

The Rise of the Concept of ‘Own-Nature’ (Sabhāva) in the Paṭisambhidāmagga

Noa Ronkin (Gal)

The Buddha’s teaching, as it is recorded in the first basket of the Pali Canon, the *Sutta-piṭaka*, is presented as the path leading to the solution of the fundamental problem of human existence, namely, *dukkha*, customarily translated as ‘suffering’. The Buddha’s message contains doctrinal concepts and theoretical statements on the nature of suffering, its cause and the way to its cessation, but these are merely guidelines for making sense of Buddhist thought and do not amount to a systematic theory.

Noa Ronkin (Gal)

I. The development of the Abhidhamma

The Buddha’s teaching, as it is recorded in the first basket of the Pali Canon, the *Sutta-piṭaka*, is presented as the path leading to the solution of the fundamental problem of human existence, namely, *dukkha*, customarily translated as ‘suffering’. The Buddha’s message contains doctrinal concepts and theoretical statements on the nature of suffering, its cause and the way to its cessation, but these are merely guidelines for making sense of Buddhist thought and do not amount to a systematic theory. The attempt to supply the Buddhist mindset with such a theory was introduced later on, with the advance of the Abhidhamma (*abhidhamma* meaning a discipline whose subject matter is the *Dhamma*, the teaching, or higher/further teaching). The Abhidhamma is a doctrinal, exegetical movement that gradually developed in tandem with distinctive theoretical and practical interests. These eventually resulted in an independent branch of inquiry and literary genre documented in the third basket of the Pali Canon, the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. The Abhidhamma attempts to spell out the Buddha’s *Dhamma* fully, to describe its underlying structure in ultimate terms that apply under all circumstances; that is, to establish Buddhist thought as a comprehensive philosophy.

Seeking to explain the dynamics of sentient life in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, the Buddha taught that to understand this repetitive experience is to see reality as it truly is: not a container of entities and ‘things’, but an assemblage of interlocking physical and mental processes that arise and cease subject to multifarious conditions. Having rejected the notions of a metaphysical substance and an enduring self, he analysed human experience in terms of conceptual and physical identity (*nāma-rūpa*), in terms of the five aggregates (*khandha*), in terms of the twelve sense spheres (*āyatana*) and in terms of the eighteen elements of perception (*dhātu*) – modes of analysis that are based on a conception of phenomenal experience as a series of dynamic processes. Consider the following partial list of phenomena the Buddha discusses: greed, hatred, delusion, ignorance, grasping, craving, sense perception, becoming, aging, concentration, non-attachment, dispassion, equanimity, tranquility, trust, gladness, liberation-by-insight. Although these may all be referred

to as ‘things’ in the broadest, non-technical sense, they are not substances. Rather, they are *dhammas*, conditioned physical and mental processes. [1]

Within the Abhidhamma framework the notion of the plurality of *dhammas* becomes the basis of a complex theory of human experience. In the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* the plural form *dhammas* predominantly refers to the objects of mind-consciousness, *manoviññāṇa*, the primary cognitive operation within the process of perceptual discrimination. [2] *Dhammas* are here psychophysical occurrences, or rather acts of conceptualisation by which the mind unites and assimilates sense data and ideas to a cognitive whole that makes sense. Their character is determined by the contact between the relevant unimpaired sense organ, its respective sense object and appropriate attention on the part of the mind. These psychophysical occurrences – the product of our cognitive apparatus – constitute our experience as presented in consciousness.

Hence *dhammas* here designate the constituents of experience as taught by the Buddha, and in this sense the elements that make up one’s world. Whereas the *Nikāyas* depict the *dhamma* -occurrences as ongoing sequential processes, the Abhidhamma portrays them as psychophysical events: short-lived, interlocking complexes of phenomena that undergo recurring phases of rise and cessation and that are made up of appropriate consciousness-types (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*) and certain groups of material phenomena (*rūpa*). Later on, and clearly in the post-canonical literature, these events are construed more radically as momentary (*khaṇika*). [3] For the Abhidhammikas *dhammas* are flashes of experience that make up world-creating processes; the irreducible elements of encountered phenomena and the final items revealed when the analysis of conscious experience is pursued to its ultimate limit. In contradistinction to the *suttas*’ listings of doctrinal concepts, the Abhidhamma analysis of human experience into *dhammas* results in a systematic structure by which every topic of the Buddha’s teachings is dissected and explained in relation to all other topics. The comprehensive theory resultant from this enterprise of analysis and synthesis was fixed in the post-canonical texts and is referred to by modern scholars as ‘the *dhamma* theory’.

