

He Who Sees Dhamma Sees Dhammas: Dhamma in Early Buddhism

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS: BUDDHISM AND *DHARMA*

The basic subject of the present article is the understanding of the concept of *dharma* in early Buddhist literature – in the Nikāyas/Āgamas and the early *abhidhamma/abhidharma* texts. As it is clear that early Buddhist texts were composed in some form of Middle Indic and as my main sources will be Pali texts I shall generally use the Pali Middle Indic form *dhamma*.¹ There are three basic problems that I think need to be considered in order to present a clear account of the distinctively Buddhist understanding of *dhamma*: (1) we need to establish the range of meanings found in early Buddhist literature; (2) we need to consider the relationship between those different meanings and how they evolved; (3) we need also to consider the relationship of the distinctively Buddhist usage of *dhamma* to the usage and understanding of *dharma* more generally in Indian literature and thought, and especially in early Brahmanical writings. These problems are, of course, not entirely separable. Clearly how we map out the different early Buddhist uses and their relationship will affect how we understand the Buddhist usage in relation to the non-Buddhist usage. But equally how we map out the different early Buddhist uses and their relationship in the first place, depends in part on how we understand the Buddhist usage in relation to the non-Buddhist usage. Moreover, the complexities and subtleties of the broader Brahmanical and ‘Hindu’ usage mean that there is hardly a scholarly consensus on how best to pick up and follow the trail of the elusive spirit of *dharma* beyond the field of Buddhist literature. In the present context, then, what I should like to do is devote some space first of all to a consideration of the range of meanings *dhamma* has in early Buddhist texts, and then move on to a consideration of the evolution and development of the distinctively Buddhist usage and how that might relate to Vedic and early Brahmanical usage.

MODERN SCHOLARLY ACCOUNTS OF *DHAMMA*

As one of the basic terms of Buddhist thought *dhamma/dharma* has been the subject of a number of studies and articles over the last century or so. Mostly scholars have focused on the first problem identified above – the range of meanings found in early Buddhist literature – although they have offered some observations and even theories about the development and evolution of its usage in Buddhist thought. Less, perhaps, has been said about the relationship between the distinctively Buddhist usage and the usage in Indian thought in general. Three books devoted to the subject of Buddhist *dhamma/dharma* deserve special mention as being representative not only of the information about *dhamma/dharma* that modern scholarship has presented on the basis of the study Buddhist textual sources, but also of somewhat different approaches and emphases in considering the significance of that information. The first is the pioneering study of Magdelene and Wilhelm Geiger, *Pāli Dhamma vornehmlich in der kanonischen Literatur*, published in 1920.² This is a comprehensive philological study divided into four main sections, each of which considers a distinctive set of meanings of the term *dhamma*. The basic method is one of cataloguing and grouping the different uses and meanings and providing illustrative quotations from the Pali canonical literature. The four sets of meanings centre around ‘law’ (Gesetz), ‘teaching’ (Lehre), ‘truth’ (Wahrheit) and ‘thing’ (Ding, Sache). This last meaning of *dhamma* refers to the use of the term *dhamma* in early Buddhist texts to characterize simple mental and physical states and phenomena as *dhammas*. The Geigers regard this usage of *dhamma* as far removed from its original usage, and identify the issue of how *dhamma* comes to be used in this way as the principal question to be addressed in accounting for the development of the usage of the term in Buddhist texts.³

Three years later Stcherbatsky published his *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word ‘dharma’*.⁴ Referring to the Geigers’ achievement in having ‘drawn up a concordance of nearly every case where the word *dhamma* occurs in Pali canonical literature’, and having ‘established a great variety of meanings’, he comments that among the various meanings, ‘there is, indeed, only one that really matters, that is the specifically Buddhist technical term *dharma*.’⁵ This specifically Buddhist technical meaning of *dharma* Stcherbatsky expresses as ‘element of existence’, and he takes as a basis for its exposition not the literature of the Pali canon, but a

fourth or fifth century CE work of Buddhist systematic thought, namely Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*. Rather than seeking to consider the various meanings of *dharma/dhamma* and their relationship, Stcherbatsky focuses on just one meaning, and attempts to provide a precise philosophical account of the Buddhist conception of a *dharma* as an 'element of existence'.

Just over half a century later John Ross Carter published another book-length study: *Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations*.⁶ If the Geigers' focus was basically linguistic and philological, and Stcherbatsky's philosophical, then Carter's is more broadly religious. He begins with a survey of the account of *dharma/dhamma* given in modern scholarly studies, beginning with the work of Burnouf (1844), and taking into account writings by Spence Hardy, Childers, T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids, Oldenberg, Beckh, the Geigers, Keith, Stcherbatsky, Glasenapp, Thomas, Horner, Lamotte, and Conze, among others. He then turns his attention to the understanding of *dhamma* in specifically the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, focusing not only on the Pali canonical texts, but also on the way *dhamma* has been understood in the Pali commentaries and exegetical works, as well as in later vernacular Sinhala literature. Carter states explicitly that the 'dharma-theory' and the role of *dhammas* in Buddhist systematic thought is not his main focus;⁷ his book instead seeks to explore and bring out the potency of *dhamma* as a religious concept: it is the teaching of a *buddha* – a fully awakened being; it is a path of religious practice, an object of devotion worthy of reverence whose qualities are to be recollected and pondered by the practitioner in order to inspire faith and engender calm; it is a transcendent reality and 'salvific Truth'.

What I have said so far has already introduced some of the principal meanings of *dhamma/dharma* that modern scholarship has identified in the early Buddhist usage. In fact, while different scholarly authors might identify fewer or more meanings, give more or less emphasis to a particular aspect of the early Buddhist understanding of *dhamma*, or present the relationship between the different meanings in different ways, there is a basic consensus in the range of meanings identified. While no particular writer presents the usage of the term *dhamma* in precisely the following terms, I think this consensus can be summed up by way of six basic meanings:⁸ (1) the 'teaching' of the Buddha; (2) 'good conduct' or 'good behaviour', in general, but also more specifically the putting into practice of the good conduct prescribed by the Buddha's teaching and constituting

the Buddhist path, namely keeping ethical precepts (*sīla*), developing calm and concentration (*samatha*, *samādhi*, *jhāna*), and insight and knowledge (*vipassanā*, *paññā*, *vijjā*) through the practice of meditation; (3) the ‘truth’ realized by the practice of the Buddhist path; (4) any particular ‘nature’ or ‘quality’ that something possesses; (5) the underlying and objective ‘natural law or order’ of things which the Buddha has discerned; (6) a basic mental or physical ‘state’ or ‘thing’, a plurality of which, at least in the texts of the Abhidhamma, becomes explicitly to be conceived as in some sense constituting the ‘reality’ of the world or experience. While the order of presentation here is intended to be suggestive of a possible affinity between certain meanings, it is not intended to indicate a judgement about which meanings have priority, either in terms of normative usage or in terms of historical development. Having, with the help of the work of earlier scholars, identified and set out this range of basic meanings, what I should like to do now is to consider them more closely with specific reference to the Pali Nikāyas in order to illustrate and establish, at least provisionally, the extent to which they do indeed reflect the usage of the early texts.

