

THERAVADA VERSION OF THE TWO TRUTHS

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The theory of the two truths, as far as the Theravada is concerned, is an innovation on the part of the Abhidhamma. However, it is not completely dissociated from the early Buddhist teachings, for the antecedent trends that led to its formulation can be traced to the early Buddhist scriptures themselves. One such instance is the distinction drawn in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*. The former refers to those statements that have their meaning “drawn out” (*nīta-attha*), i.e. to be taken as they stand, as explicit and definitive statements. The latter refers to those statements that require their meaning “to be drawn out” (*neyya-attha*).¹ The distinction alluded to here may be understood in a broad way to mean the difference between the direct and the indirect meaning. The distinction is so important that to overlook it is to misrepresent the teachings of the Buddha: “Whoever declares a discourse with a meaning already drawn out as a discourse with a meaning to be drawn out and [conversely] whoever declares a discourse with a meaning to be drawn out as a discourse with a meaning already drawn out, such a one makes a false statement with regard to the Blessed One”.² What is very important to remember here is that no preferential value judgment is made between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*. All that is emphasized is that the two kinds of statement should not be confused.

It seems very likely that this distinction between *nītattha* and *neyyattha* has provided a basis for the emergence of the subsequent doctrine of double truth, not only in Theravāda but

also in other Buddhist schools. In point of fact, the commentary to the *Āṅguttaranikāya* seeks to establish a correspondence between the original Sutta passage and the Theravāda version of the two truths as conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and absolute or ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*).³ In the Madhyamaka system, too, *nīārtha* (*nīattha*) and *neyyārtha* (*neyyattha*) are explained as a parallel to its version of the two kinds of truth (*saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*). This is shown by the statement in the *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*: “Consciousness is declared as atman according to *neyyārtha* which is *saṃvṛti*, and not in the absolute sense.”⁴ However, on the basis of these subsequent interpretations we cannot conclude that in the original Sutta passage, too, there is an allusion to two kinds of truth. The distinction referred to is not between two kinds of truth but that between two kinds of statement, in other words, between two ways of presenting the Buddhist teachings. It must also be noted here that in most of the schools of Buddhist thought *nīārtha/nīattha* is evaluated as higher than *neyyārtha/neyyattha*. In the Madhyamaka system, for instance, “a *nīārtha* text is recommended as a guide in preference to one that is *neyyārtha*”.⁵ The original Sutta passage makes no such preferential value judgement. All that is emphasized is that the two kinds of statement should not be confused.

Another important link between the Abhidhamma theory of double truth and the early scriptures is found in the Saṅgīti-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*), (c) knowledge of analysis (*paricchede ñāna*), and knowledge of (linguistic) conventions (*sammuti-ñāna*).⁶ That there is a close parallelism between the latter pair of knowledge referred to here and the Theravada theory of the two truths as *sammuti* and *paramattha* is fairly obvious. For *paramattha* is based on the analysis (*pariccheda*) of what is amenable to analysis. In point of fact, what is called *paramattha* (ultimate, absolute) is the result of *pariccheda* (analysis).⁷ So knowledge of analysis (*paricchede ñāna*) could be understood to mean the ability to resolve what appears as substantial and compact into its elementary constituents. This exactly is what the *dhamma*

theory is. On the other hand, *sammuti-ñāna*, which is the knowledge of linguistic conventions, could be understood to mean the ability to know that what appears as substantial and compact, yet analysable, is not something ultimately real and therefore that it is a part of consensual reality (*sammuti*). As we shall see, this exactly is what *sammuti* is all about.⁸ Thus what the Sutta passage refers to as two kinds of knowledge anticipates not only the *dhamma* theory but also the theory of double truth, which is a logical extension of the *dhamma* theory.