Throughout the Abhidhamma’s formative period Buddhist thought was subject to a gradual process of institutionalisation, schematisation and conceptual assimilation. Fundamental to this doctrinal development is the concept of *sabhāva* (Skt. *svabhāva*), which we may provisionally translate as ‘own-nature’. This concept plays a major role in the systematisation of Abhidhamma thought, is bound up with the rise of the *dhamma* theory and its ancillary doctrines of momentariness and atomism, and is regarded as that which gave an impetus to the Abhidhamma’s growing concern with ontology. To judge from the *suttas*, the term *sabhāva* was never employed by the Buddha and it is rare in the Pali Canon in general. Only in the post-canonical period does it become a standard concept, when it is extensively used in the commentarial descriptions of the *dhammas* and in the sub-commentarial exegesis. [4] The term *sabhāva*, though, does occur on various occasions in five canonical or para-canonical texts: the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Peṭakopadesa*, the *Nettipakaraṇa*, the *Milindapañha* and the *Buddhavaṇsa*. Although these texts are generally considered as late additions to the Canon, they may at least contain parts that predate the latest works of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* and that are certainly older than the main Pali commentaries. [5] By examining the meaning of the

concept of *sabhāva* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the present article shows how this transitional text sheds light on the doctrinal development of the Theravādin Abhidhamma during its formative period.

II. Some remarks on the chronology and framework of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*

Albeit included in the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is clearly a work of the Abhidhamma.^[6] Erich Frauwallner explains the absence of this treatise from the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* as due to its being the latest of the Abhidhamma works, and dates it to a time when the compilation of the Canon had essentially been completed.^[7] A conceptual mapping of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, though, suggests that at least parts of the text are earlier than the main body of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. If so then this early textual layer belongs to and may shed light on the formative period of the Abhidhamma and its doctrinal move away from the Nikāya thought-world. To settle this hypothesis we should briefly deal with the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s method.

Translated as *The Path of Discrimination*,^[8] the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is a treatise whose purpose is to expound the actual way by which one comes to discriminate and comprehend the Buddha's teachings. This type of discrimination (*paṭisambhidā*) has four aspects. The first aspect is the discrimination of *dharmas*: *dharmas* in this context refer to the principles or elements constituting human experience, such as eye, knowledge or recognition, but also to such items as the four noble truths, the five faculties and five powers, the seven factors of awakening or the eight factors of the path. These are taken in the sense of objects of thought, and testify to what Gombrich has identified as a movement from thinking *about* the Buddha's teachings to thinking *with* them, thus seeing the world through Buddhist spectacles, as it were.^[9] The second aspect is the discrimination of the *dharmas' attha*. *Attha* here signifies the *dharmas'* operation or function, for the enumerated *atthas* are those of establishment (*upaṭṭhānaṭṭho*), of investigating (*pavicayaṭṭho*), of calm (*upasamaṭṭho*), of non-distraction (*avikkhepaṭṭho*), and others, all with reference to their corresponding *dharmas*.^[10] The discrimination of *attha*, then, concerns what the *dharmas* do and how they act – an aspect fit for the process-oriented construal of the *dharmas* as dynamic occurrences. The third aspect is the discrimination of the language (*nirutti*) expressing the *dharmas* and their *atthas*, and the fourth is the discrimination of perspicuity or penetration (*paṭibhāna*). The latter is 'meta-knowledge', namely, the apprehension of instances of the first three kinds of discrimination, which are regarded as its supporting object (*ārammaṇa*) and its domain (*gocara*). Discrimination of penetration, then, is the knowledge of the differences between the various types of *dhamma*, their functions and the language in which they are articulated.^[11]

