

Satipaṭṭhāna and the Evolution of the Dhamma Theory

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This essay is a response and partial critique of Rupert Gethin's valuable article, 'He who Sees Dhamma Sees Dhammas: Dhamma in Early Buddhism'¹. It is not a full analysis, but does two things: firstly, questions some of the methodology used by Gethin, and secondly considers some possible implications this may have for our understanding of the evolution of the concept of 'dhamma'.

Gethin's primary sources for early Buddhism are of course the Pali Nikāyas. He says in a footnote that '...it would seem that any account of early Buddhist thought based on the Chinese Āgamas would be essentially similar to an account based on the Pali Nikāyas. As Étienne Lamotte has observed, the doctrinal basis common to the Chinese Āgamas and Pali Nikāyas is remarkably uniform; such variations as exist affect only the mode of expression or the arrangement of topics.' While this is generally true, as we shall see, sometimes a rearrangement of topics, though seemingly innocuous, has unexpected implications. In any case, it is not really good enough to rely on a generalization like that when conducting an inquiry into a specific field or text.

For example, one of the key controversial attributes of a 'dhamma' according to the Sarvāstivādins was that dhammas exist in the past, future, and present. It has been noticed that the Sarvāstivādin Āgamas – specifically, the Saṃyukta and Madhyama preserved in Chinese translation² – frequently say that various things have existed in the past, will exist in the future, and do exist in the present. I do not know of a passage where such a formula is applied to the term 'dhamma' specifically, although it is certainly used of things that are 'dhammas', such as the four noble truths. A number of researchers, including Thich Minh Chau and Yin Shun, have concluded that such statements are sectarian, implying a nascent tendency towards the Sarvāstivādin perspective even within the Āgamas. There is, accordingly, good reason to suspect that sectarian difference on this particular question may be discerned between the Āgamas and Nikāyas, and hence it is unwise to rely on either one source for conclusions about 'early Buddhism'. In fact, Gethin's work is about 'Pali Buddhism', and it should portray itself as such.

DHAMMAS IN SATIPAṬṬHĀNA

Perhaps a more important example is in the consideration of the meaning of 'dhamma' within the fourth satipaṭṭhāna, 'contemplation of dhammas'. Almost every scholar who has studied satipaṭṭhāna has committed the unforgivable heresy of regarding 'the' Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as the be-all and end-all of satipaṭṭhāna. Here Gethin follows suit, and uses the presentation of 'dhammas' in the 'contemplation of dhammas' section of 'the' Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta to draw important conclusions for his work. He should really have known better, for a series of scholars (Warder, Schmithausen, Bronkhorst, and others) have noticed important differences in the various versions of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, including the section under consideration here.

There are a few questions about the contemplation of dhammas in satipaṭṭhāna that we can clear up immediately. The first is: has there been historical change in the text? The answer is yes. The Burmese version of the Pali canon has displaced the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M10) with the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D22). The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta no longer exists in the Burmese canon. This difference is mentioned in the PTS Pali, so stems

¹ Journal of Indian Philosophy 32: 513-542, 2004

² The Sarvāstivāda Dīrgha has been recently discovered in ancient Sanskrit manuscript, but has been little studied as yet.

from the 19th Century at least; perhaps the change was made at the Burmese so-called ‘Fifth Council’. The second question is this: has the change any sectarian agenda? Again, the answer is unequivocally, yes. As is well known, those who have presided over the revision and distribution of the Burmese version of the Pali canon are enthusiastic advocates of a meditation technique called ‘vipassanā’, which claims the (Mahā) Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as its primary source text. Clearly, the insertion of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta into the Majjhima Nikāya was intended to bolster the prestige of this school by making its text the longest in the Majjhima.

WHICH SATIPAṬṬHĀNA SUTTA?

These rather disturbing considerations make it imperative that we should clarify exactly what we are talking about when we refer to ‘the’ Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The first point to be clear about is that there are several versions of ‘the’ Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, and there is no *a priori* reason why any one should be more reliable than any other. They can be summed up as follows.