The theory of double truth as developed by the Abhidhamma has a close connection with the early Buddhist analysis of empirical existence into aggregates (*khandha*), sense bases (*ayatana*), and elements (*dhatu*) of cognition. According to these different modes of analysis the term ‘person’ becomes a common designation (*sammuti*) given to a congeries of dependently originated psycho-physical factors: ‘Just as there arises the name “chariot” when there is a set of appropriate constituents, even so there comes to be this convention “living being” when the five aggregates are present’.⁹ There is, however, this important difference to be noted: The early Buddhist idea of *sammuti* is not based on a formulated doctrine of real existents. Although what is analysed is called *sammuti*, unlike in the Abhidhamma, that into which it is analysed is not called *paramattha*. What is more, in the early Buddhist scriptures the term *paramattha* is used only as a descriptive term of Nibbāna, to show that, from an ethico-psychological perspective, Nibbana is the ‘highest ideal’ (*sumnum bonum*).¹⁰ Whereas in the Abhidhamma the term *paramattha* is used in an ontological sense to mean ‘what exists in a real and ultimate sense’. In this ontological sense the term *paramattha* denotes not only *Nibbāna*, the Unconditioned Element but also all mental and material elements into which the conditioned existence is analysed.

What *sammuti* really means and how it differs from *paramattha* can be seen if we draw our attention to the doctrinal controversy, recorded in the *Kathāvatthu*, on the reality of the person. Here, in response to the contention of the Puggalavādins, namely that the person

exists in a real and ultimate sense, the Theravādins seek to debunk it, first, by taking it absolutely, i.e. as an entity per se (*suddhi-saccikaṭṭha*), secondly by taking it with reference to space (*okāsa-saccikaṭṭha*), thirdly by taking it with reference to time, and finally by taking it with reference to the *dhammas*. Accordingly, the Theravādin (= Sakavādin) asks: (a) Is the so called *puggala* (person) known in the same way as an ultimate fact of experience is known? (b) Is the *puggala* known everywhere in that sense? (c) Is the *puggala* known always in that sense? (d) Is the *puggala* known in every thing (*dhammas*) in that sense?¹¹

The Puggalavādins deny all the alternatives. This denial, on their part shows that in their opinion what they mean by *puggala* is not something that is cognized in the same way as a *dhamma* is cognized, that it is not something that is co-extensive with the corporeal aspects of the individual, that it does not exist for all times as an immutable entity, and that it does not exist having the constituents of the living being as its receptacle. The implication seems to be that what they mean by *puggala* is not something like the soul of the soul-theorists, but the synthetic unity of the constituents that make the so-called empiric individuality. The whole controversy relates to the question as to the degree of reality that should be attributed to the sum total of the *dhammas* that make up the ‘person’. According to the Puggalavādins the sum total should be assigned the same degree of reality that is assigned to the constituents. Whereas, according to the Theravādins the sum total is not real in an ultimate sense because of its analyzability and only the ultimate constituents into which the sum total is analyzable are ultimately real, because they are not amenable to further analysis.¹²

Thus here we find referred to two levels of reality, namely that which is amenable to analysis and that which defies further analysis. The first level is called *sammuti* because it represents conventional or relative truth or what is called consensual reality, and the second is called *paramattha* because it represents the absolute truth or ultimate reality. Thus *sammuti* and analyzability become mutually convertible terms, so do *paramattha* and non-analyzability. From an epistemological point of view there is another important

difference between the two levels of reality or the two kinds of truth: What is not further analyzable and, therefore, what exists in an ultimate sense, is known as an ultimate datum of cognition, whereas what is analyzable and, therefore, what exists in a relative or conventional sense is the result of mental interpretation. It is always known as an object of conceptual thought¹³.

Paramattha is a verifiable existent, known with reference to its own characteristics (*salakkhaṇa, saka-lakkhana*), whereas *sammuti* is a mental construction superimposed on things per se and as such possessing no objective counterpart. As a product of the synthesizing function of the mind, it exists by virtue of mind. For example, from the point of view of the *dhamma* theory what we call a table is a designation given to a series of material elements organized in a particular way. Although it is admitted that the elements that enter into its composition are necessarily co-existent and positionally inseparable (*padesato avinibhoga*) as far as their own-nature is concerned they are mutually exclusive (*aññam'aññam vyatireka*).¹⁴ But the same situation is not true of the 'table', for it is not something that is constitutionally distinct from and, therefore, as objectively real, as the material elements that enter into the composition of what from a conventional point of view is called the table, because it cannot be apprehended independently of the latter. The table is a name given to our idea corresponding to the form or appearance presented by those material elements when they are organized in a particular manner:

‘Thus as when the component parts such as axles, wheels, frame, poles, etc. are arranged in a certain way there comes to be the mere term of common usage “chariot”, yet in the ultimate sense, when each part is examined, there is no chariot, and just as when the component parts of a house such as wattles, etc., are placed so that they enclose a space in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage house, yet in the ultimate sense there is no house, and just as when trunk, branches, foliage, etc., are placed in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage tree, yet in the ultimate sense when each component is

examined, there is no tree, so, too, when there are the five aggregates as objects of clinging, there comes to be the mere term of common usage “a being”, “a person”, yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no being as a basis for the assumption of “I am” or “I”.¹⁵

In like manner, it is the grasping as one what actually is a complex (*samūhekaggahaṇa*) by the synthesizing function of the mind that gives rise to the diverse objects of conceptual thought. With the dissolution of what appears to be one (*ghana-vinibbhoga*), the apparent oneness disappears leaving only a congeries of factors, which are always in a state of constant flux. The factors alone are real (*paramattha*), the unity is conceptual.¹⁶

One interesting feature in the Theravāda version of the theory is the use of the term *sammuti* for relative truth. For in all other schools of Buddhist thought the term used is *saṃvṛti*.¹⁷ The difference is not simply that between Pali and Sanskrit, for the two terms differ both in etymology and meaning. The term *sammuti* is derived from the root *man*, to think, and when prefixed with *sam* it means consent, convention, general agreement. On the other hand, the term *saṃvṛti* is derived from the root *vr*, to cover, and when prefixed with *sam* it means covering, concealment. This difference is not confined to the vocabulary of the theory of double truth alone. That elsewhere, too, Sanskrit *saṃvṛti* corresponds to Pali *sammuti* is confirmed by other textual instances.¹⁸ Since *sammuti* refers to convention or general agreement, *sammuti-sacca* means truth based on convention or general agreement. On the other hand, the idea behind *saṃvṛti-satya* is that which covers up the true nature of things and makes them appear otherwise.

In introducing the double truth, a number of commentaries and sub-commentaries cite two verses. According to the first, the Buddha himself proclaimed two kinds of truth as consensual and absolute, and a third does not exist.¹⁹ This emphasis on two kinds of truth to the exclusion of a third reminds us of the Yogācāra School of Buddhism, which advocates a

theory of triple truth. It also reminds us of a verse occurring in the Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra, stressing the fact that a third truth is not to be found.²⁰ The second stanza sets out the validity of the two kinds of statement corresponding to *sammuti* and *paramattha* as follows:

Statements referring to convention-based things (*saṅketa*) 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.²¹

As shown here, the distinction between the two truths depend on the distinction between *saṅketa* and *paramattha*. Now, *saṅketa* includes things which depend for their being on mental interpretations superimposed on the category of the real. For instance, the validity of the term ‘table’ is based, not on an objective existent corresponding to the term, but on mental interpretation superimposed on a congeries of material elements that enter into its composition. Nevertheless the table is said to exist because in common parlance it is accepted as a separate reality. On the other hand, the term *paramattha* denotes the category of real existents (*dhammas*), which have their own objective nature (*sabhāva*). Their difference may be set out thus: When a particular situation is explained on the basis of terms indicative of the real elements of existence (*dhammas*), that explanation is *paramattha-sacca*. When the self-same situation is explained on the basis of terms indicative of things which have their being dependent on the mind’s synthesizing function (*i.e. paññatti*), that explanation is *sammuti-sacca*. The validity of the former is based on its correspondence to the ultimate data of empirical reality. The validity of the latter is based on its correspondence to things established by conventions.

In the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma the difference between *saṃvrti* (relative) and paramārtha (absolute) is explained in a different manner. It is sought to be based on the principle of physical reducibility and mental analyzability. Thus in the Abhidharmakoṣa we read: If the notion of a thing disappears (*na pravartate*) when it is physically reduced into pieces, then

that particular thing exists relatively (*saṃvrti-sat*). The idea of a pitcher, for instance, disappears when it is reduced to pieces. Again, if the notion of a thing disappears when it is analysed by mind, then that particular thing, too, is to be regarded as existing relatively. Water, for example: if the material elements such as colour, which constitute what is called water, are separated mentally from one another, then the notion of water disappears. It is to be understood therefore that such things as pitcher, cloth, water, fire, etc., are called so according to conventional practice and from the point of view of relative truth.²² Hence from the point of view of relative truth if one says 'There is a pitcher' (*ghato 'sti*), 'There is water' (*āpos 'ti*), one speaks truthfully and not wrongly.²³