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* presents a practice based on the coupling of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*), which is made possible when the practitioner gains such fourfold discrimination of the nature of reality as taught by the Buddha. The move away from the *suttas* is evinced by the attempt to provide a more systematic and all-embracing account of this path than previously supplied by the Buddha's scattered descriptions on various occasions. To this end, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* distinguishes and discusses the prior doctrinal concepts in their manifold aspects. Commenting on this method, Frauwallner opines that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* differs from the older Abhidhamma works in that 'several "excrescences" of the "method" which are so unpleasantly obtrusive in the old Abhidharma are missing here.'^[12] May it not be the case, however, that the reason for the loose systematic structure of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is that major parts of it overlap with, or perhaps even predate, the main body of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*?

First, to judge from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s method of explaining the *dhammas*, the work is considerably prior to the Aṭṭhakathā period.^[13] In the commentaries the method of explaining the *dhammas* is based on a fourfold scheme of stating the distinguishing characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*), manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*), immediate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*) and function (*rasa* in a special technical sense) peculiar to each *dhamma*. Concentration (*samādhi*), for example, which is equated with one-pointedness of mind, is assigned the characteristic of non-scattering or non-distraction, the function of combining co-nascent *dhammas*, the manifestation of calm or knowledge and being the immediate cause of happiness.^[14] Thus, each *dhamma* is defined by means of a particular characteristic peculiar to itself, in addition to the *ti-saṅkhata-lakkhaṇa* shared by all conditioned phenomena, namely, *anicca, dukkha* and *anattā*.

In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, though, the method of explaining the *dhammas* consists in stating their *atthas*, following the second of the four discriminations.^[15] The *lakkhaṇas* of the *dhammas* are, indeed, brought forward, yet they do not refer to the actuality of these *dhammas* as entities of any sort, nor to particular, distinguishing features peculiar to each and every *dhamma*. Rather, they signify the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of the *dhammas* in their totality, as well as the rise, fall and change which they all have in common. For instance, the term *lakkhaṇa* is repeatedly employed throughout Chapter Six of Treatise I in the first division of the text, which deals with the knowledge of the rise and fall (*udaya-bbaya-ñāṇa*) of *dhammas*. There it is stated of each of the five *khandhas*, which are qualified as presently-arisen (*paccuppanna*) and as born (*jāta*), that the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of its generation is rise whereas the characteristic of its change is fall.^[16] Further on, in Treatise XII of the second division, which concerns the four noble truths, we also find an extensive usage of the term *lakkhaṇa*. It is there stated that the four truths have two *lakkhaṇas*: the conditioned (*saṅkhata*) and the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). The conditioned are, in their turn, qualified by the marks of rise (*uppāda*), fall (*vaya*) and change of what is present (*thitassa aññathatta*). In the case of the unconditioned it is said that no such marks are discerned.^[17] *Lakkhaṇas* as the *dhammas*' characteristics are but concepts referring to the common features of the conditioned *dhammas* in their totality rather than to the individuality or actual existence of any *givaṇdhamma*. The idea of *lakkhaṇa* thus falls short of being either an epistemological determinant

ascertaining the discernibility of a *dhamma*'s particular nature or an ontological determinant attesting to a *dhamma*'s existential status.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is not of one piece and is probably not all of the same date. Like the other canonical Abhidhamma works, it is likely to have grown by expansion of its *mātikās* and presupposes much of the *Sutta-piṭaka* – in fact, its first part is based on the *Dasuttara-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.^[18] It seems that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* presupposes the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, for it is acquainted with the latter's analysis by 'planes' (*avacaras*) and with its first triplet (I 83–85), and occasionally quotes descriptions or definitions from it.^[19] Yet the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* generally manifests a lesser degree of systematisation in its *dhamma* categorisation compared to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and is not aware of the latter's elaborate triplet-couplet *mātikā*.^[20] It may thus be the case that the two texts originated from a common source around the same time. Warder has indeed suggested that 'a substantial part of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* may have been elaborated in the same period of the composition of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, parallel to it and using some of its contents in an earlier form.'^[21]

