

THE TWO TRUTHS: THE CONVENTIONAL AND THE ULTIMATE

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1. In the early Buddhist Discourses there is no reference to Two Truths. What we get there is reference to the Four Noble Truths. These truths do not imply a hierarchical order: One truth is neither higher, nor lower than another.

2. However, the antecedence of the Two Truths can be traced to an early Buddhist Discourse that refers to two kinds of statement: (1) *Nītattha* and (2) *Neyyattha*. The former is “a statement whose meaning is already drawn out”. The latter is “a statement whose meaning has to be drawn out”.

3. Of the two statements, one statement is not higher or lower than the other. What is emphasized, however, is that one statement should not be understood as the other. The distinction is so important that to overlook it is to misrepresent the teachings of the Buddha.

4. Another link between Early Buddhism and the Two Truths can be traced to the Sangīti Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, where four kinds of knowledge are mentioned:

(a) The direct knowledge of the doctrine (*dhamme ñāna*)

(b) The inductive knowledge of the doctrine (*anvaye ñāna*)

© Knowledge of analysis (*paricchede ñāna*)

(d) Knowledge of (linguistic) conventions (*sammuti-ñāna*)

The latter two kinds of knowledge roughly correspond to the Two Truths, ultimate and conventional.

5. In the Theravāda Abhidhamma, the relative or conventional truth is called “*sammuti-sacca*”, truth based on “consent, convention, or common agreement”. The absolute or ultimate truth is called *paramattha-sacca*, truth based on the ultimate elements of existence.

6. Their difference is follows:

“Statements referring to convention-based things (*sanketa*) are valid because they are based on common agreement. Statements referring to ultimate categories (*paramattha*) are valid because they are based on the true nature of the real existents.” (Anguttaranikaya Atthakatha, PTS, I 54; Kathavatthu Atthakatha, PTS, 34).

7. *Sanketa* means things that depend on mental interpretation, which we superimpose on the category of the real, as for example, our ideas of chairs and tables. On the other hand, *paramattha* includes the category of the real existents known as *dhammas*, which have their own corresponding objective nature.

8. In the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma the difference between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* is based on the principle of physical reducibility and mental analyzability. If the notion of a thing disappears, when it is physically reduced to pieces, then that particular thing exists relatively. The idea of a pitcher, for instance, disappears when it is reduced to pieces. Again, if the idea of a thing disappears, when it is analyzed by mind, then that too exists relatively, as for example, water. If the material dharmas, such as colour, which constitute what we call water, are

separated mentally from one another, then the notion of water disappears. (Abhidharmakosa-bhasya, 335)

9. Are the two truths equal in status? Or is one truth higher than the other? Almost all Buddhist Schools of Thought consider one truth to be higher than the other. This is clearly shown by the use of the term *saṃvṛti* for the relative truth. *Samvṛti* means “that which hides, that which hides the true nature”.

10. However, as shown by K. N. Jayatilleke (*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*), according to the Theravāda, one truth is neither higher, nor lower than the other. Both have parity of status. (Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, 364)

11. In this connection, a number of Pali commentaries say:

“There is this simile on this matter. Just as a teacher of the three Vedas who is capable of explaining their meaning in different dialects might teach his pupils, adopting the particular dialect which each pupil understands, even so the Buddha preaches the doctrine adopting according to the suitability of the occasion, either the *sammuti*- or *paramattha-kathā*. It is by taking into consideration the ability of each individual to understand the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha presents his teaching either by way of *sammuti* or by way of *paramattha* or by way of both (*vomissaka-vasena*). Whatever the method adopted the purpose is the same, to show the way to “Immortality” through the analysis of mental and physical phenomena.” (Anguttaranikaya Atthakatha, PTS, I 54-55; Samyuttanikaya Atthakatha, PTS II 77)

12. This situation is closer to the early Buddhist distinction drawn between (a) *nitattha*: a statement whose meaning is already drawn out and (a) *neyyattha*: a statement whose meaning has to be drawn out. One statement is not considered higher or lower than the other.

13. What this really means is that truth is one, but it can be stated in more than one way.

14. As a matter of fact, according to the Theravāda the two truths do not refer to two kinds of truth, as such. It means that what is true can be stated in two or more ways.