Teaching

To say that *dhamma* in certain Nikāya contexts means the ‘teaching’ of the Buddha is to say that it can refer to both the content of his teaching – what he taught, the collection of instructions and doctrines taught by the Buddha – and to the ‘texts’ that contain and set out those teachings. In the Nikāya period the latter are, of course, oral compositions rather than written texts and are often conceived as comprising nine ‘parts’ (*aṅga*); but later they are referred to as consisting of the three ‘baskets’ (*piṭaka*) or collections of Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma. A clear example of this kind of usage would be the sentence: ‘a monk learns the *teaching* – the discourses, chants, analyses, verses, utterances, sayings, birth stories, marvels, and dialogues’.⁹

Good Conduct or Behaviour

A typical usage of the term *dhamma* in the broad sense of good, right or proper behaviour and conduct is in the context of the rule of kings: kings are described as ruling ‘righteously’ or ‘justly’ (*dhammena rajjaṃ kāreti*)¹⁰ or as practicing ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness’ (*dhammaṃ carati*).¹¹ More generally a person may acquire a possession ‘prop-

erly' or 'lawfully' (*dhammena*), or he may acquire it 'improperly' or 'unlawfully' (*adhhammena*).¹² And while *dhamma* is characteristically used to refer to good, right and proper behaviour, we should note that it can be used more neutrally of conduct and behaviour, thus people indulge in the 'practice' of sexual intercourse (*methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevati*).¹³

It is in the context of this use of *dhamma* in the sense of proper conduct and behaviour that we need to understand the extension of the use of the term *dhamma* to refer to the 'practices' taught by the Buddha for the benefit of gods and men:

So, monks, those *practices* that I have taught to you for the purpose of higher knowledge – having properly grasped them, you should practise them, develop them, make them mature so that the spiritual life might continue and endure long; this will be for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the sake of compassion for the world, for the benefit, good and happiness of gods and men. And what are those *practices* . . . ? Just these – the four ways of establishing mindfulness, the four right endeavours, the four bases of success, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of awakening, the noble eightfold path.¹⁴

The significant point about the use of *dhamma* in such a passage as this, is that it is clear that at least the four ways of establishing mindfulness, the four right endeavours, the four bases of success and the noble eightfold path refer to things one does or practices; they are not 'teachings' or 'texts'. Whether the five faculties, powers and factors of awakening can be so straightforwardly characterized as 'practices' perhaps needs further consideration. I shall return to this presently.

Truth

In certain contexts meanings such as 'teaching' or 'practice' seem not to fit; a meaning closer to 'truth' – the truth about the world or reality as directly realized and taught by the Buddha – seems to be required. Thus in a number of places in the Nikāyas it is described how the Buddha by means of step by step instruction (*anupubbī kathā*) leads his listeners to a vision of the truth: he talks of giving, virtuous conduct, and heaven; he reveals the danger, vanity and impurity of sense desires, and the benefit of desirelessness; and when he sees that the hearts of his listeners are ready, open and without hindrance, are inspired and confident, then he reveals the teaching of the *truth* that is special to buddhas – suffering, its arising, its cessation, the path; and at the conclusion of such step by step instruction there arises in his listeners 'the clear and spotless vision of the *truth* (*dhamma-cakkhu*)';

the listeners are now ‘ones who have seen the *truth*, gained the *truth*, known the *truth*, penetrated the *truth*, gone beyond doubt, removed their questioning, and acquired full confidence in what is taught by the Teacher without having to rely on others’.¹⁵

Taking *dhamma* as close to ‘truth’, as opposed to teaching or practice, would also seem to be appropriate in such statements as the well known ‘he who sees *dhamma* sees me, he who sees me sees *dhamma*’, or ‘he who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*, he who sees *dhamma* sees dependent arising’.¹⁶ That *dhamma* in these statements means something like ‘truth’ is reinforced by the way in which in context they are illustrated by accounts of precisely the early Buddhist understanding of the truth about the way things are: physical form, feeling, recognition, volitions, consciousness are impermanent, suffering, and not to be taken as self; the five aggregates of attachment arise dependent on factors and conditions.

Some scholars have suggested that *dhamma* in the sense of ‘truth’ becomes hypostasized as the highest metaphysical principle, equivalent to the *ātman-brahman* of the Upaniṣads, almost personified.¹⁷ Such an interpretation is, of course, controversial and certainly problematic from the point of view the interpretations of traditional Theravāda Buddhism.

Nature

In the passages referred to in the previous paragraph, the particular vision of truth that the listeners are said to have at the end of the Buddha’s instruction is described in each case in the following terms: ‘the *dhamma* of everything whose *dhamma* it is to arise, is to cease’ (*yaṃ kiñci samudaya-dhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodha-dhamman ti*). The term *dhamma* used at the end of a *bahuvrīhi* compound in this manner has to mean something like ‘nature’ or ‘characteristic quality’: ‘the *nature* of everything whose *nature* it is to arise, is to cease’. Similarly, in the ‘Discourse on Establishing Mindfulness’ (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta) a monk is instructed to practice watching the *nature* of things to arise and fall away in the case of the body, feelings, and consciousness.¹⁸ The use of *dhamma/dharma* at the end of a compound in the sense of a particular nature or quality possessed by something is a common usage in both Pali and Sanskrit and is not a specifically Buddhist usage. We shall return to this usage later.

Natural Law

Given that the truth one sees when one sees *dhamma* is that ‘the nature of everything whose nature it is to arise, is to cease’, it might seem that the truth that is *dhamma* is understood as some kind of ‘law of the universe’. A number of modern scholars and interpreters have thus suggested that *dhamma* signifies the natural law or order which the world or reality conforms to. Thus T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede in their dictionary article speak of the *dhamma* preached by the Buddha as ‘the order of the law of the universe, immanent, eternal, uncreated, not as interpreted by him only, much less invented or decreed by him, but intelligible to a mind of his range, and by him made so to mankind as bodhi: revelation, awakening’.¹⁹ Seeing *dhamma* as some form of eternal natural order or law would appear to be a more interpretative suggestion for the meaning of *dhamma* than those that we have so far considered, in that it is harder to cite passages where the translation ‘Natural Law’ or ‘Universal Law’ is clearly required by context and to be given preference over other translations. The kinds of passage referred to in order to illustrate this kind of understanding of *dhamma* are those which speak of the way things arise in dependence upon other things, or of how the mental and physical factors that make up the world (*saṃkhāra*) are all impermanent, suffering and not self, and then refer to this fact as the *dhamma-ṭṭhitatā*, the *dhamma-niyāmatā* that endures whether or not Buddhas arise in the world. Certainly these last two expressions might be translated ‘the constancy of nature’, ‘the law of nature’. And one could also suggest that the statement quoted above – ‘he who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*’ – might be rendered as ‘he who sees dependent arising sees the *law*’. Yet it does not follow from such translations that we should necessarily hypostasize *dhamma* and conceive of it as some form of ‘immanent, eternal, uncreated’ law of the universe.²⁰ Possibly these two expressions should be interpreted as the constancy and law of *dhammas*, plural, rather than *dhamma*, singular,²¹ and this brings us to the sixth sense of *dhamma*.

Mental or Physical State or Thing

We come now to the use of the term *dhamma* in a manner that is at once the most distinctively Buddhist and the hardest to offer a suitable translation for. Before considering the question of the appro-

priateness or not of particular translations, let us consider some examples of this usage.

Completely secluded from sense desires and unwholesome *dhammas*, a monk attains and remains in the joy and happiness of the first meditation.²²

A monk . . . endeavours so that bad, unwholesome *dhammas* that have not arisen, do not arise; . . . he endeavours so that bad, unwholesome *dhammas* that have arisen are abandoned; . . . he endeavours so that wholesome *dhammas* that have not arisen, arise; . . . he endeavours so that wholesome *dhammas* that have arisen, are constant, not lost, increase, grow, develop, are complete.²³

A monk . . . dwells watching *dhammas* as *dhammas* . . .²⁴

Quite clearly to understand and translate *dhammas* as teachings, truths, laws – whether of nature or otherwise – simply will not do in the above contexts; ‘practices’ just might work in the first passage, but to think of ‘practices’ as things that have ‘arisen’ or ‘not arisen’, as such a translation would demand in the second passage, must rule it out. And when we read the full exposition of what watching *dhammas* as *dhammas* involves, such a conclusion is only reinforced. A monk dwells watching *dhammas* as *dhammas* in terms of: (1) the five hindrances – sensual desire, aversion, sleepiness and tiredness, excitement and depression, doubt – knowing whether each is present in him or not, how each arises and is abandoned such that it will not arise again; (2) the five aggregates of attachment – physical form, feeling, recognition, volitional formations, consciousness – how each arises and disappears; (3) the six senses and their respective objective fields, knowing the fetters that arise dependent on the two, how these fetters arise and are abandoned such that they will not arise again; (4) the seven constituents of awakening – mindfulness, *dhamma*-investigation, vigour, joy, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity – knowing whether each is present in him or not, how each arises and is brought to full development; (5) the four noble truths, knowing what suffering is, what the arising of suffering is, what the cessation of suffering is, what the way leading to the cessation of suffering is.

