

The Virtue of Truthfulness: A *Dhārmic* Quest

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the virtue of truthfulness from the *dhārmic* point of view. It defines the terms “*dharmā*” and “truthfulness” using illustrations from different *śāstras* including the *Mahābhārata* and states the importance of the virtue of truthfulness to do dharma through words. The paper also discusses the virtue of truthfulness as *dharmā* used in the different *śāstras*. The term *dharmā* means to uphold, and support. It also refers to religion, law, duty, ethics, sacrifice, etc. In some *śāstras*, it is defined that what prevents injury to any being in speech, mind and deed is called *dharmā*. Sometimes it is synonymous with truth. Speak the truth and practice *dharmā*. It means that one who speaks the truth is superior to those doing penance and charity. Such a type of person is greatly respected and become a model in our community. On the contrary, some *śāstras* also hold that there is nothing more sinful than falsehood. However, telling false would not always be considered *adharma*. This paper will discuss whether telling a lie is always considered *adharma* or not.

Keywords: *dharmā*, *satya*, virtue, falsehood, *hitavacana*.

Introduction

Truthfulness is a great virtue that consists in showing oneself true in deeds and words. There is no virtue equal to truth. It is also a great *dhārmic* (religious) vow, that is why we should not violate it. It, generally, stands for being honest about oneself to oneself and others. In other words, one would be committed to speaking or acknowledging the truth to someone as an individual and to society as a whole even in jest. For society, it is a social virtue as it helps us to make

social bonds by making trust and faith among us. In this regard, it is nothing wrong to say that the virtue of truthfulness acts as a binding force to make a social bond in our society. For an individual, it is an individual virtue as it helps someone to grow trust and happiness in him by making himself pure. As a result, he lives a peaceful life and is loved by all by becoming a virtuous being in our society. It would also be noted from a historical point of view that, the virtues of truthfulness and *dharma* are intimately bound up. One cannot be a *dhārmic* person without following it. Thus, it is a necessary condition to be a *dhārmic* person. Despite this fact, most of the *dhārmic* people of our society often try to tell lies for themselves and others. Sometimes telling lies is appreciated and sometimes not. Sometimes the virtue of truthfulness is synonymous with *dharma* in Indian *śāstras* including the *Mahābhārata*. In this regard, some general questions arise I) What does *dharma* mean? II) What is the nature of truthfulness? III) What is the importance of the virtue of truthfulness? IV) How is the virtue of truthfulness synonymous with *dharma*? Let me answer one by one.

The Concept of *Dharma*

The concept of *dharma* is a key concept in Indian ethics. It is derived from the root *dhṛ*. It means to uphold, support, or to nourish. In the few hymns of *Ṛg-Veda*, the term *dharma* is used in the above senses. Here the term *dharma* occurs at least fifty-six times either as an adjective or a noun (in the form *dharman*, generally neuter).ⁱ So it is difficult to determine what the exact meanings of *dharma* were used in our ancient period of the *Vedic* era. It is also difficult to translate the term *dharma* in English or other languages because there is no identical word for *dharma* in English or other languages. In this regard, P. V. Kane in his *History of Dharmaśāstras* claims that “*Dharma* is one of those *Sanskrit* words that defy all attempts at an exact rendering in English or any other tongue.”ⁱⁱ In the *Practical Sanskrit dictionary*, the term *dharma* refers to religion, law, religious or moral merit (virtue, righteousness, good works), duty (prescribed course of conduct) right, justice equity, impartiality, piety, morality, ethics, nature manners, sacrifice, etc.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* claims *dharma* or righteousness is an excellent form (*chreyo-rūpam atyasrjata dharmam*) that is projected by *Brahman*. This *dharma* is the controller of the *kṣatriya*. There is nothing higher than it. *Dharma* is synonymous with truth. Those who speak of *dharma*, they speak of truth or those who speak of truth, they speak of *dharma*. Righteousness and truthfulness are identical.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, a truthful person is always a *dhārmic* person. In the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* of Kaṇāda, the term *dharma* is defined as what leads to the attainment of *abhyudaya* and *niḥśreyasa* is called *dharma* (*yato 'bhyudayaniḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmah*).^{iv} It means that through *dharma* both prosperity (material) and Supreme good are achieved. We find another

