

The Buddhist Conception of Truth

as edited by

David dale Holmes

In his authoritative, posthumous papers, entitled *The Message of the Buddha*, Professor K.N. Jayatilleke provides us with a breakdown of: –

The Buddhist Conception of Truth

“One of the five precepts that a Buddhist has to undertake to observe is that of ‘refraining from saying what is false.’ Stated in its negative as well as positive form he has to ‘refrain from saying what is false, assert what is true (*sacca-vádi*), be devoted to the truth (*sacca-sandha*), be reliable (*theta*), trustworthy (*paccayika*) and not be one who deceives the world (*avisam-vadako lokassa*)’ (A II 209).

The necessity for speaking the truth is one of the Ten Virtues (*dasa kusala kamma*) that one has to practise for one’s own good as well as for the good of society. For it is held that a just social order requires that, among other things, the people in it be honest and speak the truth.

In this context there is a social slant in the description given as to why one should speak the truth: ‘Herein, a certain layman rejects

falsehood and, refraining from saying what is false, asserts the truth whether he be in a formal assembly of people or in a crowd or at home among his relatives or in his office or when he is called to witness in a court of law-disclaiming to have known or seen what he did not know or see and claiming to have known or seen what he has known or seen.

Thus, neither for his own sake nor for the sake of others, nor again for some material gain would he state a deliberate falsehood' (*Saleyyaka Sutta, M: I 288*).

Right speech, however, is not limited to the requirement of speaking the truth. It is also necessary that

- (1) one avoids slander which causes divisions and dissensions among people and confines oneself to statements which bring about social harmony and understanding;
- (2) one refrains from harsh or foul language and is civil and courteous in one's speech, saying what is pleasant; and
- (3) one avoids gossip and vain speech and speaks at the right occasion and in accordance with the law what is profitable, righteous and true.

An exception is sometimes made in the case of (2); where it is held that our statements even when true, may be either pleasant or unpleasant. It is sometimes necessary to say what is true but unpleasant when it is useful, just as much as it is necessary to put one's finger in the throat of a child even when it causes a little pain in order to pull out something that has got stuck there.

Thus in the *Abhayarajakumara Sutta*, it is pointed out that statements: may be true or false, useful or useless and pleasant or unpleasant. This results in eight possibilities 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

Of the eight possibilities, it is said, that the Transcendent One asserts (1) and (2) at the proper time. The text reads: ‘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) ... 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). Lying is prohibited and the necessity to seek and speak the truth is emphasised because such action promotes one’s personal happiness as well as social progress and harmony. Yet, one incurs moral blame only if there is an intention to deceive and cause disharmony, but negligence is also to be avoided so that a Buddhist must act with a high sense of responsibility with regard to what he says, considering its possible social repercussions.

THE NATURE OF THE TRUTH

The statements of Buddhism or the Dhamma are claimed to be true. The central truths of Buddhism, pertaining to its theory of reality and ethics; are asserted in the form of ‘the Four Noble Truths’ (*cattari ariya-saccáni*). Nirvana is claimed to be ‘the Truth’ (*sacca*), being the supreme truth (*parama-sacca*). It is also interesting to note that the two things which are claimed to be ‘eternal values’ (*sanantana Dhamma*) are Truth and Love. With regard to the former it is stated:

‘Truth, indeed, is immortal speech—this is an eternal value (*saccaí ve amatá vacá—esa Dhammo sanantano*). There is a tendency today to regard what is old as antiquated. This is a mistaken view, for all that is verified and established as true is forever modern irrespective of the age in which these truths were discovered.

What is the nature of truth? We use the words ‘true’ or ‘false’ normally of statements. We say that the statement, ‘There is a harbour in Colombo.’ is true, while the statement, ‘there is a harbour in Hambantota’ is false. But we also speak of believing, conceiving of and, knowing the truth, and as such we have experience of truth. Knowledge of truth or even belief in it helps us to act efficiently in our environment without causing trouble to others. When we know the road to Kandy, it helps us to get there without difficulty and without the necessity for troubling others. Knowledge of causal laws operating in us or in nature helps us to control our selves or nature for our own good as well as that of others.

When we continue to think of any evil that somebody has done to us, we tend to hate him, but if we continue to think of even some good that he has done to us, our hatred tends to disappear. So by understanding the psychology of mental phenomena, we can gradually get rid of our hatred and, thereby, make ourselves as well as others happy.

This is why knowledge of the truth both with regard to ourselves as well as the environment is important, since it helps us to control ourselves as well as the environment for our own good as well as that of others. When we are aware of the truth, we have knowledge (or true beliefs.) Knowledge gives us control or power and this can help us develop our personal and social freedom and happiness.