Title	School	Language	Reference
Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta	Theravāda	Pali	M 10 (except Burmese Tripitaka)
Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta	Theravāda	Pali	D 22
Smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra	Sarvāstivāda	Chinese	MA 98
Ekāyana Sūtra	Mahāsaṅghika?	Chinese	EA 12.1
Vibhaṅga	Theravāda	Pali	Chapter 7
Dharmaskandha	Sarvāstivāda	Chinese	T 1537 (p475c24)
Śāripūtrābhidharma	Dharmaguptaka	Chinese	T 1548 (p612b26-612b20)
Prajñāpāramīta Sūtra	Mahāyāna	Chinese, Tibetan, Skt	Ch 16 (pp153-5, Conze’s trans.)

Each of these contains recognizable features that enable them to be clearly recognized as a version of the ‘Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta material’. While some, such as the Prajñāpāramīta, come from later works, the satipaṭṭhāna material has clearly been ‘cut-&-pasted’ with a minimum of alteration, so there is no reason why it should not preserve genuine early features. However, the Prajñāpāramīta only treats body contemplation in detail, so for the purpose of this essay it may be left aside.

We are then left with seven sources. Here are the lists of contents of contemplation of dhammas in each version. Here we treat the Theravādin medium length Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and long Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta together, as the list of contents in dhamma-contemplation is identical, the only difference being that the long version greatly expands the description of the four noble truths.

Theravāda Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga	Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma Dharmaskandha	Dharmaguptaka Abhidharma Śāripūtrābhidharma	Theravāda (Mahā-) Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta	Sarvāstivāda Smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra	Mahāsaṅghika Ekāyana Sūtra
5 hindrances 7 awakening-factors	5 hindrances 6 sense fields 7 awakening-factors	5 hindrances 6 sense fields 7 awakening-factors 4 noble truths	5 hindrances 5 aggregates 6 sense fields 7 awakening-factors 4 noble truths	6 sense fields 5 hindrances 7 awakening-factors	(5 hindrances in intro & conc.) 7 awakening-factors 4 jhanas

Each of these contains several items under ‘contemplation of dhammas’, and these items share much in common. Clearly, the sects were talking about the same kinds of things in this context. Yet each version has its own peculiarities. There are two possible explanations. One is that there is simply some flexibility as to what this section includes. There is every reason to suppose that the Buddha in his long career taught satipaṭṭhāna from several perspectives and the traditions from the earliest times may have recorded different lists of specifics in this context, without implying that one or other was final and definitive. The alternative hypothesis is that there was one version that was the ‘real’, ‘original’ version of contemplation of dhammas, and that the other versions represent developments by the schools. While it is never possible in such cases to come to an absolute decision between these alternatives, I believe there are a number of considerations that, taken together, make it very likely that in this case the second alternative is correct, and moreover, that we can reconstruct the original form with a reasonable degree of certainty.

WHAT DOES ‘CONTEMPLATION OF DHAMMAS’ MEAN?

We should first get some idea of what is at stake. Gethin takes for granted the Theravāda Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta in presenting dhammas as including the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense fields, the seven awakening-factors, and the four noble truths. Now, in the Theravāda Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, each of the meditation practices is followed by a ‘vipassanā refrain’, which urges us to contemplate each object in terms of its ‘dhamma’ (nature) to arise and cease. Gethin connects this meaning of –dhamma as the second element of a *bahuvrīhi* compound in the sense of ‘a particular nature or quality’ with the meaning in the contemplation of dhammas. He argues that dhammas in satipaṭṭhāna cannot mean ‘teachings’, ‘practices’, ‘truths’, or ‘laws’. It can only mean ‘basic qualities, both mental and physical’. And it is on this basis that he suggests that this is the most prevalent usage in the Nikāyas, closely anticipating the similar though more technical usage in the Abhidhamma.