important definition of *dharma* in the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* of Jaminī as it is an object distinguished by a command (*codanā lakṣaṇo artho dharmah*).^v In other words, it is described as a desirable goal or result that is indicated by injunctive (*Vedic*) passages.^{vi} According to Vātsyāna, *śubhā pravṛtti* produces *dharma* (righteousness) and *pāpātmika pravṛtti* produces *adharma* (unrighteousness). *Dharma* takes three forms regarding the originating conditions or sources as i) *śarīra dharmas*: *dāna* (charity, munificence), *paritrāṇa* (succouring the distressed), *paricaraṇa* (social service), ii) *vācika dharmas*: *Satya* (veracity), *hitavacana* (the uttering of beneficial speech), *priya-vacana* (gentleness and agreeableness of speech), *svādyāya* or *Veda-pāṭhādi* (the reciting of the scriptures), and iii) *manas dharmas*: *dayā* (kindness, benevolence), *asprḥā* (indifference to material advantages), *śraddhā* (reverence, piety).^{vii} In the Buddhist system, the term *dharma* is used as ‘an element of existence.’^{viii} Another meaning of *dharma* is often used as ‘the whole teaching of Buddha.’^{ix}

In the *Karṇa Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, Lord Kṛṣṇa defined *dharma* as “All that is free from any motive of injury to any being is surely morality. For, indeed, the moral precepts have been made to free the creatures from all injuries. *Dharma* (morality) is so-called because it protects all. Indeed, morality saves all creatures. Surely then that is morality which is capable of keeping off a creature from all injuries”^x In the *Śānti-Parva*, it is proclaimed for the aggrandizement and growth of all creatures. So, what brings on advancement and growth of all creatures is *dharma*. It is that which prevents injury to creatures. It maintains, keeps up as well and upholds all creatures.^{xi} In the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, Savitri similarly defines *dharma* as “The eternal duty of the righteous is mercy and charity, benevolence, and favour towards all creation in thought, word, and deed.”^{xii}

In the *Tattvārthsutra*, the term *dharma* refers to supreme forbearance (*uttama kṣamā*), supreme modesty (*uttama mārdava*), supreme straightforwardness (*uttama ārjava*), supreme purity (*uttama śauca*), supreme truthfulness (*uttama satya*), supreme self-restraint (*uttama saṃyama*), supreme austerity (*uttama tapa*), supreme renunciation (*uttama tyāga*), supreme non-attachment (*uttama ākiñcarya*) and supreme celibacy (*uttama brahmacārya*).^{xiii} The *Manu Samhita*, like *Tattvārthsutra* mentions ten *dharmas* as contentment (*dhṛti*), forbearance (*kṣamā*), non-attachment to worldly concerns (*dama*), non-avarice (*cauryā-bhāva*), purity (*śauca*), subjugation of the senses (*indriya-nigraha*), knowledge of the immutable principles (*dhī*), erudition (*vidyā*), truthfulness (*satya*), and non-irascibility (*akhrodha*).^{xiv} The *Śānti-Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* mentions thirteen common duties for all *varṇas*. These are compassion, abstention from injury, carefulness, giving to others what is due to them, *shraddhas* in honour of departed manes, hospitality to a guest, truthfulness, subjugation of anger, contentedness with one’s married wives, purity, freedom from malice, knowledge of self, and renunciation.^{xv} The term *dharma* of the *Tattvārthsutra*, the *Manu*