In support of dating the text to as early as the third century BCE, Warder adduces the text's view of the nature of insight (*abhisamaya*). The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* bespeaks the Theravādin idea that the penetration of the four noble truths in the path moments occurs as a sudden flash of intuition, a single breakthrough to knowledge (*ekābhisamaya*), rather than as separate intuitions of each truth.^[22] The idea of a spontaneous insight arose in the wake of the Sarvāstivāda schism and is propounded for the first time in the *Kathāvatthu*. This supports the impression that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* was composed during the period of the great doctrinal divisions as a summation setting out the doctrines accepted by the Theravāda, perhaps as a positive counterpart to the *Kathāvatthu*.^[23] Cousins also notes that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is certainly a work of the period of the first doctrinal split related to the Second Council of Vesālī.^[24] On the basis of all these pieces of evidence the suggestion that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* may have been composed during the period of the doctrinal divisions among the ancient schools – a period that witnessed the formation of the Abhidhamma – is more convincing than the claim that this text is the latest of the Abhidhamma works.

Nevertheless, while this suggestion applies mainly to the first division of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, some parts of the second division are probably later than the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*. These introduce several concepts that are not to be found in the latter, and hence the last major stage of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s composition is likely to have taken place in the early or mid second century BCE, with only minor later additions.^[25] The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is therefore a transitional text residing somewhere in between the *suttas* and the *Aṭṭhakathā*. It introduces new concepts and ideas that depart from the Nikāya outlook, while at the same time its method of explaining these concepts and ideas is not yet as crystallised as that of the commentaries, and the ideas themselves are not fully worked out, or indeed are still latent. One such concept that belongs to the textual layer posterior to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is *sabhāva*. The third and final section examines the meaning of *sabhāva* in this text and concludes with some remarks on the implication of this concept for the alleged Abhidhamma ontology.

III. What is *sabhāva* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*?

The term *sabhāva* features at the end of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s second division in Treatise XX, which deals with emptiness (*suññatā*) (pp. 177–183). The treatise opens with a Sutta-quotation style ('Thus have I heard'), describing an occasion on which *ṇanda*, referring to the supposed claim 'The world is empty' (*suñño loko ti*), asks the Buddha to explain in what way it is so. In reply, the Buddha affirms the validity of that claim on the grounds that the world 'is empty of self or of what belongs to self.'^[26] He then expounds what exactly it is that is empty of self or of what belongs to self, enumerating the six sense spheres (*saḷāyatana*) along with their appropriate sense objects, that is, the twelve *āyatana*s, adding their six respective types of consciousness that arise from the contact between the sense organs and their objects, thus forming together the eighteen *dhātus* or elements of perception. Included in the above list is also whatever feeling arises from the contact between the sense organs and their objects, whether pleasant, painful or neither.^[27] Bear in mind that the twelve *āyatana*s and the eighteen *dhātus*, along with the five *khandhas*, represent three methods of classifying the totality of *dharmas* that make up all conditioned phenomena; three modes of analysing human experience.

At this stage the Buddha lists various types of emptiness, one of which is emptiness by change (*vipariṇāmasuññatā*). To the question 'What is emptiness by change?' his reply is:

Born materiality is empty of *sabhāva* (*sabhāvena suññatā*); disappeared materiality is both changed and empty. Born feeling is empty of *sabhāva*; disappeared feeling is both changed and empty... Born apperception... Born volitions... Born consciousness... Born becoming is empty of *sabhāva*; disappeared becoming is both changed and empty. This is emptiness by change. ^[28]

Obviously the entire meaning of this excerpt depends on how the phrase *sabhāvena suññatā* is interpreted. Taking into account the context, namely, expounding the predication of the world by the term 'empty', and which *dharmas* are listed in the above *mātikā*, this extract means that the totality of human experience is devoid of an enduring substance or of anything which belongs to such a substance, because this totality is dependent on many and various conditions, and is of the nature of being subject to a continuous process of origination and dissolution. It should be noted that the passage deals with the totality of *dharmas* and with classes of them as they work together, not with each and every single *dhamma* separately. Inasmuch as the issue at stake is the *dharmas* in their totality and their being subject to constant change, it is close in spirit to the teaching of impermanence as expressed in the *Nikāyas*.^[29] There it is frequently repeated that impermanent, conditioned phenomena are of the nature of origination and decay, whereby the word employed to denote this nature is *dhamma*.^[30] In this context, then, the term *sabhāva* is interchangeable with *dhamma* in its sense of 'nature'.

