

VOHĀRA can stand for "worldly affairs" and "transactions", or else for a "commonly used way of speech".<sup>1</sup> *Vohāra* in the sense of worldly affairs occurs, for example, in the *Potaliya Sutta*, where a householder visiting the Buddha claims to have given up all worldly affairs, *sabbe vohārā samucchinnā* (*M. I*, 360). The topic of the present entry, however, is the other sense of *vohāra* as common or worldly parlance.

Early Buddhism distinguishes between noble types of *vohāra* and their ignoble counterparts. The noble types of commonly used ways of speech, *ariyavohāra*, are statements made in accordance with what one has indeed seen, heard, experienced or come to know (*D. III*, 232; *A. II*, 246; *A. IV*, 307). Their ignoble counterparts are when statements do not accord with what one has seen, heard, experienced or come to know. Such *anariyavohāra* could either involve claiming to have seen something one has not seen etc., or else claiming to have not seen something one has seen etc.

The implications of *ariyavohāra* would thus be truthfulness and empiricism. Truthfulness in the sense that on ethical grounds early Buddhism strongly censures falsehood (see also VAC\*KAMMA). Empiricism in the sense that early Buddhist epistemology emphasizes direct observation. Several discourses criticize views proposed by some of the Buddha's contemporaries on the ground that they are not based on actual observation. An example in case is the humorous criticism voiced in the *Caṅkī Sutta* of truth claims made by Brahmins. Since these truth claims are not based on actual experience, they can be compared to a file of blind men that follow each other, with none of the men in the file knowing the proper direction (*M. II*, 170). A criticism of Jain asceticism in the *Devadaha Sutta* similarly points out the lack of any personal experience that would provide an empirical ground for maintaining that ascetic practices are the means to overcome karmic retribution for past deeds (*M. II*, 214). In considering empirical observation as a characteristic of early Buddhism it needs, however, to be kept in mind that extrasensory means of observation are considered as valid as the physical senses. Hence teachings on rebirth and karmic retribution fall within the scope of propositions made on the basis of observations, as according to early Buddhism both principles are accessible to direct and personal experience by means of developing recollection of past lives and the divine eye.

While *vohāra* should be truthful and based on actual observation, early Buddhism acknowledges that language is simply a means of communication. That is, *vohāra* is merely the outcome of perception, in the sense that a particular way of perceiving will then be expressed in speech, *vohāravepakkaṃ ... saññā vadāmi, yathāyathānaṃ saññānāti, tathā tathāvoharati 'evaṃ saññā aho sin 'ti* (*A. III*, 413).

For the purpose of communicating his discovery of the path to liberation, the Buddha had to rely on conventional terminology. A passage in the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* clarifies that the *Tathāgata* simply employs appellations, expressions, ways of speech and designations commonly used in the world without holding on to them, *loka-samaññāloka-niruttiyo lokavohārā loka paññatiyo yāhi Tathāgato voharati aparāmasaṃ* (*D. I*, 202). In a similar vein, the *Dīghanakha Sutta* indicates that even though a liberated one will employ the conventional terminology of the world, this takes place without holding on to such conventions, *yañca loke vuttam tena voharati aparāmasaṃ* (*M. I*, 500). The same detached and pragmatic stance towards words and language also underlies an injunction given in the *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta*, according to which one should not insist on using a particular terminology, but instead be willing to adopt one's mode of speech to local customs and circumstances (*M. III*, 234; see also LANGUAGE).

This pragmatic stance in regard to matters of speech is quite significant, in that the Buddha would never overstep the boundaries of common logic. In the thought world of early Buddhism, "consistency is regarded as a criterion of truth".<sup>2</sup> Thus, from an early Buddhist perspective, any lack of consistency can indeed be questioned and there is no indication that to do so should be considered a sign of one's spiritual immaturity and incapability to bear the ultimate vision conveyed by contradictory propositions. Just as in matters of ethics, in matters of language and epistemology early Buddhism did not recognize double standards.

