

Asanga TILAKARATNE

Emeritus Professor of Buddhist Studies
University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Knowing Reality, Wisdom and Liberation: the Universal Statements in Buddhism

ABSTRACT

Those who are familiar with the early Buddhist discourses are familiar with such universal statements as 'all constructed phenomena are impermanent,' 'all constructed phenomena are sorrowful,' 'all phenomena are no-soul,' 'whatever has the nature of arising has the nature of ceasing,' 'the phenomena have mind as their fore-runner,' etc. Although these and other similar statements occur in the context of religious practice, one cannot reduce these statements to mere utterances motivated by religious faith or zeal because, within the Buddhist religious practice, which cannot be fit into the popular picture of religious practice, these statements are meant to be serious observations the comprehension of which is claimed to lead to liberation through the dawn of wisdom. Then the question is, how are we to understand the ontological status or the factuality of these statements. The statements are presented as serious and valuable insights into the nature of world, human beings and reality. And they are attributed to the Buddha whose 'enlightenment' or the awakening is traced as the source from where these and other insights arise.

Looking from a philosophy of science point of view, we may say that all these statements are subject to what is called the problem of induction which highlights the limits of human experience (e.g. how do we know that all constructed phenomena are impermanent all the time, everywhere?). Why one has to accept these statements to be true? It is true that the Buddha made these statements. In his very first statement to the world, he articulated the essence of his teaching, the four noble truths, as arising from his awakening or understanding which is known in the Theravada tradition as 'bodhi', a term that cover a range of meanings related to understanding, comprehension, realization etc. But why would anyone accept these statements, as the history of Buddhism shows, to the extent that a good number of people opted to change their entire way of life to achieve what was promised by these teachings? Obviously here there is a vast role for human rational and intellectual capacity and for the faculty of faith which has very crucial but essentially limited role to play in the process, a condition necessary but not sufficient.

The 'truths' Buddhism refers are to be seen and experienced in one's own life. In other words, the entire edifice of liberation rests on one's own experience, conviction and understanding. 'The Dhamma has to be known by each person within one's own self' – as the well-known statement goes, notwithstanding that teaching and instruction is not without its function within the system. The Dhamma is open to be verified or falsified and to do either, one has to overcome one's skepticism, which is permitted, and put the path into practice. Ultimately, the universal statements found at the heart of the teaching of the Buddha are not innate or 'clear and distinct' ideas of the type of the traditional rationalist persuasion, but insights to the nature of reality resulting from being fully awake to it. The quest for certainty may come to an end, not necessarily because one has found the ultimate

answers to all questions motivated by curiosity but because one has reached a state in which the hitherto existed questions are no longer questions.

Key words: universal statements, awakening, wisdom, liberation, questions, answers