In the *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā*, Ācārya Yaśomitra observes that the two examples given here refer to two kinds of reducibility (*bheda*): the pitchers, etc., can be broken by means of a physical apparatus (*upakrama*), whereas water etc., can be analyzed by mind (*buddhi*). Stated otherwise: what exists relatively is of two kinds: (a) that which exists on the basis of another which is also relative (*saṃvrtiyantara-vyapaśraya*), and (b) that which exists on the basis of something that is real (*dravyāntara-vyapaśraya*). In the case of the former, it is physically breakable (*bheda*) and mentally analyzable. Both possibilities can be there at one and the same time. A pitcher, for example: it can not only be reduced to pieces by another physical object but can be analyzed by mind into its constituent atoms and elements. In the case of the latter, it can be analyzed only by mind. An aggregate-atom (*saṃghāta-paramāṇu*), for example; for although it can be analyzed by mind into its constituent unitary atoms (*dravya-paramāṇu*), each of these constituent unitary atoms is not further reducible either physically or mentally. The first alternative is not possible because the unitary atoms (= material elements) that enter into the composition of the aggregate-atom are necessarily co-existent (*niyata-sahotpanna*) and positionally inseparable (*avinirbhāga*). The second alternative is not possible because what is called unitary atoms are devoid of spatial dimensions as they represent the final stage in the analysis of physical existence.²⁴

Ācārya Paramārtha, as quoted by L.de la Vallee Poussin, clarifies the difference between the two kinds of *saṃvṛti* as follows:

‘If the idea of a thing does not persist any more when it is analyzed, then it exists in a conventional sense (*saṃvṛtisat*). When, for example, the pitcher is reduced to baked powder, then in relation to the baked powder the idea of pitcher continues no more. On the other hand, *paramārtha* (absolute) is defined in a diametrically opposite manner: When a given thing is analyzed by mind, if the idea of it continues to persist, then that particular thing is said to exist in an ultimate sense (*paramārtha-sat*). For example, materiality (*rūpana*) or impenetrability (*pratighāta*) continues to persist when what is material or impenetrable is reduced to atoms or analyzed by mind into their constituents, such as colour, odour, savour, etc. In all these different stages the essential defining characteristic of matter, i.e. materiality/impenetrability, continues to persist. Similarly should be considered such mental phenomena as feeling (*vedanā*), ideation (*sajñā*), etc.²⁵

In the opinion of Bhadanta Śrīlāta, one of the celebrities of the Sautrāntika School of Buddhism, the difference between the two truths consists in this: that which exists in a number of objects (*dravya*) is *saṃvṛti*; that which exists in a single object is *paramārtha*. In other words, if the thing in question loses its original name when it is analyzed, it is *saṃvṛti*; if it does not, it is *paramārtha*.²⁶ Although this explanation appears to be quite different from the ones we have already discussed, here, too, analyzability is taken as the sole criterion in distinguishing the two kinds of truth.

One important question that arises here concerns the status of one truth in relation to the other. Are the two kinds of truth co-ordinate? Or, is one truth higher than the other in the sense that one truth is more valid than the other. Obviously, the use of the term *paramattha/paramārtha*, which means the ultimate, absolute, or the highest, to describe one truth seems to show that what is so expressed represents a higher level of truth. This in fact is

the position taken up by almost all Buddhist schools. But not so is the case with Theravāda. As pointed out by K.N. Jayatilleke in his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, the Theravāda version of double truth “does not imply that what is true in the one sense is false in the other or even that the one kind of truth is superior to the other, notwithstanding the use of the term *paramattha* to denote one of them”.²⁷ This observation that the distinction in question is not based on a theory of degrees of truth will become clear from the following free translation of the relevant passages contained in three Pali commentaries:

Herein references to living beings, gods, Brahma, etc., are *sammuti-kathā*, whereas references to impermanence, suffering, egolessness, the aggregates of the empiric individuality, the spheres and elements of sense perception and mind-cognition, bases of mindfulness, right effort, etc., are *paramattha-kathā*. One who is capable of understanding and penetrating to the truth and hoisting the flag of Arahantship when the teaching is set out in terms of generally accepted conventions, to him the Buddha preaches the doctrine based on *sammuti-kathā*. One who is capable of understanding and penetrating to the truth and hoisting the flag of Arahantship when the teaching is set out in terms of ultimate categories, to him the Buddha preaches the doctrine based on *paramattha-kathā*. To one who is capable of awakening to the truth through *sammuti-kathā*, the teaching is not presented on the basis of *paramattha-kathā*, and conversely, to one who is capable of awakening to the truth through *paramattha-kathā*, the teaching is not presented on the basis of *sammuti-kathā*. 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 the *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. Whatever the method adopted the purpose is the same, to show the way to Immortality through the analysis of mental and physical phenomena.²⁸

As shown in the above quotation, the penetration of the truth is possible by either of the teaching, the conventional or the ultimate, or by the combination of both. One method is not singled out as superior or inferior to the other. It is like using the dialect that a person readily understands, and there is no implication that one dialect is either superior or inferior to another. What is more, as the commentary to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* states specifically, whether the Buddhas preach the doctrine according to *sammuti* or *paramattha*, they teach only what is true, only what accords with actuality, without involving themselves in what is not true (*amusā'va*).²⁹

This observation that the Theravāda version of double truth is not based on a theory of degrees of truth needs emphasis, for this is an important aspect of the subject that has often been overlooked. In his well-known monograph on ‘Some Points in Buddhist Doctrine:’, for instance, Ven. Ledi Sadaw observes that ‘according to conventional truth it is not untruthful to say there is a personal entity. Why? Because that is the conventional opinion of the great majority ... Nevertheless, it is just an erroneous view. How so? Because a being who in reality does not exist is spoken of as if he existed. According to ultimate truth, to say, “there is no personal entity” is neither untruthful nor mere opinion.’³⁰ This observation on the part of Ven. Ledi Sadaw, that the conventional truth is ‘just an erroneous view’ is not in consonance with the traditional opinion on the subject. As K.N. Jayatilleke observes further, ‘the statement: “The person exists” is not an erroneous statement, provided one does not imagine by the person a substance enduring in time. Convention requires the use of such terms, but as long as one does not imagine substantial entities corresponding to such linguistic usages, such statements are valid.’³¹ On the other hand as the commentators observe, if for the sake of conforming to the ultimate truth one would say, ‘The five aggregates eat’ (*khandhā bhujjanti*), “The five aggregates walk” (*khandhā gacchanti*), instead of saying: “A person eats”, “A person walks”, such a situation would result in what is called *vohāra-bheda*, i.e. a breach of convention resulting in a breakdown in meaningful

communication.³² It is just like a well meaning scientist using the expressions, such as ‘sun-rise’ and ‘sun-set’ instead of using the cumbersome technical terminology to describe the actual situations meant by the two conventional expressions.

Hence in presenting the teaching the Buddha does not exceed linguistic conventions (*Na hi Bhagavā samaññam atidhāvati*),³³ but uses such terms as ‘person’ without being led astray by their superficial implications (*Aparāmasaṃ voharati*).³⁴ Because the Buddha is able to employ such linguistic designations as ‘person’ and ‘individual’ without assuming corresponding substantial entities, he is called ‘skilled in expression’ (*vohāra-kusala*).³⁵ The use of such terms does not in any way involve falsehood (*musāvādo na jāyati*).³⁶ Skillfulness in the use of words is the ability to conform to conventions (*sammuti*), usages (*vohāra*), designations (*paññatti*), and turns of speech (*nirutti*) in common use in the world without being led astray by them.³⁷ Hence, in understanding the teaching of the Buddha one is advised not to adhere dogmatically to the mere superficial meanings of words (*Na vacanabhedamattam ālambitabbam*).³⁸

One important question that arises here is this. If no preferential value judgement is made between *sammuti-sacca* and *paramattha-sacca*, between the conventional and the absolute truths, what is the justification for calling one ‘the absolute or ultimate truth’? Here what should not be overlooked is that if one truth is called absolute or ultimate it is because this particular kind of truth has for its vocabulary the technical terms used to express what is ultimate, i.e. the *dhammas* into which the world of experience is ultimately resolved. Strictly speaking, the expression ‘*paramattha*’ (absolute/ultimate) does not refer to the truth as such, but to the technical terms through which it is expressed. Thus *paramattha-sacca* really means ‘the truth expressed by using the technical terms expressive of the ultimate elements of existence. In like manner, *sammuti-sacca* or conventional truth means the truth expressed by using conventional terms in common parlance’.

