

## *Theory of Truth in Buddhism II*

### *Nitattha and Neyyattha.*

The doctrine of the two kinds of knowledge, the higher and the lower, which made its appearance in the Middle and Late Upanisads and the theory of standpoints adopted by the Trairasika Ajivikas and the Jains has its counterpart in Buddhism in the doctrine of the two kinds of truth, conventional-truth (sammuti-sacca) and the absolute truth (paramattha-sacca). There is, however, no clear-cut distinction between these two kinds of truth in the Pali Canon. What we do find is a distinction between two types of Suttas (Discourses) which seems to have provided a basis for the later emergence of the doctrine of the two kinds of truth.

The two kinds of Suttas are the nitattha– or ‘those of direct meaning’ and the neyyattha- or ‘those of indirect meaning’. In one place in the [Anguttara Nikaya](#) the importance of distinguishing between these two types of Suttas is stressed and it is said that those who confuse the two misrepresent the Buddha:

*‘There are these two who misrepresent the Tathagata. Which two? He who represents a Sutta of indirect meaning as a Sutta of direct meaning and he who represent a Sutta of direct meaning as an indirect meaning’. (A. I. 60).*

On the basis of this Edgerton has remarked that ‘In Pali neither is ipso facto preferred to the other; one errs only in interpreting one as if it were the other’ (BHS. Dictionary, nitaratha). On the other hand Edgerton says that in BHS, ‘a nitartha text...is recommended as a guide in preference to one that is neyarttha’. This is certainly so. And even in the Pali, the very fact that one is called a nitattha Sutta, whose meaning is plain and direct and the other a neyyattha- in the sense that it’s meaning should be inferred in the light of the former, gives the former a definite precedence over the latter.

No examples are given in the Canon of the two kinds of Suttas referred to, and we have to seek this information in the commentaries. The commentary on the above passage tries to illustrate the difference: ‘A Sutta of the form *“there is one individual, O monks”, “there are two individuals, O monks”, “there are three individuals, O monks”,* etc., is a Sutta of indirect meaning. Here although the perfectly Enlightened One speaks of *“there is one person, O monks”,* etc., its sense has to be inferred since there is no individual in the absolute sense. But a person because of his folly may take this as a Sutta of direct meaning and would argue that the Tathagata

would not have said “*there is one person, O monks*”, etc., unless a person existed in the absolute sense. Accepting the fact that since he has said so there must be a person in the absolute sense, he represents a Sutta of indirect meaning as a Sutta of direct meaning.

One should speak of a Sutta of direct meaning (as of the form), “*this is impermanent, sorrowful and devoid of substance (soul)*”. Here the sense is that what is impermanent is at the same time sorrowful and lacking in substance. But because of his folly, this person takes this as a Sutta of indirect meaning and extracts its sense saying, “there is something which is eternal, happy and is the soul” and thus represent a Sutta of direct meaning as a Sutta of indirect meaning’. (AA. II. 118).

This explanation seems to trace the distinction between these two kinds of discourse to the statement of the Buddha that there were ‘*expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Tathagata makes use of without being led astray by them*’. For according to this statement, the Buddha is constrained to use language which has misleading implications and we have to infer what he means without these implications, if we are to understand him rightly. In other words, when he is speaking about things or persons we should not presume that he is speaking about entities or substances; to this extent his meaning is to be inferred (neyyatta). But when he is pointing out the misleading implications of speech or using language without these implications, his meaning is plain and direct and nothing is to be inferred (nitattha). This is a valid distinction which certainly holds good for the Nikayas at least, in the light of the above statement.

But the commentaries go a step further. They characterize these two kinds of discourse, the direct (nitattha-) and the corrigible (neyyattha-) as two kinds of truth, Paramattha sacca and Sammuti sacca. A verse, which is quoted in the commentaries to the Anguttara and the Kathavatthu in the same contexts as the above, reads as follows (with a slight variation in the fourth line): “*The Perfectly Enlightened One, the best of teachers, spoke of two truths, viz. conventional and absolute – one does not come across a third; a conventional statement is true because of convention and an absolute statement is true as (disclosing) the true characteristics of things*”.