This sense may be taken as roughly corresponding to the non-technical and broad meaning of *pakati*. In the Pali texts *pakati*, the Pali equivalent of the Sanskrit *prakṛti*, is not a technical philosophical term and, unlike in the Sāṅkhya-Yoga, it has a limited metaphysical bearing. *Pakati* denotes the regularity with which things normally occur in nature: the normal custom or innate predispositions of persons, the order of occurrences in the environment and that which is common to all or shared by all. For instance, *pakati* is employed with reference to the innate character – virtuous or bad – of people, to the inborn capacities of sense perception or the natural strength of the body; when a habit has become so natural that one performs it automatically and effortlessly, or when it is raining during the rainy season. In this respect the Pali usage of *pakati* is similar to the meaning of the term *dhammatā*, namely, the regular orderliness of the encountered world. The word *dhammatā* is used in the *suttas* to denote events which are natural, normal and regular, such as the flowing of water, the blowing of wind or the behaviour of a monk endowed with right view. These events should not be understood as occurring because of *dhammatā*; rather their happening is itself *dhammatā*. In the commentaries, this sense of *dhammatā* – which has no metaphysical or ontological bearing – is equated with *sabhāva* as ‘nature’ and with *niyāma* as the ‘order of things’. [31]

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, then, endorses a broad notion of *sabhāva* as an essential nature that the *dhammasshare*, but it is by no means clear that this nature necessarily defines what a *dhamma* is, or that a *dhamma* exists by virtue of this nature which it possesses. [32] Nor is the relation between *lakkhaṇa*, *sabhāva* and *dhamma* spelled out: nowhere is it stated that a *dhamma* is defined, identified or exists by its *sabhāva*; or that it is marked by a set of *lakkhaṇas* or by any single unique *lakkhaṇa*; or that a *dhamma*’s *sabhāva* is to be identified in any way with its set of *lakkhaṇas*, or yet again that the latter is possessed by or constitutes those *sabhāva* and *dhamma*. The text merely presents the Buddha as saying that things have no particular nature, *sabhāva*, in a way that parallels his saying that they have no self, *attā* – for instance, in the *Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta* at S III 66ff as later interpreted with *anattā* taken as a *bahuvrīhi*. This suggests that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s *svabhāva*. As *ātman*, too, was a brahminical term, history is more or less repeating itself. [33]

That this notion of *sabhāva* represents a shifting point between the *Sutta* and the *Aṭṭhakathā* periods and does not yet carry the technical sense attached to it in the commentaries is shown by comparing the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* with its exegesis in Mahānāma’s Commentary, the *Saddhammappakāsinī*, (6th century CE). In his commentary Mahānāma seeks to present the text as a systematic exposition of the way to arahantship. In doing so, he draws heavily on the *Visuddhimagga* and his exegesis is often laden with metaphysical implications that exceed the laconic, aphoristic account of the original text. [34] Mahānāma initially analyses the compound *sabhāva as sayatbhāvo*, or *sako bhāvo*, that is, ‘essence by itself’ or ‘essence of itself’, explaining this to mean ‘arising by itself’ (*sayam eva uppādo*) or ‘own-arising’ (*attano yeva uppādo*). Given this interpretation, to translate *bhāvo* as ‘nature’ is inappropriate, for the commentator points to the narrower and more technical sense of essence. [35] Mahānāma then turns to an explication of the coupling *sabhāvena suññaṃ*. First, he states that essence, *bhāva*, is but a figurative designation for *dhamma*,

and since each single *dhamma* does not have any other *dhamma* called ‘essence’, it is empty of essence other than itself. This, in fact, reveals a different analysis of *sabhāva*, as ‘the essence that it has of itself’ (*sakassa bhāvo*). It thus follows that every single *dhamma* has a single ‘essence-hood’ (*ekassabhāvatā*).[\[36\]](#)