If my textual arguments have any force, then this conclusion is deprived of its key support (which of course does not mean it is wrong). One of Gethin’s assumptions seems to be that ‘dhammas’ in the contemplation of dhammas has essentially a uniform meaning. This is by no means necessarily the case – the term dhamma might have been chosen specifically for its ambiguity. The list of factors we are given in fact seems to fall into two rather different categories. The hindrances and awakening-factors are qualities of mind, good and bad; the aggregates, sense fields, and truths are alternative descriptions of reality. The hindrances and awakening-factors pertain to the fourth noble truth; the aggregates and sense fields pertain to the first; the truths themselves, of course, are all encompassing. Now which, if any, is more intrinsic to this context? Consider the following points.

WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF CONTEMPLATION OF DHAMMAS?

1. While all the versions differ to some degree, they all contain the hindrances and awakening-factors. Moreover, while the other items vary in their positions, these two always occur in the same sequence. There is one exception to this: the Ekāyana Sūtra has the four jhanas instead of the hindrances. But this version places the hindrances at the beginning and the end of the sutta, and I believe that this represents a later, independent development, emphasizing the importance of eradicating the hindrances as the ‘alpha and omega’ of satipaṭṭhāna practice.

2. One version, the Theravāda Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga, contains only the hindrances and awakening factors. This is in fact the simplest of all the versions in its basic specification. For example, it omits the introductory and closing questions: ‘And how does bhikkhu dwell contemplating a dhamma in the dhammas in terms of the five hindrances?’ The specification of body contemplation is similarly simple and primitive. Of course, this simplicity only applies to the basic specification stripped of the developed abhidhamma analysis.

3. The hindrances and awakening-factors are found together with satipaṭṭhāna in many places, including the Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta. But a survey of the relevant Saṃyuttas reveals that there is no close relationship between satipaṭṭhāna and the aggregates, sense fields, and truths.

4. The Samudaya Sutta (SN 47.42/SA 609) of the Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta (both Pali and Chinese) says that the origin of dhammas in satipaṭṭhāna is attention (*manasikāra*). While this could apply to the truths, it obviously cannot apply to the aggregates and sense fields. On the other hand, the Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta contains many suttas that say that unwise attention gives rise to the hindrances, and wise attention gives rise to the awakening-factors. Clearly, this is exactly what the Samudaya Sutta is implying. In case we have any doubt on this point, the commentary explains it in just this way.

This last point is really the clincher. The other considerations carry weight, though they might also be interpreted differently; but I don't see how anyone could reasonably object to the commentarial interpretation here. I can only conclude that the original specification of contemplation of dhammas was the hindrances and awakening-factors.

Notice that these fall together under the first meaning of 'dhamma' I mentioned above: good and bad qualities of mind. This is, in fact, another reason for thinking they belong together here. Another meaning of 'dhamma', however, also emerges from the manner in which these factors are treated: each is considered in terms of how it comes to arise and pass away. This implies that 'dhamma' here might also encompass the meaning of 'natural principle', the 'laws' of cause and effect. It would seem to be quite clear, then, that the other meaning of dhamma – the constituents of reality, as exemplified especially by the aggregates and sense fields – is secondary and probably a later interpolation. This leads to a number of conclusions.

THE PLACE OF THE SATIPAṬṬHĀNA SUTTA

In terms of textual interpretation, we have found that the key to this Majjhima sutta is to be found in the Saṃyutta. On the basis of other research, I believe that many, perhaps all, of the Majjhima suttas that deal with saṃyutta-style topics were originally included in the (proto) Saṃyutta and were later moved out. There are some specific textual reasons for believing this has happened in the case of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The clearest is that the basic satipaṭṭhāna formula in the Sarvāstivāda Smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra is abbreviated. The explanation for this is found in the Smṛtyupasthāna Saṃyukta of the same school. There, the formula is often abbreviated, as one could expect in a collection that has dozens of suttas repeating the same formula. But some suttas give the formula in full, and in one of these (SA 612) there is a note saying that all the suttas on satipaṭṭhāna should be spelt out in the same way. This makes perfect sense in the Saṃyukta; but in the Majjhima version there is no reason why the formula should be abridged, and no guidance as to how to expand it. This anomaly is easily explained if we assume that the Smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra originally belonged in the Saṃyukta, but was later moved and 'padded out' for inclusion in the Majjhima. At the very least, this suggests we should look in the Saṃyutta for other clues for interpreting satipaṭṭhāna. This approach has proven fruitful in other areas of satipaṭṭhāna, such as the contested meaning of the phrase '*ekāyana magga*', though I cannot go into details here. (We should note that one version is in the Ekottara (=Aṅguttara), which anyway confirms that it need not necessarily belong to the Majjhima.)