Samhita, and the *Śānti-Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* is used in the sense of duties to be performed by human beings. *Dharma* in the sense of duties is divided into two categories such as *sādhāraṇa-dharma* and *viśeṣadharmā*. *Varṇāśrama-dharmas* are known as *viśeṣa-dharmas*. The above-mentioned *dharmas* of the *Tattvārthsutra*, the *Manu Samhita*, and the *Śānti-Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* are called *sādhāraṇa-dharmas*. It is common to all *varṇas*. It is not limited by caste or creed. On the other hand, *viśeṣa-dharmas* are also divided into two categories such as *varṇa dharma* and *āśrama dharma*. According to *varṇa dharma*, there are four *varṇas* in our society; these are *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *sūdra*. According to *āśrama dharma*, every *varṇa's* (*brahmana*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*) life is divided into four stages: *brahmacārya*, *gṛhastha*, *vānaprastha* and *sannyās*. Now let me discuss the nature of the virtue of truthfulness.

The Nature of the Virtue of Truthfulness

We have seen that according to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, there is nothing higher than *dharma*. *Dharma* is truth. When a man speaks the truth, he speaks the *dharma* or if he speaks *dharma*, he speaks the truth. For both is one. According to the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, “Speak the truth. Practice righteousness (*Satyamvada. Dharmacara*).”^{xvi} In the Jaina Philosophy, truthfulness is one of five great vows (*pañca-mahāvratā*). It is taken extremely rigorously as Jain *Sādhus* and *Sādhvī* never speak about what is not true. It means that they have to speak the truth, no matter how much difficulty comes to their life. To obey the virtue of truthfulness, they require moral courage. To get moral courage, they must conquer (greed, fear, and anger) and even restrain the habit of jesting. It is also pointed out that they should not only abstain from falsehood but should always speak the truth, which should be good and pleasant.^{xvii}

According to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, “By truth the sun sheds warmth; in truth, the earth stands firm; truth in speech is the highest righteousness: *Svarga* is based on truth. Also, a hundred horse sacrifices and truth are placed in the balance-truth verily outweighs the hundred horse sacrifices.”^{xviii} Similarly, the *Mahābhārata* claims that everything is supported by truth and that everything relies on truth.^{xix} The *Ādi parva* of the *Mahābhārata* stated that if one thousand horse sacrifices and truth were weighed, the truth would be found heavier than those sacrifices. Truth is equal to the study of the entire *Vedas* and by practising it, one ablutions in all the sacred pilgrimages. There is no virtue equal to it; there is nothing in the world superior to it. It is the great *Brahman*. It is a great vow that is why one should not violate it. One should unite oneself with it forever.^{xx} It is the essence of *Veda*. The essence of it is self-control. The essence of self-sacrifice is Liberation.^{xxi} According to the *Vana Parva*, it is the supreme virtue that is specially adopted by the pious.^{xxii} It is also narrated in the *Mahābhārata* that truth is always a duty with the good. It is an eternal duty. We should respectfully bow to it. It is a duty (*dharma*); it is penance (*tapasyā*); it is *Yoga*; and the eternal

Brahman (*Sanātana Brahman*). Everything depends upon it.^{xxiii} There is no duty (*dharma*) that is higher than truth. It is the very root of righteousness. No sin is more dreadful than untruth. So, we should never destroy the truth.^{xxiv} It is the best religious vow. There is no higher righteousness for a man than maintaining his truthfulness.^{xxv} That is why one should never sacrifice truth. Further, the *Mahābhārata* instructed that “To tell the truth is good and the knowledge of truth also is good, but what conduces to the greatest good of all creatures is known as the highest truth.”^{xxvi}