Clearly if watching *dhammas* involves watching the hindrances, the aggregates, the senses and their objects, and the constituents of awakening, then *dhammas* are not teachings, practices, truths, or laws. And while it might be possible in some contexts to take the Nikāyas as presenting the ‘four noble truths’ as four doctrinal propositions – ‘suffering is the five aggregates of attachment’ – the kind of usage above challenges such a notion. Suffering, its arising, its cessation, the way

leading to its cessation are here not ‘truths’ in the sense of doctrinal propositions, but realities that have to be understood.

So what are *dhammas*? In many ways it is the usage of *dhamma* at the end of a *bahuvrīhi* compound in the sense of a particular nature or quality possessed by something that seems the best fit in the present context, only here the particular natures or qualities are not possessed by anything, they are natural qualities in their own right, which the meditating monk watches arising and disappearing, some of which he strives to stop arising, and some of which he strives to keep arising.

We can define *dhammas* in this final sense as basic qualities, both mental and physical. When we consider this particular understanding of what a *dhamma* is alongside the defining of the world or experience in its entirety (*sabbam*) in terms of the five aggregates or the twelve spheres of sense, then we can go one step further and say that *dhammas* are the basic qualities, both mental and physical, that in some sense constitute experience or reality in its entirety.²⁵ What I think is undeniable is that, whether or not one accepts this as something the Buddha himself taught, this sense and basic understanding of a *dhamma* is firmly established and imbedded in the Nikāyas. Indeed, I think it not unreasonable to suggest that it is the prevalent usage of the word *dhamma* in the Nikāyas. It is, of course, a usage that approximates to the one found in the Abhidhamma/Abhidharma, and the question of the relationship of this Nikāya usage to the more technically precise Abhidhamma/Abhidharma usage is something that I shall return to below. But before doing that I wish first to consider how the Pali commentaries approach the issue of the different senses of the word *dhamma* in the Nikāyas.

DHAMMA AND DHAMMAS IN THE PALI COMMENTARIES

Obviously the commentaries offer a rather more developed understanding of *dhamma* than that found in the Nikāyas and early Abhidhamma. Nevertheless, their understanding represents a tradition of interpretation that is still relatively close to the earlier texts, and provides us with important points of references for plotting the development of the usage of the term in early Buddhist thought. A number of scholars have paid some attention to the traditional expositions of *dhamma* presented in the Pali commentaries. The Geigers and PED, for example, both begin their accounts by citing lists of meanings for *dhamma* found in the commentaries to the *Dīgha*

Nikāya, *Dhammapada* and *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*.²⁶ But it is John Ross Carter's work that provides the fullest account of the understanding of *dhamma* found in the Pali commentaries.²⁷ Drawing on especially Carter's work, I wish to highlight what seem to me the most significant aspects of the way the early Buddhist exegetical tradition approaches the notion of *dhamma*.

Some six passages from the Pali commentaries explicitly explain that in the canonical texts the word *dhamma* can have various meanings which they then go on to list (see Table I).²⁸ The number of meanings listed ranges from 4 to 11, although each list is explicitly open ended; in aggregate 18 different possible meanings are suggested. Having listed the possible meanings, the commentaries proceed by citing illustrative passages from the canonical texts – mostly the *Nikāyas* and *Abhidhamma*. These 18 meanings can, I think, be grouped and understood by way of five principal meanings that broadly correspond to the six meanings identified above: (1) teaching or text, (2) good qualities or conduct more generally, (3) truth, (4) the natural condition of something, (5) a mental or physical quality in a technical *Abhidhamma* sense (see Table II). Let me comment briefly on these in turn.

The first meaning is straightforward: *dhamma* can mean the teaching of the Buddha and the texts that contain those teachings, defined as 'the word of the Buddha contained in the Three Baskets' (*tepiṭakaṃ buddha-vacanaṃ*).²⁹ I have grouped the next set of meanings together in that they all take *dhamma* in the sense either of the general good qualities and conduct (*guṇa*, *puñña*) promoted by Buddhist practice or are specific examples of those qualities and conduct (*samādhi*, *paññā*). I have also grouped with these an example of *dhamma* in a more general sense of practice: in the *Vinaya* *dhamma* is used to refer to the various categories of 'offence' (*āpatti*), as in 'four offences involving defeat' (*cattāro pārājikā dhammā*).³⁰ What I have listed as the third meaning of *dhamma* identified by the commentaries is again straightforward: in certain contexts *dhamma* should be taken as meaning the truth or, more specifically, the four truths, more or less in the same way that I have already outlined above. The fourth meaning of 'natural condition' is once again unproblematic in that it corresponds straightforwardly to a meaning that we have already noted: *dhamma* as the last member of a compound means the natural condition (*pakati*) possessed by something, thus to describe someone as *jāti-dhamma* or *jarā-dhamma* means that birth and old age are his 'natural condition' (*pakati*).³¹ An alternative term used by the commentaries here is *vikāra* in the sense of disposition.³²

Under the fifth heading I have grouped eight distinct meanings that all relate in various ways to the technical Abhidhamma understanding of a *dhamma* as a basic ‘mental or physical quality’. These eight meanings fall into four subsets (see Table II).

As I have suggested above, the word *dhamma* is quite clearly already used in the Nikāyas in the sense of a basic quality, both mental and physical, a plurality of which in some sense constitutes experience or reality in its entirety. A *dhamma* in the sense of one of these basic qualities may be defined in the commentaries as a ‘a particular nature’ (*sabhāva*). The canonical passage referred to for the meaning of *dhamma* in the sense of *sabhāva* is the Abhidhamma matrix of triplets (*tika-mātikā*) that is set out at the beginning of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and is used as a basis of exposition in that text, the *Vibhaṅga*, *Dhātukathā*, and *Paṭṭhāna*; it begins ‘wholesome qualities, unwholesome qualities, undetermined qualities’ (*kusalā dhammā akusalā dhammā avyākatā dhammā*).³³ I shall return to the Abhidhamma understanding of *sabhāva* below.

We next have three terms – having no essence (*nissattatā*), being lifeless (*nijjīvatā*), being empty (*suññatā*) – that are perhaps best understood as relating the understanding of *dhammas* as basic qualities to the notion of ‘not-self’ (*anattan*). As illustrative of *dhamma* in these senses, the commentaries consistently cite two passages.³⁴ The first is a section from the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* explicitly called ‘the section on emptiness’ in the text (*suññata-vāra*), which occurs after the various mental *dhammas* or qualities that arise together constituting an instance of consciousness have been set out and defined in detail. The section states simply that ‘at that time there are *dhammas*, there are aggregates, there are sense-spheres ...’³⁵ What the commentaries seem to be suggesting is that in stating this the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* emphasises that these *dhammas* constituting an instance of consciousness are nothing but evanescent and insubstantial non-entities that have no real essence or life of their own. The second passage cited by the commentaries in this context is one I have already referred to above, the passage describing the fourth way of establishing mindfulness by watching *dhammas* as *dhammas*. In other words, when the meditator watches *dhammas* as *dhammas* in the manner described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, what the commentaries are suggesting is that what he is watching is the arising and disappearance of nothing but evanescent and insubstantial non-entities that have no real essence or life of their own. This ties in with the way Buddhaghosa later alludes to a number of images and similes from the Nikāyas in order

