

THE EARLY BUDDHIST THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE (EPISTEMOLOGY)

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2. Early Buddhist literary sources refer to many sources of knowledge recognized by many religious traditions. Among them one is: 1. Knowledge based on Divine Revelation. In Buddhism's view, what is based on divine revelation lends itself to four different interpretations:

*It is well-heard, true, and corresponds to reality (sussutam tatha)

*It is well-heard, false, and does not correspond to reality (sussutam annatha)

*It is ill-heard, true, and corresponds to reality (dussutam tatha)

*It is ill-heard, false, and does not correspond to reality (dussutam annatha)

What is based on divine revelation is not rejected as necessarily false. What is asserted is that the truth or falsity of a statement based on divine revelation has to be judged by factors other than that of its claim to be a revealed doctrine.

2. Buddhist view of knowledge based on logic and pure reasoning (takka-vimamsa)

"Herein ... a certain teacher is one who resorts to reason, an investigator, he teaches a doctrine which is self-evident and is a product of reasoning and the pursuit of speculation. But in the case of a person who reasons and speculates, his reasoning may be good or bad, true or false."

Thus, what is based on logic and pure reasoning, lends itself to four interpretations

Well-reasoned, true and corresponds to reality (sutakkitam tatha)

Well-reasoned but false, does not correspond to reality (sutakkitam annatha)

Ill-reasoned, but true, and corresponds to reality (duttakkitam tatha)

Ill-reasoned, false, and does not correspond to reality (duttakkitam annatha)

The truth or falsity of a theory cannot be judged by the consistency of its reasoning. Even a well-reasoned theory may be false, or an ill-reasoned theory true, in the light of empirically observable facts. The soundness of the reasoning and logical consistency is no guarantee of truth.

3. The means of knowledge recognized in Buddhism:

Normal perception

Inductive inference (anvaye nana): An instance of inductive inference is illustrated in a conversation between the Buddha and Bhadraka, a headman. Bhadraka wanted to know how he could understand

the origin and the passing away of suffering. Then the Buddha told him: “If headman I were to teach you about the origin and the passing away of suffering with reference to the past, saying ‘So it was in the past’, perplexity and uncertainty about that might arise in you. And if I were to teach you about the origin and the passing away of suffering with reference to the future, saying ‘So it will be in the future’, perplexity and uncertainty about that might arise in you. Instead, headman, while I am sitting right here, and you are sitting right there, I will teach about the origin and the passing away of suffering.”

Then the Buddha explained to the headman, with many examples, how all suffering arises with self-centred desire as its cause, and how all suffering ceases with the cessation of its cause, which is self-centred desire. The Buddha asked the headman to apply this principle, which he has seen here and now, which he has fathomed immediately, to the past and the future as well.

Here we find an instance of inferential (inductive) knowledge (anvaye nana), which is one of the means of knowledge recognized in early Buddhist epistemology. Having first understood the fact of suffering and its cause, in the immediate present, through personal verification, one draws an inference (nayam neti) with regard to the past and the future as follows:

“Whatever suffering arose in the past all that arose rooted in desire, with desire as its source; for desire is the root of suffering. Whatever suffering will arise in the future all that will arise rooted in desire, with desire as its source, for desire is the root of suffering.”

What the dialogue between the Buddha and the headman demonstrates is that the Four Noble Truths can be penetrated here and now, without direct knowledge of the fact of re-becoming (punabbhava).

4. Extra-sensory perception (abhinna)

The six kinds of abhinna:

(a) Iddhividha = psycho-kinesis: the ability to display multiple forms of one’s body, to appear and vanish at will, to pass through walls unhindered, to walk on the water, to travel through the air, such various manifestations of the power of will in jhana-attainments:

(b) Dibbasota = clairaudience (divine ear), the ability to hear sounds, both far and wide

© Cetopariya-nana = telepathic knowledge, knowledge of others’ minds, it is the ability to read the thoughts of others and to know directly their states of mind

(d) Pubbenivasanussati-nana = retro-cognitive knowledge, recollection of past lives, the ability to know one’s past births.

(e) Dibbacakkhu = divine eye (Cutupapata-Nana) = knowledge of the decease and survival of beings in accordance with their kamma.

The reason given for the possibility of acquiring extra-sensory perception is that when the mind is cleansed of its impurities and defilements, it acquires the ability to gain these faculties. These experiences can be obtained after attaining the fourth Jhana, which is characterized by supreme

perfection of equanimity and mindfulness (upekkha-satiparisuddhi). These five kinds of knowledge are mundane. They are not a necessary condition for the realization of emancipation.

(f) Asavakkhaya-nana: knowledge of the destruction of the taints/defilements. This is the only supra-mundane knowledge and it is through this that emancipation is realized.

