of the *pāramitās* or *pāramīs*. And it's a series of classes I've been doing all year on what's called the ten perfections. And what I've been saying, what I've been doing, is the Monday after the class, I gave a talk here on that particular perfection. It happened to be that Monday. And the perfection that we're covering is the perfection of truth. Just so it turns out that last week I said I was going to talk about a different topic today, so I promised two different things, which makes it the truth thing kind of hard, but I'll stick with the first promise.

That's best, one way to solve the problem, right? So the perfections, these things called the *pāramīs*, are ten qualities of character, of personal development that is available to anybody to develop, and which are understood to be very important and helpful for engaging in the path to liberation and compassion, the path of compassionate service to others. And sometimes these ten qualities are developed just naturally in the course of practice. No one does anything particular; it just comes along with the maturation process. And sometimes people will actually focus on developing one or several or all of these qualities as a way of supporting their practice. Sometimes when people reach a plateau or they reach a barrier in their Buddhist practice, sometimes they'll stop meditation practice or, in addition to meditation practice, will engage in other practices.

There are these foundational practices to start, get them up strong enough so that your other practice can go on further. So the ten are: generosity, ethics, renunciation or letting go, wisdom, effort—yes, thank you—effort, resolve, truth—no, it's not right, getting it wrong. I've been going—what, patience is in there? Thank you. It's effort, patience, truth, resolve, and

then loving-kindness and equanimity. So today it's a topic: Is truth the perfection of truth or truthfulness?

And in thinking about this this weekend and today, I felt a little bit intimidated by the topic. In a way, I hadn't felt intimidated by the other ones. It seems kind of a very big topic, the topic of truth, or big in the sense of, you know, and very—who can speak about it? You know, who knows enough about truth to hold forth about it? So I feel a little bit shy about it, and so I'm talking strongly. So people here know keys are still working.

So truth is essential to the Buddhist path. There is no Buddhist path without a commitment to truth. One of the ways in the mythology of Buddhism this is represented is in the story of the many lifetimes that the Buddha practiced before he became a Buddha. In this mythology, he had to spend many, many lifetimes perfecting these ten perfections, and when they were perfected, the highest possible level, only then was he ready to do the work to get fully enlightened like a Buddha.

And it's said that in those many lifetimes of preparation, the Buddha-to-be broke, at one point or another, all the main precepts, all the five precepts. He had ethical transgressions except the one ethical transgression he never made is that he never lied. It was that important to his dedication and resolve. He resolved in the practice he was doing that he was committed never to lie. And it's been said that if a person lies, they're capable of breaking all the other precepts, that the other precepts have somehow or other behind them, or around them, or in them, the idea of deceit and lying.

People who kill, people who steal, people who engage in sexual misconduct tend to somehow have lies as part of it, part of that scene. So the commitment to speaking the truth is a tremendous support for living an ethical life. And this idea that the *bodhisatta*, in the many years of his training, never lied. I have noticed that one of the primary characteristics of people maturing spiritually or just maturing in general tends to be a dedication to never lying to themselves. That too, and it's so many different ways in which people deceive themselves or hide the truth from themselves or don't want to admit the truth.

But when we start telling the truth, at least to ourselves, that's a prerequisite for growth and development. So what is truth? is an interesting question. And I can't say that I have a definitive answer for you, though I'll try to give some today. So what is truth? It might help a little bit to say that truth is not facts.

So as I said Friday, the address of this building here is twelve-oh-five Hopkins. That's true.

That doesn't do much for anybody, does it? I mean, I guess I suppose you could lie about it and for various reasons. There might be a reason I don't want mail from that person, so I give them a different address. But it's not, you know, it's a form of a fact, and it's not the kind of truth that is going to make some deep difference in our growth.

You know the famous expression, "The truth will set you free." The fact that this is twelve-oh-five Hopkins is not going to set many people free. So what is it that is a truth? What does truth mean here? And what's the kind of truth that has the kind of power? Perhaps it can set people free.

In the Buddhist tradition, as in many other places, truth is considered to be a very powerful force. Oh, it's not, you know, it's not simply words strung together or facts strung together. But it carries a certain power or force. And that power and force in the Buddhist tradition is associated with the intention behind the words. In other Indian religious traditions, sometimes they have a kind of metaphysical understanding that there is power and force inherent in the words and the sounds of the words themselves. In the Buddhist tradition, words have power, but that power comes with the intention, the motivation behind what we say, that somehow the intention is infused in the words.