The theory of two levels or even two types of truth is a later development that does not appear to be found in the early discourses.<sup>3</sup> The only instance that might bear some relation to this theory is a discourse in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, which distinguishes between statements that require further explanation and those

that do not require explanation, *neyyattha* and *nītattha* (A. I, 60). A more commonly used distinction in the discourses is between a succinct statement, referred to as *uddesa*, and a more detailed explanation, usually called *vibhaṅga*. The above *Aṅguttara Nikāya* discourse might simply intend the same distinction, in that certain statements are in need of a further explanation in order to be properly understood, while others have, quite literally, their meaning already drawn out. Notably, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* discourse does not treat one of these two as superior to the other, but simply indicates that a misrepresentation of the teaching occurs when one is confused with the other.

According to the commentary on the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* discourse, however, the distinction between *neyyattha* and *nītattha* involves the notion of "ultimate" truth, *paramattha* (AA. II, 118).<sup>4</sup> The commentary indicates that when the Buddha uses a term like "person", *puggala*, it should be explained that from the perspective of ultimate truth no person exists. Other commentaries then set the notion of "ultimate truth" against "common" truth, *sammuti*, concluding that the Buddha taught two levels of truth, *duve saccāni akkhāsi, sambuddho vadatam varo, sammutim paramatthañca* (MA. I, 138). This proposal is not easy to reconcile with the dictum in the *Sutta Nipāta* that there is only a single truth, *ekaṃ hi saccam, na dutiyaṃ atthi* (Sn. 884).

Applied to the theme of *vohāra*, the early Buddhist attitude towards language need not be interpreted in the light of the theory of two truths. That is, truth would not depend on the type of language used to express it. Though truth can be expressed in words, it cannot be found in words alone. Words can only act as a means to point to the path, or to the truth that has to be realized. In doing so, commonly used ways of speech can certainly be utilized. As a discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* clarifies, an *arahant* will still employ expressions such as 'I speak' or 'they speak to me', since skilfully knowing the appellations commonly used in the world, he or she would just be employing commonly used way of speech, *'ahaṃ vadāmi pi so vadeyya, 'mamaṃ vadanti pi so vadeyya, loke samaññaṃ kusalo veditvā vohāramattena so vohareyya* (S. I, 14). That is, there is nothing untrue or false in using such expressions.<sup>5</sup> The same *Saṃyutta Nikāya* discourse makes it clear that to employ such terminology should not be mistaken as a sign of a remnant of conceit still found in the mind of one who

uses such expressions, *pahīnamāssa na santi ganthā, vidhūpitā mānaganthassa sabbe ... 'ahaṃ vadāmi pi so vadeyya, 'mamaṃ vadanti pi so vadeyya*.

Moreover, the use of ultimate truth terminology, such as speaking of the four elements of earth, water, fire and air, *paṭhavī-kāyo, āpo-kāyo, tejo-kāyo* and *vāyo-kāyo*, or reckoning a person to consist only of these four elements, *cātummahābhūtikā ayaṃ puriso*, were according to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* part of the views put forth by Pakudha Kaccāyana and Ajita Kesakambalī (D. I, 56 and 55). This goes to show that the usage of 'ultimate truth' language does not guarantee that a statement is anywhere nearer the truth than a statement couched in 'I' and 'mine' language. Far from being in itself a guarantee for the truth of a proposition, 'ultimate truth' terminology can form part of what from a Buddhist perspective is an entirely wrong and mistaken view.

Hence *vohāra* as common worldly parlance can certainly be employed to express truth. Though "one might distinguish ... between the scholastic and the wayward in phraseology, ... one has to remember that as concepts they are all one. Nor should one seriously regard some concepts as absolute and inviolable categories in preference to others, and pack them up in water-tight cartons labeled '*paramattha*'".<sup>6</sup> That is, language is but "one of the means by which we gain experience of the world and share that experience with others. It is one that should not be enthroned as an ultimate reality or rejected as being meaningless".<sup>7</sup>

Hence in regard to matters of language and the use of worldly parlance, early Buddhism falls neither into the trap of reifying concepts and language, treating them as something real on their own account, nor does it go for the opposite extreme of attempting to demolish concepts altogether. Both extremes miss the middle path of making use of language and ways of speech in accordance with worldly customs, without grasping at them by either affirmation or wholesale rejection.