What are the characteristics or criteria of truth? Philosophers have

put forward about four main theories regarding this. Some hold that truth is what accords or corresponds with fact. This is called the Correspondence theory. Others hold that truth is what is consistent. This is called the Coherence theory. Yet others hold that what is true is useful and what is useful is true. This is called the Pragmatic theory. Others, again, hold that truth is verifiable in the light of experience. This is called the Verifiability theory of truth.

CORRESPONDENCE AND COHERENCE

What is the Buddhist theory? Quite clearly, Buddhism maintains that truth is to be defined in terms of correspondence with fact. A theory or statement is true when it is ‘in accordance with fact’ (*yathábhútam*). It is the object of knowledge - ‘one knows what is in accordance with fact’ (*yathábhútam pajanat* I D I 84). In contrast, a statement, theory, belief or conception would be false when it does not accord with fact. As the *Apaóóaka Sutta* states: 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, if one asserts that there is no next world, that would be a false statement...’ (M I 402). On the other hand, true beliefs, conceptions or statements correspond with fact: ‘When in fact there is a next world, if the belief occurs to me that there is a next world, that would be a true belief.’ (403).

Although correspondence with fact is considered to “be,” essential characteristic of truth, consistency or coherence is also held to be a criterion. In contrast, inconsistency is a criterion of falsehood. In arguing with his opponent, the Buddha often shows that their theories lead to inconsistencies or contradictions, thereby demonstrating that, they are false using what is known as the Socratic method. In the debate with Saccaka, the Buddha points out

at a certain stage in the discussion that his later statement is not compatible with a statement nor the former with the Citta, one of the disciples of the Buddha, arguing with ... Nigaópha Nátaputta, the founder of Jainism, says: If your former statement is true, your later statement is false and if your later statement is true, your former statement is false (S IV 298).

This means that truth must be consistent. Therefore, when a number of theories with regard to the nature of man and his destiny in the universe contradict each other, they cannot all be true, though they could all be false if none of them corresponded with fact. So at a time when a number of different religious teachers and philosophers put forward a variety of theories about man and the universe, the Sutta Nipáta asks: ‘Claiming to be experts, why do they put forward diverse theories—are truths many and various?’ The answer given is: ‘Truths, indeed, are not many and various ... Truth is one without a second (*ekai hi saccaí na dutiyaí atthI* Sn 884). Consistency or the lack of contradiction is, therefore, a criterion of truth.’ It is evident from this that if we take different theories such as Materialism, Theism, Scepticism, Buddhism, etc., not all can be true, though all may be false.

We must, however, distinguish consistency between divergent theories and consistency within each theory. Two theories may be each internally consistent though mutually contradictory. So consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of truth. In other words; if a theory is internally inconsistent, it is false, but the fact that it is consistent is not sufficient for us to accept it as true. From the same shreds of evidence, two lawyers may concoct two mutually contradictory theories as to what happened. Each of these may be internally consistent but this alone is no criterion of their truth. This was why the Buddha rejected theories based on mere

reasoning as unsatisfactory since the reasoning may be valid or invalid and even if valid (in the sense of being internally consistent), it may or may not correspond with fact (*Sandaka Sutta*, M I 520).

While internal theoretical consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of truth, Buddhism also holds that, with regard to theories which concern human behaviour, there must also be consistency between theory and practice. The Buddha claimed that he practised what he preached and preached what he practised' (It 122). He expected his disciples also to follow his example. If I preach against the evils of taking liquor but take it myself, it may imply that I am not fully convinced of the truth of what I say. So if someone asserts a certain theory and acts as if he believes that at least part of it is false, his practice would be inconsistent with the theory he puts forward.

PRAGMATISM

What does Buddhism have to say about Pragmatism? Does it uphold a pragmatic theory of truth? Evidently, it does not, since it does not maintain that all true statements are useful or that all useful statements are true. As we have seen above, there are useless truths and useful falsehoods according to Buddhism. The pragmatic theory of truth was put forward to accommodate theistic beliefs, but Buddhism does not hold that a theory is true because people like to believe it and it is, therefore, of some use to them.

At the same time, we have to stress the fact that the Buddha: confined himself to asserting statements, which were true and useful, though pleasant or unpleasant, so that the Dhamma is pragmatic although it does not subscribe to a pragmatic theory of truth. This fact is well illustrated by two parables, those of the arrow and of the raft. The parable of the arrow states that a man struck with a

poisoned arrow must be concerned with removing it and getting well rather than in purely theoretical questions (about the nature of the arrow, who shot it, etc.) which have no practical utility. Certain questions concerning matters beyond empirical verification were not categorically answered by the Buddha because this was ‘not useful, not related to the fundamentals of religion, not conducive to dispassion, peace, higher knowledge, realisation and Nirvana’ (M I 431).