So if we speak with kind intentions, hopefully those kind intentions carry a very different quality into the world than if we speak with intentions to deceive or to lie. One of the places where the power of truth is also pointed at in the Buddhist tradition is in what is called an assertion of truth or a statement of truth. It's a little bit perhaps superstitious—sometimes it's taken that way—but the idea is that you can make a statement that something is true, certain things, and that has a force or influence on others or in the world around you that is beneficial. The most famous story of this in the Buddhist tradition is a story about *Angulimāla*, who was a mass murderer at the time of the Buddha. And the Buddha went into the forest where he lived and was able to stop him from doing any more killing.

And in fact, he converted to become a Buddhist monk. And in becoming a Buddhist monk, he then became protected from the king and from, you know, his own execution by the king. The king left him alone, and he practiced with the Buddha and became fully awakened. After he was fully enlightened, he went for a walk in the village for his alms in the morning, and he came across a house where he heard the sound of a woman going through very difficult labor, very painful labor. The baby wasn't going to be born. And he went back to the Buddha and explained what he heard.

And the Buddha said, Go back to that woman and say, Make a statement of truth, and say,

Since the time I was born, I have never harmed anyone. So he looked at the Buddha with big eyes. Wait a minute, I can't say that because I've been really bad. And so the Buddha says, Oh no, okay, say from the time that I was born in the noble birth, I have never harmed anyone. And I don't know what noble birth means. Either the time I was ordained as a Buddhist monk, or from the time that he was enlightened, from that. So in a certain period of time, he has not harmed anyone. So to go to that woman and make that statement. So he does that, and the baby is born.

Now, is that just a superstitious story, the mythology that's been carried about how powerful words are in truth statements, or is there something behind that? Maybe it was true. Maybe it did happen. When I was young, I lived in a spiritual community called the Farm and the Eight Hundred, a happy commune that grew up out of the Haight-Ashbury era in San Francisco. And in this community, when they moved to Tennessee and started their farm, their commune there, because of maybe the times and the place, they decided they had to find a substitute for LSD as their core spiritual practice. And what they found that was, as power—they claimed—was as powerful as LSD was the power of truth, speaking the truth.

And I was, that was kind of my entryway into spiritual practice. In some ways, it was this community where people had an amazing ability to stop and talk about what was going on, what is really going on between them. If there was any tension, any difficulties, any at all, people got really sensitive to tension, strange vibes, and they would stop, and they would talk about what was going on until everyone understood. And every time it came to an agreement about what was going on, what needed to happen, and I was so amazed at this process of truth telling, of discussion, that I stayed for a while, and felt I'd learn as much as I could from this community.

Well, the high priests of the farm in Tennessee were the midwives. Maybe they still are, and they had a book they published in the seventies called *Spiritual Midwifery*. Some might have seen it, Ina May Gaskin, and so they were kind of like the high priests. And so we would keep the stories about, you know, the stories of a birthing story from these midwives, and one of the most common stories they liked to tell was the stories of being present for a woman giving birth, and the baby wouldn't come, and the partner was there, and the midwives would kind of get a sense that something needed to happen before the baby could be born. And what needed to happen was that the couple needed to work something out.

And so they'd turn to this couple and say, You know, you guys got to talk about something, get clear about something, face up to something. And so the couple would have their conver-

sation. And once they got to the point of clarity, they worked it out. Then the baby was born. Now, was that a modern myth? I took, you know, who knows what was going on exactly, but that was what the story is that then we were told by these midwives when they were there at the birthing rooms.

I think that then sometimes I've heard stories from other places of women who hold back. And now, there's a kind of natural, biological process in getting born, but also there might be some degree of maybe unconscious at times holding back from giving birth. So when *Angulimāla* came to this woman, who knows why she was having difficult labor, perhaps making a story up, ancient India was a very difficult place to live. There was a tremendous amount of suffering and illness. There was a lot of people who died in childbirth, lots and lots. There was a lot of children who died quite young in age. Even if you lived, chances of getting illness of various kinds were quite high. Starvation was maybe a big deal. The world that this woman was giving a burning child into—I could easily imagine that she had some reluctance about what she was doing, maybe holding back in some ways, holding on as long as she could before having to deal with this.

And here comes a Buddhist monk, someone who has a high degree of spiritual maturation, of peace, peacefulness about him. And I can imagine that person coming and making a statement that somehow would help her to relax, maybe give her some hope or some inspiration about a different kind of life or a different possibility. Now, it may be a little bit risky for me to make this kind of supposition being a man. I apologize, but I wanted to tell you this ancient story of the power of making a statement of truth: This is what I'm saying. This is what's true.

