



Truth Telling in Peacebuilding: A Buddhist Contribution

Le Ngoc Bich Ly

Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

<bich_l@payap.ac.th>

Abstract

Truth telling has been recognized as important in the process of trauma healing and reconciliation according to modern peacebuilding theories. Studies have shown that truth telling is not a simple issue but involves problems and challenges that need research and solutions. This study contributes to this problem-solution or the question “How should difficult and painful truth be told in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes benefit for all?” by offering an alternative knowledge and method rooted in the Buddhist tradition. Based on textual study of the Majjhima Nikaya and Anguttara Nikaya, the paper argues that the Buddha’s teachings can widen the understanding and minimize potential problems with the work of truth telling whether in the collective or interpersonal context by providing a concrete systematic framework and criteria for reflection, making decision and communication of truth.

Keywords: truth telling, reconciliation, Buddha’s wisdom, Nikaya texts, peacebuilding

Introduction

In peacebuilding, truth telling has been argued by peace scholars and activists to be a key factor in the process of trauma healing and reconciliation. [1] Due to seeing this important role of truth telling, since 1974, truth commissions have been established in various war-torn countries during the transitional period from war to peace to deal with human rights abuse, human

suffering, ensuring accountability for the past injustices, fostering reconciliation and building democracy. [2] By 2009, over 50 truth commissions had been established worldwide.[3] Such work has made some significant contributions to the peacebuilding process. For instance, according Richard Goldstone, quoted by Porter[4] there are five contributions of truth exposure to peacebuilding: (1) individualizing

guilt and avoiding imposing guilt on the whole group; (2) bringing public and official acknowledgment of the victims; (3) ensuring accurate and faithful record of history; (4) ensuring effective criminal justice; and (5) revealing a systemic pattern of violence. Porter also adds that truth telling is important to restore the humanity and dignity of the victims, preventing similar future crimes, and moving positively into the future.[5]

However, literature on truth and reconciliation work has revealed that this work of truth telling is not a simple one but has faced several problems and challenges. A highlight of the problem is that the purpose of truth telling for some truth commissions is controlled by those in power to serve the political purpose of national unity and reconciliation rather than to serve justice for the victims and deal with structural transformation.[6] Another problem facing the work of truth telling is that uncovering the violent past experiences can awaken pain and trauma.[7] According to Hamber, revealing truth of the violent past is not always healing. It may create a temporary release for the victim but it masks long-term deeper psychological issues. A study of victims who underwent this truth telling process in Cape Town in 1997 revealed that 50 to 60 percent of the dozens of victims who gave testimonies suffered or regretted after doing it.[8] In some cases, truth commissions were

not effective to enable the survivors of violence especially female victims of sexual abuse to give testimonies in public because of social and cultural constraints. In some cultures, rape is regarded as invisible or normal; and the victims are blamed and stigmatized for the crimes they have suffered. In such cases, women often do not choose the victim identity and keep silent even though they are given the chance to speak out and get the perpetrators accountable.[9]

How should difficult and painful truth be told in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes benefit for all? Scholars and activists have attempted to propose different solutions to the encountered problems. For example, Porter argues that truth telling should serve the purpose of justice and restoration of dignity for the victim rather than for the sake of apology and forgiveness demand; however, it is still a question that how truth telling does not poison the future and the demand for justice is not an exchange of evil for evil.[10] She also argues that truth telling should also take into account issue of difference and equality in order to protect the rights of difference and attend to the needs of the individuals. [11] Dewolf and Geddes propose that a safe environment and relationship building should come before truth telling. They also see the importance of self-reflection on and addressing personal bias and systemic violence

in one's culture in order for healing and reconciliation to happen.[12] For Brandon Hamber, in order for truth telling to be effective, the act of truth telling alone and psychological treatment of individuals' post-traumatic symptoms according to Western remedy is not sufficient but it must go with justice and reparations, and attempts to shape the larger society.[13] Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai Buddhist scholar, proposes that in truth telling, space for expressing anger is important; however, for a positive common future, both victim and perpetrator should overcome the binary thinking of being either victim or perpetrator. Those involved should see both roles within themselves and become mindful of the interconnectedness and universality of shared suffering. Only then can people generate understanding to overcome the ego and have compassion for self and the other.[14]