According to the *Mahābhārata*, there are thirteen forms of truth. The various forms of it are i) Truth itself: It is immutable, eternal, and unchangeable. It does not oppose any of the other virtues. It may also be experienced by practising *yoga*, ii) Impartiality: After destroying desire and hatred as well as lust and anger, one can get the virtue of impartiality. With the help of this virtue, he can look impartially upon himself and his enemy, iii) Self-control: It is adopted through knowledge. It consists of never wishing for another man’s property. It is in gravity and patience. It also consists of the power to remove the fears of others regarding one’s self, and freedom from disease, iv) Forgiveness: It is one kind of virtue by which an esteemed and good man puts up with both what is agreeable and disagreeable. It is acquired by the practice of truthfulness, v) Modesty: With the help of modesty virtue, one can contend in mind and words, perform many good works, and is never blamed by others. It is acquired with the help of righteousness, vi) Endurance: This virtue is one of the forms of forgiveness. It forgives for the sake of virtue and religious profit. It is gained through patience. Its object is to attach people to one’s self, vii) Goodness: With the help of this virtue, one does well with care to all creatures of the universe. It consists in the casting off of all selfish attachments, viii) Renunciation: That virtue under the influence of which one is casting off of all worldly egoistic desire as also all earthly possessions. It can be gained by cutting off one’s anger and malice, ix) Meditation, x) Dignity, xi) Fortitude: Under the influence of this virtue, one remains unchanged in weal and woe. That who wants his well-being always practices this virtue. To gain this virtue, he should practice forgiveness and be devoted to truth. It is also stated that by renunciation of jay, fear, and anger, one can gain this virtue, xii) Compassion, xiii) Abstention from injury: With the help of this virtue, one should not injure any creature in thought, word, and deed. He should be kind to all creatures. These are thirteen different manifestations of truth, seemingly different, but they have the same shape, namely truth. All these hold up the truth and strengthen it.^{xxvii} Thus, ‘whatever conduces to the greatest good of all creatures is considered to be the truth.’^{xxviii}

The Importance of the Virtue of Truthfulness

The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* tried to mention the helpfulness of truthfulness with the help of the story of a boy namely Satyakōma Jabālō. It narrated that

Satyakāma Jabālā wishes to live as a religious student under ṛṣi Gautama-Hārīdramata. Gautama-Hārīdramata asks about his family's background from Satyakāma Jabālā. In reply, Satyakāma Jabālā said, he does not know what family he is. He heard from his mother, namely Jabālā that she obtained him in her youth. She attended to many people, devoted to their service. So, she is not able to say what family he is. He also said to that ṛṣi, he is Satyakāma Jabālā. Thereafter, Gautama-Hārīdramata says to him that you speak out so openly, truly, and straightforwardly about your family background. You do not flinch from the truth. It is the rightful duty or *dharma* of the Brāhmaṇa caste. So, you are a *Brahman*. As a result, he initiates Satyakāma Jabālā as a religious student.^{xxxix} Thus, by following the virtue of truthfulness, one can acquire the position of a higher race. In *Bhagavadgītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa says austerity of speech consists of truthful speaking.^{xxx} In this regard, Tamil great poet Thiruvalluvar in his book *Thirukkural* claims that one who speaks the truth is superior to those doing penance and charity. If one observes the virtue of truthfulness then he does not need to practice any other virtue. Truth enlightens the soul as water cleans the body. The lamp of truth alone is the real lamp.^{xxxi} Ādi Śankāracārya in the *Prasnauttara Ratnamalika* claims that 'one who as a rule utters lies' is not to be trusted.^{xxxii}

For the *Mahābhārata*, all classes of men go up to heaven by speaking the truth.^{xxxiii} Thus it is the only means for reaching heaven even as a ship is the only means for crossing deep.^{xxxiv} One can become a model for all creatures to follow, and succeed in getting over all difficulties even when his life is in danger by speaking the truth.^{xxxv} Thus, such type of person is greatly respected in our community. He obtains a life that is free from all trouble. He is a hereditary servant of the king and should be consulted.^{xxxvi} Further, the *Mahābhārata* instructed that to speak the truth is meritorious. One must speak the truth always because it is one of three reckoned (not offending anybody, charitable, always speaking the truth) to constitute the highest way of the pious.^{xxxvii} The truthful person never feels pleasure in falsehood.