SATIPAṬṬHĀNA AND ABHIDHAMMA

In terms of doctrinal evolution, we have discovered that the original meaning of 'dhammas' in satipaṭṭhāna was good and bad qualities or principles. This later moved towards the meaning of 'elements of reality'; in other words, it tended towards the Abhidhamma meaning. The Abhidhamma connection is, in fact, quite explicit. The Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta is distinguished from its shorter Majjhima brother by the inclusion of a long explanation of the four noble truths. This explanation is derived from the Saccavibhaṅga Sutta, but the treatment of the second and third noble truths is considerably expanded. There is no exact version of this

passage in the Nikāyas, and for parallels, we must look to the Abhidhamma Vibhaṅga. There the exposition of the truths is essentially identical with that in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This makes it certain that the contemplation of dhammas in satipaṭṭhāna was, from early times, tied up with the evolving Abhidhamma conception of dhammas.

Now, to appreciate what this means we must first consider what kind of text the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta really is. Is it, as so often claimed, the most important of all discourses, the greatest of the Buddha's authentic meditation teachings, the 'heart of Buddhist meditation'? Sadly, the answer must be no. In fact, we must question whether it is an authentic discourse at all. The Dharmaguptaka version of the Dīgha, preserved in Chinese translation, has no equivalent for the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta. They certainly had a 'Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta', for as we have seen their Abhidharma preserves a version of the satipaṭṭhāna material (which is close to the Pali). The newly discovered Sarvāstivāda Dīgha also lacks a Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The absence from these two collections, of schools quite close to the Theravāda, strongly suggests that the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta is an independent Theravāda development, a compilation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta with proto-abhidhamma material. The extra material is entirely included in the contemplation of dhammas. Thus to use this text, as Gethin does, to argue for the similarity between the Nikāya and Abhidhamma usage of 'dhamma', is flawed.

THE CRITIQUE OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

In fact, our historical analysis leads us to exactly the opposite conclusion. While not denying Gethin's conclusion that the Nikāyas/Āgamas frequently use 'dhamma' to mean something like an element or aspect of reality, the usage in satipaṭṭhāna reveals an increasing tendency for this meaning to override what, in this context, is the earlier and more important meaning. This gets to the heart of what the 'dhamma-controversy' is all about. The original specification of contemplation of dhammas, according to us, was an ethical injunction: it was a practice, an ought-to-do, based on an understanding of how things work, the principles of causality. Later a more ontological emphasis emerged: a highly detailed and technical listing of what there is. This is precisely where the argument about dhammas raged in ancient India. The critics alleged that the Buddha's original injunction to seek freedom through meditation and examining one's own mind had been usurped by a nit-picking, pedantic obsession with categorizing and sorting out the details of the elements of so-called 'ultimate reality'. And, in embryonic form, this is exactly the kind of movement we have seen in the contemplation of dhammas. Here is a key passage from the Saṁdhinirmocana Sūtra, a central source work for the Yogacāra school of Mahāyāna probably composed in the Second Century CE:

'The Venerable Subhūti addressed the Blessed One and said: "World-honored One, in the world of sentient beings I know a few who state their understanding without pride, but I know innumerable, untold sentient beings who cherish their pride and state their understanding in a prideful manner. World-honored One, once I was dwelling in a grove in a forest. A large number of monks lived nearby. I saw them assemble after sunrise to discuss various issues and to propose their own understandings, each according to his insight.