TABLE I

Meanings	Commentary to					
	Dīgha Nikāya (Sv I 99)	Majjhima Nikāya (Ps I 17)	Dhammapada (Dhp-a I 22)	Paṭisambhidāmagga (Paṭis-a I 18)	Buddhavaṃsa (Bv-a 13)	Dhammasaṅgaṇī (As 38)
1 <i>Guṇa</i>						
Good quality	1		1	9		3
2 <i>Desanā</i>						
Teaching	2		2			
3 <i>Pariyatti</i>						
Text	3	1	3	5	1	1
4 <i>Nissatta(ī)-(-nijjiva(ī))</i>						
Without essence/life	4		4	6		4
5 <i>(Catur-)sacca(-dhamma)</i>						
(Four) truths					10	
6 <i>Samādhi</i>		2				
Concentration		3			2	
7 <i>Paṭiñā</i>						
Wisdom		4		2	3	
8 <i>Pakati</i>						
Natural condition		5			4	
9 <i>Sabhāva</i>						
Particular nature		6		1	5	

10	<i>Suññatā</i>					
	Emptiness	7				6
11	<i>Puñña</i>					
	Merit	8	3			7
12	<i>Āpatti</i>					
	Offence	9	6			8
13	<i>Ñeyya</i>					
	Object of knowledge	10				9
14	<i>Paññatti</i>					
	Concept			4		
15	<i>Vikāra</i>					
	Disposition				8	
16	<i>Paccaya</i>					
	Causal condition				10	
17	<i>Paccayuppanna</i>					
	Arisen from a causal condition				11	
18	<i>Hetu</i>					
	Cause					2

TABLE II

Teaching/text	(Good) conduct	Truths	Nature	Mental/physical quality
<i>Desanā</i>	<i>Guṇa</i>	(<i>Catu-</i>) <i>sacca</i>	<i>Pakati</i>	<i>Sabhāva</i>
Teaching	Good quality	(Four) truths	Natural condition	Particular nature
<i>Pariyatti</i>	<i>Puñña</i>		<i>Vikāra</i>	
Text	<i>Merit</i>		Disposition	
	<i>Samādhi</i>			<i>Nissatta-nijjīvatā</i>
	Concentration			Without life
	<i>Paññā</i>			<i>Suññatā</i>
	Wisdom			Emptiness
	<i>Āpatti</i>			
	Offence			<i>Paccaya</i>
				Causal condition
				<i>Paccayuppanna</i>
				Arisen from a causal condition
				<i>Hetu</i>
				Cause
				<i>Ñeyya</i>
				Object of knowledge
				<i>Paññatti</i>
				Concept

to illustrate the manner in which *dhammas* that are not lasting or solid but rather things that vanish almost as soon as they appear – like dew drops at sunrise, like a bubble on water, like a line drawn on water, like a mustard-seed placed on the point of an awl, like a flash of lightning; things that lack substance and always elude one’s grasp – like a mirage, a conjuring trick, a dream, the circle formed by a whirling fire brand, a fairy city, foam, or the trunk of a banana tree.³⁶

The third subset comprises three terms each of which brings out the manner in which a *dhamma* is understood as a causal condition itself (*hetu*, *paccaya*) and as something that has arisen as a result of causal conditions (*paccayuppanna*). Seeing *dhammas* in this way, while not perhaps explicit in the Nikāyas, is none the less certainly

implicit. Thus again the description of how the meditator is to watch *dhammas* as *dhammas* focuses in particular on the conditions which lead to the arising and abandoning of particular *dhammas*. As the commentaries put it in the context of dependent arising: nothing arises from a single cause, and all causes have multiple effects.³⁷

Finally we have two terms that focus on *dhammas* as objects of consciousness: *dhammas* are ‘things that can be known’ (*ñeyya*), and they are concepts (*paññatti*). This last meaning of *dhamma* relates to the way *dhammas* are presented in the list of the six senses – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind – and their corresponding objective fields – visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible sensations, *dhammas*.

As Geiger and Carter noted, in trying to evaluate the lists of terms offered as possible meanings of *dhamma* by such commentarial passages, we should not forget that they end with an ‘etc.’ (*ādi*) and are thus explicitly open ended. In fact, it is clear that such lists of meanings do not exhaust the commentarial and exegetical understanding of *dhamma*. There are two particular aspects of the commentarial understanding of *dhamma* that Carter has drawn attention to and which I should like to pick up on.³⁸ The first concerns the understanding of *dhamma* in terms of ‘nine transcendent *dhammas*’ (*nava lokuttara-dhammā*, *navavidha-lokuttara-dhamma*), the second is the understanding in terms of a threefold division by way of texts (*pariyatti*), practice (*paṭipatti*), and realization (*paṭivedha*) or attainment (*adhigama*).

At the beginning of his discussion of the meditation practice (*kamma-ṭṭhāna*) of recollecting *dhamma* (*dhammānussati*), Buddhaghosa makes a distinction between *dhamma* as the texts (*pariyatti*) containing the teaching of the Buddha on the one hand and transcendent *dhamma* on the other.³⁹ The latter is ninefold and comprises the four paths of stream entry, once-return, non-return, and arahatship, the four corresponding fruits, and *nibbāna* itself. Carter notes, citing some 40 examples, that the Pali commentaries frequently suggest that *dhamma* in the Nikāyas is to be understood as referring to the nine transcendent *dhammas*.⁴⁰ In the technical understanding of the commentaries, this refers to the four kinds of consciousness (*citta*) that arise as the attainment of the four ‘paths’ (*magga*), the four kinds of consciousness that arise as the attainment of the ‘fruits’ (*phala*) of those ‘paths’, and lastly *nibbāna* as the ‘unconditioned element’ (*asaṃkhata-dhātu*), ‘object’ (*ārammāṇa*) of those classes of consciousness.⁴¹ In other words transcendent *dhamma* consists of the mind that knows and sees *nibbāna* at the moment of awakening (*bodhi*), and also of what is known and seen at that moment. Such a

usage, in fact corresponds more or less to the usage of a word like ‘knowledge’ in English, which can denote both the act of knowing as well as what is known.

In several places in early Buddhist texts a list of five mental ‘waste lands’ (*ceto-khila*) is itemized and explained. The second of these consists in having doubts about *dhamma*.⁴² The commentaries take it that this means having doubts either about Buddhist texts (*pariyatti*) – that the word of the Buddha consists of 84,000 sections – or about realization (*paṭivedha*) – that the path is achieved by insight, the fruit by the path and that *nibbāna* represents the stilling of all volitional formations.⁴³ The understanding of *dhamma* as ‘realization’ relates closely to its understanding as knowledge of *nibbāna*. Elsewhere, in explanation of the expression ‘the true/good *dhamma*’ (*sad-dhamma*), this twofold understanding of *dhamma* is expanded to a threefold one: texts (*pariyatti*), practice (*paṭipatti*), attainment (*adhigama*), with ‘practice’ taken as referring to Buddhist practice in its entirety – ascetic practices, precepts, concentration, insight – and attainment to the nine transcendent *dhammas*.⁴⁴

While the technical *specificity* of the commentarial explanations of *dhamma* is often out of place in a Nikāya context, nevertheless the *general* meanings suggested by the commentaries are more or less consonant with the range of meanings offered by modern scholars. One meaning, however, that is brought out by modern scholars, but is not highlighted by the commentators is that of ‘natural law’. Nevertheless, as we have seen, some such meaning is certainly implicit in certain contexts.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BUDDHIST UNDERSTANDING OF *DHAMMA*

I noted above that the Geigers regard the usage of *dhamma* in the sense of ‘thing’ (or ‘basic quality’) as somewhat removed from its original usage, and they identify the issue of how *dhamma* comes to be used in this way as the principal question to be addressed in accounting for the development of the usage of the term in Buddhist texts. They go on to offer some brief comments on the development of this usage. They point out that the meaning of ‘thing’ is associated particularly with the plural usage, and that in this plural usage *dhammas* refers to the things that constitute the world of experience as perceived by the mind. It is in these things or ‘norms’ that the *dhamma* – the law of the world and nature consisting in the arising

and disappearance, the fleetingness and emptiness of reality – becomes manifest.⁴⁵ Thus the Geigers wish to see *dhamma* in the sense of the ‘law’ of the world – or, perhaps, ultimate ‘truth’ about reality – as basic. And the ‘things’ that constitute reality, eventually come to be designated ‘laws’ or ‘truths’ because seeing them, one sees *the Law*, *the Truth*. While I think this account certainly resonates with the early Buddhist understanding of *dhamma*, I do not think it adequately explains the semantic development of the word and I shall suggest an alternative model presently.