In ordinary language the term ‘essence’ is often employed synonymously with ‘nature’, but there is a significant difference between the two. Essence is bound up with the notion of necessity, for it singles out what necessarily determines an individual – i.e., a distinguishable particular – as that very item, thus assuming the role of an item’s individuator. An essence has the status of a particular: it is not a property had by a certain object (whether a substance, process or event), but the latter’s definition, and hence it cannot be predicated of other members within the domain of that object. In this sense essence is detached from ontology altogether: it does not account for the existence of its possessing item – a *dhamma* in our case – but determines what this item is in distinction from any other item of that kind. *What* something is and *that* it is are two distinct issues and the latter is not necessarily implied by the former. Unlike an essence, a nature does not individuate its associated particular and may be common to many different particulars within a certain domain; its metaphysical status is that of a universal. Essence, though, may also have an ontological significance: a renowned line of thought in the history of metaphysics holds that essence is meant to account for its associated particular’s existence as an individual. Accordingly, an essence is what constitutes its possessing particular as the very item it is: it does not merely define the individuality of this particular within its domain, but is the cause of this particular’s being an actual, unified individual. This causal role, too, is not shared by a particular’s nature: the essence alone is the cause of there being an actual particular. A particular’s nature is the sum total of the concurrent attributes this particular possesses; it is neither what determines the particular’s individuality nor the cause of its existence as such.[\[37\]](#)

Mahānāma oscillates between an epistemological and ontological interpretations of *sabhāva* as essence: his initial explanation of *sabhāva* as *sayat/sako bhāvo* draws on the epistemological sense of essence as an individuator of a *dhamma*. His analysis of *sabhāva* as *sakassa bhāvo/ekassabhāvatā*, though, relies on the ontological aspect of essence as the cause of a *dhamma*’s being. The meaning suggested here is that a *dhamma* is independent of other *dharmas* for its existence; it bears its own reality all by itself.

The *sabhāva* is the cause of the *dhamma*’s actual existence and its evidence. The commentator begins by analysing *sabhāva* as *sva+bhāva*, ‘own-nature’, but eventually divides the compound into *sat+bhāva*, ‘real essence’. The latter has ontological repercussion for the *dharmas*’ existential status which the former explanation lacks.[\[38\]](#)

This exegesis over-interprets the concise indications of the original text and may give the impression that Mahānāma was here trying to accommodate the text to the intellectual milieu of his own epoch. Interestingly, he next offers an alternative elucidation of *sabhāvena suññatā* – and a preferred one, as implied by the particle *athavā* that normally introduces the preferred explanation in a commentary – namely, ‘empty through having emptiness as its individual essence’.[\[39\]](#) This interpretation is more in harmony with the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s spirit. Yet even here Mahānāma discloses the influence of his contemporary

intellectual milieu: first, he refers to ‘every single *dhamma*’ (*ekassa dhammassa*), thus attesting to the view that the emptiness of essence is a distinguishing mark unique to every single *dhamma*.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, as already noted, is concerned with the totality of *dhammas* and the universal nature they all share. Second, Mahānāma rejects the argument that the latter rendering of *sabhāvena suññat* means that the *dhammas* are completely empty, having no reality at all, by claiming that *dhammas* exist as real things, though only momentarily.^[40] The commentator refers to *dhammas* as *sat*, as real existents, whereas the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* neither ascribes to the *dhammas* any ontological status nor mentions the doctrine of momentariness.

To sum up, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* sheds light on the conceptual shift from the Nikāya worldview to the Abhidhamma’s and specifically on the origination of the concept of *sabhāva*. It contains one of the rare canonical occurrences of this term in Pali literature; indeed it may be the earliest one. Although the text anticipates the post-canonical explanation of the *dhammas* based on their *sabhāva* and other later concepts such as *lakkhaṇa orūṭitassa aññathatta*, these are indistinct and not yet endowed with their later technical meanings found in other para-canonical texts and clearly in the *Aṭṭhakathā*. If Buddhist thought eventually teased out an ontology from the concept of *sabhāva* and the *dhamma* theory – a possibility that calls for a re-assessment of what is meant by ‘ontology’ – then the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* demonstrates that this state of affairs is not attributable to the beginning of the Abhidhamma.

