

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara Dharma Post #2-A: Look of Truth

Dear Thay,¹ dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

Two Kinds of Truth

The first phrase we are studying is, “look of truth (*satya*).” According to Buddhism there are two kinds of truth, **relative or worldly truth** (*samvriti satya*) and **absolute truth** (*paramartha satya*).² In the phenomenal world we use relative truth, notions of birth and death, being and non-being, coming and going, etc. These signs are all useful in describing the phenomenal world, but if we contemplate the phenomenal world very deeply we will be able to come into contact with the noumenal world, ‘reality as it is,’ suchness or nirvana. **Nirvana** means extinction. First of all, the extinction of all concepts and notions. Thay has taught that our concepts about things prevent us from really touching them. “We have to destroy our notions if we want to touch the real rose. A real being is quite different from a concept.”

In **The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching**, Thay looks at the Buddha’s teaching on the Four Noble Truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path from the perspective of relative and absolute truth. He compares it to the *Heart Sutra* where Avalokiteshvara speaks about no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no path. He asks, is there a contradiction between these two teachings? His answer is, no. The Buddha is speaking in terms of relative truth, and Avalokiteshvara is teaching in terms of absolute truth. “When Avalokiteshvara says there is no suffering, he means that suffering is made entirely of things that are not suffering.” Whether you suffer or not depends on many circumstances.

The Relative and Absolute Truth of the Five Aggregates

According to Buddhism, a human being is composed of Five Aggregates (*skandhas*): body (form), feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The Five Aggregates contain everything—both inside and outside of us, in nature and in society.³

And yet in the *Forty Tenets of Plum Village Buddhism*, Thay states: “The five aggregates are like an ever-changing stream that is always flowing. It is in connection with, receives from and contributes to other streams of phenomena. We cannot speak of a person as an unchanging and permanent separate self.”⁴

¹ “Thay” is the affectionate term Thich Nhat Hanh’s student call him. The term means teacher.

² For more on the Two Truths, see **The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching**, Thich Nhat Hanh

³ For more on the Five Aggregates, see **The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching**, Thich Nhat Hanh

⁴ **40 Tenets of Plum Village Buddhism**, Thich Nhat Hanh

In these two cases we are looking at the Five Aggregates first with the look of relative truth, and then with the look of absolute truth.

In the *Turning of the Wheel Sutra* the Buddha taught that, "...an ordinary person caught in dualistic conceptions [relative truth] thinks that the Five Aggregates are the cause of his suffering, but in fact the root of suffering is his lack of understanding about the **impermanent, non-self, and interdependent nature** [absolute truth] of the Five Aggregates." **Impermanence** means that everything in the phenomenal world is always changing. **Non-self** means that the self is made up entirely of non-self elements. For example, we are made up of the earth, water, air, the heat of the sun, plants, our ancestors, etc. Without any one of these elements we would not exist. This is the case for all phenomena. **Interdependent nature** is the true nature of all phenomena. All phenomena are part of the great body of reality that is indivisible, and they cannot exist separately on their own. The many in the one. The one in the many. This is the insight of interbeing.

When we do not understand correctly, we become attached to things and get caught by them. If we perceive only the phenomenal world, without touching the noumenal world, we suffer. Our lack of understanding may cause us grasp, cling to, or turn away from what we wish to avoid. We may get stuck in our ideas about reality. If the wave sees only signs, it may be happy when it is high and sad when it is low. It may grasp and cling to the height or try to avoid the low. Or it may worry that some day it will die. Sound familiar? However, if the wave knows that it is water, then all the grasping, clinging and worry that arise from the notions of its limited life span as a wave will be ended, and the wave will be free. Whether birth and death are suffering depends on our insight. Thay has said that with insight, we can look at all these things and smile to them. We are not affected in the same way anymore. We ride the wave of birth and death, **and** we are free from birth and death. This insight liberates us. According to Thay:

Liberation is the ability to go from the world of signs to the world of true nature. We need the relative world of the wave, but we also need to touch the water, the ground of our being, to have real peace and joy. We shouldn't allow relative truth to imprison us and keep us from touching absolute truth. Looking deeply into relative truth, we penetrate the absolute. Relative and absolute truths inter-embrace. Both truths, relative and absolute, have a value.

Penetrating the True Nature By Following the Form

"We need the relative world of the wave, but we also need to touch the water, the ground of our being, to have real peace and joy."