Another place of the power of truth is not in the Buddhist tradition, but again from India, is in the expression that Mahatma Gandhi coined, *satyāgraha*. *Satya* means truth, and *graha*, as I understand, means to hold on but also can mean to insist, but hold on or insist, to be dedicated to the truth. And this was a kind of the force and the power that underlie the nonviolent movement that Gandhi led in South Africa and in India. When Martin Luther King read and was inspired by Gandhi, he took the term *satyāgraha*—truth power, the holding to truth—and translated it into his English, and it became, from Martin Luther King, it became Soul Power, and Soul Power was the fuel for the civil rights movement that he was leading.

So here he took Soul and Truth for him, or all, you know, he took them to be synonymous or very closely together. Often the word *Dharma* is treated as a synonym for truth. Living a life with *Dharma* or doing *Dharma* practice would be synonymous as living a life of truth,

practicing the truth, realizing the truth, realizing the *Dharma*. They're that closely connected. But a lot of people say that their religion is teaching the truth. So that's kind of like, you know, I have the true way, the only way.

And even at the time of the Buddha, there were people who made that claim, that came along and said, Only I have the truth. There's something different about the Buddha's truth. Was he truer than the other truths? Did he have it right? Or did he have a different kind of understanding of truth? And that's one of things I want to say today is, when the Buddha talked about spiritual truths, the truths of the *Dharma*, truths like we have the *Four Noble Truths*, they were truths not in the sense of metaphysical statements, but they were statements of, I mean, of pragmatic value. They were truths about a process.

So, you know, it's very simple. If you take a knife and cut your finger, it hurts. You bleed. If you take a bandage and cover your wound, you optimize the chances of a healing. And that's kind of, you know, a pragmatic truth, a straightforward kind of truth. It's not a metaphysical truth.

It's what the Buddha would call a pragmatic truth or experiential truth. So the *Four Noble Truths* that the Buddha taught were not meant to be metaphysical truths, but rather this kind of, develop this realm of pragmatic truth that if you cling, if you hold on and grasp, really hold hard to something, if you get a compulsive clinging or grasping to anything at all, you will suffer. If you let go of that clinging, the suffering will stop. That's one of the core truths of the Buddhist tradition. It's a process truth, and that's something that you can verify in your own experience. I hope—I think all of you have probably had some experience of grasping, of clinging to something, and then had the experience of suffering because of that, and the experience of letting go.

So partly the focus on Buddhism is this focus on what's pragmatically true. It's useful. What of the truth that we need to understand to help us in this process of becoming free? So the quote from Jesus, "Then the truth will set you free," works very well for Buddhism, because what is the truth? What is a seeing? What's the understanding that will set us free?

I wanted to give you a couple of other things that came to mind about the power of truth that is quite inspiring. One very simply is a mention of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It's a phenomenal process of a country that had tremendous civil war, tremendous atrocities that happened, and they decided that, within certain limits, they would try to find reconciliation between people who'd been enemies, people who had killed each other. But the requirement for that was the truth had to be spoken, the truth had to come out. So

they had these commissions where people would come and some of the South African whites who had tortured and killed the black South Africans would have to come and explain what they'd done to the families, the survivors, and actually confess what they'd done.

And if that confession wasn't complete, then there might be some other process, a legal process that might kick in. But if they could put it all on the table, what happens? Truth could be told. Then we set in motion a process of reconciliation or attempt at reconciliation. That just blows me away. That was a whole country that was dedicated to dealing with their past through that kind of process. But the truth had to be spoken. The truth has to come out.

We bring it closer to home here in America. One of the phenomenal spiritual movements in the United States has been—it's probably saved more lives than probably any religion has. And there, telling the truth is essential, a certain kind of truth. One of the first truths is the truth that I'm powerless in the face of alcohol. To really realize that or face that or confess that is a very powerful step in that process of becoming sober. Then if you go through the different twelve steps, the other place where truth becomes important, as they go through and make various points and make moral inventories, to have a very honest look at your past and be really honest about all the things you've done, the inventory of all the things, all your transgressions, all the ways you've harmed people, and then you're told to go and make amends, deal with it, go talk to them, go ask for forgiveness, speak the truth.

Don't hide what happened, but put it out there. So this idea of hiding the truth and speaking it, there's power in speaking it, and there's a certain kind of other power in hiding the truth and not speaking it. The most common definition of the perfection of truth in Buddhism is not speaking the truth so much as no longer deceiving, to stop deceiving, a dedication to not living a deceptive life, lying. So then the question is, what does it take to live an honest life? What does it take to live a life we don't lie?

