

THE BUDDHIST THEORY OF DOUBLE TRUTH

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The distinction between two kinds of truth, corresponding to two levels of reality, is recognized by almost all schools of Buddhist thought. It is also assumed that this distinction is maintained, at least implicitly, in the early Buddhist scriptures themselves. Whether such a situation is true of early Buddhism, too, and, if not, what doctrinal developments necessitated a theory of double truth, to be held in common by a number of Buddhist schools irrespective of their metaphysical differences, is a matter that merits examination.

It must, however, be stated at the very outset that as far as the Nikāya/Āgama literature is concerned, there is no positive evidence to show that the Buddhist teachings contained therein are based on a theory of two kinds of truth, as relative and absolute. Whether such a dichotomy is implicitly assumed in the formulation of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) is a matter that needs investigation. It is well known that what this four-fold formulation seeks to explain is man's present predicament (pathological), the causes thereof (diagnostical), deliverance therefrom (ideal) and the path that leads to its realization (prescriptive). That this formulation does not rest on a theory of degrees of truth is fairly certain. For what it brings into relief is not the dichotomy between two levels of truth, but the logical sequence between four facts. As such, taken as four propositions, they do not lend themselves to be interpreted on a hierarchical basis. For, if the first refers to the human state of suffering, the second seeks to explain its origination; likewise, if the third refers to the ideal state of happiness, the fourth shows the way to its realization. This is not to overlook the fact that the four truths in combination imply two levels of reality, the *samsāric* plane of existence and the Nirvānic state where the former is brought to an end. However, this distinction between two levels of reality does not, in any way, impart to the four truths a qualitative distinction as four statements of truth. Taken as four propositions they are co-ordinate. That is precisely why all the four are introduced as Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*)¹ Thus although the Four Noble Truths in combination represent two levels of reality, their formulation as four propositions is not based on the distinction between two levels of truth.

However, the subsequent theory of double truth is not completely dissociated from the early Buddhist teachings, for the antecedent doctrinal trends that led to its formulation can be traced to the early Buddhist scriptures themselves. One such instance is the distinction drawn in the *Anguttaranikāya* between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*.² The former refers to those statements which have

1. See e. g. *Dighanikāya* (-D.), PTS., London, 1890-1911, Vol. I, p. 189; Vol. II, p. 90; Vol. III, p. 277; *Majjhimanikāya* (-M.), PTS., London, 1948-1951, Vol. I, pp. 62, 184; Vol. III, p. 248; *Samyuttanikāya* (-S.), PTS., London, 1884-1904, Vol. V, p. 415

2. *Anguttaranikāya* (-A.), PTS., London, 1885-1900, Vol. II, p. 60