"Some proposed their understanding of the aggregates, their descriptive marks, their arising, their exhaustion, their destruction, and the realization of their destruction. Other, in like fashion, proposed their understanding of the sense fields...dependent origination...sustenance...truth...realms [*dhātus*]...the stations of recollection [satipaṭṭhānas], their descriptive marks, the states they are able to control, their cultivation, their arising from a state of being non-arisen, their assured non-forgetfulness after arising, and their increase from repeated practice. [also the right efforts, etc.]...

'...Each one of them cherished their pride...and were unable to comprehend the one universal taste of the truth of ultimate meaning...'³

³ The Scripture on the Explication of the Underlying Meaning (translation of T 676 Saṁdhinirmocana Sūtra), pg. 22, John P. Keenan, Numata Center, 2000

As with many Mahāyāna sūtras, this makes little sense considered as an authentic teaching of the Buddha (because some of the terminology is clearly later and derived from the Abhidhamma), but makes complete sense if considered as a critique of the academic Buddhist scene that dominated around the time of Christ. Whether coincidence or not, the phrasing of this passage closely reflects the phrasing of the contemplation of dhammas in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. As I have shown elsewhere, the list of topics here is clearly derived from the Sarvāstivāda Saṃyukta Āgama; but the manner of phrasing may well be influenced by the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. If it is meant as a critique of the developed conception of satipaṭṭhāna as represented by the existing texts, this raises the question whether the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta may be considered a meditation text at all, or if it is really a doctrinal compilation.

THE DATE OF THE MAHĀSATIPAṬṬHĀNA SUTTA

The difficult question of dates may offer some clarification here. We have noticed that the Dīghas of the Dharmaguptakas and the Sarvāstivādins lack a Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The Dharmaguptaka schism, in particular, was relatively late; it seems that they split from the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāravāsins (or Theravādins) during the missionary period, probably under Asoka, as Mahinda and Saṅghamittā were sent to the Southeast, while Yonaka Dhammarakkhita went to the North-west and founded the Dharmaguptaka school. This suggests that substantive differences between the texts of the two schools may be post-Asokan, and in the case of the Mahāvihāravāsins, may be Sri Lankan in origin. In fact, the Sinhalese commentaries openly admit that some of the latest additions to the Dīgha were made in Sri Lanka, specifically the closing verses of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. While the details are too complex to go into here, I think there is some reason to believe that the final redaction of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta was as late as 20 BCE, when the canon was written down in the Āloka Vihāra. It was there, of course, that the Mahāvihāravāsins made the momentous decision, never since reversed, that their main emphasis would be on preservation, study, and teaching of texts, rather than the practice of their contents. Thus from the Mahāvihāravāsin's own assertion we find confirmation of the accusations leveled by such texts as the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra. And if I am correct in deducing that the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta dates from the same period and the same group of monks, it seems that here we are dealing with an essentially scholastic exposition of meditation.

DHARMASKANDHA: DHAMMAS = SAÑÑĀ + SANKHĀRA

Now it is clear that the contemplation of dhammas has been an important part of the development of the conception of 'dhamma', for ancient Buddhists as well as modern scholars. I cannot trace this in detail here, but will just mention some key points. In the early Sarvāstivāda Abhidhamma period the Dharmaskandha correlates the four satipaṭṭhānas with the five aggregates: body = form; feeling = feeling; mind = consciousness; and dhammas = perception and activities (*saññā, saṅkhārā*). It should be plain that this last equation is incongruous to say the least, if considered as a genuine description of contemplation of dhammas as found in the existing suttas. How can, say, the 'eye', or the four noble truths, be construed as perception and activities? Obviously they can't, and this suggests an early confusion as to what exactly is going on. It would seem that the correlation of the aggregates with the satipaṭṭhānas is not really intended to explain the satipaṭṭhānas, but as part of the Abhidhamma project of mapping the various teaching frameworks on top of one another.

