

HOW BEST CAN WE DESCRIBE WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT

What the Buddha taught is not actuality. It is a description of actuality, through a series of propositions. “Actuality” is a series of neutral facts, neither true nor false. But its description through the symbolic medium of language can be either true or false. The nature of actuality can be described in more than one way.

As recorded in one Buddhist discourse, the Buddha tells Ananda: “In this way, Ananda, the Dhamma has been stated by me in (different) presentations” This means that what accords with actuality, and therefore what is true, needs not be repeated in the same way as a holy hymn or a sacred mantra. What is true can be restated in many ways, from many perspectives. As elsewhere, here too, Buddhism avoids absolutism and dogmatism: There is no one absolutist way of presenting the Dhamma that must be dogmatically adhered to.

The possibility of communicating the Dhamma in diverse ways is recognized in a Abhidhamma compendium when it says: “It is not going beyond concepts (pannatti) that the nature of actuality has been presented.” Here the term “concept” denotes both concept-as-naming (nama-pannatti) and concept-as-meaning (attha-pannatti). What this means is that the nature of actuality has been presented within a conceptual- theoretical framework, through the symbolic medium of language.

There can be more than one conceptual-theoretical model encapsulating the nature of actuality. The validity of each will be determined by its ability to take us to the goal, from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to wisdom, from our present predicament to final emancipation.

If the Dhamma can be presented as different conceptual models, it can be communicated through a variety of languages. Buddhism does not have a holy language. When it was reported to the Buddha that the Dhamma should be rendered into the elitist language of Sanskrit, the Buddha did not endorse it but allowed the Dhamma to be understood by each through his or her own language.

As the founder of a religion, the Buddha did not attribute the authorship of what he had discovered through supreme human effort to a higher source, a personal God or an impersonal Godhead. Nor are the Buddha’s teachings claimed to be a reformed version of a previous doctrine. What these two characteristics show is that the Buddha took full responsibility for what he taught.

The Dhamma is mainly a discovery. The three basic doctrinal tenets, namely, impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and self-less-ness (anatta) are discoveries. If the Dhamma is mainly a discovery, then it is the pivotal role of the Dhamma that comes into prominence. From the Buddhist perspective, therefore, what is important is not the historicity of the discoverer (Buddha), but the veracity and the validity of the discovery (Dhamma). As recorded in one Buddhist discourse, the Buddha himself says that he depends on the Dhamma, honours the Dhamms, is respectful and deferential to the Dhamma, he considers the Dhamma as his banner and standard, and the Dhamma as his overload. Equally significant

is what the Buddha told Ananda, his close disciple, a few days before his parinibbana: "Ananda, the Doctrine-and-Discipline, which I have taught and enjoined, is to be your teacher after my passing."

Because of the pivotal role assigned to the Dhamma, the Buddha himself recognizes that others, too, can present the Dhamma and elaborate on it. Many are the occasions recorded in the Buddhist discourses when the Buddha appreciates his own disciples' expositions of the Dhamma. Among the most pre-eminent expounders of the Dhamma are both monastic members as well as lay disciples. Among them are Punna Mantaniputta, a Buddhist monk, Dhammadinna, a Buddhist nun, and Citta and Hatthaka, two lay disciples.

The world of Buddhism in time and space:

"Pluralism" is the best expression to describe the world of Buddhism. "Pluralism" is the direct opposite of "totalitarianism", the attempt to reduce everything into an unalterable monolithic structure, where no alternative possibilities are permitted.

Buddhist cosmic pluralism:

The Buddhist view of the world/universe is not confined to our earthly existence. Nowhere does Buddhism assert that earth is the centre of the universe. Buddhism recognizes the vastness of space and the immensity of time:

"As far as these suns and moons revolve shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousand-fold world system. In it are a thousand suns, a thousand moons, thousands of earths and thousands of heavenly worlds. This is said to be the thousand-fold minor world-system. A thousand times such a thousand-fold minor world system is the twice-a-thousand-middling world-system. A thousand times such a twice-a-thousand middling world-system is the thrice-a-thousand major world-system"

These world-systems are, however, never static. They are either in the process of expansion (vivattamana), or in the process of contraction (samvattamana).