More recently Richard Gombrich has offered a somewhat different account.⁴⁶ Gombrich offers his account of the history of the way the word *dhamma* is used as a way of tracing the development of a Buddhist ontology. His starting point is that ‘the Dharma’ of the Buddha is both the Buddha’s account *describing* his ‘experience’ and a message *prescribing* what to do about it. The basic Buddhist understanding of *dhamma* and the basic brahmanical understanding of *dharma* are thus alike, in so far as they at once describe the nature of reality and prescribe how to act. They thus both ‘obliterate’ the fact-value distinction. Turning to the usage of *dhamma* in the plural to denote ‘noeta’, ‘phenomena’ or ‘things’ as the objects of consciousness, Gombrich finds the key to this development in meaning in the passage from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta describing the practice of watching *dhammas* as *dhammas*:

First he learns to observe physical processes in his own and other people’s bodies; then he learns to be similarly aware of feelings; then of states of mind. Finally he learns to be aware of *dhammā* (plural). This has been rendered as ‘his thoughts’. But the *dhammā* that the text spells out are in fact the teachings of the Buddha, such as the four noble truths. The meditator moves from thinking *about* those teachings to thinking *with* them: he learns (to use an anachronistic metaphor) to see the world through Buddhist spectacles. The Buddha’s teachings come to be the same as (any) objects of thought, because anything else is (for Buddhists) unthinkable. Thus the *dhammā* are the elements of reality as understood by the Buddha.

Gombrich concludes by suggesting that it is from this specific context of meditation that the usage of *dhammas* in the plural has become generalized. If I have understood him correctly Gombrich’s theory is, then, that watching (*anupassati*) *dhammas* as *dhammas* originally signified contemplating (as *anupassati* is often rendered) or thinking about the teachings of the Buddha. And because thinking about those *teachings* involves seeing the world in the Buddha’s way, what you see when you think *through* (in both senses) those *teachings* are the *teachings*, which have come to represent experience in its entirety for

the meditator. While, once again, I think the way this account ties together different senses of the word *dhamma* has genuine resonances with the early Buddhist understanding of *dhamma*, I do not think it works as an account of the *history* of the way the word *dhamma* is used – for two reasons. First, because I think taking *dhamma* in the sense of the *teaching* of the Buddha as the starting point for the history of its usage is problematic. Secondly, because, as we saw above, apart from the four truths the *dhammas* that the text spells out as objects of contemplation are *not* in fact the *teachings* of the Buddha as such; certainly the Buddha of the Nikāyas teaches *about* the hindrances, the aggregates, the senses and their objects, etc., but these things are not actual teachings; moreover if we were to understand *dhammas* here in the sense of teachings *about* the hindrances, etc., we would be left with the problem of explaining why the watching of body as body, feelings as feelings, and consciousness as consciousness is not also included here under the heading of watching *dhammas* as *dhammas*. In fact I think there is a much simpler way of approaching the development of the Buddhist usage of *dhamma* in the sense of ‘noeta’, ‘phenomena’ or ‘things’.

In order to begin to consider the question of the relationship of the various meanings of *dhamma* in early Buddhist literature, and the question of the development of the specifically Buddhist notion of a *dhamma* as a basic mental or physical quality (the Buddhist theory of *dhammas*), we need first of all to consider what notion and understanding of *dharma* Buddhist thought inherited and thus started with. This, however, must remain a problematic and even controversial issue, both because of the problems in dating particular understandings of *dharma* in relation to Buddhist developments, and because of the problems in agreeing the contours of the ‘Hindu’ understanding of *dharma*.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, I think it is possible to map out some general lines of development.

The beginnings of the Indian concept of *dharma* go back to the usage of the noun *dharman* and various verb forms derived from the root *dhṛ* in the Ṛg Veda. A well known example occurs at the close of the ‘Hymn of the Man’ (Puruṣasūkta):

With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first *ritual laws*.⁴⁸

In his discussion of the Vedic usage of *dharman* Halbfass emphasises that the plural usage is the norm, commenting that ‘only later did an essentially singular use as a “complex” or “totality of binding norms”

gain in prominence'.⁴⁹ The precise meaning of *dharman* in the Ṛg Veda is perhaps unclear. In the verse just quoted, O'Flaherty uses 'ritual laws', explaining in a note that these are 'archetypal patterns of behaviour established during this first sacrifice to serve as the model for all future sacrifices'.⁵⁰ In his study of *dharman* in the Ṛg Veda in the present volume, Joel Brereton emphasises the sense of 'foundation' – a sense which straightforwardly reflects its etymology and form – as the meaning common to the various contexts in which it is used. He translates:

With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed the sacrifice: these were its foundations.

He goes on to comment that these first 'foundations' can thus be understood as 'the model sacrifice instituted by the gods and replicated in human performance'; or, as he puts it later, 'they are the ritual precedents which the present rituals follow'. Halbfass likewise stresses the importance of the sense of the underlying root *dhr*: *dharma*s are thus things that 'support', 'uphold', 'maintain'; and referring to the work of Schayer, he characterises *dharma* in the Brāhmaṇas as 'the continuous *maintaining* of the social and cosmic order and norm which is achieved by the Aryan through the performance of his Vedic rites and traditional duties'. A.K. Warder too considers the primary sense of *dharman/dhr* in the Ṛg Veda as closely connected with the idea of maintaining.⁵¹ Whatever the precise connotations of *dharman* in its earliest usage it seems clear that among its earliest uses is the use in the plural to refer to certain *practices* – primarily sacrificial rites – as maintaining and supporting things – the cosmic and social order. The underlying assumption is, of course, that maintaining and supporting the cosmic and social order is a good thing; *dharma*s are therefore *prescribed* practices.

Another *dharman* or 'foundation' that the Ṛg Veda identifies is, suggests Brereton, the foundational authority especially of Varuṇa and Mitra; this authority consists in the commandments of Varuṇa and the alliances governed by Mitra. This sense of authority is one that Patrick Olivelle's contribution to the present volume shows being taken up in the Brāhmaṇas, where *dharma* is understood as the social order founded on the authority of especially the king. And if these are the sources for the Brahmanical and general 'Hindu' understanding of *dharma*, so too are they for the Buddhist. I take it then that the plural usage of *dhamma* is something that early Buddhism inherited from earlier pre-Buddhist usage, and that for early Buddhist thought

dhammas are in the first place the practices, the kinds of behaviour, prescribed and recommended on the authority of the Buddha. That *dhamma* subsequently comes to refer to the Buddha's teaching or, in the plural, teachings is then a straightforward development, just as the English word 'prescription' can denote both the act of prescribing and what is prescribed. Indeed, 'prescription' can also denote a piece of paper handed to one by a doctor, so we have an analogous development for the way in which *dhamma* comes to mean the texts that contain the teachings of the Buddha.

In fact all this ties in precisely with the general tendency of early Buddhist thought to appropriate brahmanical terminology and reinterpret it in its own terms: the true *brāhmaṇa*, the true *ārya*, is not someone who is born as such and performs the duties and rites – the *dharma*s – laid down in the Vedas, the real *ariya-puggala* or 'noble person' is the one who takes up the practices – the *dhammas* – recommended by the Buddha and roots out greed, hatred and delusion. Though, as Patrick Olivelle points out, again in his contribution to this volume, the relationship between the Buddhist and brahmanical understanding may be more complex: while the Buddhists take over the basics of the Vedic and brahmanical understanding of *dharma*, the manner in which the notion of *dhamma* functions as a pervasive concept of religious, philosophical and ethical discourse is perhaps characteristically Buddhist; and *dharma* is developed as the central concept of Hindu thought only subsequently as a reaction to Buddhist and especially Aśokan usage.