Another thing that needs mention here is the obvious fact that *sammuti* is not the same as *sammuti-sacca*. So is the relationship between *paramattha* and *paramattha-sacca*. *Sammuti* is that which is based on general agreement or common consent, for example, ‘table’ ‘chair’, ‘the sun’, ‘the moon, ‘living being’. All these exist by way of being designated by words (*nama-paññatti*) and conceptualized by mind (*attha-paññatti*).³⁹ In other words, they are all objects of conceptual thought. On the other hand, *paramattha* means that which is ultimate, that which is not further resolvable. The reference is to the *dhammas*, the ultimate data of existence. Accordingly, *sammuti* and *paramattha* are not on par. The former is conceptual (*kappanā-siddha*) and the latter, objectively real (*bhāva-siddha*). Although the latter can be designated and conceptualized by mind, it exists without being designated and conceptualized. On the other hand, the very existence of the latter depends on being designated and conceptualized.⁴⁰ In contrast *sammuti-sacca* and *paramattha-sacca* are on par. For as two ways of explaining what is true they are on par. The one is not superior or inferior to the other. No preferential value-judgement is introduced here.

As far as this situation is concerned, the Theravada position is very faithful to the distinction drawn in the *Anguttaranikāya* between the two ways of presenting the *dhamma*, i.e. the distinction drawn between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*, to which we have already drawn attention. All that is emphasized is that the two kinds of statement should attention. For, as we saw earlier, no preferential judgement is made between not be confused. This precisely is the situation with the Theravada version of double truth.

This situation does also remind us of the particular context in which the Four Noble Truths should be understood. Although the Four Noble Truths represent four different facts, no preferential value judgement is introduced in respect of them. As four statements or propositions, they are all co-ordinate. One particular truth is not held out as superior or inferior to another. That is precisely why they are all introduced as Noble Truths (*Ariya-saccāni*). All are equally noble (*ariya*), and all are equally true (*sacca*). But this does

not mean that ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*) and ‘cessation of suffering’ (*dukkha-nirodha*) are on a par. They represent two diametrically opposite situations. However, as two propositions or as two statements of truth they are certainly co-ordinate, they are on a par.

Thus, we see that there is one important feature that is common to the Theravada version of double truth, on the one hand and the distinction drawn between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*, and the formulation of the Four Noble Truths, on the other. This common feature is that none of them introduces a preferential value judgement in respect of each of them.

On the other hand, to the best of our knowledge, in all other schools of Buddhist thought belonging to both the so-called ‘Hīnayāna’ and ‘Mahāyāna’ traditions the *paramārtha satya* is considered superior to *samvrti satya*. This becomes all the more obvious by the use of the term *samvrti* to express the conventional or relative truth. As noted earlier, *samvrti* means that which covers, hides, or conceals the true nature of reality. If *samvrti* means that which conceals, it is clearly implied that *paramārtha* is that which reveals the true nature of reality. Thus, the very use of the term *samvrti* to express one of the truths shows that that particular truth is less truthful and therefore inferior to what is called *paramārtha-satya*, the absolute truth.

Another interesting conclusion that to which the foregoing observations lead is that as far as the Theravada is concerned, the distinction between *sammuti-sacca* and *paramattha-sacca* does not refer to two kinds of truth as such, but to two ways of presenting what is true. Although they are formally introduced as two truths, they are explained as two modes of expressing what is true. They do not represent two degrees of truth, of which one is superior or inferior to the other. Nor do they represent two parallel truths. This explains why the two terms *kathā* (speech) and *desanā* (discourse) are sometimes used when referring to the two kinds of truth.⁴¹ In this respect, too, the distinction made between *sammuti* and *paramattha*

exactly corresponds to the distinction drawn in the early scriptures between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*.

