

The Two Truths

The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings, 1998, Broadway Books, p. 121
Thich Nhat Hanh -1-

According to Buddhism, there are two kinds of truth, relative or worldly truth and absolute truth. We enter the door of practice through relative truth. We recognize the presence of happiness and the presence of suffering, and we try to go in the direction of increased happiness. Every day we go a little further in that direction, and one day we realize that suffering and happiness are "not two."

A Vietnamese poem says:

*People talk endlessly about their suffering and their joy.
But what is there to suffer or be joyful about?
Joy from sensual pleasure always leads to pain,
and suffering while practicing the Way always brings joy.
Wherever there is joy, there is suffering.*

If you want to have no-suffering, you must accept no-joy. The poet is trying to leap into absolute truth without walking the path of relative truth. Many people think that in order to avoid suffering, they have to give up joy, and they call this "transcending joy and suffering." This is not correct. If you recognize and accept your pain without running away from it, you will discover that although pain exists, joy also exists. Without experiencing relative joy, you will not know what to do when you are face-to-face with absolute joy. Don't get caught in theories or ideas, such as saying that suffering is an illusion or that we have to "transcend" both suffering and joy. Just stay in touch with what is actually going on, and you will touch the true nature of suffering and the true nature of joy. When you have a headache, it would not be correct to call your headache illusory. To help it go away, you have to acknowledge its existence and understand its causes.

We enter the path of practice through the door of knowledge, perhaps from a Dharma talk or a book. We continue along the path, and our suffering lessens, little by little. But at some point, all of our concepts and ideas must yield to our actual experience. Words and ideas are only useful if they are put into practice. When we stop discussing things and begin to realize the teachings in our own life, a moment comes when we realize that our life is the path, and we no longer rely merely on the forms of practice. Our action becomes, "non-action," and our practice becomes "non-practice." Their boundary has been crossed, and our practice cannot be set back. We do not have to transcend the "world of dust" (*saha*): in order to go to some dust-free world called nirvana. Suffering and nirvana are of the same substance. If we throw away the world of dust, we will have no nirvana.

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In the *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma*, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path. But in the *Heart Sutra*, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara tells us that there is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no path. Is this a contradiction? 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. Whether you suffer or not depends on many circumstances. The cold air can be painful if you are not wearing warm enough clothes, but with proper clothing, cold air can be a source of joy. Suffering is not objective. It depends largely on the way you perceive. There are things that cause you to suffer but do not cause others to suffer. There are things that bring you joy but do not bring others joy. The Four Noble Truths were presented by the Buddha as relative truth to help you enter the door of practice, but they are not his deepest teaching. With the eyes of interbeing, we can always reconcile the Two Truths. When we see, comprehend, and touch the nature of interbeing, we see the Buddha.

*All conditioned things are impermanent.
They are phenomena, subject to birth and death.
When birth and death no longer are,
the complete silencing is joy. (Ekottara Agama)*

This verse (*gatha*) was spoken by the Buddha shortly before his death. The first two lines express relative truth, while the third and fourth lines express absolute truth.

"All conditioned things" includes physical, physiological, and psychological phenomena.⁴

"Complete silencing" means nirvana, the extinction of all concepts.

When the Buddha says, "The complete silencing is joy," he means that thinking, conceptualizing, and speaking have come to an end. This is the Third Noble Truth in absolute terms.

The Buddha recommends that we recite the "Five Remembrances" every day:

1. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
2. I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape having ill-health.
3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
4. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
5. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.

The Five Remembrances help us make friends with our fears of growing old, getting sick, being abandoned, and dying. They are also a bell of mindfulness that can help us appreciate deeply the wonders of life that are available here and now.

4. "Form-conditioned things" (*rupa-samskara*), like a teapot or a flower, can be seen with our eyes. "Mind-conditioned things" (*chitta-samskara*), such as anger or sadness, are psychological.

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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.

Sitting in the northern hemisphere, we think we know which direction is above and which is below. But someone sitting in Australia will not agree. Above and below are relative truths. Above what? Below what? There is no absolute truth of above and below, old age and youth, etc. For me, old age is fine. It is nice to be old! There are things young people cannot experience. Young people are like a source of water from the top of the mountain, always trying to go as quickly as possible. But when you become a river going through the low land, you are much more peaceful. You reflect many clouds and the beautiful blue sky. Being old has its own joys. You can be very happy being an old person. When I sit with young monks and nuns, I feel that they are my continuation. I have done my best, and now they are continuing my being. This is interbeing, nonself.

This morning, before giving a Dharma talk, I was having breakfast with my attendant, a lovely novice monk. I paused and said to him, "Dear one, do you see the cow on the hillside? She is eating grass in order to make my yogurt, and I am now eating the yogurt to make a Dharma talk." Somehow, the cow will offer today's Dharma talk. As I drank the cow's milk, I was a child of the cow. The Buddha recommends we live our daily life in this way, seeing everything in the light of interbeing. Then we will not be caught in our small self. We will see our joy and our suffering everywhere. We will be free, and we won't see dying as a problem. Why should we say that dying is suffering? We continue with the next generations. What is essential is to be our best while we are here. Then we continue to be through our children and grandchildren. Motivated by love, we invest ourselves in the next generations. Whether birth and death are suffering depends on our insight. With insight, we can look at all these things and smile to them. We are not affected in the same way anymore. We ride on the wave of birth and death, and we are free from birth and death. This insight liberates us.