Be that as it may, the use of *dharman/dharma* in Vedic literature in the senses of 'foundational rituals' and 'foundational authority' is sufficient to account for the development of early Buddhist *dhamma* in its normative and prescriptive senses, but what of its descriptive sense, what of *dhamma* as the truth about the ways things are? In the course of his discussion of *dharma* in Hinduism, Halbfass comments:

Since ancient times *dharma* has also possessed a meaning which may be rendered as 'property', 'characteristic attribute', 'essential feature', or more generally as 'defining factor' or 'predicate'. Evidence of this is available since the time of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. In classical Hindu philosophy, and most clearly in the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, *dharma* functions as 'attribute' or 'property' in the broadest sense and is used to characterize anything that is inherent in, or predicable of, an identifiable substratum (*dharmin*).⁵²

In fact this usage of *dharma* in the sense of 'property' or 'characteristic attribute' would seem to derive directly from the Vedic usage of *dharman* to refer to 'the foundational *nature* of a deity', while there

are also several places in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads where *dharma* appears to be used in a sense close to ‘qualities’, ‘attributes’ or even just ‘things’.⁵³ The passage of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* that Halbfass cites (14.7.3.15) is one in which *dharman* occurs as the last member of a *bahuvrīhi* compound; the same passage is also found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: ‘This self, you see, is imperishable; it has an indestructible *nature*.’⁵⁴ The linking of the technical philosophical usage of *dharma* in the sense of an attribute belonging to an underlying substratum (*dharmin*) to its usage as the last member of a *bahuvrīhi* compound is crucial. We have already noted that this kind of usage is common in early Buddhist texts, and again it would seem that it is a common usage inherited from earlier usage. So, to expand on Halbfass’s remarks, to describe *y* as *x-dharma*, is to say that *y* is something that possesses the *dharma* – the attribute, the quality – that is *x*; and in philosophical, as opposed to purely grammatical, terms, the ‘something’ that possesses an attribute (*dharmin*) is an underlying substance. As Halbfass points out, this understanding of *dharma* and *dharmin* as attribute and substance respectively involves the use of *dharma* in terms of a passive derivation: a *dharma* is what is ‘supported’ or ‘maintained’ (*dhriyate*) by the underlying substance (*dharmin*). I think we can see a precisely parallel development of the usage of *dhamma* in Buddhist thought.

In fact I have already suggested that the early Buddhist understanding of *dhammas* as the basic mental and physical qualities that constitute experience or reality is to be related to the usage of *dhamma* at the end of a *bahuvrīhi* compound in the sense of a particular nature or quality possessed by something. To this extent the basic qualities of early Buddhist thought and the attributes of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika are the same things. The crucial difference, however, is that instead of understanding these particular natures or qualities as attributes that belong to some underlying substance, early Buddhist thought takes them as natural qualities in their own right, emphasising how they arise dependent on other qualities rather than on a substratum that is somehow more real than they are.⁵⁵

Seeing the development of the Buddhist understanding of *dhammas* in this way also casts a somewhat different light on some of the remarks made about *dhammas* in the Pali commentaries, which are perhaps often viewed too much in the light of later controversies about the precise ontological status of *dharmas* and the Madhyamaka critique of the notion of *svabhāva* in the sense of ‘inherent existence’. John Ross Carter has drawn attention to the way in which the Pali

commentaries later come to gloss *dhamma* at the end of a *bahuvrīhi* compound both by *pakati* and *sabhāva*.⁵⁶ It follows from this that when the commentaries define *dhammas* as *sabhāvas* this is not a statement about their ontological status and that *sabhāva* should not be translated as ‘inherent existence’, but is merely a gloss stating that *dhammas* are ‘particular natures’ or ‘particular qualities’. Moreover when the commentators say that *dhammas* are so-called ‘because they maintain (*dhārenti*) their own particular natures, or because they are maintained (*dhāriyanti*) by causal conditions’,⁵⁷ this should be understood, I think, 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.⁵⁸

This gives us two basic meanings of *dhamma* in early Buddhist texts: the practices recommended by the Buddha and the basic qualities that constitute reality. The first takes *dhamma* as something normative and prescriptive, the second as something descriptive and factual. Both of these meanings essentially derive from pre-Buddhist usage but are adapted to the specifics of Buddhist thought.

The question of how the prescriptive and descriptive meanings of *dharma* are related is a general one and not specific to Buddhist thought. Halbfass refers to the work of Paul Hacker, who sees the self-conscious and deliberate linking of *dharma* in its prescriptive and descriptive senses as essentially modern and a feature of Neo-Hinduism.⁵⁹ The point here appears to be that in ancient Indian thought there was no *explicit* attempt to derive *dharma* in its prescriptive sense from *dharma* in its descriptive sense: there was no explicit suggestion that it is because your nature (*dharma*) is such, your duty (*dharma*) is such. While this may be so, it is not clear to me that such an understanding is not implicit in early Indian thought. Indeed without the latent idea that there is some sort of link between nature and norm, the way things are and the way we should behave, it seems to me difficult to explain the usage of *dharma* in these two senses – unless, that is, one regards it as some sort of semantic accident or coincidence.

In this context the observations of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre seem pertinent.⁶⁰ MacIntyre argues that eighteenth century European thinking about morality involved the disappearance of a hitherto taken for granted connection between the precepts of morality and the facts of human nature, such that moral philosophers, like Hume and Kant, begin to assert for the first time that

moral laws cannot be derived from factual statements, an ‘ought’ cannot be derived from an ‘is’. MacIntyre goes on to point out that this is problematic: a statement that someone is a sea-captain suggests that he ought to do what a sea-captain ought to do. This is because a ‘sea-captain’ is a ‘functional’ concept: being a sea-captain involves functioning as a sea-captain. What MacIntyre suggests is that in the classical tradition right through to the Enlightenment the concepts used in discussions of ‘morality’ – how one should behave – were functional: thus for Aristotle a man’s living well is precisely analogous to a harpist’s playing well (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a 16). The relevance of this in the present context is that, if the distinction between nature and norm is not made in the first place, because a deep connection between the two is assumed, then there can be no *explicit* argument that attempts to link the two. And thus that the explicit argument that derives *dharma* as duty directly from *dharma* as nature is modern – in part a reflection, perhaps, of the conceptual framework of modern European philosophy – is hardly surprising.

In fact it seems clear that *dharman/dharma* is from the very beginning itself a functional concept: it is a foundation, and a foundation that fails to perform the functions of supporting and maintaining is not much of a foundation: for something to be a *dharma/dhamma* it must maintain and support. Thus, in the present volume, Brereton suggests that in the Ṛg Veda there is a deep connection between the foundational nature of the Ādityas and their foundational authority such that they are one and the same thing. And certainly in the case of brahmanical *dharma* it seems hard to deny a deep connection between *being* a member of a particular class (*varṇa*) at a particular stage of life (*āśrama*) and *acting* accordingly – fulfilling one’s *dharma*. And when the Pali commentaries come to define the ‘particular natures’ that are *dhammas*, they define them by what they *do*: it is contact (*phassa*) because it contacts (*phusati*), it is will (*cetanā*) because it wills (*cetayati*), it is concentration (*samādhi*) because it places (*ādhiyati*) the mind evenly (*samaṇi*) on the object; it is trust (*saddhā*) because it trusts (*saddahati*), it is memory (*sati*) because it remembers (*sarati*).⁶¹

Halbfass refers to ‘a certain elusive coherence’ in the various meanings and functions of *dharma* in the different traditions of Hinduism,

Buddhism, and Jainism.⁶² This article has largely been an attempt to seek out that elusive coherence in the case of early Buddhist thought. I should like now to attempt to sum up by returning to the description of the practice of watching *dhammas* as *dhammas* found in the (Mahā-) Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and by offering a paraphrase of it as a final attempt at capturing that elusive coherence. Among the *dhammas* (practices) the Buddha prescribes is this practice of watching *dhammas* (mental and physical qualities) as *dhammas*; to watch these truly as *dhammas* involves watching how they arise and disappear, how the particular qualities that one wants to abandon can be abandoned, and how the particular qualities that one wants to develop can be developed. Watching *dhammas* in this way one begins to understand how they work, and in understanding how they work one begins to understand certain truths (*sacca*) – four to be exact – about these *dhammas*: their relation to suffering, its arising, its ceasing and the way to its ceasing. And in seeing these four truths one realizes the ultimate truth – *dhamma* – about the world, the extinguishing (*nibbāna*) of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. This reading of the (Mahā-) Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta reveals the underlying equivalence between seeing *dhammas* (that is, understanding the way mental and physical qualities arise and disappear) and seeing the *dhamma* or the truth.