What is odd here is that the five aggregates pertain to the first noble truth, suffering, while the satipaṭṭhānas pertain to the fourth noble truth, the path. But here the satipaṭṭhānas are being gradually subsumed under the first noble truth, that is, moving from a description of how to practice to a description of what really exists.

This definition was later adopted across the traditions, including the Theravāda, which caused a further problem. For the Theravāda, alone among the existing versions, the contemplation of dhammas itself includes the five aggregates: how then can it be said to be just two of them?

The whole situation seems odd, and we might wonder how it arose. Again, the history of the texts provides a good answer. The definition first occurs in the Dharmaskandha, which lists under dhamma-contemplation just the hindrances, sense fields, and awakening-factors. Thus it does not include the aggregates within the contemplation of dhammas, escaping at least some incongruity. The Dharmaskandha exposition is very similar to the Vibhaṅga, which has just the hindrances and awakening-factors. We may suspect that dhammas were first defined as perception and activities when the content of the section was just the hindrances and awakening-factors. While this is not obviously ‘correct’ as an interpretation, at least it is less incongruous.

A further significance of this passage in the Dharmaskandha is this: the Dharmaskandha follows each exercise in satipaṭṭhāna with a ‘vipassanā refrain’, seeing each object as impermanent, suffering, a disease, etc. We have noted that the Theravāda Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta includes a vipassanā refrain, contemplating the ‘origination-dhamma’, ‘cessation-dhamma’, etc., following each exercise. This vipassanā refrain is not found in all versions, and we conclude that it is a later insertion, formed by splicing in a passage from a different sutta in the Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta (SN 47.40, which has no Chinese counterpart). There is no vipassanā refrain in the Sarvāstivāda Smṛtyupasthāna Sūtra, and the vipassanā refrain in the Abhidhamma of the same school is clearly later, having probably been imported from the Khandha Saṃyutta. It is quite different to the vipassanā refrain in the Theravāda and cannot have come from the same source. Nevertheless, we see an increasing tendency to see satipaṭṭhāna in terms of vipassanā; this parallels the change in meaning of ‘dhamma’. As the objective, ‘what there is’ meaning of dhamma gains in importance, the sutta becomes more and more oriented towards vipassanā. (The major theme of *A History of Mindfulness* is that the primary context of satipaṭṭhāna in the Nikāyas/Āgamas is samatha rather than vipassanā.)

DHAMMAS AND BEING

Gethin wishes to counteract the famous Nagarjunian critique of the developed Abhidhamma conception of dhammas, especially in the Theravādin context, and possibly generally. He quotes the commentarial definition that dhammas are so-called because ‘they maintain (*dhārenti*) their own particular natures (*sabhāva*), or because they are maintained (*dhāriyanti*) by causal conditions’. Gethin says that this definition should be understood as a ‘direct and deliberate counter to the idea of *dhammas* as “particular natures” that are “maintained” by an underlying substance (*dharmīn*) distinct from themselves: it is not intended to define dhammas as ontologically irreducible entities.’⁴ He also says that this definition ‘is not a statement about their ontological status’.

Gethin’s position cannot be sustained in light of how the commentarial tradition itself describes *sabhāva*. Basic information on this can be gleaned most easily from Ñāṇamoli’s footnote 68, chapter 8 of the Path of Purification. The Theravāda considers both *sabhāvadhammas* and *asabhāvadhammas*. The *sabhāvadhammas* are the familiar dhammas of Theravādin theory, the mental and physical elements. In other words, the *sabhāvadhammas* exist in the ‘ultimate’ (*paramattha*) sense. The *asabhāvadhammas* include space, and especially concepts, including all objects of meditation that can produce jhana; generally, then, these equate with those things that are considered to exist only ‘conventionally’ (*sammuti*). *Sabhāva* itself is glossed with such terms as *bhavana*, *vijjānatā*, *labhamānarūpa*, and especially: ‘A dhamma’s own essence or existing essence’ (*sako vā bhāvo samāno vā bhāvo*). These terms all have an ontological import, and none of the definitions quoted by Ñāṇamoli describe *sabhāva* as merely characteristics or qualities (*nimitta*, *liṅga*, etc.).