This step is not taken in the Pali Canon, where probably the impact of the statement of the Suttanipata that ‘*truth was one without a second*’ was strongly felt. The saying that there is one truth but not a second contradicts this later saying that there are two truths but not a third.

But although the commentaries speak of these two kinds of truth, it is necessary to note that they do not imply that what is true in the one sense, is false in the other or even that the one kind of truth was superior to the other, not withstanding the use of the term ‘paramattha’ (absolute) to denote one of them. The Comy. to the Anguttara says, *‘the Exalted One preaches the conventional teaching to those who are capable of listening to this conventional teaching and penetrating the meaning, discarding ignorance and acquiring eminence. But to those who are capable of listening to his absolute teaching and penetrating the truth, discarding ignorance and attaining distinction, he preaches the absolute truth. There is this simile on this matter. Just as if there were a teacher, who explains the meaning of the Three Vedas and is versed in the regional languages; to those who would understand the meaning if he spoke Tamil language, he explains it in the Tamil language and to another who would understand (if he spoke in) the Andhra language, he speaks in that language’.* We note that the penetration of the truth is possible by either teaching, conventional or absolute; it is like using the language that a person readily understands and there is no implication that one language is superior to the other. The Comy. to the Kathavatthu also emphatically says, *‘But whether they use conventional speech or absolute speech, they speak what is true, what is factual and not false’.*

But the view of modern orthodoxy differs from even that of the Comy. It is necessary to point this out, though it is strictly outside our scope, since frequent reference is made by scholars to the article of Ledi Sayadaw for enlightenment on this subject. Sayadaw, speaking of ‘two kinds of truth’ goes on to say that a conventional truth is ‘just an erroneous view’. Ultimate truth for Sayadaw ‘is established by the nature of things, it is opposed to mere opinion.’ But this view is contradicted by the Comy. where it was said, *‘But whether they use conventional speech or absolute speech, they speak what is true, what is factual and not false’.* According to Sayadaw, what is true according to conventional truth, i.e. ‘a person exists’ (to take his own example) is false according to the ultimate truth. This is a doctrine of standpoints, as in Jainism, where p is true from standpoint x and false from standpoint y, but this does not represent the position of the Nikayas, where it could be true to say, ‘a person exists in the present’ so long as one does not mean by ‘person’ a substance enduring in time. Convention requires that one uses such words as “I” or ‘person’ but so long as one is not misled by their implications (of an enduring entity) the statement is true.

The origin of this theory of double truth in Buddhism is, therefore, as we said, based on this distinction of the two types of discourse. But the use of

the words *sammuti* and *paramattha* in the Pali Canon also has much to do with the later emergence of this theory.

In the earliest use, *sammuti* denotes the ‘commonly accepted (theories or beliefs)’ of the various debating recluses and Brahmins. Close to the sense of ‘conventional truth’ is the use of the *sammuti* at S.I. 135, where it is said that ‘just as much as the word “chariot” is used when the parts are put together, there is the use (*sammuti*) of the term “being” when the (psycho-physical) constituents are present’ (Quoted Kvu.). *Paramattha* is used for ‘the highest goal’ in the earliest phase, while in the latest phase in the Canon *paramatthena* means ‘in the absolute sense’. The two words, *sammuti* and *paramattha*- are nowhere contrasted in the Canon though we meet with the term *sammuti-sacca* (conventional truth) on one occasion in the *Kathavatthu* without the term *paramattha-sacca*.

To conclude, the Pali Canon distinguishes two aspects of truth – but the distinction here unlike in the Comy. and in the article of Sayadaw is a distinction of subject-matter and not a distinction of two kinds of truth in real or apparent contradiction with each other.