

Conventional truth, ultimate truth

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Intermediate Meditation Course Level 1. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

(Pāli: *sammutisacca*; Sanskrit: *vyavahārasatya*: conventional truth.)

Introduction

During his process of spiritual realization and enlightenment, the Buddha saw the true nature and true appearance of all worldly phenomena, which include the characteristics of impermanence, suffering, no-self, suchness, indivisibleness, identicalness, specific conditionality, change and transformation, emptiness, equality and illusion.

The Buddha saw that the true nature and true appearance of sentient beings that he had just realized were indeed very profound concepts, and he was concerned that it might be impossible to express them using worldly words, especially those principles that are beyond logical reasoning, called *atakkāvacara*. However, accepting the request of Brahma deity Sahampati, the Buddha decided that he would teach his new knowledge to help free human beings from suffering. The Buddha saw human beings as like lotus flowers in a lotus pond, which are of different lengths, shapes, and colors, and he decided that he would adapt his teachings according to each human being's inherent spiritual capacity. From that time, both conventional truth teachings and ultimate truth teachings came into being in Buddhism.

Reasons

The Buddha recognized that the perturbations of the mind that lead to the generation of bodily karma, intention karma, and speech karma are caused by an energy that has laid dormant in the human consciousness from times immemorial. The Buddha called this energy "mental defilements", consisting of four groups: ignorance, desire, craving for existence and false perspective. In his compassion towards all human beings and his desire to save all beings from suffering, the Buddha put forth several truths (Pāli: *sacca*) as teaching methods, depending on the inherent spiritual capacity of each human being.

To progressively guide all human beings towards enlightenment, the Buddha divided the truths that he taught into two categories. The first category consists of the realities of the world in which people live and that can be experienced through the senses or by the mind. These realities can be apprehended by our thinking mind, our consciousness or our intellect.

The second category consists of ultimate realities of the spiritual world that are very difficult for people to realize because they cannot be perceived by the intellect, by dualistic discrimination, or by knowledge, but only through the knowing of the unborn. Or, using Zen terminology, through the wordless awareness mind. This is the ultimate truth that people who want to attain wisdom insight must experience directly for themselves. This is because the ultimate truth cannot be understood by logical reasoning or worldly concepts that are based on intellect and knowledge, even though it is a truth that pertains to the world. The Buddha advised his disciples to attain the ultimate truth, as this will lead to enlightenment and liberation.

This is the reason why there are two categories of truth in Buddhism.

Characteristics

Both conventional truth and ultimate truth are realities. They are not vague concepts, and people, depending on their inherent spiritual capacity, can directly see, feel and experience them. They are realities that will always exist, regardless of whether the Buddha had come into this world or not.

The Buddha, as an enlightened being, has identified them clearly, and seen and known them as they are, either from a worldly standpoint or from an enlightened standpoint. In order to free all human beings from suffering, the Buddha systemized his teaching into two categories to address the different inherent spiritual capacity of the people he taught. To the unenlightened ones, Buddha taught the conventional truth, to the enlightened ones, Buddha taught the ultimate truth.

To unenlightened people, with lower inherent spiritual capacity, and living more in ignorance than in awakening, Buddha taught the conventional truth. This teaching is more easily accepted by the wider population as it is consistent with logical reasoning and with common concepts in this worldly and temporary life. It can be apprehended by knowledge and consciousness and can be easily recognized by ordinary people. It is accessible to ordinary, unenlightened people because they can come in contact with it in their everyday life. This is why it is called conventional truth.

To enlightened people, with higher inherent spiritual capacity, and living more in awakening than in ignorance, Buddha

taught the ultimate truth. This teaching is aimed at the wise. It carries the highest meaning and is called the self-evident truth or the ultimate truth or the highest truth (Pāli: paramattha-sacca; Sanskrit: paramārtha-satya). It is not the object of the dualistic mind as one cannot see the ultimate truth with the dualistic mind. It is the object of wordless awareness or paññā wisdom.

The common characteristic of both conventional truth and ultimate truth is that they cannot exist together. Conventional truth obscures the ultimate truth. Once ultimate truth shines through, conventional truth disappears. However, in reality, ultimate truth is established with the help of conventional truth. Similarly, ignorance leads to awakening; extreme suffering leads to the quest for enlightenment; discovering suffering and the origin of suffering leads to the Noble Eightfold Path; recognizing the illusion, impermanence and falsehood in worldly phenomena leads to understanding the law of dependent origination, causal correlations and the empty nature of the phenomenal world.