The *sabhāvas* are frequently mentioned in meditation contexts, and sometimes this reinforces our impression that they are primarily ontological. For example, the Visuddhimagga discusses which meditation signs can be ‘extended’; that is, consciously enlarged due to the manipulative power of the yogi’s concentration. But ‘it is not possible to extend a *sabhāvadhamma*’⁵. Why might that be? In philosophical understanding of the relation between the mind and its objects, there are three basic positions. The mind exists ‘in here’ and the objects exist

⁴ Gethin, pg 534

⁵ PP 3.115

independently ‘out there’ (naïve realism); the mind is all there is and objects are an illusion (idealism); and the mind and its objects exist interdependently. In the second and third cases there would seem to be no problem in extending the object of meditation, since one is after all only altering the mode of perception. Only if the object has an independent, inherent existence ‘out there’ would it be the case that one could not extend the object. This is, of course, the basic ontological presupposition of ‘naïve’ science, that the object measured is independent of the measuring apparatus (here, the mind of the yogi). Thus, such contexts clearly seem to assume some kind of ‘naïve realism’ in their ontology.

NIBBANA AS A SABHĀVADHAMMA

There is a serious problem with the *sabhāva* theory when we come to consider the status of Nibbana. It is a *sabhāvadhamma*, that is, it really exists in the ultimate sense. In fact, Nibbana could hardly be excluded from those things that exist ‘ultimately’, for in the Suttas it is the only thing described as ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*), although there the meaning is rather ‘highest goal’; or else it is true in the sense of the ending of delusion. Be that as it may, the commentaries are in the unenviable position of putting Nibbana on essentially the same ontological footing as conditioned dhammas. The sub-commentary addresses this issue by appealing to the profundity of Nibbana, which explains nothing, merely draping the problem in a mystical shroud.

But the idea of Nibbana as *sabhāvadhamma* directly contradicts the basic definition of dhamma we started with. To repeat: dhammas are so-called because ‘they maintain (*dhārenti*) their own particular natures (*sabhāva*), or because they are maintained (*dhāriyanti*) by causal conditions’. The second part of this explanation appeals to the conditioned nature of dhammas, which of course, cannot apply to Nibbana. Thus this definition cannot be consistently applied to those things that are regarded by the commentary as *sabhāvadhammas*. The second part of the definition is dispensable and hence not intrinsic to the definition itself.

From a Nagarjunian perspective one would simply scoff and say, of course! The definition was utterly incoherent from the beginning. How can we, on the one hand, assert the individual maintenance of the *sabhāvas*, and on the other, say they are conditioned? The two notions are essentially incompatible, and the notion of *sabhāva* is irrelevant to a sufficient description of the four noble truths and dependent origination.

Gethin further supports his non-ontological interpretation of *sabhāva* by pointing out the functional definition of many dhammas in the commentaries. It is contact (*phassa*) because it contacts (*phusati*), it is will (*cetanā*) because it wills (*cetāyati*), etc. This mode of definition is, of course, derived from the Suttas, and in using it the commentaries are doing what they should: taking the Buddha’s mode of exposition and applying it in contexts not literally spelt out in the existing texts. But this does not free them from the charge of ontological essentialism; in fact, it confirms the charge. For the commentarial tradition worked out a scheme that grades the various kinds of definitions that it uses. (Unfortunately, I don’t have the exact details or references to hand). The above kind of definition, which explains a noun with a verb, is clearly stated to be provisional; the only ultimately valid definition is the definition in terms of *sabhāva*; that is, not functional, but ontological.

Thus we must accept that of the two aspects of the basic definition of a *sabhāva*, the second, being inapplicable to Nibbana, is superfluous. In fact, it was probably a later addition, tacked on to the original conception in order to escape the Nagarjunian critique, but without really understanding or addressing the problem. It was the abhidhamma schools that first placed Nibbana and conditioned dhammas (=samsara) on the same ontological footing. When Nagarjuna and followers with their ‘emptiness’ critique tended to equate both Nibbana and samsara as empty, they merely mirror the position they are critiquing.

