Theory of Truth in Buddhism I

Let us examine the concept of truth as we find it in the Nikayas. There is no direct inquiry into the nature of truth (in the epistemological sense) in them, but the value placed on truth (in the wider sense) was so great that some observations about the nature of truth (in the above sense) were, perhaps, inevitable.

In the Abhayarajakumara Sutta MN 58, we find statements classified according to their truth-value, utility (or disutility) and pleasantness (or unpleasantness). The intention of the classification is to tell us what kinds of propositions the Buddha asserts. If propositions could be true (bhutam, taccham) or false (abhutam, ataccham), useful (atthasamhitam) or useless (anatthasamhitam), pleasant (paresam piya manapa) or unpleasant (paresam appiya amanapa), we get eight possibilities in all as follows:

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

The text reads as follows:

…….The Tathagata does not assert a statement which he knows to be untrue, false, useless, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (i.e. 8).

……. He does not assert a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useless, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (i.e. 4).

……. He would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (i.e.2).

……. He would not assert a statement which he knows to be untrue, false, useless, agreeable and pleasant to others (i.e. 7).

……. He would not assert a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useless, agreeable and pleasant to others (i.e. 3).

……. He would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, agreeable and pleasant to others (i.e. 1).

……. We may observe that possibilities 5 and 6 are omitted.

According to this passage the Buddha asserts propositions which are true, useful and are either pleasant or unpleasant at the right time occasion. This appears to be a departure from the earlier statement in the Suttanipata, where it is said that **'one should say only what is pleasant'** (Sn. 452), unless we say that this apparent exception holds well only in the case of the Tathagata. The reason given 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 has to cause a certain amount of pain in order to remove something that has got stuck in its throat.

Correspondence theory of truth.

Let us first inquire as to what could be meant by 'true' in these contexts. The word used is 'bhutam, taccham' (MN). The use of bhutam in the sense of 'true' is significant for it literally means 'fact, i.e. what has become, taken place or happened'. Likewise yathabhutam, which means 'in accordance with fact', is often used synonymously with truth. It is the object of knowledge – **'one knows what is in accordance with fact'** (DN). This tacitly implies the acceptance of a correspondence of truth.

In the Apannaka Sutta there is a conscious avowal of this theory. Falsity is here defined as the denial of fact or as what does not accord with fact. A false belief, a false conception and a false statement are defined as follows: **'When in fact there is a next world, the belief occurs to me that there is no next world, that would be a false belief. When in fact there is a next world, if one thinks that there is no next world, that would be a false conception. When in fact there is a next world, one asserts the statement that there is no next world, that would be a false statement' (MN).** Thus, propositions entertained as beliefs or conceptions or expressed as statements are considered false, when they do not correspond with or deny facts, true beliefs and conceptions. Statements are said to be true when they reflect or correspond with fact.

The words used for true beliefs, conceptions or statements are sammaditthi, sammasankappa and sammavaca respectively, which literally mean 'right belief, etc.', but here 'right' (samma) being the opposite of 'miccha' (false) is synonymous with 'true': **'When in fact there is a next world, that would be a true belief…' (MN).**

Consistency or coherence theory.

Though truth is defined in terms of correspondence with fact, consistency or coherence is also considered a criterion of truth. When two statements contradict each other, it cannot be the case that both statements are true for 'if p is true, not-p is false and if not-p is true, p is false.'

In the Suttanipata 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? (Sn. 885)**' and answered: **'Truths, indeed, are not many and various' (Sn. 886)**. It is in this context that the statement is made that **'truth is one without a second' (Sn. 884).**

The Buddha in arguing with his opponents appeals to this principle of consistency by showing that their theories are false because they are contradicting themselves. Thus, in the debate with Saccaka the Buddha says at a certain stage in the discussion, referring to his opponent's statements that **'his later statement is not compatible with the former or the former with the later'.** Here the consistency called for is the coherence with the various statements and implications of a theory.

Consistency between the behavior of a person and his statements.
But is important to note that there is another sense of consistency recognized in the Nikayas. This is the consistency between the behaviour of a person and his statements. In this sense, it is claimed that the Buddha **'practiced what he preached and preached what he practiced' (yathavadi tathakari, yathakari yathavadi, It. 122).**

Concept of pacceka-sacca / partial truth.
Despite this emphasis on consistency, which runs through the Nikayas, we find an early reference to the concept of pacceka-sacca, i.e. individual (private) or partial truth. Prima facie this notion appears to run counter to the conception of truth as being consistent. This concept first appears in the Suttanipata in reference to the diverse theories put forward by controversial debaters. It is said **that 'these individuals dogmatically cling to (immersed in) individual (or partial) truth' (Sn. 824).** These theories are called **'the several paccekasaccas of the several recluses and brahmins' (A. II.41; V. 29).** Now pacceka literally means 'each one' (PTS. Dictionary) or 'individual' and the BHS. Dictionary suggests 'individual (alleged) truths' for pratyeka-satya.

