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Neyy'attha Nīt'attha Sutta

The Discourse on Direct and Indirect Meanings | A 2.3.5+6

Theme: Two types of religious language

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003; rev 2010

1 Two levels of meaning

1.1 Even in our daily conversations and writings, we speak on two levels of language. Mostly, we tend to speak on a worldly (*lokiya*) or conventional (*sammuti*) level, that is, we communicate in images, similes, hyperboles, exaggerations, even untruths. But occasionally, especially on some technical level (such as scientific, medical, technical, legal, and religious levels), we try to be more accurate and specific in our communications.

In studying and speaking the Dharma, we especially need to be aware of the *conventional* (or worldly or cultural) level and the ultimate (*param'attha*) or spiritual or Dharma) level of teaching. The conventional language is only useful and wholesome when they point, even remotely, to the true Dharma. And at the proper time, this reference should be clarified to the follower or practitioner. The point is that the spiritual should in due course transcend the worldly and cultural.

1.2 The Neyy'attha Nīt'attha Sutta (A 2.3.5-6) records an important reminder by the Buddha on how we should approach every sutta and text, that is, we must carefully consider whether the language is *conventional* (based on everyday language describing causes and conditions) or *ultimate* (that is, Dharma language, pointing to the fact that things have no intrinsic nature or abiding essence).

Those suttas or teachings that tell stories, describe ritual acts, or that talk of “beings,” “gods,” etc, need to have their meaning drawn out (*neyy'attha*), as they do not directly refer to true reality. They use language and words in the form of a story or images to talk *about* true reality. Their meaning is indirect. They are *provisional* (*pariyāya*) teachings, unlike say some Abhidhamma doctrines, which are said to be *explicit* (*nippariyāyena*).¹

1.3 However, a caveat must be made here: not *all* Abhidhamma texts “have their meaning drawn out” (*nīt'attha*), that is, are explicit or direct in meaning. A late Abhidhamma work like the *Kathāvatthu* (compiled by Moggalīputta Tissa during Asoka's time), for example, is polemical, and is clearly a “provisional” work. Only where a particular Abhidhamma teaching refers directly to true reality that it is said to be “drawn out” or explicit.²

2 Examples of provisional teachings

2.1 Certain passages in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and related texts, for example, refer to a post-Buddha non-Buddhist situation, reminiscent of *strategic placement or geomancy*.³ It is very important to understand here that the Buddha does *not* advocate geomancy, but that the Dīgha Nikāya narrators are simply relating to us a belief and practice of the day. Let us just say here that we have a good idea how the ancient Indian Buddhists dress, but it does not mean that we need to dress just like them (or speak like them, and so on)! What we need is the liberating teaching of the Buddha.

2.2 Another example: “*offering to the devas*” is mentioned in **the Ādiya Sutta** (A 5.41),⁴ but this clearly refers to those who are already deva-worshippers,⁵ not a practice introduced by the Buddha: there is a great difference between *tolerance* and teaching those who are free from such cultural baggage. In **the**

¹ See *Pariyāya Nippariyāya*, SD 33.2 (2.1) + SD 68.2.

² On the *Abhidhamma*, see **Dhamma & Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1. For a detailed discussion, see **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (3.1.1). For a philosophical analysis of *neyy'attha* and *nīt'attha*, see Ganeri 2007b:107-115.

³ D 16,1.26-28/2:86 f @ SD 9.

⁴ A 5.41/3:45 f @ SD 2.1.

⁵ This category today helpfully refers to God-believers who are attracted to certain aspects of Buddhism, esp meditation. They can use, for example, the *Devatā'nussati* (recollection of devas) to calm and focus their minds before going on to the breath meditation.