According to Thay, in Buddhism there is a form of contemplation known as 'penetrating the true nature by following the form.'⁵ The path of penetrating the true

⁵ "Letter to a Young Scientist: Understanding and Love," Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Village retreat 2012

nature by following the form is a gradual path taking us from the phenomenal/ historical dimension to the noumenal/ ultimate dimension. Thay has said that we enter the door of practice through relative truth. We study the Buddha's teachings or read one of Thay's books. We begin to practice. By practicing mindfulness we can recognize the presence of happiness and the presence of suffering, and we try to go in the direction of increased happiness. Then one day we have a realization that suffering and happiness are "not two." If we can stay present with what is actually going on in the moment, we touch the true nature of suffering and the true nature of happiness. Concepts of suffering and happiness fall away, and we merely experience what we are experiencing, just as it is. This is the path of penetrating the true nature by following the form. Our mindful attention to relative truth helps us to touch the true nature of absolute truth.

Several weeks ago my oldest daughter came up from California to visit family for the holidays. Midway through the week she began having some intense pain in her head, with other worrisome symptoms. Her condition continued to worsen such that we took her to the emergency department of a local hospital to be checked out and see if it was safe for her to fly home. She got on a flight later that evening, planning to see her regular doctor in the next day or so. However, in the middle of the night I received a text from her saying she was in the emergency department of an LA hospital, having experienced further worrisome symptoms on the plane. She was too weak to talk, so I was left having to wait for her next message.

You might say it was a mother's worst nightmare. That's how it felt to me. My body went into panic and shock. I spent the rest of the night just taking care of my body—warm packs, massaging parts of my body to increase circulation, deep relaxation, calming my breath, holding myself gently. I didn't sleep but I was able to rest.

The next morning I got up and sat in meditation just practicing awareness of my body, feelings, sensations, following my breath and noticing its quality. There was nothing I could do for my daughter but practice. With a bit of concentration, allowing everything to be and holding it kindly, the practice of the Five Remembrances rose into my consciousness. But this time, I practiced them a bit differently:

My daughter is of the nature to grow old. There is no way she can escape growing old.

My daughter is of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way she can escape having ill-health.

My daughter is of the nature to die. There is no way she can escape death.

Everything that is dear to her, and everyone she loves is of the nature to change. There is no way she can escape being separated from them.

Her actions are her only true belongings. My actions are my only true belongings. We cannot escape the consequences of our actions. Our actions are the ground upon which we stand.

What a realization. For sure, tears were streaming down my face. But my whole experience of the situation shifted. We (I) want only happiness for our children, even when they are grown, and it is difficult when we (I) see them suffer. And yet this is their human nature—no different from my own human nature. For a moment at least, I saw through the foolishness of my belief that I could always keep them safe and happy—protect them from suffering. I felt the preciousness of life in that moment, as well as my overwhelming love for all my children and beyond. At that moment I was more than my small suffering self, and I was able to touch something much deeper. The relative truth of suffering helped me touch the ultimate truth.⁶ Thay has said that if you practice looking deeply into the First Holy Truth, you can see the Noble Eightfold Path revealed. Outside of the First Holy Truth, there cannot be any path, holy or unholy:

That is why you have to embrace your suffering, hold it close to your chest, and look deeply into it. The way out of your suffering depends on how you look at it. That is why suffering is called a Holy Truth. Look deeply into the nature of the path, using your Buddha eyes. The truth of the path is one with the truth of suffering. Every second I am on the path that leads out of suffering, suffering is there to guide me. That is why it is a holy path.

We experience nirvana right in the midst of this very precious, sometimes difficult, life we live. There is no other way. Leonard Cohen wrote: There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." As Thay has said:

When we stop discussing things and begin to realize the teachings in our own life, a moment comes when we realize our life *is* the path, and we no longer rely merely on the forms of practice. ...The boundary has been crossed, and our practice cannot be set back. We do not transcend the "world of dust" (*saha*) in order to go to some dust-free world called nirvana. If we throw away the world of dust, we will have no nirvana.

What is the True Nature of Reality?

Brother Phap Ho practices with the gatha, "Waking up this morning, I smile. Twenty-four brand new hours are before me. I vow to live fully in each moment, and look at all beings with eyes of compassion." Then one time he was on a camping trip and didn't want to get up in the morning because it had been so cold the night before and he hadn't slept much. However, when he got up and was able to enjoy warm tea, and the rays of the shining sun on the faces of his brothers and sisters, he said he

⁶ By the way, my daughter is home now and seems to be recovering. She said she was grateful, in the midst of her suffering, to realize the extensive network of really caring people around her. I am grateful for her realization as well.

was grateful for the cold and thick layer of frost of the dark night. So, he said, "Waking up this morning, I smile" is a practice, and on some days it is a realization.

Dear friends, perhaps sometimes we practice with a look of truth, and sometimes we realize the holy look of truth. Sometimes we live within the historical bubble of reality and then something cracks, and we touch a deeper truth. Avalokiteshvara would not be able to respond to the cries of the world unless she saw or heard the Holy Truth of the deep suffering of living beings. How does she respond? How do we respond? What is the nature of our look then?