What could be the significance of the use of this term? Could we interpret this to mean that each of these theories had an element of truth and were in fact 'partial truths'? This is very strongly suggested by the parable of the blind men and the elephant (Ud. 68).

There are ten conflicting accounts in all corresponding in description to the ten parts touched and these are compared to the ten avyakata-theses put forward by the various recluses and Brahmins. If we interpret the

parable literally one would have to say that their theses too mistakenly describe the part for the whole and in so far as they constitute descriptions of their partial experience, they have an element of truth but are deluded in ascribing to the whole of reality what is true only of the part or in other words what is partially true. Thus, it would appear to be not without justification to translate pacceka-saccas as 'partial truths'. If such an interpretation is to be justified, we would have to say that these theories were a product of partial descriptions. Their error consists of regarding these partial accounts as descriptions of the whole of reality. They would be the misdescribed experiences of different thinkers like the blind men's accounts of the elephant. In fact, it is almost suggested in the Brahmajala Sutta all the sixty two philosophical theories **'result from impressions' (DN)**, it is impossible that they would entertain (these theories) without the impressions they had, (DN) -i.e. perceptive, sensory and extrasensory and cognitive experience – and that these theories were presumably only partial accounts of reality.

But this conception of truth is not developed in the Nikayas and if we hold the above account of pacceka-sacca as a 'partial truth' we would have to regard this conception as a remnant of early Jain influence of Buddhism. The conception of partial or relative truth was basically a Jain conception, for according to Jainism a number of apparently conflicting theories could each be true according to a stand point. As such the parable of the blind men and the elephant is much more appropriate to the context of Jainism and it is probable that Buddhists borrowed it from a Jain source, since as Radhakrishnan says 'the Jains are fond of quoting the old story of the six blind men, who each laid hands on a different part of the elephant and tried to describe the whole animal'.

However, another more probable explanation of the use of the term pacceka-sacca is that it is sarcastic and means as Edgerton says 'individual (alleged) truth applied to doctrines of heretical sects' (prateya-satya, BHS. Dictionary). The reason for this is that the theory of Truth is one (ekam) and not two (dutiyam) or many (nana) is promulgated in the very stratum in which the term paccekasacca occurs. But while denying the objective truth of several incompatible theories, the Buddhists do not seem to have doubted the reality of those experiences on the basis of which these theories were propounded. Sn. 886 says that **'there are not many diverse truths in the world except those which are surmised by (faulty) perception'.** This seems to make the same point as the parable of the elephant and the blind men and the statement in the Brahmajala Sutta quoted above, that the sixty two views were based on our (subjective) impressions, which though real do not make the theories true.

Pragmatism of Buddhism

If truth is what corresponds with fact and is consistent within itself, what was the relation of truth to utility? Mrs. Rhys Davids, arguing against the theory that the Buddha was a rationalist suggests that he be called an 'utilitarian' in the sense of being a pragmatist, for whom truth is what 'works'. She says: "Utilitarian" might be urged with some weight. "Rationalistic" is surely not. In the very Sutta chosen to illustrate the latter assertion, the Kalama discourse, the rational grounds for testing a gospel are only cited to be put aside…. The one test to be used is "What effect will this teaching produce on my life"?' Poussin too calls Early Buddhism 'pragmatic'.

This pragmatism of Buddhism is also strongly suggested by the parable of the arrow (M.I. 429) and the parable of the raft (M. I. 134). The parable of the arrow occurs in reference to the avyakata-theses and the gist of it is that a man stuck with a poisoned arrow should be concerned with removing the arrow and getting well rather than be interested in purely theoretical questions, which have no practical utility. The moral is that man should only be interested in truths which have a practical bearing on his life. In the same context it was said that the avyakata-questions were not answered because 'it was not useful, not related to the fundamentals of religion, and not conducive to revulsion, dispassion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, realization and Nirvana' (M.I. 431).