And on Friday, when we had a discussion here about this, we had some pretty involved discussion about, When is it okay to lie? I find a little bit interesting that in talking about truth and speaking the truth, what people wanted to talk most about was, When is it okay to lie? And so then the various kinds of ethical scenarios that arose, that people presented. But what happens in this kind of situation, this kind of situation? And some people are really bugged by the English expression, How are you? Because you know what you're supposed to say. You're supposed to say, Right. You're supposed to say, Fine.

But then people say, So that is, No, I'm not really fine, and so that's not really being honest. So is that being dishonest? And my idea is that no one's asking you how you really are. The

intention of the question is not, How are you? The intention of the question is, Why, I see you. And when you say, Fine, that means, Hi back, I see you. And that's what it can mean, I think. So it's not a lie. But if the person comes back and says, Oh, great, but really, how are you? That's when they really want to know. And then you don't say, Fine, because then it becomes a lie.

So it's not so far-fetched, you know. Probably most of you know this. Maybe not all of you know this. Many—I think many of you use the expression “goodbye.” You know what that means. Some of you know, you know. So saying goodbye is a contraction of the English words “God be with you.” Is that your intention? When you say goodbye, you know, God be with you. You know, you know. That's not what it means anymore. It just means goodbye. That's, you know, kind of a simple thing about. But what about a larger issue of, in the classic example, in classrooms, of a classroom setting, when people have ethical dilemmas, is what happens if some awful terrorist comes chasing after somebody, and the person hides in your house, and an awful terrorist comes and knocks on the door and says, Is she there?

Well, a truthful thing to do is say, What? Yes, that's a truthful thing to say. So someone dedicated to the truth would say, Oh, yes, open the door. And so that person gets shot, and well, I kept the truth. Is that, you know? Is that maintaining the truth? Is that what truth is? So one way of kind of explaining this, working with this, is there's a difference between truth statements and being true.

And if we're true to the situation or true to ourselves, the true thing to do is to protect the person from being killed. And so, in order to be true to our values, to our compassion for everyone concerned, we have to do—may we have—may be lies, I know, or figure out some very clever way of saying something different. Like sometimes when my son, you know, asks for something and I have that, occasionally I know that saying No is not the wisest thing to say, even though No is the answer. Sometimes distraction is a parental technique. I'm not sure about the karma of it. But sometimes when I see the alternative, you know, the no answer, just not going to work. So what is it that you know? So is it—what is it to be true to oneself? Is there a higher duty, in a sense, to being a person who is true, first, as a person who speaks the truth? If the two are in conflict, that's for anybody. It's for you to decide for yourself.

It's dangerous to say, Yes, there's a higher duty to being a true person than to speaking the truth, because then it becomes a relative question, a question of discernment about what is the right—where is the line that you cross? How do you do it? And once you get a grey area, then sometimes self-interest sneaks in. So what is it to be a true person? So one of the



simplest definitions of what is truth, and perhaps pointing to the idea of the truth that might set us free: if we are being truthful when we do what we say and we say what we do, at least to ourselves and maybe to others. We say what we do, and we do what we say. There's a harmony between our words and our actions.

Buddhists would go one step further and say, When there's a harmony between our beingness and what we say and do, when what we be, what we are, and what we do, and what we say are in harmony with each other, in a sense, are the same. Now, I associate truth with peace. For me, it is a very strong association of being truthful with being peaceful, because one of the functions of being truthful is to help overcome the conflicts we carry in our minds, in our psyche. The idea of being truthful is the idea of not living with internal conflicts, not having to hide, not having to be apologetic, not having to be defensive, not having to be assertive in some kind of neurotic way.

But to simply be able to rest in the truth, be able to speak the truth, and know that the truth is adequate enough. We don't have to hide. We need not be embarrassed, we don't need to be defensive. The cliché about lying or being truthful is that if you speak the truth, you have a lot less to remember. If you start lying, then you have to remember your lies and be very clever at making new ones to cover them when they kind of begin cracking. But when you're committed to the truth, it's possible to rest much more easily in a way that you can't if you're living lies.

And I would say that truth is realized when there is no conflict in our minds. Oh, I won't say this thing. This question, the ethical question, when is it OK to lie, is sometimes a—OK to lie, you know? So then it's a big question. People, this is debated a lot. I would like to suggest a definitive statement around this topic. So you don't take these Buddhists, you know, to be a little bit wishy-washy, and you kind of relativists, and say, well, it's all relative, dependent situation, and that Buddhists don't have any absolute truths. You need to be as if there's a pillar or foundation for who they are.