Wolfson College, Oxford

July 2003

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Pali texts used are the romanised editions published by the Pali Text Society (PTS).

Kv	Kathāvatthu
D	Dīgha-nikāya
Dhātuk	Dhātukathā
Dhs	Dhammasaṅgaṇi
Nett	Nettipakaraṇa
Paṭis	Paṭisambhidāmagga
Paṭis-a	Saddhammappakāsinī (Paṭisambhidāmagga commentary)
Peṭ	Peṭakopadesa

Ps	Papañcasūdanī (Majjhima-nikāya commentary)
M	Majjhima-nikāya
Mil	Milindapañha
Vin	Vinaya-piṭaka
Vibh	Vibhaṅga
Vism	Visuddhimagga
S	Saṃyutta-nikāya

Secondary Sources

Adikaram, E.W.; Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon, or “State of Buddhism in Ceylon as Revealed by the Pali Commentaries of the 5th Century A.D.”; Migoda: D.S. Puswella, 1946.

Margaret Cone; A Dictionary of Pali, Part I, A-Kh (“A Critical Pali-English Dictionary”); Oxford: PTS, 2001.
[CPED]

Cousins, L.S.; ‘Nibbāna and Abhidhamma’, Buddhist Studies Review Vol. 1 (2), 1983–84, pp. 95–109.

Cousins, L.S.; ‘The “Five Points” and the Origins of the Buddhist Schools’, in Tadeusz Skorupski (ed.), BF Vol. II; London: SOAS, University of London, 1991, pp. 27–60.

Cousins, L.S.; ‘Abhidhamma’, in J.R. Hinnells (ed.), A New Dictionary of Religions; Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995.

Fraassen, Bas C. van; ‘Essence and Existence’, American Philosophical Quarterly: Monograph Series Edited by Nicholas Rescher (no. 12); Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, pp. 1–25.

Frauwallner, Erich; Studies in Abhidhamma Literature and the Origins of Buddhist Philosophical Systems; (trans. from German by Sophie Francis Kidd), Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.

Gethin, Rupert; The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of Bodhi-Pakkhiyā Dhammā; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992a.

Gombrich, Richard F.; 'Dating the Buddha: A Red Herring Revealed', in Heinz Bechert (ed.), *The Dating of the Historical Buddha Part 2* (Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, IV, 2); Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992.

Gombrich, Richard F.; *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*; London and Atlantic High lands, N. J.: Athlone Press, 1996.

Hamilton, Sue; *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being according to Early Buddhism*; London: Luzac Oriental, 1996.

Hinüber, Oskar von; 'On the Tradition of Pali Texts in India, Ceylon and Burma', in Heinz Bechert (ed.), *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries* (Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, I), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978, pp. 48–57.

Hinüber, Oskar von; *A Handbook of Pali Literature*; Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997.

Jacobsen, Knut A.; 'Ordinary Nature: Pakati in the Pali Scripture', *Asian Philosophy* Vol. 3 (2), 1993, pp. 75–87.

Kim, Wan Doo; *The Theravādin Doctrine of Momentariness: A Survey of its Origins and Development*; An unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1999.

Lamotte, Étienne; *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Çaka Era*; (trans. from French by Sara Webb-Boin), Paris: Louvain-la-Neuve, 1976.

Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu (trans.); *The Path of Purification*; Kandy: BPS, 5th edition, 1991. [Vism trans]

Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu (trans.); *The Path of Discrimination*; Oxford: PTS, 2nd edition, Introduction by A.K. Warder, 1997. [Paṭis trans]

Norman, K.R.; *Pali Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of All the Hīnayāna Schools of Buddhism* (A History of Indian Literature Vol. VII Fasc. 2, ed. Jan Gonda); Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983.

Rahula, Walpola; 'Wrong Notions of Dhammatā', in L.S. Cousins, A. Kunst & K.R. Norman (eds.), *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*; Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974, pp. 181–191.

Rospatt, Alexander von; The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness: A Survey of the Origins and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1995.

Warder, A.K.; Indian Buddhism; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1st edition, 1970.

[Click here](#) to view all end notes