5. The place assigned to analogy (upama) as a means of knowledge: Many references to analogy in the Buddhist discourses and commentarial exegesis seem to give the impression that analogy is recognized as a means of knowledge. But this is not so. The purpose of analogy is not to prove a point, but merely to clarify it (atthassa vinnapanaya).

6. Factors that contribute to wrong judgements and erroneous views:

(a) Impact of desire on our beliefs. One causal statement in Dependent Origination is “Conditioned by desire, arises clinging (tanha-paccaya upadanam). This clinging is of four kinds:

*Kamupadana = clinging to sense-pleasures

*Silabbatupadana = clinging to rites and rituals

*Ditthupadana = clinging to metaphysical speculations

*Attavadupadana = clinging to self or soul theories

The last two kinds of clinging show that our beliefs in certain metaphysical speculations and the self or soul theories are impelled by our own desires to believe in them.

7. All defilements, negative dispositions, prejudices, and habits of mind have their impact on what we choose to believe in. Among them the following are specifically mentioned:

* The three roots of moral evil: passion (raga), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha)

*The five hindrances (nivarana): sensual desire (kamacchanda), ill-will (vyapada), sloth and torpor (thina-middha), excitement and perplexity (uddhacca-kukkucca), and skeptical doubt (vicikiccha). These five are described as “the defilements of the mind and factors that weaken wisdom” (cetaso upakkilese pannaya dubbalikarane)

8. The Authority of Self-Experience:

Addressing Kalamas, the Buddha says: “Yes, Kalamas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look, you Kalamas, do not be led by report, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, or by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: “this is our teacher”. But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome, wrong and bad, then give them up. And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them. (Kalama Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya).

9. There are many theories of truth, such as:

- * Correspondence Theory: Truth is what accords with fact, or corresponds with fact
- * Coherence Theory: Truth is what is consistent
- * Pragmatic Theory: What is true is useful and what is useful is true.

10. The Buddhist position is that truth is to be defined in terms of correspondence with facts. A proposition is true when it “accords with fact” (yathabhutam).

Although correspondence with facts is the essential characteristic of truth, consistence or coherence is also recognized as a criterion. In the course of his debate with Saccaka, the Buddha points out that “Saccaka’s latter statement is not consistent/compatible with his former statement, or his former statement consistent/compatible with his latter statement”.

One of the disciples of the Buddha, known as Citta when arguing with Nigantha Nataputta, says “If your former statement is true, your latter statement is false and if your latter statement is true, your former statement is false.”

11. In the Suttanipata, v. 884, one question raised is: “Claiming to be experts, why do they put forward diverse theories? Are truths many and various?” The answer is: “Truth indeed is one, a second does not exist” (Ekam hi saccam, na dutiyam atthi).

12. There are a wide variety of philosophies, realism, idealism, theism, materialism, and Buddhism. All of them cannot be true. Only one can be true. Or all may be false.

13. Partial Truths (pacceka-sacca)

In this connection there is the parable of the blind men and the elephant (Udana 6. 4). The blind men touch various parts of the elephant, the tusks, ears, forehead, etc. and each says that the elephant is like the part that he has touched. In like manner, there are various religious and philosophical theories that contain aspects of truth based on misinterpreted experiences.

14. The Buddhist instruction on right speech says, that one should speak what is true, refrain from slander, which causes divisions and dissensions among people, refrain from harsh or foul language, refrain from gossip and vain talk, and speak at the right occasion what is profitable, righteous and true. However, an exception seems to have been made in regard to saying what is pleasant to others. It is said that sometimes it is necessary to say what is unpleasant if it is true and useful. It is compared to inserting one’s finger in the throat of a child even if it causes a little pain to pull out something that has got stuck there.

15. Accordingly, in the Abhayarajakumara Sutta of the Majjhimanikaya it is said that statements may be true or false, useful or useless, pleasant or unpleasant. Thus there are eight possibilities:

- * True, useful, pleasant
- * True, useful, unpleasant
- * True, useless, pleasant
- * True, useless, unpleasant
- * False, useful, pleasant

- * False, useful, unpleasant
- * False, useless, pleasant
- * False, useless, unpleasant

Among these eight possibilities, the Buddha resorts to the first and the second at the proper time

16. Another critical guideline mentioned in the Buddhist discourses to correctly understand the teachings in them is the distinction drawn between two kinds of statements:

Nitattha: “a statement whose meaning has already been drawn out”

Neyyattha: “a statement whose meaning has to be drawn out”

The former refers to those statements to be understood as they stand, as explicit and definitive, and the latter to those statements which should be interpreted to fall in line with the explicit and the definitive. “Whose meaning is already drawn out” is an expression for philosophical language, the use of impersonal technical terms to bring out the true nature of actuality. “Whose meaning is to be drawn out” is an expression for the use of conventional and transactional terms in ordinary parlance in presenting the Buddhist teachings.

