

Truth and Reality in Buddhism

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The first discourse delivered by the Buddha is Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. In the sutta He proclaims the Four Noble Truth. According to the Theravada tradition, the Four Noble Truth is the essence in Buddhism while in Mahayāna Buddhism especially the Mādhyamika tradition, it is the Dependent Origination. However, factually, the essence in Buddhism is the Dependent Origination because of the answer given by Arahant Assaji to the question, "What does your teacher teach".¹ When the truth and reality are considered, the reliability of both Four Noble Truth and Dependent Origination should be considered. The Truth escorts one to the Reality. In this regard, the dependence of both Four Noble Truth and Dependent Origination are to be examined. On the one hand, Four Noble Truth where the suffering, cause of suffering, cessation of suffering and path leading to the cessation of suffering² are stated directly reveals the truth while it makes one enlightened the realization of reality indirectly. On the other hand, Dependent Origination reveals the reality. When the conventional form of language is being considered, the reality and truth are differed. In accordance to the context, Truth is Four Noble Truth, Two Truths, etc. and Reality is the Nibbana, Four Ultimate Realities, etc. However, this also confirms that the Reality comes under the Truth.

The Dependency of the Truth and Reality on one another should be examined further. In Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the five ascetics listened to the Four Noble Truth. Having taught the truth, ascetic Kondañña realized the reality as found in the discourse is "If there is origination, there is cessation".³ This reveals that Four Noble Truth paves the way to the reality.

Because Truth leads to the Reality, the parable of the raft found in Alagaddūpama should be illustrated here. The parable is intended to indicate the utilitarian character of the teachings or the 'truth' of Buddhism. Though the truths are useful as they may have been, it is said: 'I preach you a Dhamma comparable to a raft for the sake of crossing over and not for the sake of clinging to it...'⁴

Prof. K.N. Jayatilake explaining the parable says that a person intending to cross a river and get to the other bank, where it is safe and secure makes a raft and with its help safely reaches the other bank but however useful the raft may have been (*bahukāro me ayaṃ kullo*), he would throw it aside and go his way without carrying it on his shoulders.⁵ Therefore, Buddha advises his followers not to carry Dhamma on when you realise the reality. According to the context, Dhamma is a raft that is useful to travel to the realisation, Nibbāna. That is why it is said 'those who realise the Dhamma to be like a raft should discard the Dhamma as well, not to speak of what is not dhamma'.⁶

The diversity that could be seen among the teachings of different teachers in contemporary to the Buddha regarding the truth was questioned by the Buddha in Cūlavyuha Sutta. He said, "The truth should be one but not two or more".⁷ Referring to numerous theses put

forward by various theorists, the question is asked "Claiming to be experts, why do (they) put forward diverse theories - are truths many and various..."⁸ and answered: "Truths, indeed, are not many and various".⁹ In this context, the statement is made that 'truth is one without a second'.¹⁰

When the words or propositions are taken into consideration, we can analyse them into different categories considering their values. In this regard, Prof. K.N. Jayatilake suggests that if the propositions could be true or false, (*bhūtaṃ, tacchaṃ*) or false (*abhūtaṃ, atacchaṃ*), useful (*atthasaṃhitaṃ*) or useless (*anattasaṃhitaṃ*), pleasant (*paresaṃ piyā manāpā*) or unpleasant (*paresaṃ appiya amanāpā*), eight possibilities. They could be gained as follow.¹¹

1. True useful pleasant
2. True useful unpleasant
3. True useless pleasant
4. True useless unpleasant
5. False useful pleasant
6. False useful unpleasant
7. False useless pleasant
8. False useless unpleasant

In Abhayarāja Sutta, statements are classified according to their truth-value, utility (or disutility) and pleasantness (or unpleasantness). The statements found in the Sutta are:

1. The Tathāgata would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, agreeable and pleasant to others.
2. The Tathāgata would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, disagreeable and unpleasant to others.
3. The Tathāgata would not assert a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useless, agreeable and pleasant to others.
4. The Tathāgata does not assert a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useless, disagreeable and unpleasant to others.
7. The Tathāgata would not assert a statement which he knows to be untrue, false, useless, agreeable and pleasant to others.
8. The Tathāgata does not assert a statement which he knows to be untrue, false, useless, disagreeable and unpleasant to others.