The parable of the raft has the same motive and is intended to indicate the utilitarian character of the teachings or the 'truth' of Buddhism. The truths are useful for salvation but even they should not be clung to however useful they may have been. It is said: **'I preached you a Dhamma comparable to a raft for the sake of crossing over and not for the sake of clinging to it….'** (M.I. 134). 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 reached the other bank but however useful the raft may have been, he would throw it aside and go his way without carrying it on his shoulders; so it is said that **'those who realize the dhamma to be like a raft should discard the dhamma as well, not to speak of what is not dhamma'** (M.I. 135).

However, we cannot interpret this to mean that the dhamma is true only by virtue of its utility and that it ceases to be true when it ceases to be useful. What is meant is that unlike the answers to the avykata-questions (which were 'not useful' for salvation), the dhamma was useful for salvation and its value (though not its truth value) lay in its utility. It

ceases to have value, though it does not cease to be true, when one has achieved one's purpose with its help by attaining salvation.

We may conclude from this that the truths of Buddhism were also considered to be useful (atthasamhitam) for each person until one attains salvation. This is confirmed by what it is stated in the passage quoted above where it was said that the Buddha speaks only what is true and useful, whether pleasant or unpleasant. We may sum this up by saying that the truths of Buddhism were considered to be pragmatic in the Buddhist sense of the term, but it does not mean that Early Buddhism believes in a Pragmatist Theory Of Truth.

According to the pragmatist theory of truth 'a belief is true if it is useful and false, if it is not, or more widely . . . a belief is true if "it works'". Now in the passage quoted above, the possibility was granted that there could be statements which were true but useless. This means that a statement could be useless without being false, thus showing that utility (atthasamhitam) was not considered to be a definition or an infallible criterion of truth. But on the other hand, it is curious that the list of possibilities mentioned in the passage are only six and as we have shown, there is a failure to mention statements which are both false as well as useful (pleasant or unpleasant).

It is difficult to say whether this omission was accidental or intentional. If it was intentional, we would have to say that it was not reckoned one of the possibilities either because it was considered self-contradictory to say of a statement that it was false but useful or because such statements did not in fact exist. This (i.e. both these latter alternatives) seem likely not because of any pragmatist theory of truth but because of the peculiarly Buddhist use of the term 'useless' (na atthasamhitam). Here attha- (PTS. Dictionary) is not just 'what is advantageous' in the broad utilitarian sense of the term, but what is morally good in the sense of being useful for the attainment of the goal of Nirvana. Since falsehood or the assertion of a statement which is false (musavada) was considered a moral evil, it would have been held to be logically or causally impossible for what is false, i.e. what is morally evil to result in what was useful in the sense of being morally advantageous or good (atthasamhitam).

While truth is not defined in terms of utility it seems to have been held that the claims of a belief to be true were to be tested in the light of personally verifiable consequences as according to the Kalama Sutta. As we have shown in the light of other evidence, verifiability in the light of experience, sensory and extrasensory, is considered a characteristic of

truth but what is thus claimed to be true is held to be true only by virtue of its 'correspondence with fact' (yathabhutam). Thus, verifiability is a test of truth but does not itself constitute truth.

Many of the important truths in Buddhism are considered to lie midway between the two extreme points of view. Extreme realism, which says that 'everything exists', is one extreme and extreme nihilism which asserts that 'nothing exists' is other extreme – the truth lies in the middle (S.II. 76). Similar anti-theses which are false are the doctrines of eternalism and annihilationism (S.II. 20, II. 98), the Materialist conception that the body and the soul are identical (S.II. 60) and the dualist conception that they are different, the Determinist thesis (A. I. 173) and the Indeterminist thesis, that we are entirely personally responsible for our unhappiness (S. II. 20) and that we are not at all responsible for our happiness, extreme hedonism (S. IV.330, V. 421) and extreme asceticism. In all these instances it is said that the Buddha 'without falling into these two extremes preaches the dhamma in the middle'. Thus the mean between two extreme views is held to be true. The 'middle way' which is a mean both in the matter of belief as well as conduct is said **to 'make for knowledge…and bring about intuition and realization' (M. I. 15).**

Logically, there is no reason why the truth should lie in the middle rather than in one of the two extremes though most people would be inclined to think that a moderate view, which takes count of the elements of truth in all the extreme views with regard to a particular matter, is more likely to be true than any of the extreme views. The problem, however, is whether it was dogmatically assumed that the truth must lie in the middle or whether the truth in the above instances happened to lie between two extremes. The second appears to be the more plausible alternative in the lights of the facts. When the Buddha held that neither the paths of over-indulgence nor of extreme asceticism makes for spiritual progress and happiness, this is considered to be a finding based on his experiences and experiments. Likewise the truth of the other syntheses or the middle views is claimed to be established independently.