This study does not aim at any specific truth commission or institution. The main purpose of this paper is to contribute theoretically the topic of how to effectively tell difficult truth by offering an alternative way rooted in the Buddha's teachings in the Tipitaka, particularly the Majjhima Nikaya (MN) and Anguttara Nikaya (AN). [15] There is a growing interest in exploring Buddhist contributions to communication ethics[16] and peace studies.[17] However, I have not found any study directly addressing the

Buddhist perspective on truth telling for peacebuilding. This study contributes to this gap. From a document analysis of the two Buddhist scriptures, I argue that the Buddha's teachings can widen the understanding and minimize potential problems with the work of truth telling whether in the collective or interpersonal context by providing a concrete systematic framework and criteria for reflection, making decision and communicating truth as illustrated by the map below:

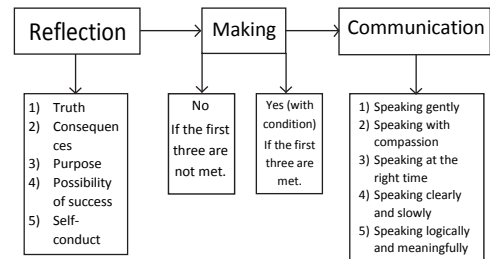


Figure 1: Buddhist Framework of Truth Telling (Source: This figure is created by the author based on Majjhima Nikaya 21, 44, 58, 61, 63, 65, 88, 95, 139; and Anguttara Nikaya 3.67; 10. 94, 95, 176).

Reflection Stage

According to the Buddha, in truth telling, the most important step to begin with is a thorough reflection before taking any action, whether it is bodily action, speech, or thought. This step determines the quality and result of a conduct. A right understanding of the issue will lead to more positive outcomes while a wrong or bad understanding of it will lead to more negative consequences. Truth

telling belongs to the speech conduct. Concerning this issue, the Buddha gave specific criteria for reflection in order to make a wise decision and maximize positive outcomes. Based on my data from Majjhima Nikaya 44, 58, 61, 63, 65, 88, 94, 103, & 139; and Anguttara Nikaya 3.67; 10.95, there are five criteria provided by the Buddha:

1. Truthfulness of the issue to be spoken: Is it fact? Is it true? (MN 44, 58, 139)
2. Consequences of the speech: Does it lead to harm and suffering for oneself, other and both or does it lead to no-harm, to benefit and happiness for oneself, other and both? Will this truth telling increase good states and decrease evil states or the reverse? (MN 61, 88, 94)
3. Purpose of speech: Is this truth essential for the transformation of the people involved toward virtue and liberation from suffering? (MN 63, 88, 139; AN 10.95)
4. Possibility of Success: Do I have the power to convince the offender to the good way or not? (MN 65, 103; AN 3.67)
5. Self-conduct: Am I worthy speaking it? (MN 44).

Firstly, truth telling must begin with the investigation of the truthfulness of the issue to be spoken. At the time of the Buddha, whenever there was an accusation brought to the Buddha's ear, he immediately invited relevant parties to come and asked them to confirm if

the accusation was correct before he made any judgment. In life, truth often has multiple versions rather than one. For example, there are four types of truth emerging from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: factual truth, personal narratives, dialogical truth and restorative truth. [18] A thorough investigation of truth from different perspectives will avoid wrong accusation or unfounded criticism. A wrong accusation or unfounded criticism can harm both the accused and the accuser in a long time.

Secondly, according to the Buddha, knowing something is factual and true is not sufficient to make a decision to speak out. A wise person needs to reflect several times about the consequences of one's speech by asking "Does this truth telling lead to harm and suffering for myself, for the other, and for both or does it lead to non-harm, to benefit and happiness for myself, for the other, and for both?" If after reflection, the person sees that this truth telling once conducted will lead to more negative consequences than positive ones, the Buddha advised that this truth should not be told. With this reflection, it is understandable that some women victims of sexual abuse, as reflected by Porter's studies, chose not to testify their experiences in the public because these women could foresee more negative impacts once they spoke out. [19] Truth telling without a thorough reflection often leads to fear and regret

such as those who regretted after giving testimonies as reflected by Hamber.[20] Additionally, truth telling as practiced by truth commissions for example has mainly focused on the harm and benefit of the victim. In this respect, the Buddha's teaching can contribute to expanding modern truth telling framework to include consideration about harm and benefits for more entities in the reflection: the offended, the offender, the mediator, and the whole community. This reflection process should be done by all people involved themselves.