Pluralism and the Concept of Buddha:

As noted above, if the Buddha is a discoverer, the Buddha-hood is not the monopoly of one individual. This is precisely why Buddhism admits that there had been many Buddha's in the remote past and there will be many Buddha's in the distant future. When we consider the immensity of time and the vastness of space with billions of galactic systems within it, and with the possibility of many kinds of living beings inhabiting them, to speak of only one Buddha for all time and all space is, to say the least, extremely parochial.

Buddhist Doctrinal Pluralism:

What the Buddha taught has given rise to a colossal number of doctrines and doctrinal interpretations, which we find incorporated in three main Buddhist traditions: Vajrayana in North Asia, Mahayana in East Asia, and Theravada in South Asia. The presence of many doctrinal interpretations does not necessarily

mean that they have deviated from the original teachings. They could be understood in the light of the saying “what is true can be restated in different ways”. Moreover, the criterion of what is and what is not the Dhamma is not textual, but pragmatic: what leads to the cessation of passion, aversion, and delusion is the Dhamma; what leads away from it is not the Dhamma.

Buddhist Scriptural Pluralism:

Buddhist scriptural pluralism is equally colossal. There are in fact four Buddhist Canons: the Mongolian Buddhist Canon, the Tibetan Buddhist Canon, the Chinese Buddhist Canon, and the Theravada Buddhist Canon. They are not translations into four different languages of one and the same Buddhist Canon, although of course, they have many commonalities as well as differences.

Buddhist Cultural Pluralism:

When it comes to religious culture, Buddhism could be the most pluralistic. To whichever country Buddhism was introduced, Buddhism did not level down its cultural diversity to create a mono-culture. The Buddhist culture of China is different from the Buddhist culture of Japan, and both from that of Thailand, or that of Myanmar. Because Buddhism promotes cultural pluralism, Buddhism does not become a culture-bound religion. What this means is that just as a bird can fly from place to place leaving behind its cage, even so Buddhism can go from one place to another, say from Hong Kong to America, leaving behind its cultural paraphernalia.

Buddhist Social Pluralism:

Another area where we find many forms of pluralism is in the Buddhist attitude to society. As a religion Buddhism does not interfere with people’s ways of living by imposing on them unnecessary restrictions. We never hear of a Buddhist Dress, Buddhist Food, or Buddhist Medicine, laid down as valid for all times and climes. These are things that change from place to place and from time to time, depending on the progress of our knowledge.

This situation is true when it comes to marriage, too. There are many forms of marriage, monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, and so on. Today the legally recognized practice is mainly monogamy. Nevertheless, nowhere does Buddhism say that other forms of marriage are immoral. The form of marriage too can change from time to time, from place to place. If it changes, there is no problem for Buddhism. For Buddhism marriage is only social institution. It is something entirely mundane, not a religious “sacrament”. Nor does Buddhism say that marriage is an indissoluble bond. If two married partners are incompatible, they can certainly divorce, provided, of course, they follow the laws of the country enacted for such situations.

Buddhism has no prohibitions against birth control. If a married couple decides to practice contraception to prevent children being born, that is entirely their private business. They are not committing a serious moral evil. It is very unlikely that the Buddhist Monastic Order, Mahayana, Vajrayana, or Theravada will ever promulgate an edict condemning and prohibiting such acts.

Abortion is of course a different matter. Since abortion involves taking of life, it goes against the First Precept. However, in our opinion abortion can be condoned in cases of serious health hazards, if abortion is the lesser evil.

Pluralism in the Buddhist Monastic Order:

We can find pluralism in the Buddhist monastic organization as well. The monastic order is not a pyramid-like organization, exhibiting an ascending hierarchical order, where at the top presides a supreme head. It is not centralized, but decentralized. The principle of organization is not perpendicular and vertical, but parallel and horizontal. This situation allows for diversity within the monastic community. It is in fact this characteristic that makes it strongly resilient.