THREE SABHĀVAS

To find an elegant approach to this question we must look outside the Theravāda. Vasubandhu with his ‘three *sabhāvas*’ has articulated a clever solution. Vasubandhu is a post-Nagarjuna Śūñātāvādin of the Yogacāra

school. Unlike your typical abhidhammika, he is actually possessed of a sense of humor, and his use of *sabhāva* after Nagarjuna is downright cheeky. Rather than dividing reality into ‘really real’ and ‘not really real’, as proposed by the abhidhammikas and refuted by Nagarjuna, he suggested a threefold division: the conceived or constructed or imagined (*parikalpita*); the interdependent (*paratantrika*); and the consummated (*pariniṣpanna*). Vasubandhu’s work is difficult and subtle, and I don’t necessarily wish to accept all of Vasubandhu’s conceptual apparatus, such as the *ālāyavijñāna*. But as I understand it, put simply the three mean something like this. The ‘conceived’ refers to the normal world of conceptually filtered experience. (This is what the abhidhammikas call ‘conventional reality’; the remaining two would both be classed by the abhidhammikas as ‘ultimate reality’.) The interdependent refers to the conditioned phenomena as experienced by the insight yogi, which are real but still tainted by ignorance and so not seen with complete clarity. And the consummated is Nibbana, or the experience of enlightenment, which is ultimately true due to the ending of ignorance. Thus there is a vital distinction preserved between Nibbana and conditioned phenomena, a distinction that is intrinsic to the conception, not tacked on as an afterthought. In his own words from the beginning of the Trisvabhāvanirdeśa:

‘That which appears is the interdependent [*paratantrika*]
“how it appears” is the conceived [*parikalpita*]
Through the former’s state of developing subject to conditions
And the latter’s being mere conception.

The constant state-of-not-being-found
of “how it appears” in that which appears
Can be known as the consummated [*pariniṣpanna*] *sabhāva*
Because of its state of non-otherness’

CONCLUSION

So in this essay I have criticized some of the methods and conclusions used by Gethin in his exposition of dhammas. Obviously, my little essay is no attempt at a comprehensive solution, just a few pointers. I do think it is counterproductive to marginalize the importance of historical evolution in Buddhist thinking. While it is true – and I think this is where Gethin is coming from – that some modern interpreters have been too rash and sweeping in their dismissal of traditional interpretations, there is nevertheless much to learn from historical analysis. Not least, we can free ourselves from the simplistic idea that there ever was a uniform interpretation of all aspects of Dhamma adhered to and consistently expounded throughout the life of a school of Buddhism.

If you talk with any Theravādin today, he will insist that there are ‘dhammas’ that exist ‘ultimately’, that are ‘really real’, as opposed to the merely conventionally existing things we take for the truth. And the program of study in most Abhidhamma courses in Theravāda countries consists precisely of memorizing, analyzing, and classifying these dhammas. There is little consideration of the philosophical problems with this approach, and no meaningful response to the Nagarjunian critique. Surely, this situation, observable today, must have arisen from somewhere: if not from the texts, that is, the commentarial abhidhamma works, then from where? While it is true that the texts do at times exhibit a degree of philosophical sophistication, for the most part they assume this rather simplistic ontology, an ontology that, we should not need reminding, cannot be traced to the Suttas.

These philosophical suppositions, inherited from the traditions and largely unexamined, underlie and inform the major schools of meditation that have emerged from this tradition. Meditators practice precisely in order to see the elements of ‘ultimate reality’: that’s all that matters. The prime source text for this approach is the ‘Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta’, which we suggest would be better called the ‘Piltown Sutta’. Is it too much to hope that the revelation that this is one of the latest and least authentic of all the texts in the Nikāyas will cause such meditation schools to question their own assumptions and methods?