This does also provide us with a clear clue as to how we should understand the statement in the Pali commentaries, that the teachings in the Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka correspond respectively to conventional teaching (*vohāra-desanā*) and absolute teaching (*paramattha-desanā*). The Sutta Piṭaka is said to contain teachings mostly based on conventional terms (*vohāra-desanā*), because therein the Blessed One, who is skilful in the use of conventions, has taught the doctrines with a preponderance of conventional terms. In contrast, the Abhidhamma Piṭaka is said to contain teachings mostly based on *paramattha-desanā* because therein the Blessed One, who is skilful in the use of absolute terms, has taught the doctrine with a preponderance of absolute terms.⁴² This does not mean, as some are inclined to think, that the teachings in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka represent a higher set of doctrines. The distinction drawn should be understood in the same way as that between the two kinds of truth. Understood in that way, it does not, in any way, refer to two kinds of doctrines of which one kind is higher than the other. All that it does is to bring into focus two different ways of presenting the same set of doctrines. In the Sutta Piṭaka more use is made of conventional terms in ordinary parlance, whereas in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka more use is made of specific, technical terms which directly refer to the ultimate categories of empirical existence. It is a question pertaining to method and not content. Thus what is intended to show by the description of the Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka as *sammuti-desanā* and *paramattha-desanā* respectively is that they represent two different ways of presenting the same doctrine.

Although the *sammuti-sacca* is quite different from the *paramattha-sacca*, both share in common one important characteristic. This refers to the fact that not only *sammuti-sacca* but *paramattha-sacca* as well are expressed through paññatti. This is the significance of the commentarial statement: ‘The ultimately real is expressed (communicated) without going

beyond *paññatti*' (*Paññattim anatikkamma paramattho pakāsito*).⁴³ This reminds us of a similar statement in the Madhyamaka: 'The absolute is not taught without resorting to the conventional' (*Vyavahāram anāsrtya paramārtho na deśyate*).⁴⁴ If *paramārtha* is the goal (*upeya-bhūta*), *vyavahāra* is the means (*upāya-bhūta*).⁴⁵ Both statements refer to the invariable association between the two truths and the symbolic medium of language. It is of course true that, as we have noted, *paññatti* and *paramattha* are mutually exclusive. But not so are *paññatti* and *paramattha-sacca*. For *paramattha* is not the same as *paramattha-sacca*. The difference can be stated as follows: *Paramattha* denotes what is ultimately real, the category of the real existents. On the other hand, when a particular situation, is explained by resorting to the vocabulary of the real existents, i.e. the terms expressive of the ultimate constituents of existence (*dhamma*), it is called *paramattha-sacca*. Thus although the category of the real is not a product of the mind's interpretative and synthesizing function, nevertheless it cannot be explained without the medium of *paññatti*, which is a product of the mind's interpretative and synthesizing function.

¹ Aṅguttaranikāya (= A.), PTS Vol. II p. 60.

² Ibid. loc.cit.

³ Aṅguttaranikāya Aṅguttarakāṇḍa (=AA.), PTS Vol. II, p. 118.

⁴ Bodhicaryāvatāra-pañjikā (=BAP.). *Bibliotheca Indica*, Calcutta, 1904-1914, p.227.

⁵ See Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, New Haven & London, 1952, s.v. nīrārtha.

⁶ Dīghanikāya (=D.) PTS Vol. III, p. 226.

⁷ See Y. Karunadasa, *The Dhamma Theory*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1993.

⁸ See below, pp. 4-5

⁹ Saṃyuttanikāya (= S.), PTS Vol. III, p.52.

¹⁰ Cf. Suttanipāta (= Sn.), PTS, verse 68

¹¹ Kathāvatthu, PTS. cf. Puggalakkathā

¹² Ibid. loc. cit.

¹³ See Abhidhammatthavikāsinī (= Abhv.), ed. Ven. A.P. Buddhadatta, Colombo, 1960, pp.346 ff.

¹⁴ Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā (= VsmT.), ed. Ven. M. Dhammananda, Clombo, 1928. pp. 262 ff.

¹⁵ Path of Purification (tr. Visuddhimagga), Ven. Nanamoli, 1963, p.342.