Even the true statements in the Dhamma are not to be clung to. They are to be used for understanding the world and overcoming it. One should not identify oneself with it by forming a sentiment of attachment (*upádána*) towards it and making it a basis for mere disputation. The parable states 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, he would throw it aside and go his way without carrying it on his shoulder. In the same way it is said ‘those who realise the Dhamma to be like a raft should be prepared to discard even the Dhamma, not to speak of what is not Dhamma’ (M I 135). The value of the Dhamma lies in its utility for gaining salvation: It ceases to have value to each individual though it does not cease to be true, when one’s aims have been realised.

VERIFIABILITY

The statements of the Dhamma are meaningful (*sappatihariyam*) and are supported by reason and experience (*sanidham*) and are hence verifiable (*ehipassika*). It is the duty of each Buddhist to try and verify their truth in practice. The Buddhist starts with right beliefs in his *sammádipphi* endeavour gradually to eliminate greed and hatred and ends his quest for truth with right knowledge (*sammanani*) and emancipation of mind (*sammavimutti*). In the process, each person

has to verify the truths of Buddhism for himself. Verifiability in the light of reason and experience is thus a characteristic of the truths of Buddhism.

MIDDLE PATH

Another characteristic of many of the important truths of Buddhism is that they happen to lie midway between two extreme points of view. Extreme realism, which says that ‘everything exists’ (*sabbam atthi*) because everything comes into existence is one extreme, while extreme nihilism which asserts that ‘nothing exists’ (*sabbam natthi*) since everything passes away is the other extreme—the truth is that everything is becoming: Similarly false extreme theories are the doctrines of the eternity of the soul and of annihilationism, the doctrines of the identity of the body and mind and of the duality of the body and mind. Strict Determinism (whether theistic or natural) and Indeterminism, the doctrine that we are entirely responsible personally for our own unhappiness and the doctrine that we are not at all responsible for our own unhappiness, extreme hedonism (*kamasukhallikanuyoga*) and extreme asceticism (*attakilamathanuyoga*). In all these instances, it is said that the Buddha ‘without falling into any’ of these two extremes, preaches the Dhamma *in the middle* (*majjhena*).

The truth lies in the mean between two extreme views. The middle way (*majjhima papipadā*) is thus a mean, both in the matter of belief as well as of conduct. ‘

We have shown so far that, in the Buddhist texts, truth is defined as correspondence with fact, consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of truth, and the truths of Buddhism are pragmatic and verifiable.

PARTIAL TRUTHS

As a result of the Correspondence theory, statements which strictly correspond with fact are considered to be ‘true’ and those which do not are considered to be ‘false.’ All statements would thus be true or false. Aristotelian logic is based on this assumption alone but modern logicians as well as ancient Indian thinkers have discovered that, without prejudice to our definition of truth, we can adopt other conventions.

We can consider statements which strictly correspond with fact (as those of the Dhamma are claimed to do) as absolutely true, while those which do not all correspond with fact would be absolutely false. In that case, those which correspond to some extent with facts would be ‘partially true’ (or, partially false). According to this convention, all statements will be either true, false or partially true. Modern logicians have shown that a system of logic could be constructed on the basis of this fundamental assumption as well—namely that every statement is either true, false or partially true.

It is on the basis of this convention that the Buddha characterised certain theories held by individuals, religious teaches and philosophers as being ‘partial truths’ (*pacceka sacca*). It is in this connection that we have the parable of the blind men and the elephant (Ud G8). The men who are born blind touch various parts of the elephant such as the tusks, ears, forehead, etc. and each reports, mistaking the part for the whole, that the elephant was like that part which was felt by him. In the same way, the various religious and philosophical theories contain aspects of truth and are based on the misdescribed experiences of the individuals who propounded them, while the Buddha was able to understand how these theories arose as well as their limitations, since he had a total vision of reality with an unconditioned mind.

THE CATUSKOTI

When a statement is characterised as ‘true’ or ‘false,’ these characteristics (true, false) are called ‘values’ in logic. So a system of logic which is based on the fundamental assumption that all statements are either true or false is called a two-valued logic. Such a system may have two logical alternatives. We may illustrate this with an example:

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|
| First Alternative | 1. This person is happy. |
| Second Alternative | 2. This person is not happy. |

We notice that in this two-valued logic of two alternatives, when the first alternative is true, the second has to be counted as necessarily false, while if the second alternative is true, the first would be false. But this system of logic would not do justice to the facts, if the person concerned was partly happy and partly unhappy.