15. “The person exists” (conventional truth) is not erroneous if we do not imagine by the term a “person”, a self-entity enduring in time. Convention requires the use of such terms. But so long we do not imagine substantial entities corresponding to them, such statements are valid. On the other hand, as the Buddhist exegesis says, just in order to conform to the ultimate truth if we say “The five aggregates eat”. “The five aggregates walk”, such a situation would result in a breach of convention resulting in a breakdown in meaningful communication. (Samyuttanikaya Atthakatha, PTS, I, 51).

16. Therefore, in presenting the teaching, the Buddha does not exceed linguistic conventions (*na hi Bhagava samannam atidhavati*), but uses such terms as “person” without being led astray by their superficial implications (*aparamasam voharati*). Hence the Buddha is called “skillful in expression” (*vohara-kusala*). Skillfulness in the use of words is the ability to conform to conventions (*sammuti*), usages (*vohara*), designations (*pannatti*), and turns of speech (*nirutti*) without being led astray by them. Therefore, in understanding the teaching of the Buddha, we should not adhere dogmatically to the mere superficial

meanings of words (na vacana-bheda-mattam alambitabbam: Abhidhammavataara, PTS, 88).

17. This situation does also help us to understand the commentarial statement that the teachings in the Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka correspond respectively to conventional teaching (*vohāra-desanā*) and absolute teaching (*paramattha-desanā*). This does not mean that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka contains a set of *higher doctrines*. What it means is that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka follows more the *absolute truth* than *conventional truth* in presenting what the Buddha taught.

18. Another distinction drawn in presenting the Dhamma is that between “pariyaya-desana” and “nippariyaya-desana”. The first refers to the discursively applied method or, illustrated discourse employing stories, similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech, which we find in the Buddhist Discourses (suttanta-bhajaniya). The other refers to the presentation of the Dhamma in a precise, technical, and impersonal terminology, which we find in the Abhidhamma (abhidhamma-bhajaniya).

19. “Sammuti” (conventional, consensual) is not the same as “sammuti-sacca” (conventional truth). “Sammuti” is that which is based on general agreement or common consent, as for example, “table”, “chair”. Similarly, “paramattha” is not the same as “paramattha-sacca” (ultimate truth). Paramattha means that which is ultimate, that which is not further resolvable. Accordingly, “sammuti” and “paramattha” are not on par. On the other hand, when “sammuti” and “paramattha” refer to two kinds of truth, they are on par.

20. The Abhidhamma compendiums maintain that if we are to understand the true implications of the two truths, we should not make a confusion between the two truths. They are two different but parallel contexts.

21. There is one important feature common to the Four Noble Truths, the distinction between *Nītatattha* and *Neyyattha*, and the Theravāda version of Double Truth. In none of them we find a hierarchical presentation. This situation is consonant with how early Buddhism presents various modes of analysis: That is to say, the factors obtained through analysis, such as the five aggregates, the twelve sense-bases, and the eighteen elements of cognition are never presented in such a way as to show that one factor is higher or lower than another. They are always presented, not one above or below another, but one besides the other. This is in order to show that they are parallel factors. This way of presenting the factors does not exhibit a hierarchy among them. It also prevents the intrusion of the notion of substance and qualities, and the notion of a substantial self-entity.

22. Finally, it is important to remember that both truths, the conventional and the absolute, have to be communicated through a common medium, namely, through *paññatti*, the category of the nominal and the conceptual. Hence we read in a Pali commentary: “It is without going beyond (the parameters) of *paññatti* that the ultimately real is presented” (*Paññattiṃ anatikkamma paramattho pakāśito*). Both truths come under *paññatti*, the category of the nominal and the conceptual. (Mohavicchedani, PTS, 266).

23. If one truth is not higher or lower than the other, why is one truth called absolute or ultimate and the other conventional or consensual? If

one truth is called absolute, it is because this particular kind of truth is expressed by using technical terms, which we use in expressing what is ultimate, that is, the dhammas into which the world of experience is analyzed. Strictly speaking, “absolute” or “ultimate” does not refer to the truth as such. Rather, it refers to the technical terms through which the truth is expressed. Thus, “paramattha-sacca” really means the truth expressed by using technical terms which refer to ultimate factors of existence. In like manner, “sammuti-sacca” means the truth expressed by using conventional terms in common parlance.