¹⁶ Ibid. loc. cit.

¹⁷ Abhidhammatthavikāsinī (= Abhv.), ed. Ven. A.P. Buddhadatta Mahathera, Colombo, 1960, pp. 232 ff.

¹⁸ The only two exceptions seem to be the Simhala sannes to Visuddhimagga and Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, where we get *saṃvrti* in stead of *sammuti*.

¹⁹ Cf. the Suttanipāta (897) gāthā sentence: *yā kāc' imā sammutiyā puthujjā sabbā va eṭā na upeti vidvā* and its corresponding version in *Bodhisattvabhūmi*: *ya | kaścana saṃvrtayo hi loke sarvā hi tā muni nopaiti*, ed. U.Wogihara, Tokyo, 1930-36, p. 48.

²⁰ *Duṅḍubhi saccāni akkhāsi sambuddho vadatam varo Sammutim paramatthaṇ ca tatiyam nūpalabbhati* – AA. Vol I, p.54; KvuA. P. 34; DA. Vol.I, pp. 251-52; SA, Vol. II, p.77.

²¹ *Satya ime duvi lokavidūnam*

Diṣṭa svayam asrunitva paresam

Samvrti ya ca tatha paramārtho

Satyū na sidhyati kim ca trṭīyū – quoted in RAP. p. 171.

²² See AA. Vol. I, p.54; KvuA. P. 34; DA. p.251; SA. Vol.II, p.77.

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- ²² Abhidharmakoṣa-bhāṣya(= AKb.), Ch. VI, pp. 139 ff.
- ²³ Abhidharmakoṣa-vyākhyā (AKb. Vy.), ed. U. Wogihara, Tokyo, 1932-36, p. 161
- ²⁴ Ibid. pp. 161 ff.
- ²⁵ De La Vallee Poussin, 'Les Deux, Les Quatre, Les Trois Verites, Melanges chinois et bouddhique, Vol. V, 1936-37, p. 174.
- ²⁶ Ibid. loc. cit. pp. 171 ff.
- ²⁷ K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1963, p. 52.
- ²⁸ AA. Vol. I, pp.54-55, DA., Vol. I pp. 251-52; SA., Vol. II p.77
- ²⁹ DA, Vol. I p. 251
- ³⁰ Ven. Ledi Sadaw, 'Some Points in Buddhist Doctrine', *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 1914, pp. 115-163
- ³¹ K.N.Jayatilleke, op. cit. loc. cit.
- ³² SA. Vol. I, p. 51
- ³³ KvuA. p. 103
- ³⁴ VsmT. p. 346; KvuA. p. 103: Atthi puggalo ti vacana-mattato abhiniveso na kātabbo
- ³⁵ SA. Vol. I. p.51
- ³⁶ Cf. MA Vol. I, p. 125: Tasmā vohāra-kusalassa lokanāthassa satthuno
Sammutim voharantassa musāvādo na jāyati
- ³⁷ DA. Vol. I, p. 351.
- ³⁸ Abhidhammāvatāra (= Abhvt.), Buddhadatta's Manuals I, PTS 1915, p. 88.
- ³⁹ See Saccasamkhepa (=SS.), *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 1917-19, verses 367. ff.; Paramatthavinicchaya (= PV.), ed. Ven. A. Devananda Thera, Colombo, 1926 verses 1062 ff.; Nāmarūpapariccheda (= NRP.), *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 1913-14, verses 847 ff.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. loc.cit.
- ⁴¹ See e.g. AA, Vol. I, p. 54; DA. Vol. I p. 251; Abhvk p. 324
- ⁴² Cf. Suttapiṭakam vohārakusalena Bhagavatā vohārabāhullato desitattā vohāradesanā; abhidhammapiṭakam paramatthakusalena paramatthabāhullato desitattā paramatthadesanā ti vuccati (Dhammasaṅgani Aṭṭhakathā, PTS. p.32).
- ⁴³ Mohavicchedanī (=MV), PTS, 1961 p. 108; PugA, p. 7
- ⁴⁴ Mūlamadhyamakakārika, ed. Ven. Sasanaratana Mahathera, Colombo, 1963 p.159.
- ⁴⁵ BAP. P. 179.