

## THE PERFECTION OF TRUTHFULNESS

### *Sacca-parami*

Truthfulness has the characteristic of non-deceptiveness. In speech; its function is to verify in accordance with fact; its manifestation is excellence.... Without truthfulness, virtue and the following perfections are impossible, and there can be no practice in accordance with one's compassionate vows. All evil states have in common the transgression of truth.... With truthfulness as a foundation one is able to purify and fulfill the requisites of enlightenment...All the perfections are grounded in truth, clarified by letting go, intensified by peace, and purified by wisdom.

*A Treatise on the Paramis*, By Dhammapala

Abandoning false speech, one abstains from false speech; one speaks truth, adheres to truth, is trustworthy and reliable; one is no deceiver of the world.

Majjhima 51.14

When one is not ashamed of telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil that one would not do.

Majjhima Nikaya 61.7

Whatever tricks, deceits, wiles or subterfuges one has, one shows them as they actually are to the Teacher or to one's knowledgeable companions in the holy life, so that the Teacher or the Teacher's knowledgeable companions in the holy life can try to straighten them out.

Anguttara Nkaya 8.13

### **Essay on Truthfulness by Bhikkhu Bodhi**

*What is verbal conduct in accordance with the Dhamma? Here someone, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech; when summoned to a court, or to a meeting, or to one's relative's presence, or to one's guild, or to the royal family's presence, and questioned as a witness thus: 'So good person, tell what you know,' not knowing, one says, 'I don't know,' or knowing, one says, 'I know'; not seeing, one says, 'I do not see,' or seeing, one says, 'I see'; one does not in full awareness speak falsehood for one's own ends, or for another's ends, or for some trifling worldly end.*

Majjhima Nikaya 41.13

This statement of the Buddha discloses both the negative and the positive sides to the precept. The negative side is abstaining from lying, the positive side speaking the truth. The determinative factor behind the transgression is the intention to deceive. If one speaks something false believing it to be true, there is no breach of the precept as the intention to deceive is absent. Though the deceptive intention is common to all cases of false speech, lies can appear in different guises depending on the motivating root, whether greed, hatred, or delusion. Greed as the chief motive results in the lie aimed at gaining some personal advantage for oneself or for those close to oneself -- material wealth, position, respect, or admiration. With hatred as the motive, false speech takes the

form of the malicious lie, the lie intended to hurt and damage others. When delusion is the principal motive, the result is a less pernicious type of falsehood: the irrational lie, the compulsive lie, the interesting exaggeration, lying for the sake of a joke.

The Buddha's stricture against lying rests upon several reasons. For one thing, lying is disruptive to social cohesion. People can live together in society only in an atmosphere of mutual trust, where they have reason to believe that others will speak the truth; by destroying the grounds for trust and inducing mass suspicion, widespread lying becomes the harbinger signaling the fall from social solidarity to chaos. But lying has other consequences of a deeply personal nature at least equally disastrous. By their very nature lies tend to proliferate. Lying once and finding our word suspect, we feel compelled to lie again to defend our credibility, to paint a consistent picture of events. So the process repeats itself: the lies stretch, multiply, and connect until they lock us into a cage of falsehoods from which it is difficult to escape. The lie is thus a miniature paradigm for the whole process of subjective illusion. In each case the self-assured creator, sucked in by his own deceptions, eventually winds up their victim.

Such considerations probably lie behind the words of counsel the Buddha spoke to his son, the young novice Rahula, soon after the boy was ordained. One day the Buddha came to Rahula, pointed to a bowl with a little bit of water in it, and asked: "Rahula, do you see this bit of water left in the bowl?" Rahula answered: "Yes, sir." "So little, Rahula, is the spiritual achievement of one who is not afraid to speak a deliberate lie." Then the Buddha threw the water away, put the bowl down, and said: "Do you see, Rahula, how that water has been discarded? In the same way one who tells a deliberate lie discards whatever spiritual achievement he has made." Again he asked: "Do you see how this bowl is now empty? In the same way one who has no shame in speaking lies is empty of spiritual achievement." Then the Buddha turned the bowl upside down and said: "Do you see, Rahula, how this bowl has been turned upside down? In the same way one who tells a deliberate lie turns his spiritual achievements upside down and becomes incapable of progress." Therefore, the Buddha concluded, one should not speak a deliberate lie even in jest.

It is said that in the course of his long training for enlightenment over many lives, a bodhisatta can break all the moral precepts except the pledge to speak the truth. The reason for this is very profound, and reveals that the commitment to truth has a significance transcending the domain of ethics and even mental purification, taking us to the domains of knowledge and being. Truthful speech provides, in the sphere of interpersonal communication, a parallel to wisdom in the sphere of private understanding. The two are respectively the outward and inward modalities of the same commitment to what is real. Wisdom consists in the realization of truth, and truth (sacca) is not just a verbal proposition but the nature of things as they are. To realize truth our whole being has to be brought into accord with actuality, with things as they are, which requires that in communications with others we respect things as they are by speaking the truth. Truthful speech establishes a correspondence between our own inner being and the real nature of phenomena, allowing wisdom to rise up and fathom their real nature. Thus, much more than an ethical principle, devotion to truthful speech is a matter of taking our stand on reality rather than illusion, on the truth grasped by wisdom rather than the fantasies woven by desire.