An example in case is the famous chariot simile, employed by the nun Vajirā to illustrate the true nature of a being. Just like the word 'chariot' stands for an assembly or parts, so too the appellation of a 'being' simply stands for the [continuity of the five] aggregates, *yathā hi aṅgasambhārā, hoti saddo 'ratho' iti, evaṃkhandesu santesu, hoti 'satto' ti sammuti* (S.

I, 135). That is, to speak of a 'chariot' does not refer to a substantial entity apart from the parts of which the chariot is composed. Yet, the term 'chariot' is certainly meaningful and there is nothing wrong or false about it. The parts of the chariot by themselves, if just spread out on the ground, do not make up a chariot. Only the functional assembly of these parts that makes it possible to drive becomes a 'chariot'. Thus the term 'chariot', or else a 'being', can perfectly well be used to express truth, provided one does not fall into the two extremes of either reifying it as a substantial entity or else believing that such concepts need to be entirely dispensed with.

As part of its pragmatic use of *vohāra* as commonly used ways of speech, early Buddhism also recognizes that there are limits to what can be expressed through the medium of spoken words. When questioned after the counterpart to *Nibbāna*, the nun Dhammadinnā made it clear that such a query goes beyond what can be given an answer, since *Nibbāna* is the final goal (*M. I, 304*). In a similar vein, when asked about the future destiny of an awakened one, according to a verse in the *Sutta Nipāta* the Buddha explained:

*Atthaṅgatassa na pamāṇam atthi,  
yena naṃ vajju taṃ tassa n' atthi,  
sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu,  
samūhatā vādapathā pi sabbe.*

"There is no measure for one who has gone out,  
That by which one could speak of him no longer  
exists,  
When all phenomena have come to an end,  
Then all pathways for speech have also come to  
an end." (*Sn. 1076*).

#### Anālayo

#### References

- 1 For an examination of these two senses in Sanskrit and Chinese texts see Bapat: "Vohāra, Vyāhāra, Vyavahāra", *Sanskrit and Indological Studies*, Delhi 1975: 27-33.
- 2 Jayatilleke: *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, Delhi 1980: 334.
- 3 Kalupahana: *The Buddha's Philosophy of Language*, Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha 1999: 81-82 explains that "the conception of two truths, the conventional and the ultimate ... in spite of the total absence of such a dichotomy in the early discourses, the interpreters ... who relied heavily on the commentaries of Buddhaghosa have continued to attribute two truths to the Buddha himself".
- 4 According to Kalupahana op.cit.: 83, "these two types of discourses have nothing to do with conventional and ultimate truths".
- 5 Thus in the thought-world of early Buddhism there seems to be little basis for the distinction drawn by Nāpatiloka: *Guide through the Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, Kandy 1983: 2 between "philosophically incorrect 'conventional' every day language (*vohāra-vacana*)" and the *Abhidhamma* which employs "terms true in the absolute sense (*paramattha-dhamma*)". In fact, even the commentary to the *Kathāvatthu* recognizes that *sammutikathā* is as true as *paramatthakathā*, *KhvA. 36*. Hence, as pointed out by Jayatilleke op. cit.: 365, the notion that the former is somehow wrong is a late development.
- 6 Nāpananda: *Concept and Reality*, Kandy 1986: 44.
- 7 Kalupahana op.cit.: IV.

**VOSSAGGA**, stands for "letting go", in the sense of relinquishing, forsaking, or renouncing. Similar to the closely related *paṭinissagga*, "giving up", (which will also be discussed in the present article), *vossagga* has a considerable scope of activity in early Buddhism. Both terms can be seen to throw into relief a central theme that underlies the path to liberation from its outset to its final completion, namely the need to quite literally "let go" of any clinging whatsoever.

*Vossagga* in a relatively mundane sense is part of a set of recommendations given in the *Siṅgālovāda Sutta*, according to which a householder should hand over authority to his wife, *issariyavossagga* (*D. III, 190*), and grant leave to his workers at the right time, *samaye vossagga* (*D. III, 191*). These practical instructions already involve at a deeper sense of *vossagga*, since in both instances what has to be let go off is control, whether this is in household affairs by handing over authority to the wife, or in labour matters by allowing the workers to take their leave. The desire to control that might render such letting go a difficult task is simply a particular prominent manifestation of clinging to a sense of 'I'. Hence even with such mundane types of *vossagga*, as in the

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