Thirdly, according to the Buddha, knowing something is factual, true, and good is not sufficient to make a decision to speak out. A person needs to examine the purpose of her speech to see if this speech is necessary or not. This means: Is this truth essential for the transformation of the people involved toward virtue and liberation from suffering? Concerning the purpose, two levels of understanding can be identified from the Buddha's teachings: the mundane and super-mundane levels. The mundane level aims at training people's moral capacity in worldly gains such as health, wealth, success, and good fortune in the future life. The supramundane or ultimate level aims at complete freedom from suffering by purifying the heart from greed, hatred, and delusion through the threefold training: virtuous living, concentration (which can be understood as mindful

living and tranquility), and wisdom. [21] When reflecting on modern concept and practice of truth telling such as the work of truth commissions, the purpose is mostly restricted to the mundane level with little attention to the moral aspect. In other words, this truth telling is shaped in a dualistic framework: perpetrator-victim, apology-forgiveness, loss-reparations, shame and condemnation for the perpetrator – material and emotional restoration and satisfaction for the victim. At the surface level, this framework of truth telling appears to bring justice and satisfaction to a number of victims as recognized by some studies.[22]

However, there are some problems with this dualistic model. Sivaraksa has mentioned some of them such as the lack of mindfulness of the shared human weaknesses, of suffering and interconnectedness of life, and the gratification of the ego when one thinks one has the right to forgive people. [23] Another problem is that it does not encourage moral excellence but impoverishes human moral agency. That means a moral person is able to overcome the traumatic past and decides one's own dignity based on one's own virtue and wisdom cultivation without depending on an external apology or acknowledgement (Dhammapada 165). [24] If the healing and happiness of a person demands the shame, pain, and suffering back from the other, the cycle of violence will repeat. This person

defiles his own heart with anger and hatred and also inflicts harm back to the other. Anger and hatred will never cease according to the Buddha's view (AN 3.14-15). Shame and apology should be a free and natural response from the side of the offender as a result of his own moral awakening first for his own benefit and later for the benefit of others. Confession of wrong doing is to help the transgressor release the burden of guilt and suffering inside. It must be done with a self-determination to prevent a similar act in the future. In the Buddha's teaching, knowing shame and fear of blame are two good qualities for a person to cultivate virtue and advance in spiritual practice and for society to be in moral order and harmony. Therefore, it will be a leap in peacebuilding art if truth telling can be practiced in a way that convicts both the accuser's and the accused's inner conscience of their own greed, anger and delusion as the common enemy to get rid of. This truth telling will not exalt one party and shame the other but will transform both toward being better human beings.

Fourthly, the Buddha also mentions a forth factor to be considered in truth telling, i.e. the possibility of success in convincing the offender to return to the good way. This is the gap in theories of truth telling in modern peacebuilding. Modern peacebuilding tends to be activity-oriented and rushes for visible signs of change rather than working internally with the human heart

through tranquil mind and penetrative wisdom to perceive reality directly. For the Buddha, affective truth telling requires the wisdom to discern truth recipients' attitudes and capacity to change. Without this discernment, truth telling will be a waste of time and resources and even harm people. The first discernment is to know if the truth receiver has the capacity to discuss or not. The Buddha gave some methods to recognize this: (i) by observing how the person responds to questions; (ii) by observing the person's verbal and non-verbal reactions and attitudes. For the first method, if a person does not answer a reasonable question according to what the question requires, or avoids the question by asking another one, or change the topic, this person does not have the capacity to discuss. For the second method, if when being asked a reasonable question, the person does not lend an ear, shows anger, hatred, and disappointment, or responds with abusive words, insulting, taking advantage of the weaknesses of the other, or talks with hatred, prejudice, pride and self-assertion, this person has no capacity to discuss (AN 3.67). A wise person would not waste time talking when encountering a person who shows these symptoms. The second discernment to be made in truth telling is to distinguish the truth recipient's personality in order to have appropriate treatment. The Buddha discerns three types of personality: a stubborn wrong-