Definitions

What is conventional truth? Convention refers to a general agreement, a general opinion or anything that people within a group, community or nation have agreed to accept as norm or truth, including any characteristics, appearance or status of phenomena or objects, as they traditionally perceived them.

When language comes into existence, human beings give names to phenomena based on the general agreement within their community. From then on, all objects are labeled and named, and thus, language becomes the means of human communication. In essence, convention is the creation of concepts to label, or name, phenomena. These concepts are manifested by gestures, speech and written words as established by the community or nation. And as they are established by a community or nation, they are only applicable to that particular community or nation.

Therefore, speech, words, gestures, images, sounds and signs are means used by human beings to concretize concepts that have been conventionally established by a community to label or name phenomena such as physical objects or anything that people come into contact with.

Conventional truth is based on language and uses the capabilities of the thinking mind, the intellect, and consciousness that are located in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain. Conventional truth is expressed through concepts, names, sounds, words, signs etc. Conventional truth is based on concepts that are formed in the perception aggregate.

Effects of conventional truth

The benefits of conventional truth include:

- facilitating communication and expression in society
- helping keep society safe
- developing civilization and culture through language, writing, movies, etc.
- helping spread scientific knowledge through communication
- having a relative value to the community group, at a point in time and space.

As conventional truth is based on concepts that are formed in the perception aggregate, it is influenced by mental defilements, old habits, fetters and underlying tendencies. Therefore conventional truth will easily lead to:

- suffering and affliction
- dispute, conflict, insecurity, and war
- generating karma.

The two truths in Buddhism

After attaining enlightenment and accepting the request of the Brahmā deity Sahampati to teach the dhamma, the Buddha thought of teaching his two former yoga masters but learned that they had both passed away. So he went to the Deer Park in Varanasi (Pāli: Bānāraṣi) to teach the five monks who had practiced asceticism with him previously. These monks had a middle level of inherent spiritual capacity as they had practiced for decades without being able to develop their spiritual wisdom. This was because they did not follow the correct practice and were still attached to the ego and believed that people have a permanent immutable soul.

The two sermons that the Buddha delivered to the five ascetic monks are classified as conventional truth or worldly paññā truth. Meanwhile, the teaching on the suchness, emptiness and illusion characteristics of phenomena is classified as ultimate truth or true paññā truth.

The Buddha adopted the principle of adapting his teaching to the inherent spiritual capacity of the audience, making each

teaching appropriate for the time-location-situation.

In the first week, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths to the five ascetic monks and then in the second week, he taught the Sutta on the No-Self, also known as the five aggregates, and the three characteristics of worldly phenomena. Upon hearing the sermon on the Four Noble Truths, the five ascetic monks entered the holy stream and reached the stage of Entering the Stream. Once they had heard the Sutta on the No-Self, they were cleansed of all mental defilements and attained the stage of Arahāt. The two sermons were later called the sermons that set the wheel of dhamma into motion.

The ultimate truth is beyond logical reasoning, beyond language, and cannot be taught to those with a middle level of inherent spiritual capacity. It can only be internalized through wordless awareness.

Worldly paññā truth differs from worldly conventional truth in that it requires an awakened intellect. Both remain in the domain of language and of cognition using language. Worldly paññā truth involves experience that has limits. It is by reaching true paññā truth that one can reach the ultimate goals of Buddhism: freedom from suffering, enlightenment, emancipation from the cycle of births and deaths, and experience that has no limits.

Conclusion

Conventional truth is the object of consciousness, intellect and worldly knowledge. This is the truth that is derived from the way we see objects and limitations of the phenomenal world. As all phenomena are interdependent in their arising, conventional truth also depends on the interdependent existence of worldly phenomena. However, it is through conventional truth that the Buddha developed the ultimate truth.

Conventional truth in Buddhism is used to teach people with a middle level of inherent spiritual capacity. For those who still depended on the perception of the senses; who still saw the world as real; who still experienced pleasant and unpleasant feelings and sensations, the Buddha used conventional methods and taught the Four Noble Truths. To those who believed that the ego is permanent and unchanging, he taught the Sutta on the No-Self to help them recognize that there is no self. Once people have changed their cognition of the world, they will start to realize the ultimate truth. It is only through wordless cognitive awareness that one can see that the true nature of all worldly phenomena is suchness, emptiness, and illusion. The difference between conventional truth and ultimate truth resides in the former relying on cognition through words while the latter relies on wordless cognitive awareness.