In the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta Sāriputta attributes the saying to the Buddha: ‘He who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*; he who sees *dhamma* sees dependent arising.’⁶³ The text goes on to explain that the five aggregates of attachment have arisen dependently (*paṭicca-samuppanna*). The commentary glosses the Buddha’s saying as ‘he who sees causal conditions, sees dependently arisen *dhammas*’.⁶⁴ My suggestion is that this should be read in part as a quite deliberate play on the meaning of *dhamma*, a play, moreover, that is entirely consonant with the Nikāyas. As we have seen, *dhammas* are mental and physical qualities, and seeing these *dhammas* as *dhammas* – seeing how they arise and disappear, seeing how they are dependently arisen – one sees the ultimate truth: he who sees *dhammas* sees *dhamma*.

Lest I should be misunderstood, I am not trying to impute a specific technical *abhidhamma*/*abhidharma* understanding to the Nikāyas, I am not suggesting that *dhamma* is used in early Buddhist thought in the sense of an irreducible element. The use of *dhamma* in the general sense of a mental or physical quality is quite distinct from the question of the metaphysical and ontological status of those

qualities. That *dhammas* are mental and physical qualities is one thing; in what precise sense those mental and physical qualities should be said to exist is quite another. Thus the issue of what precisely *dhammas/dharmas* are is one that is debated and discussed by the later schools – the Vibhajjavāda, the Sarvāstivāda, the Madhyamaka.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, alongside the use of *dhamma* in the Nikāyas in the senses of the practices, truths and teachings that are recommended on the authority of the Buddha, there is a further usage already firmly embedded in the Nikāyas: *dhammas* are the fundamental qualities, both mental and physical, that in some sense constitute – or better, support and maintain – experience or reality in its entirety.

In many ways it might be the English word *quality* in its range of uses in both the singular and plural that provides the single best fit for *dhamma* in early Buddhism.⁶⁶ Yet while it might be capable of carrying a wider range of appropriate meanings than some other term such as ‘truth’, it clearly falls short of conveying the full range of meanings. Often translators have resorted to ‘teaching’, ‘law’, ‘doctrine’, yet in addition to the problem of conveying the semantic range of *dhamma* such translations highlight the problem of evoking its religious and emotional power. That the precise understanding and translation of *dhamma* in early Buddhist thought should remain elusive and hard to pin down is perhaps fitting. It is, after all, profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, beyond the sphere of mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise – something that the buddhas of the past, present and future honour and to which they pay respect.⁶⁷

NOTES

¹ I make no attempt in what follows to distinguish what the Buddha taught from what the Nikāyas/Āgamas in general teach. This does not mean that I consider that the Buddha taught everything just as the Nikāyas/Āgamas say he did. It does mean, however, that I think there are serious methodological flaws in attempting to distinguish in the Nikāyas/Āgamas two clear categories consisting of ‘authentic’ teachings of the Buddha on the one hand and later ‘inauthentic’ interpretations on the other. It follows from this that my drawing principally on the Pali sources is not to be taken as indicating that they are necessarily a more ‘authentic’ witness of early Buddhist thought – apart from the obvious fact that they are preserved in an ancient Indian language which must be relatively close to the kind of dialect or dialects used by the Buddha and his first disciples – than the Chinese Āgamas. In any case, 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; see Lamotte (1988, p. 156).

² Geiger and Geiger (1920).

³ Geiger, and Geiger (1920, p. 8)

⁴ Stcherbatsky (1923).

⁵ Stcherbatsky (1923, p. 1)

⁶ Carter (1978).

⁷ Pp. 48–49.

⁸ Edward Conze, for example, has distinguished seven meanings as ‘philosophically important’: (1) transcendent reality, (2) the order of law of the universe, (3) a truly real event, (4) objective data of the mind, (5) quality or property, (6) right behaviour and religious practice, (7) the Buddha’s teaching. These seven meanings more or less correspond to the six I have suggested, although I in effect have subsumed his (3) and (4) under my (6). See Conze (1962, pp. 92–94).

⁹ *Bhikkhu dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇāti suttaṃ geyyaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ gāthaṃ udānaṃ itivuttakaṃ jātaṃ abhutaḍḍhammaṃ vedallaṃ* (M I 133f; A II 103f, 108f, 178f, 185f; III 86f, 177f). The precise referent of the terms that make up the *aṅgas* or parts of Buddhist texts are problematic; see von Hinüber (1994).

¹⁰ A IV 90.

¹¹ M II 78.

¹² M II 257.

¹³ D II 9, 88, 95; M I 523; III 125.

¹⁴ D II 119–120: *ye vo mayā dhammā abhiññāya desitā te vo sādhuṃ uggahetvā āsevitaḍḍhā bhāvetabbā bahulīkātabbā yathayidaṃ brahmacariyaṃ addhaniyaṃ assa ciraṭṭhikaṃ. tadassa bahujana-hitāya bahujana-sukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya deva-manussānaṃ. katame ca te bhikkhave dhammā ... seyyathidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā cattāro sammappadhānā cattāro iddhipādā pañc’ indriyāni pañca balāni satta bojjhaṅgā ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*. See also D II 127–128; M II 238, 245.

¹⁵ E.g. D I 110: *bhagavā anupubbiṃ kathaṃ katesi, seyyathidaṃ dāna-kathaṃ sila-kathaṃ sagga-kathaṃ; kāmānaṃ ādīnaṃ okāraṃ saṅkilesaṃ, nekkhamme ānisaṃsaṃ pakāsesi. yadā bhagavā aññasi brāhmaṇaṃ Pokkharasātiṃ kalla-cittaṃ mudu-cittaṃ vinīvaraṇa-cittaṃ udagga-cittaṃ pasanna-cittaṃ, atha yā buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsika dhamma-desanā, taṃ pakāsesi dukkhaṃ samudayaṃ nirodhaṃ maggaṃ ... brāhmaṇassa Pokkharasātissa tasmīññ eva āsane virajam vīta-malaṃ dhamma-cakkhūṃ udapādi ... atha kho brāhmaṇo Pokkharasāti diṭṭha-dhammo patta-dhammo vidita-dhammo pariyogāḷha-dhammo tiṇṇa-vicikiccho vigata-kathamkatho vesārajja-ppatto aparappaccayo satthu sāsane*. See also D I 149; M I 380, 501; II 146.

¹⁶ S III 120: *yo kho Vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati. yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati. M I 190–191: yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati. yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati*.

¹⁷ See Carter (1978, p. 13).

¹⁸ D II 292 = M I 56: *samudaya-dhammānupassī ... viharati, vaya-dhammānupassī ... viharati*. It is possible that we should simply translate here ‘the quality or nature of arising and falling away’, since it is not clear whether *samudaya-dhamma* and *vaya-dhamma* should be construed with reference to a *bahuvrīhi* usage describing the nature of the unstated ‘body’, etc. The commentaries, in fact, construe the phrase as ‘watching the conditions for arising and falling away’ with reference to a more technical *abhidhamma* understanding of *dhamma*, allowing however that ‘nature’ is also a possible interpretation. See Gethin (1992, p. 55) and von Rosspatt (1995, pp. 203–205, n. 433).

¹⁹ PED s.v. Dhamma (p. 336, column 1).

²⁰ Cf. Rahula (1974).

²¹ Warder, (1971, pp. 285, 288).

²² D I 73: *so vivicca kāmehi, vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pīti-sukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati*. This is a stock description of the attainment of the first *jhāna* and occurs in many other places.