Here, in the Sutta the 5th and 6th are not mentioned. However, the statements, respectively the 1st and 2nd which are true, useful and are either pleasant or unpleasant at the right occasion are accepted.¹² There is no doubt when the first statement is concerned being it is true, factual, useful, agreeable and pleasant to others, but the second which is unpleasant.

Explaining the second, the Sutta states in the right occasion, it should be. Prof. K.N. Jayatilake suggests with reference to the Sutta:¹³

"The reason is given to this is that sometimes it is necessary to say what is unpleasant for the good of an individual, just as out of love for a child one had to cause a certain amount of pain in order to remove something that has got stuck in its throat."¹⁴

This is not obvious with the words that are called well-said. Subhāsita Sutta states that one should say only the words that come under well-said (*subhāsita*), reality (*dhammañyeva*), pleasant (*piyañyeva*) and truth (*sacchiyeva*). In this context, the unpleasant (*appiyaṃ*) words are not accepted.¹⁵ The reason here is that if the individual is not in a position to understand the situation, the best practice is to stay silent. Therefore, one should be very careful when he is going to utter something unpleasant though they are factual and truthful. This is obvious with parable given in Abharaja Sutta of a child who has got stuck in its throat.¹⁶

Further, in number of places, Buddha advised his followers to utter what has become, taken place or happened (*bhūtaṃ*)¹⁷ and in accordance with fact (*yathābhūtaṃ*).¹⁸ Mahagovinda Sutta, Pāsādika Sutta and Loka Sutta are taken into consideration, it is obvious that the Buddha 'practised what he preached and preached what he practiced' (*yathāvādī tathākārī, yathākārī tathāvādī*).

Limit of knowledge of the individual is being considered, the valuation of any proposition is unjustified, since it is dependent on the individual truth. Prof. K. N. Jayatilake suggests the terms '*pacceka sacca*' found in Buddhist that is quite similar with 'individual truth'.¹⁹

"This concept first appears in the Suttanipāta in reference to the diverse theories put forward by controversialist debaters. It is said that 'these individuals dogmatically cling to (lit. are immersed in) individual (or partial?) truths' (*pacceka-saccesu puthū niviṭṭhā*, Sn. 824)."²⁰

In Pasura Sutta of Sutta Nipatha states that the individuals dogmatically cling to individual truths.²¹ Patilīna Sutta says "The several *paccekasaccas* of the several recluses and Brahmins".²² This is very obvious with the number of views given in Brahamajāla Sutta of Dīgha Nikaya. Depending on one's knowledge when he illustrates the truth of the world as he could understand through his perceptive, sensory and extrasensory and cognitive experience there had been arisen the disagreement among the wise. These theories were presumably only partial accounts of reality. Therefore, 'individual truth' or 'partial truth' places a major role in early Buddhism. Considering the afore-said disagreement Prof. K. N. Jayatilake quoted Pāyasi Sutta of Dīgha Nikaya to show the irrelevancy of their statements.

"This is very strongly suggested by the parable of the blind men and the elephant. A number of men born blind (*jaccandhā*) are assembled by the king who instructs that they be shown (*dassesī*), i.e. made to touch an

elephant. They touch various parts of the elephant such as the forehead, ears, tusks, etc. They are then asked to describe the elephant and each reports mistaking the part for the whole that the elephant was like that portion of the elephant which was felt by him."²³

On the one hand the partial truth would have to put aside, on the other hand, the *avyākata*, which is neither the truth nor false had to put aside though with little historical justification. These theses were used to denote what is 'neutral' in moral contexts where the acts which are neither good nor evil ...'.²⁴ In the sense of that, theses (*avyākata*) were also a product of partial descriptions of reality. These theses are also the experience of different thinkers like the blind men's accounts of the elephant.

