

The use of Upamā as a partial theory of knowledge in early Buddhism

Ven.Dapane Chandaratana¹

The etymological combination of prefix 'upa' and root 'ma' makes the origination of words upama and upamana which means simile, comparison, analogy etc. The Pali English dictionary composed by T.W Rhys Davids and William Stede has translated the word upama as likeness, simile, parable and example. The upamana is translated as comparison. Rupasiddhi mentioned that upamana means resemblance (sādissē upamanā upama). Thus comparison of object or a thing to another object or thing is generally known as upama or upamana. It is true to say, upamana helps us to realize, a thing that is difficult to be realized only by mere explanation. That is why many philosophers have used similes to explain their philosophical matters. Nyaya, Vedanta and Mimamsa schools of philosophy have accepted upamana as an independent theory of knowledge.

Tarkasangraha dipika explains that upamana is something that which causes to gain resemblance knowledge (Upamiti Karanamupamānam). Ven. Dinnaga mentioned in Nyayavartika that upamana is included in perception. Vaisesika showed that upamana contains in Anumana. Thus different philosophers have different notions regarding acceptance of upamana as theory of knowledge. Early Buddhism has employed upamana (comparison) to make clear the sense (upamā.....kata atthassa viññapanāya - M.I.185) and Buddhism emphasizes that some intelligent people understand the meaning of what is said by means of a simile (upamāya pi idha ekacce viññu purisā bhāsītassa attam jananti- A IV 163) But there is no evidence to prove that whether Buddha has accepted or rejected upamana as direct personal theory of knowledge. Nevertheless Buddha has employed so many times upamana as the way of explaining his deep philosophical matters. For example in Suttanipata the Buddha compares the extinction of Enlighten One to going out of fire of oil lamp (Nibbanti dhira yatayam padipo) Nibbana is above of our general knowledge. It cannot be understood without attaining it, But above example helps to get understanding, at least the nature of one who attains to Nibbana, In this context upamana conduces to get partial knowledge about the nature of Enlighten One .

In Dhammapada Buddha used upama as the method of understanding the criteria of the good and bad. Here the Buddha said “all the beings fear punishment and death, therefore having compared oneself, one should refrain from doing bad actions” (attānam upamam katva nahaneyya naghataye). This is one of clear examples that Buddha has used upama as theory of knowledge. Generally it is accepted that there are only two types of theories of knowledge in Buddhism as perception (pratyaksha) and inference (anumana). But considering all factors my suggestion here is that early Buddhism employed upamana (comparison) as a partial theory of knowledge.

Key words- Upamana, Theory of knowledge, partial knowledge

¹ Department of Buddhist Studies, Bhiksu University, Sri Lanka. dapanechandima@gmail.com