Sāleyyaka Sutta (M 41), for example, after instructing how we can aspire to heavenly rebirth, the Buddha finally declares that the best of all is to be free from suffering and be liberated from rebirth.⁶

2.3 The Nanda,mātā Sutta (A 7.50) gives an account of dedication of merit to the deva Vessavaṇa refers to an ancient pre-Buddhist practice. It is said that the lady Nanda,mātā of Veḷukaṇṭa offers a meal to the Sangha headed by Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and dedicates the merit to Vessavaṇa, one of the four Great Celestial Kings: “Bhante, may the goodness through the merit of this giving be for the happiness of the great king Vessavaṇa!”⁷ Notice here that the dedication of merit is in fact a form of lovingkindness cultivation.⁸

3 “Dedicating merit” is a provisional teaching

In popular Buddhism, we often hear about “dedicating merit” (even “transferring” merit, which is, of course, erroneous). This is a *provisional* or “worldly” language, whose meaning has to be drawn out. The point is clear that merit is non-negotiable and non-transferable, as stated in **the Nidhi,kaṇḍa Sutta** (Khp 8): “No one else have a share in it” (*asādhāraṇam aññesam*) (Khp 8.9/7). We should ask ourselves, what is the meaning and purpose of dedicating merit.⁹

In **the Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43), the Buddha reminds us that the true purpose of being a Buddhist, that is, how to seek true happiness:

Houselord, there are these five things that are desirable, beloved and agreeable but difficult to obtain in the world. What are the five?

Long life, beauty, happiness, fame, and rebirth in heaven. Of these five things, houselord, I **do not teach that they are to be obtained through prayer** (*āyācana,hetu*) nor through wishing (*patthanā,hetu*).¹⁰ If one could obtain them through prayer or through wishing, who would not obtain them?...

For a noble disciple, houselord, who wishes to have rebirth in heaven, it is not proper that he should pray for rebirth in heaven or take delight in doing so. He should rather follow a way of life that is conducive to rebirth in heaven [such as the practice of giving, moral conduct and mental cultivation]. By following such a path, he would obtain rebirth in heaven.

(A 5.43/3:47-49 abridged)

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A 2.3.5+6

5 *Dve ’me bhikkhave tathāgataṃ abbhācikkhanti. Katame dve?
Yo ca neyy’attham suttantaṃ nī’ttho suttanto ti dīpeti,
yo ca nītattham suttantaṃ neyyattho suttanto ti dīpeti.
Ime kho bhikkhave dve tathāgataṃ abbhācikkhanti ti.*

5 Bhikshus, there are these two who misrepresent the Tathagata. What are the two?

⁶ M 41/1:285-290 @ SD 5.7.

⁷ *Yad-idam bhante dāne puññam hitam Vessavaṇassa mahārājassa sukhāya hotū ti* (A 7.50.2/4:65).

⁸ On dedication of merit, see **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177/5:269-273), SD 2.6a.

⁹ See **(Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 10.177/5:269-273), SD 2.6a.

¹⁰ “Wishing,” *patthanā*, also “desire, request, aspiration, request, prayer, vow.”

(1) Those who explain a sutta whose sense is drawn out (*nī'tattha*) as *to be drawn out* [whose sense is direct as indirect].

(2) Those who explain a sutta whose sense is to be drawn out (*neyy'attha*) as *drawn out* [whose sense is indirect as direct].

These, bhikshus, are the two who misrepresent the Tathagata.

6 *Dve'me bhikkhave tathāgataṃ nābbhācikkhanti. Katame dve?
Yo ca neyy'atthaṃ suttantaṃ neyy'attho suttanto ti dīpeti,
yo ca nī'tatthaṃ suttantaṃ nī'tattho suttanto ti dīpeti.
Ime kho bhikkhave dve tathāgataṃ nābbhācikkhantī ti.*

6 Bhikshus, there are these two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata. What are the two?

(1) Those who explain a sutta whose sense is drawn out (*nī'tattha*) as drawn out [whose sense is direct as direct].

(2) Those who explain a sutta whose sense is to be drawn out (*neyy'attha*) as to be drawn out [whose sense is indirect as indirect].

These, bhikshus, are the two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata.

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