17. In this context, it is necessary to note here that Buddhist philosophy is a dynamic process philosophy. When others took for granted the reality of the subject as a self-entity, the Buddha challenged its reality and reduced both subject and object, perceiver and perceived to dynamic processes. The Buddhist teachings on impermanence, non-self, and dependent arising mean that in the final analysis there are no agents, entities, and substances. There are only mental and material phenomena that arise in dependence on other mental and material phenomena, with no self-subsisting noumena as the ground of their being.

18. From the Buddhist perspective, therefore, wrongly hypostatized entities and objects of reification are nothing but conceptual constructs, logical abstractions, or pure denominations with no corresponding objective counterparts. Even the “principle of dependent arising” in its abstract sense, turns out to be a conceptual construct, with no objective reality. It is observed in the commentarial exegesis that the occurrence of several factors by way of “dependent arising” is an objective occurrence. Nevertheless, there is no independently existing abstract principle called “dependent arising” besides or in addition to the objective occurrence of dependently arising factors.

19. The same situation is true of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and self-less-ness (anatta), the three main characteristics of all that is sentient. In addition to what is subject to these three characteristics, there are no corresponding characteristics existing as independent entities. If the characteristic of impermanence, for instance, were to be postulated as a real entity, then it would be necessary to postulate a secondary characteristic of impermanence to account for its own impermanence. And this secondary characteristic of impermanence would in turn require a secondary-secondary characteristic of impermanence to account for its own impermanence. In this way, so runs the argument, it would inevitably involve what the commentarial exegesis calls a process of interminability (anupaccheda), or infinite regress (anavatthana).

20. Since the Buddhist view of actuality is free from entities and substances, in presenting it through the symbolic medium of language difficulties can certainly arise. For, the structure of language is such that

sometimes it can falsify the view of actuality as presented by Buddhism. The use of genitive expression (sami-vacana), as for example, “the colour of the rainbow” creates the “distinction between the support and the supported” (adhara-adheya-bheda), that is, the distinction between substance and quality. Its recognition leaves the door open for the intrusion of the notion of a substantial self. Again, the subject-predicate sentence, “the nominative expression” (kattu-sadhana) in Buddhist exegesis, gives rise to the false notion that corresponding to the grammatical subject there is an ontological subject as well. An example given is “cognition cognizes” (vinnanam vijanati). This kind of definition is made by superimposing a distinction on where there is no such distinction (abheda bheda-parikappana). The distinction that it, thus, creates is that between the agent and the action. For this very reason, the definition based on nominative expression is said to be tentative and provisional, not valid in an ultimate sense.

21. Accordingly, all such innocent-looking sentences as “I see,” “my eyes see,” “I see with my eyes,” “the eye-consciousness sees” are not valid in an ultimate sense. To make them valid, we need to rephrase them in the language causality (dependent arising). When so rephrased, they all mean: “depending on the eye and the eye-object arises eye-consciousness”.

22. The above observations show is that the structure of language does not exactly correspond to the structure of actuality. It is this philosophical notion that lies behind the two kinds of statement mentioned above, the technical-philosophical (nitattha) and the consensual-transactional (neyyattha). However, if we use only technical-philosophical language, just because it is the right language, it will fail to communicate what we want to communicate. Convention requires the use of such expressions as “I see,” “I hear” and so on, but as long as one does not imagine independent agents corresponding to them, such expressions are valid.

23. On the other hand, as the commentarial exegesis observes, if, for the sake of conforming to the actual situation, one were to say “the five aggregates eat” (khandha bhunjanti), “the five aggregates walk” (khandha gacchanti), instead of saying “a person eats,” “a person walks,” such a situation would result in “breach of convention (vohara-bheda), leading to a break-down in meaningful communication.” Hence in presenting the Dhamma, the Buddha does not exceed linguistic conventions, but uses such terms as “self entity” without being led astray by their superficial implications. Language is certainly necessary as a means of communicating the Dhamma. Nevertheless, on the use of language there is this well-known saying of the Buddha: Addressing Citta, the householder, the Buddha says, “These, Citta, are names (samanna), expressions (nirutti), turns of speech (vohara) and designations (pannatti) in common use in the world. And these the Tathagata makes use indeed, but is not led astray by them.” Neither clinging to language nor overstepping it is the golden mean.

24. The two kinds of statement referred to above, nitattha and neyyattha, seem to have provided a base for the emergence of the subsequent doctrine of double truth. In the schools of Sanskrit Buddhism nitārtha/nitattha is evaluated higher than neyārtha/neyyattha. As F. Edgerton observes, in Buddhist hybrid literature “a nitārtha text ... is recommended as a guide in preference to one that is neyārtha” As he further observes, “In Pali neither is ipso facto preferred to the other; one errs only in interpreting one as if it were the other.”

Reference: K. N. Jayatilleke, Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London, 1963.