doer, an easy-to-talk wrong-doer, and a wrong-doer who has little faith and kindness remained. A stubborn wrong-doer does not show willingness to change after making offences while an easy-to-talk person shows willingness to change after making offences. The Buddha advises that the stubborn wrong-doer needs a stricter treatment while the easy-to-talk wrong-doer can be quickly forgiven. The third type needs to be treated with kindness and tolerance so that his little faith and little kindness will be protected and will not deteriorate (MN 65). The third discernment to be made in truth telling is to discern who is the easy-to-talk person and if the transgressor will be convinced to return to the good way. The Buddha teaches that when conflict happens, a mediator should approach the easy-to-talk person from each side first. In case of individual offences, the accuser or mediator, after having investigated carefully, should consider if he or she has the power to convince the offender to return to the good way or not. If she sees that this truth telling will bring frustration for both herself and the offender and she has no power to convince the offender to return to the good way, the Buddha advises that the mediator should restrain from doing it (MN103). Therefore, being able to reflect on this criterion of truth recipient's attitude and capacity to change will help the work of truth telling in peacebuilding save much time

and become more effective.

Lastly, there is one more factor to be considered in truth telling that the Buddha particularly taught his own disciples. It is a self-evaluation of one's own conduct before one wants to accuse another person. The Buddha gave five criteria for self-reflection which can be generalized as the following: (1) "Is my bodily conduct good and blameless?" (2) "Is my verbal conduct good and blameless?" (3) "Do I have compassion and without hatred for this offender?" (4) "Am I a learning and practicing person of the teachings of the tradition?" and (5) "Do I know and apply well the rules and principles of the tradition?" The Buddha taught that if after reflection and the person does not meet one of these, this person should not go forward with the accusation of another. The purpose of this reflection is to protect the truth teller from potential danger such as being shamed and accused back by the offender if this truth teller's life has fault and weaknesses. Principle (3) also helps to safeguard the truth teller from heart defilement. Accusation should be directed toward goodness and transformation for the offender rather than malicious destruction of him or her. This principle protects both the accuser and the accused from potential evil. Usually people do not see their own evil in the heart when they direct their accusation toward the evil outside. Anger, hatred, malice and the will to

revenge are the evil inside a person. Once it is expressed outside, it will create another violent event. Therefore, truth telling will be harmful for both the speaker and the listener if the truth teller does not check his own conduct in deed, speech, and thought.

In short, these are the five criteria that the Buddha gave for a truth teller to reflect before making a decision to tell the truth or not. This reflection stage is the decisive stage for truth telling process because it will determine the quality and outcome of it. In modern truth telling, it seems that this stage does not receive much attention and practice. The literature reveals that truth telling such as the work done by truth commissions is a matter of “trying and learning”, “learning by doing”, “making mistakes and correcting them”. Word can kill and destroy people without time and weapon. Therefore, this reflection method from Buddhism can make a contribution to make the work of truth telling more efficient and prevent potential harms.

Making Decision Stage

The second stage in truth telling process is making decision whether the truth should be spoken or not. Ideally if all the five criteria in the reflection stage are met, this truth telling is definitely a good thing to do. Basically the Buddha stressed the first three criteria (truthfulness, consequences, and purpose relevance) as uncompromising

principles for making decision to speak out the truth (MN 58, 61, 88). If these three are met, it is sufficient for a person to speak out the truth against another person’s offence. If not, this truth should not be spoken out. The last two criteria (the possibility of success and self-conduct) require care and compassion as the decisive factors to go forward despite the unfavorable scenario. This is true in the experience of the Buddha. In some cases, the Buddha saw that it was difficult to make the person return to the good way; however, he still wanted to try out of his compassion for the offender (MN 58, 128). Concerning the fifth principle of the worthiness of the speaker, if the truth teller is aware of his own weaknesses and potential danger that may happen to himself, and still sees that this truth telling is essential for the wellbeing of the offender and the community, out of care and compassion for all, this person can go forward with truth telling wisely such as reporting the issue to a knowledgeable superior rather than directly confronting the fellow offender. In the Buddha’s practicing community, reporting wrong conduct of each other to the Buddha is a common practice among the learning monks to protect the community from the influence of evil conduct (MN 48, 128; AN 2.15, 9.11). Overall, the Buddha’s framework aims at individual’s empowerment and full responsibility for one’s own conduct and consequences.