On the contrary, according to the *Mahābhārata*, there is nothing more sinful than falsehood.^{xxxviii} So, falsehood should be avoided. It narrated the story of warrior Karṇa to mention the detriments of falsehood. It narrated that warrior Karṇa says to Lord Sūrya (Sun) that he does not fear death so much as falsehood^{xxxix} because he was cursed by Rama (Parsurama) for telling a lie to him. By telling a lie, he claims that he was a *Brahmin* for learning all weapons including *Brahma* weapons, but he was not a *Brahmin*. He was cursed that *Brahma* weapon shall not remain in his remembrance^{xl} and this *Brahma* weapon shall not live in him when he will be engaged with a warrior equal to himself. There is also an instance to mention the detriments of falsehood in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* where having offered seven horse sacrifices and a *Rāja-sūya* sacrifice, a king named Kṛiti fell forthwith from *Svarga* for his falsehood.^{xli} Thus, it would be noted that truth

leads us to *Mokṣa* and falsehood brings us down from it. So, we should not associate with falsehood at any price.

The Western great philosopher Immanuel Kant also suggested that to avoid falsehood. To him, truthfulness as a perfect duty has moral worth. Perfect duty one which follows universal law. It means that a perfect duty allows no exception in the interest of inclination.^{xlii} We have to speak the truth for the sake of truth, nothing else. Thus, telling the truth is our moral duty. On the contrary, falsehood as an imperfect duty has no moral worth. If one speaks a lie to get out of any difficulty then the maxim of that speaking (everyone in any difficulty speaks a similar lie) would defeat the very purpose of the trust. Thus, the maxim of falsehood would not be a universal law, because it would cancel itself out. So, we should not tell lie in any situation as it has no moral worth. From the above discussion, a general question arises: Is speaking the truth always treated as *dharma* in the *śāstras*? Let me answer this question.

The Relation between the Virtue of Truthfulness and *Dharma*

According to the *Mahābhārata*, speaking the truth must not always be considered as *dharma*. In the case of distress, one by even speaking falsehood acquires the merit of truthfulness where falsehood prevails as truth or where truth passes for falsehood. An ignorant person does not distinguish truth from untruth that is why he sins by speaking truth which is not righteous.^{xliii} For Lord Kṛṣṇa, it is very difficult to understand the nature of truth as observed in action because ‘truth becomes unutterable and untruth utterable, where untruth would pose as truth and truth as untruth.’^{xliiv} To understand the relation between the virtue of truthfulness and *dharma*, He illustrated a story to Arjuna that there was an ascetic Brahmin named Kaushika, who took the vow to speak the truth always. As a result, he never speaks a single lie and becomes famous as a truthful saint. Once upon a time, near Saint Kaushika’s house, certain persons, being afraid of robbers, were trying to escape from them (robbers) by entering the woods which were thickly covered with trees, creepers and shrubs. He noticed all events very well. The robbers doggedly haunt after the persons, approaching Kaushika to speak the truth about their escape. In reply, Saint Kaushika told the truth to the robbers about their entering into the woods. After that, by going in that direction they got hold of those persons and put them to death. As a result, saint Kaushika fell into a fearful hell, because he sinned by uttering the truth, which should have not been uttered.^{xliv} Here it would be noticed that Kaushika knew that if he spoke the truth about the persons to robbers then they would find them and they would rob and kill them. However, he spoke the truth to obey his vow (to speak the truth always), which is *adharmā* in that situation. It means that he was a foolish man as unacquainted with the nature of the virtue of truthfulness. As a result, he takes the truth to be as it is. Therefore, a harsh truth (that causes harm to any creature)

must not lead to *dharma*. A falsehood (under special circumstances that cause benefit to others) must lead to *dharma*.