Buddhism in the sense of philosophy, Pragmatism is also strongly suggested by the parable of the arrow found in *Cūḷa Mālūṅkyaputta Sutta*²⁵ and the parable of the raft found in *Alagaddūpama Sutta*.²⁶ A man struck with a poisoned arrow should be concerned with removing the arrow and getting well rather than be interested in purely theoretical questions like concerning the nature of arrow, who shot it, etc., which have no practical utility. The man should only be interested in truths which have a practical bearing on his life. The *avyākata* questions were not answered because 'it was no useful, not related to the fundamentals of religion, and not conducive to revulsion, dispassion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, realization and *Nirvāṇa*'.²⁷

According to the *Kālāma Sutta*, 'the one test to be used is "What effect will this teaching produce on my life?"'. What the *Sutta* states is that "you should reject those beliefs as false when you yourself realize that when they are accepted and lived up to they conduce to lack of welfare and unhappiness".²⁸ It seems to have been held that the claims of a belief to be tested in the light of personally verifiable consequences. Therefore, in the sense of pragmatism, the truth can be defined in terms of utility.

According to the aforesaid consequences, one cannot define the truth unless the reality is realised by him. However, when he realized the reality, the reality cannot be defined by him because he had to use a conventional form of language.

Endnotes

¹ Mahāvaggapālī, I, PTS, p. 39 - *ye dhammā hetuppabhavā, tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha, tesaṃ yo nirodho, evaṃvādī mahāsamaṇo*

² S.N. v., PTS, p.42

³ S.N. v., PTS, p.42 - *yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ, sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ*

⁴ M.N. I. PTS. p.134 - *Kullūpamaṃ vo . . . dhammaṃ desissāmi nītharaṇatthāya no gahanatthāya . . .*

⁵ Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, K.N. Jayatileke, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, p.357

⁶ M.N. I. PTS. p.135 - *kullūpamaṃ vo . . . ājānantehi dhammā pi vo pahātābbā, paḍaṇḍeva adhammā,*

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- ⁷ S.n. PTS, p.172 - *ekaṃ hi saccaṃ na dutiyamatthi*
- ⁸ S.n. PTS, p.173 - *kasmā nu saccāni vadanti nānā ... kusalā vadānā: saccāni su tāni bahūni nānā ...*
- ⁹ S.n. PTS, p.173 - *na h'eva saccāni bahūni nānā ...*
- ¹⁰ S.n. PTS, p.173 - *ekaṃ hi saccaṃ na dutiyaṃ atthi*
- ¹¹ K.N. Jayatileke, Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, p.351
- ¹² Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, K.N. Jayatileke, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, p.352
- ¹³ M.N. I, PTS, p. 394-5
- ¹⁴ Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, K.N. Jayathilake, Motial Banarsidass, Delhi, p.352
- ¹⁵ S.N. I. PTS, p.189 - *Bhikkhū subhāsitaṃyeva bhāsati no dubbhāsitaṃ, dhammaṃyeva bhāsati no adhammaṃ, piyaṃyeva bhāsati no appiyaṃ, sacchaṃyeva bhāsati no alikaṃ. Imehi kho, bhikkhave, catūhi aṅgehi samannāgatā vācā subhāsitaṃ hoti...*
- ¹⁶ M.N. I, PTS, p. 394-5
- ¹⁷ Chaṅkī Sutta, M.N. II, PTS, p. 170 - *bhūtaṃ, taccāṃ anaññathā,*
- ¹⁸ Sāmaññaphala Sutta, D.N. I, PTS, p. 83, 84 - *yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti,*
- ¹⁹ Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, K.N. Jayatileke, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, p. 354
- ²⁰ Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, K.N. Jayatileke, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, p. 354
- ²¹ Sn. PTS, p. 161 - *pacceka-saccesu puthā nivīṭṭhā*
- ²² A.N. II. PTS, p. 41 - *puthūsamaṇa-brāhmaṇānaṃ puthupaccekasaccāni,*
- ²³ Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, K.N. Jayatileke, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963, p. 355
- ²⁴ Dhs., 583, p. 124 - *ye ca dhammā kiriyā n'eva kusalā na akusalā ... ime Dhamma avyākātā*
- ²⁵ M.N. I, PTS, p. 429
- ²⁶ M.N. I, PTS, p. 134
- ²⁷ M.N. I, PTS, p. 431 - *na h'evaṃ atthasaṃhitāṃ n'ādibrahmacariyaṃ, na nibbidāya na virāgāya na nirodhāya na upasamāya na abhiññāya na sambodhāya na nibbānāya saṃvattati,*
- ²⁸ A.N. I. PTS, p. 190

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