Literature on truth commissions

reflected this decision making stage. For instance, according Porter's study, people have different responses in this decision stage: some decided to forget; some spoke out; some resisted; some kept silent. She explained the women victims' silence from a gender perspective but admitted that their personal motivations were not a straightforward issue.[25] Studies revealed that many of those who spoke out because they were motivated by a promise to receive amnesty for the perpetrator or by an expectation to get justice and compensations for the victim. These two motivations are vulnerable ones because they follow a one-sided logic without considering the risks and benefits of other entities (principles 2 and 3 in the Buddha's framework). Indeed, studies have shown that these two motivations gave rise to criticisms and dissatisfactions from different groups of people.[26] If applying the Buddha's framework for the truth telling work, those involved in the process should be provided with sufficient information and the five criteria for their reflection practice. Once they are clear about their own motivations, benefit for themselves and others, and potential consequences, they will be able to make a responsible decision and accept whatever the result that will come. They will be empowered as a co-problem-solver together with other people involved rather than a dependent recipient of benefit promised

and provided by someone else.

Communication Stage

The third stage in the Buddha's framework of truth telling is communicating truth. Effective truth telling is an art. The Buddha gave concrete criteria for discernment and practice. This paper lists 5 of them:

1. Speaking gently (MN 21, 44; AN 10.176)
2. Speaking with compassion (MN 21, 44; AN 10.176)
3. Speaking at the right time (MN 21, 58, 139; AN 10.176)
4. Speaking clearly and slowly (MN 139)
5. Speaking logically and meaningfully (AN 10.176)

When people are in conflict, it is difficult for them to conquer their negative emotions and thoughts toward each other. However, hostile attitudes and harsh speeches are difficult for the other to accept. Consequently conflict can prolong and even get worse when people hurt each other with word weapons. The Buddha taught that when a person does not return anger and harsh words for anger and harsh words, the person who has first thrown anger and harsh words will understand it himself and calm down naturally. Non-anger and compassion are the remedy for both the self and the other (Samyuttara Nikaya 4.2).[27] So speaking gently and lovingly aids the success of truth

communication. The timing is also important in truth telling because the truth will have greater chance to be received by the other. For the Buddha, this skill requires wisdom through practice rather than a ready-made formula. When the Buddha dialogued with another person, he often observed the person's attitudes and readiness of the heart before he decided to proceed with a deeper and more difficult truth. The Buddha also advised that speaking slowly and clearly will avoid five problems: (1) body tires; (2) thought suffers; (3) sound suffers; (4) the throat is affected; and (5) clarity and comprehension are affected (MN 139). When a person speaks clearly and slowly, it will save both time and energy for both the speaker and the listener and the message can be well communicated. Concerning the last criterion – speaking logically and meaningfully, this principle means that the truth should be presented in a way that both parties can comprehend and discuss. This principle helps to avoid unproductive ways of communicating truth such as one-sided imposition of one's view, irrelevant and unfounded speech, bias and prejudice.

In modern theories of truth telling, it seems that this communication stage has not received any attention yet. In this sense, the Buddha's wisdom of truth communication can be an insight for the work of truth and reconciliation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has argued that the Buddha's teachings on truth telling can significantly contribute to the theoretical knowledge of truth telling and reconciliation work in modern peacebuilding by providing a concrete systematic framework and criteria for reflection, making decision and communication of truth. The reflection stage is the most important step that will determine the quality and outcome of truth telling; however, this stage seems to be overlooked in modern practice of truth telling. So is the communication stage. Modern peacebuilding can learn from the Buddha's wisdom to enhance the work of truth telling and reconciliation by reflecting on the five criteria: (1) "Is it true?", (2) "Is it good?", (3) "Is it necessary?", (4) "Do I have the power to convince the other person to return to the good way?", and (5) "Am I worthy speaking it?" before making decision for truth telling, and by learning the five methods of truth communication: (1) speaking gently, (2) speaking with compassion, (3) speaking at the right time, (4) speaking clearly and slowly, and (5) speaking logically and meaningfully.

The paper does not claim that Buddhist way alone can solve the problem of peacebuilding today. Nevertheless, the unique contribution of Buddhism to human wisdom and practical methods for the work of truth telling and reconciliation cannot be

denied. While the majority of scholarly studies of the topic focus on external factors such as fairness, healing of psychological symptoms, political, cultural and social change, the Buddha's knowledge and methods penetrate the deepest structure of the human heart

and moral laws and aim at individual's wholesome empowerment and autonomy in the face of all adversity and suffering. If both methods are combined, peacebuilding will have a better future.[]

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