We can lay bare another famous story of the *Drona Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* on Yudhisthira to clear the relation between them. Yudhisthira is known as *Dharmaputra*. He is the eldest among the five Pāṇḍava brothers. He is famous for his truthfulness. He was afraid of speaking any lie in his life. His guru Drona believes that he would never tell a lie, not even for the sake of getting the earth of the three worlds.^{xlvi} That is why Drono inquired of King Yudhisthira to confirm whether his son (Ashvatthaman) is slain or not after having heard the sentence ‘Ashvatthaman has been slain, O *Brahman*; desist from fighting.’^{xlvii} In that situation, Yudhisthira was instructed to speak a lie to save himself and his army from Drono. Lord Kṛṣṇa instructed Yudhisthira that, if Drona fights filled with rage only for half a day in the field of *Kurukṣetra* then your army is sure to be destroyed. Under the circumstances, telling falsehood is better than truth. So, save us from Drona by telling a lie. ‘Speaking falsehood for the sake of saving a life one does not become a sinner.’^{xlviii} As a result, Yudhisthira utters to Drono that Ashvatthama is dead, adding indistinctly the word elephant (after the name).^{xlix} It is treated as a half-lie of his life. Therefore, it is clear that according to the *Mahābhārata*, telling the truth must not always be *dharma*.

The *Mahābhārata* also instructed that “It is not sinful to speak falsehood in the following five cases, namely in-joke, in respect of women to be associated with, in marriage, in the prospect of immediate death and at the same time of the loss of one’s whole fortune.”^l Further, the *Mahābhārata* in the *Karṇa Parva* similarly stated that it is not immoral to speak falsehood in the following cases ‘when one’s life is endangered, at marriage, at risk of destruction of one’s kith and kin or in the course of business.’^{li} Therefore, Falsehood is *dharma* when it is said for an act of piety. In other words, falsehood is *adharmā* when one (harmful) object is to be accomplished.

In this regard, *Manu Samhita* similarly asserts that “In cases where the allegation of truth would lead to the lawful execution (*lit.* death) of a S’udra, Vais’ya, Kshatriya or Brāhmaṇa, a witness is warranted to speak falsehood. In such a case a lie is greater than truth.”^{lii} *Adi Śankāracārya* holds that a lie is sinless when it is uttered for the sake of protecting righteousness.^{liii} Tamil great poet Thiruvalluvar defines truth as truth is nothing but speaking with words evil-free. When a harmless lie brings benevolence results then it can be considered as truth.^{liv} Thus, an untruth spoken in the case of distress to benefit anyone does not amount to a falsehood. Such types of untruth are morally acceptable as the virtue of truthfulness. Therefore, according to the *śāstras*, what brings benefit to creatures either speaking the truth or false is called the virtue of truthfulness or *dharma*. Thus, the relation between the virtue of truthfulness and *dharma* is identical.

Therefore, the virtue of truthfulness plays a significant role in making a harmless and beneficial society.

Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion we can conclude by saying that, according to the Indian *śāstras*, the ultimate eternal aim of our speaking is to do *dharma*. They give a roadmap to do *dharma* through the virtue of truthfulness. We must be helpful, polite, and harmless with our words to ourselves or others in every possible way to do *dharma*. Telling truth is commonly treated as truthfulness, however in the special circumstances where falsehood prevails as truth or where truth passes for falsehood, speaking falsely must also be treated as truthfulness. Thus, the definitions of truthfulness and untruthfulness are not the same in every situation and circumstance to do *dharma*. Thus, the virtue of truthfulness requires more than just telling the truth. Therefore, it would be noticed that our Indian *śāstras* do not mechanically take the virtue of truthfulness as one should always speak the truth in every situation. They present to us a wide-reaching discipline of the virtue of truthfulness. Therefore, in the 21st century, if we accept the advisement of the *śāstras* on the virtue of truthfulness then most of the socio-political and cultural problems may be abolished very soon.

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