

Dharma of Challenges (3 of 5) Clarifying Truth

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello, everyone. This is the third talk on the Dharma of challenges. In some ways, maybe life is one continuous challenge with little interludes. So, learning to be with challenges – learning to be wise about them and find our way through them in effective ways – is a very important part of Dharma practice.

Dharma has different meanings. Today's meaning – the third meaning that I've given – is Dharma as truth. It is very important to consider what we mean by truth. One of the simplest meanings, which I like a lot, is that mindfulness is a practice of truth-telling. Telling the truth means that we are honest. Honesty is basically truth out loud. We discover the truth by being honest with ourselves.

Whether we should be verbally honest and truthful about everything we experience is questionable, since sometimes the truth can hurt people. But we always want to be truthful with ourselves. We can learn how to be honest with ourselves. How do we learn to do this? How do we learn to stop and take time to recognize how we really are, what is happening for us, and the truth of how we feel?

One of the most important things to learn in this quest for truth and honesty is to be able to distinguish between our direct experience and the interpretations we add to it – the layers of meaning-making, judgments, commentary, and value that we add on top of things, and the concept of time that we add on top of things. For example, we may think, "If this continues, it will end up terribly – this means that terrible things will happen." Or we add the past, "This is just like what happened before, and therefore I know what this is about."

Some of those layers of meaning-making, thoughts, and interpretations that we add are appropriate and wise. But this is also a place where we can get into tremendous trouble. When we have challenges in our life, the chances are fairly high that the interpretive, story-making, predictive, value judgment mind is operating more strongly than usual. This makes sense when we are facing difficult challenges. We think: "What does this mean for me? How do I find my way out? What's wrong here? I have to understand what's happening."

So it makes sense that we get into that mode. But the interpretive, meaning-making, story-making mode is inaccurate a fair amount of the time. It does not have the full picture. It generalizes. It settles on a particular interpretation and particular aspect of what is happening. Sometimes it has blinders on – it doesn't see the fuller picture. Depending on what the challenge is, sometimes we don't really see ourselves fully.

We can learn to distinguish and really see whether something is an interpretation – it is an added layer. Maybe it has some accuracy and some truth to it. Maybe it contains a principle or an idea that we need to take into account and act on. But it is an interpretation – a story. It is an added thing. When we take the time to see that, then we have more ability to have choice and clarity about what we are doing.

When we are having a challenge with another person, we can say, "What you said yesterday was very difficult for me. Part of the reason it was so difficult was that I understood or interpreted it to mean you were angry with me." As soon as we say, "I understand it, I interpret it, that's how I understood it", there is a little more room for it not to be dogmatic, as in: "You were angry." Rather, let the other person participate and explain: "Well, I was irritated, but I was also really scared." Then we get a bigger picture of what is going on.

So, to be able to know, to hold, and see something a little more provisionally when we know it is an interpretation or story, as opposed to what is happening to us directly. Also, when we are challenged by other people or with ourselves, to perceive the direct experience, as the direct experience gives us a really important reference point for how to go forward or what care needs to be made.

Maybe someone was angry with you yesterday, and the direct experience is that you feel hurt. When you're hurt, you might tend to be angry back and be in attack mode. But instead, you ask: "What was the direct experience? What happened to me? Oh, yes – I was hurt, and now I'm in attack mode." Or, "Yes, I was hurt, and now I'm trying to run away." Or, "I'm afraid," or "I'm sad."

When you know that information, then you can begin asking: "Given that I'm hurt, or afraid, or sad, or angry, how do I practice with this? How can I be with it? How can I be with it so I don't act reactively? How can I be with it so that I'm caring for myself?" Because when we react to challenges, we often lose ourselves in the process.

So, to take time to find out what is true here – what is the direct experience? What is the direct experience, and what is the interpretation or the story that I'm telling? Stories are important. When there are challenges, one interesting thing to do is to tell the story, but maybe to a neutral party. For example: "Can I tell you how I understood this, and tell you the story about what happened?"

Some of the stories are accurate. Sometimes, hearing yourself say it in a neutral way – taking the pressure off the bottled-upness of the feelings by telling the story – gives you more clarity about what is going on. One way to tell the story is to tell it to yourself. Sometimes people journal about it. It is interesting to journal because there is a record of what you were thinking and interpreting. It is possible to go back and reread it, and understand better where the interpretation, the story-making, and the value judgments are – all those things you add to the basic raw story: the raw story versus how we are interpreting it.

Also, the way we think, the way that we write, and the way that we speak sometimes pull on different parts of the mind. One interesting way to see this is to speak out loud to yourself sometime when you're alone. Speak out loud about what is happening in the challenge. Maybe by speaking about it out loud rather than ruminating in the mind, you can find a different relationship to it. Maybe you are speaking from a different place. You can understand your reactivity or your place of wisdom better. Speaking out loud clarifies what is happening for you. Maybe you'll find your way through the challenge.

These are ways of being honest, being truthful – the truth of what is directly happening – knowing what direct, immediate seeing and knowing means. The truth of: "Oh, this is the story I'm telling myself about it. This is how I'm interpreting it. These are the values I put on it, the meaning I put on it, the predictions of the future I put on it. This is what I dredged up from the past to include as part of what is happening."

Seeing the truth of what we are doing in the mind is invaluable. Maybe our challenges are crises of the moment. If a challenge is ongoing, and if we can take the time, we can ask reality for a little timeout to meditate, journal, go for a walk, or spend some time with a neutral friend, and begin to discover what is the real truth here, versus the interpretation. What is the direct experience? Interpretation does have a role. But if we know it is an interpretation, then, when we are in conversation with people, we can say that. Then there is much more space to maneuver and find our way.

Truth makes us uncomfortable. Oddly enough, it is sometimes much more comfortable to be caught up in our interpretations, our meaning-making, our anger, blame, or fear, than it is to stop and really feel, know, and be present for our direct experience. But this is what we are trying to do in Dharma practice – this kind of truthfulness about what is actually happening here.

We can also try to put ourselves in situations where we are more likely to pop the bubble of our interpretations and our stories. Sometimes I have had difficulties with other people where, for example, I'm angry with them. I have learned that I don't think very accurately about the person when I'm angry towards them. I have learned that it is very important to go find the person and be in conversation with them, because that pops the bubble of the projections, the meanings, the interpretations that my mind is making up around the anger. It is much safer for me and much safer for the other person if we can meet and have a direct experience of each other rather than being involved in this whole other world of meaning-making, story-making, and interpretations.

Today, if you want to explore these ideas in your daily life, ask reality for a timeout. Depending on what's going on, it could be a minute, five minutes, or longer if you need it. Take time to go for a walk, meditate, or journal, and begin asking: "What's true here? What's true in the direct experience, and what is interpretation?"

The statement, "that's an interpretation," is a statement of truth. "Oh, it's true – that's an interpretation. That's a judgment. That's meaning-making. Oh, that's what my mind is doing. That's how I'm relating to all this." Maybe it is really important to see it clearly: that is what you're doing. Maybe you'll see that it's false. Maybe you'll see that you have to take something here into account and act accordingly. But to know clearly, "Oh, this is what's

happening.” Knowing “this is what’s happening” is one of the very important ways to work with challenges. In the long term, developing this skill makes all challenges a lot easier. Thank you very much.