In such a situation we cannot dogmatically assert that the first alternative was true because the person is partly unhappy and, therefore, not wholly happy. Nor can we say that the second alternative is true because the person is partly happy and therefore not wholly unhappy. But according to the laws of logic applicable within this system—namely the law of excluded middle – either the first alternative or the second must necessarily be true.

In order to have a better classification of the facts in situations such as this, the Buddhists adopted the logic of four alternatives, known as the *catuskoti*. This is a two-valued logic of four alternatives. According to it, statements can be made in the form of four logical alternatives of which only one will be necessarily true: Thus, speaking of the happiness or unhappiness of a person, we can say:

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| First Alternative | 1. This person is (wholly) happy. |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| Second Alternative | 2. This person is (wholly) unhappy. |
| Third Alternative | 3. This person is (partly) happy
and (partly) unhappy. |
| Fourth Alternative | 4. This person is neither happy nor unhappy
(e.g. if he experiences only neutral
sensations of hedonic tone). |

This is one of the examples given in the texts. If we take another historical example, we may state the following four logically alternative possibilities with regard to the extent of the universe:

1. The universe is finite (in all dimensions).
 2. The universe is infinite (in all dimensions).
 3. The universe is finite (in some dimensions) and infinite (in other dimensions).
 4. The universe is neither finite nor infinite (in any dimension).
- This last alternative would be the case if space or the universe was unreal. In such an eventuality, the universe cannot properly be described as either 'finite' or 'infinite.'

Now, according to Aristotelian logic or the two-valued logic of two alternatives, the logical alternatives would have to be:

1. The universe is finite.
- 2: The universe is not finite.

Now if we explain 'the universe is finite' as 'the universe is finite in all dimensions', then the other alternative, 'the universe is not finite' can mean one of three things (as above).

The logical alternatives according to this system of logic, therefore, become vague, ambiguous and not clearly defined and distinguished. The logic of four alternatives, or the *catuskoti* is thus employed in the Buddhist texts for purposes of classification or discussion, where the subject-matter requires it. Scholars like Poussin, who believed

that Aristotelian logic represented the one and only system of logic, failed to understand its significance and thought that the Buddhists or the Indians did not know any logic. But the modern developments in the subject have shown that there could be different complementary systems of logic based on different conventions and that they may be employed according to the needs of the subject-matter to be discussed. Thus the early Buddhist conception of logic was far in advance of its time.

CONVENTIONAL AND ABSOLUTE TRUTH

Another distinction that is made in the Buddhist texts is that of absolute (*paramattha*) and conventional (*sammuti*) truth. This is because appearances are sometimes deceptive and reality is different from what appearances seem to suggest. In the everyday world of common sense, we not only observe hard objects like stones and tables, which do not seem to change their form and structure, but also different persons who seem to continue as self-identical entities being reckoned the 'same' persons at different times of their existence. But this appearance, and the reasoning based on it, is deceptive and is due partly to the failure to see reality as it is and partly to the failure to understand the limitations of language, which employs static concepts to describe dynamic processes.

When we see reality for what it is and the limitations of language, we can still employ the conventional terminology without being misled by the erroneous implications of language and the assumptions we make because of our distorted view of reality. So we realise that from a conventional point of view we may speak of persons, who in reality are dynamic processes which change constantly owing to the impact of the physical, social and ideological environment and the internal changes which take place. But from, an absolute point of view, there are no such persons, who are self-

identical entities or souls which persist without change.

In the same way, modern science finds it necessary to distinguish between the conventional conception of stones and tables as hard, inert objects, which undergo no change, with the scientific conception of them as composed of atoms and molecules, whose inner content consists largely of empty space and whose fundamental elements have such a tenuous existence that they may be regarded as particles in some respects and waves in other respects, if at all it is possible to conceptualise their existence. Still, from a conventional standpoint we need to talk of stones and tables and there is no harm in doing so, provided we are aware of the false assumptions and misleading implications. As the Buddha would say, ‘They are expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Tathágata (the Transcendent One) makes use of without being led astray by them’ (D: I 202).”

Reference

K.N Jayatillike. 2000. *The Message of the Buddha*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society. (Chapter 3)

Buddhist Publication Society . P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha Kandy, Sri Lanka

First published in 1975 by George Allen & Unwin Ltd. BPS edition published 2000

This edition is published with the permission of the editor, Prof. Ninian Smart, and the author’s widow, Mrs. Patricia Jayatilleke Copyright 2000 by Buddhist Publication Society, For free distribution only.