

Illusion and Reality – Relationship between the Two Truths

The Relationship between the Two Truths

- Lower schools: Objects exist as real, and upon them is placed one characteristic: selflessness or emptiness.
- Madhyamaka school: There is a subtle line between illusion and reality – relative truth and ultimate truth are closely and intimately related.
- For any phenomenon, its relative truth and ultimate truth represent different aspects of that phenomenon.
- Example: For a book, the object itself is the relative truth, and its emptiness is the ultimate truth.
- The two truths are *one entity but different isolates*.
- Conventional truth and ultimate truth are *not* the same – they are mutually exclusive.
- Example: A body has two truths – it is a conventional truth, but it *has* an ultimate truth.
- There is no phenomenon that is *both* a conventional truth and an ultimate truth – implying that any phenomenon that exists must be either one or the other. There is nothing that is both, and there is nothing that is neither.
- Mutually exclusive: At present, we see all things as existing intrinsically; therefore, we cannot see that they are empty of intrinsic or inherent existence. When we have developed sufficiently and can perceive emptiness directly, we will be able to see all things as lacking inherent existence, and hence will no longer see things as existing inherently. By realizing the lack of inherent existence, inherent existence is excluded.
- Example: Sense of "I" – because conventional truth and ultimate truth are mutually exclusive, while our mind is realizing the conventional reality of our sense of "I", at that moment the ultimate reality of our sense of "I" cannot arise, and vice versa. When we reach a stage where we realize the final mode of existence of our "I" – which is its absence of inherent existence, its emptiness, or ultimate truth – we cannot simultaneously have a mind that realizes the conventional reality of our "I".
- The process of understanding impermanence happens slowly, through effort, with moments of realization becoming gradually more prevalent. Slowly, we will come to know the impermanence of our body or our sense of "I", and slowly we will lose our habit of grasping on to its permanence as the opposing habit becomes stronger.
- Example: A magician knows the tricks he is using, but the audience is fooled into thinking that his illusions are real.
- Example: A buddha sees things quite differently from how we see things.
- As long as we grasp at an object, its appearance and its real existence will always be discordant with one another, and there will never be any room for them to match up.
- Many masters, such as Nagarjuna, state that enormous fear arises as one's sense of "I" and its real mode of existence become closer. As one's meditation takes one closer to the way the "I" actually exists, the conventional sense of "I" diminishes. The false grasping at a sense of intrinsic identity creates a fear as we feel we are losing our identity and becoming non-existent. We have clung to a false sense of "I" since beginningless time. It feels like we are becoming nothing when all that is happening is that the appearance of the object and its actual mode of existence are becoming closer.

One Entity, Different Isolates

- Relative truth and ultimate truth are one entity, but they are not the same (because they are mutually exclusive). For any phenomenon, we can examine either of the two natures and arrive at the conclusion that they are both the same entity.
- *One entity*: A body, for example, exists – therefore it must either be a conventional truth or an ultimate truth. However, the body *has* both natures – but it is *not* both natures. The existence of a body is its conventional truth nature, but it *has* another nature as well, that is, its ultimate truth nature. The body's relative and ultimate truths are *one entity* in that it is the same object analyzed in different ways – that is, the basis of analysis is the same (the body), but the mode of analysis is different. One's conventional mind apprehends the conventional truth nature of the body, but one's ultimate mind apprehends its lack of inherent existence – its ultimate truth nature. Using the *same base*, the only difference is the conclusion.
- Same duration: The conventional truth and ultimate truth of a phenomenon arise, abide, and disintegrate at the same time – there is no sequence.
- *Different isolates*: Relative truth and ultimate truth are different *isolates* of one entity. The simplest way to explain this is to say that they are different names for the same thing. Because we approach the same object with a different mind, the object appears differently to us. All phenomena have these two mutually exclusive aspects, even emptiness itself. Emptiness can *have* a conventional truth nature, not that it is a conventional truth. All phenomena have both truths – that is, for every existent object, there is an emptiness, and a base to that emptiness, included in one entity. The table, for example, is the base, and the emptiness of the table is its ultimate truth.
- *Sutra Unravelling the Thought*: The Buddha talks about the faults that would occur if the two truths were either different entities or one isolate.
- Different entities: Ultimate truth and conventional truth are differentiated only because of the mind apprehending them. An ultimate mind analyzing emptiness ascertains the object's ultimate truth, whereas a conventional mind apprehends the object's conventional truth. Because they are mutually exclusive, but one entity, understanding emptiness eliminates the misunderstanding that an object inherently exists. This would not be the case if the two truths were different entities.
- Analogies for different entities: If there were two different entities, like teapot and cup, then realizing the emptiness of the teapot would not eliminate the misunderstanding about the cup. Another example is trying to get at the nature of water by analyzing a lump of wood.
- One isolate: If the two truths were one isolate, common beings like us would directly realize the true mode of existence, and yet we would still be unable to overcome afflictions even as we are directly perceiving reality.