And I want to give you an absolute truth. Dangerous thing, right? It's never okay to lie to yourself. I think that that's like pretty absolute. Never okay to lie to yourself. And the process of mindfulness can be understood as a process of discovering what is true, a process of being honest. That being honest, that mindfulness requires being honest to ourselves, and to really be able to admit, to confess, and to recognize what is happening for us at any given time.

And that's a very powerful practice. I've known sometimes in my practice where I was incapable, unwilling—consciously and unconsciously at times—to admit what was going on. And

sometimes I would only admit the truth to myself when things got bad enough. When I got rock bottom, I just got bottomed out. And then I finally had to admit, Oh, this is what's happening. I have to accept the fact this is what's happening. Things aren't happening how I want them to happen. They're happening, but I'm fulfilling my expectations, my thoughts about how capable I am and how I'm supposed to manage and manage on my own, all these ideas of self and self-efficacy and all these things, these goals and ideals that I was holding.

I have to admit it's not working. And a few times when I finally admit that it was hopeless, that it wasn't working, that I couldn't do it, that's when my practice began. And there are times—occasionally some of you will find that you come up against a wall in practice where it just can't go any further. And you might bang yourself against that wall over and over again. And if you leave to try to find another door, you might be doing yourself a disservice. As soon as you get discomfort, it's not working. I think I'll go try another practice, another tradition. Sometimes you need to hang in there, and sometimes you have to hang in there. And the only thing that works is you have to bang your head against that wall until something inside of you is willing to let go or give up or admit what's going on: Wow, I can't do this. This is hopeless.

And then something else can happen. But if you try to do that so something else can happen, you can't strategize this. I want to read you a quote from that Gandhi guide on speaking.

My hesitancy in speech, which was once an annoyance, is now a pleasure.  
Its greatest benefit has been that it has taught me the economy of words.  
I have naturally formed that habit of restraining my thoughts, and I can now give myself the certificate that a thoughtless word hardly ever escapes my tongue or my pen.  
I do not recollect ever having to regret anything in my speech or writing.  
I have been spared many a mishap and a waste of time.  
Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of the seeker of truth.  
Pretending to exaggerate, to suppress or modify the truth, wittingly or unwittingly, is a natural weakness of people, and silence is necessary in order to surmount it.  
A person of few words will rarely be thoughtless in his or her speech.  
She or he will measure every word.

So to some degree I've been talking about words, mostly what we say, what we recognize, we acknowledge. There's another level of truth, which is very important, and that is when we're true to ourselves. But when we discover a truth that is deeper, in a sense, than certain

kinds of words, there are certain facts that are true. There are facts of our roles in life, our ethnic background. There are facts about our gender. There are facts about, you know, our background or history. And these are very important in some ways. But some of these things about our identity or self-identity, our labels or concepts, and what happens when we see the transparency or see through the concepts that we usually use to measure and organize our lives and to relate to people, you know, in some cultures—like I've been told in Japanese culture, Japanese is a very stratified culture.

So there's a lot of different social layers. Like in England, especially England a while ago, very stratified culture, class culture. And in Japan, when the people go into the *senjo* or the baths, the public baths, and they're there, all the stratification goes away. That's where it drops, and everyone just meets each other like humans. Is there some very deep truth to be seen, to be experienced, when we can drop many of the usual concepts and ideas by which we live our life? I've read once someone said, It doesn't matter how much you know. It doesn't matter how much. It doesn't matter who you know. It doesn't matter how rich you are. It doesn't matter where you live. What matters is how well you can speak and live the truth.

Many of the values that many people in our society run around with, our values sometimes limit our capacity to see or experience or be the truth. To discover the truth and to see the truth requires an ability to see the transparency of many of the concepts of self, of society that we walk around in and carry with us everywhere. When we can drop both many of the conventional concepts, the arbitrary concepts, the created concepts society creates for us, when we can drop the filters on our eyes, like the filters of greed and hate and delusion, it isn't that we only will see truth. But more importantly, we can become truth. Truth is something we become, not something we speak and see.

We become someone who is true. We become what is true. We become the *Dharma*. So the commitment to truth in Buddhism, not only because it has ethical value, not only because it's a compassionate thing to do for the world we live in, but the commitment to truth is because truth is the path to becoming someone who is true. And if we can't, if we don't become someone who is true, there is no peace, there is no realization, there is no freedom. It doesn't matter who you know. It doesn't matter how much you know. It doesn't matter how smart you are. How rich you are doesn't matter who you are, doesn't matter what you look like. It does matter how much you tell yourself the truth. So thank you and thank you.