²³ D III 221: *bhikkhu anuppanānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ anuppādāya ... padahati. uppanānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ pahānāya ... padahati. anuppanānaṃ kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ uppādāya ... padahati. uppanānaṃ kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ thitīyā asāmosāya bhīyobhāvāya vepullāya bhāvanāya pāripūriyā ... padahati*. This is the stock account of the ‘four right endeavours’ and again occurs in many places.

²⁴ D II 290: *bhikkhu ... dhammesu dhammānupassī viharati*. This is the stock description of the fourth way of establishing mindfulness and once more occurs in many places.

²⁵ See Gethin (1986). For the twelve spheres of sense as the world or experience in its entirety (*sabbam*), see S IV 15.

²⁶ Geiger and Geiger (1923, p. 4); PED s.v. Dhamma.

²⁷ See Carter (1976); Carter (1978, pp. 58–135).

²⁸ Five of these passages (Sv I 99, Ps I 17, Dhpa I 22, Bv-a 13, As 38) are discussed by Carter (see previous note); a sixth passage (Paṭis-a I 18) is not noted by him.

²⁹ Sp IV 874; Sv III 1030; Ps II 68; Mp I 87; III 325; Vibh-a 504.

³⁰ Vin II 109.

³¹ Ps I 17 and Bv-a 13 cite *jāti-dhammā jarā-dhammā aṭṭha maraṇa-dhammino* as an example of *dhamma* in the sense of *pakati*; Carter (1978, p. 61) takes this as a reference to M I 161–162, which, however, reads *ekacco attanā jāti-dhammo samāno jāti-dhammaṃ yeva pariyesati, attanā jarā-dhammo ... attanā maraṇa-dhammo samāno maraṇa-dhammaṃ yeva pariyesati*. In fact, a search of CSCD gives no actual example of the text precisely as quoted by Ps and Bv-a, only the variant *vyādhi-dhammā jarā-dhammā aṭṭha maraṇa-dhammino* (A I 147; III 75).

³² Paṭis-a I 18: *jāti-dhammā jarā-dhammā maraṇa-dhammā ti ādisu vikāre*.

³³ Ps I 17: *kusalā dhammā ti ādisu sabhāve*. Paṭis-a I 18 *ayaṅ hi kusalā dhammā akusalā dhammā avyākataṃ dhammā ti ādisu sabhāve dissati*.

³⁴ Sv I 99: *tasmim kho pana samaye dhammā honti khandhā honti ti ādisu nissatte*. Ps I 17: *tasmim kho pana samaye dhammā honti ti ādisu suññatāyaṃ*. Dhpa I 22: *tasmim kho pana samaye dhammā honti khandhā honti ti ayaṃ nissatta-dhammo nāma nijjīva-dhammo ti pi eso eva*. Paṭis-a I 18: *tasmim kho pana samaye dhammā honti, dhammesu dhammānupassī viharatī ti ādisu nissattatāyaṃ*. As 38: *tasmim kho pana samaye dhammā honti, dhammesu dhammānupassī viharatī ti ādisu nissattatāyaṃ*.

³⁵ Dhs 25: *tasmim kho pana samaye dhammā honti, khandhā honti, āyatanāni honti*. For a brief discussion of the structure of the Dhs treatment of the arising of consciousness, see Gethin (1992, pp. 312–314).

³⁶ Vism XX 104; cf. Gethin (1998, p. 190).

³⁷ Vism VII 105–107, Vibh-a 147–148.

³⁸ Carter (1978, pp. 115–129, 131–135).

³⁹ Vism VII 68.

⁴⁰ Carter (1978, p. 122).

⁴¹ See Cousins (1984).

⁴² M I 101: *dhamme kaṅkhati vicikicchati nādhimuccati na sampasīdati*.

⁴³ Sv III 1030 = Ps II 68 = Mp III 325 = Vibh-a 504: *pariyatti-dhamme kaṅkhamāno tepiṭakaṃ buddha-vacanaṃ caturāsīti-dhamma-kkhandha-sahassāni ti vadanti atthi nu kho etaṃ natthī ti kaṅkhati. paṭivedha-dhamme kaṅkhamāno vipassanānissando maggo nāma magganissandaṃ phalaṃ nāma sabba-saṅkhāra-paṭinissaggo nibbānaṃ nāma ti vadanti taṃ atthi nu kho natthī ti kaṅkhati*.

⁴⁴ Sp I 225–226 = Mp V 33: *tividho saddhammo pariyatti-saddhammo paṭipatti-saddhammo adhigama-saddhammo ti. tattha sakalam pi buddha-vacanaṃ pariyatti-saddhammo nāma. terasa dhutaḡuṇā cāritta-vāritta-sīla-samādhi-vipassanā ti ayaṃ paṭipatti-saddhammo nāma. navalokuttara-dhammo adhigama-saddhammo nāma.*

⁴⁵ Geiger, and Geiger (1923, pp. 8–9): Wenn *dh.* die Dingbedeutung hat, wird es auch zumeist in der Mehrzahl gebraucht. Es werden damit die Dinge der Erscheinungswelt, bezeichnet, wie sie vom *manas*, dem inneren Sinn wahrgenommen werden. In diesen Dingen oder “Normen” offenbart sich aber eben der *dh.*, d. h. das Natur- und Weltgesetz von dem ewigen Werden und Vergehen, von der Flüchtigkeit und Nichtigkeit alles Seins.

⁴⁶ Gombrich (1996, pp. 34–36).

⁴⁷ See Halbfass’s two essays on *dharma* in his *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding: ‘Dharma in the Self-understanding of Traditional Hinduism’* (pp. 311–333) and ‘Reinterpretations of *Dharma* in Modern Hinduism’ (pp. 334–348).

⁴⁸ RV 10.90: *yajñena yajñam ayajanta devās tāni dharmāni prathamāny āsan.* Translation quoted from O’Flaherty (1981 p. 31).

⁴⁹ Halbfass (1988, p. 314); he cites Chāndogya Upaniṣad 2.23.1 and Taittirīya Upaniṣad 1.11.1 for the singular usage.

⁵⁰ O’Flaherty (1981, p. 32).

⁵¹ Warder (1971, p. 275).

⁵² Halbfass (1988, p. 334).

⁵³ See section 4 of Joel Brereton’s contribution to this volume, and Patrick Olivelle’s discussion of Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 11.5.7.1 and Chāndogya Upaniṣad 2.1.4.

⁵⁴ 4.5.14: *avināśī vā are ‘yam ātmānucchittidharmā.* Text and translation quoted from Olivelle (1998, pp. 130–131).

⁵⁵ Warder (1971, p. 274) raises the question of the usage of *dharma* and *dharmin* in Indian logic and its possible connection to the Buddhist understanding of a *dharma* as an element of experience, but somewhat curiously, in my view, opts to treat them as homonyms, whose homonymity is however, ‘probably not accidental’.

⁵⁶ Carter (1978, p. 61) cites Ps II 170, Spk I 159; see also Spk II 41 where *khaya-dhamma* is glossed as *khaya-sabhāva*.

⁵⁷ As 39: *attano pana sabhāvaṃ dhārentī ti dhammā. dhāriyanti vā paccayehi, dhāriyanti vā yathā-sabhāvato ti dhammā.* (cf. Nidd-a I 16; Paṭis-a I 18; Moh 6)

⁵⁸ The point that the commentarial definition of a *dhamma* as that which carries its ‘own nature’ should not be interpreted as implying that a *dhamma* is a substantial bearer of its qualities or ‘own-nature’ has been made by Nyanaponika (1998, pp. 40–41) and Karunadasa (1996, pp. 14–16).

⁵⁹ Halbfass (1988, p. 334).

⁶⁰ MacIntyre (1985, pp. 57–59, 83–84).

⁶¹ Vism XIV 134, 135, 139, 140, 141.

⁶² Halbfass (1988, p. 317).

⁶³ M I 190–191: *yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati, yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati.* The saying is also found in the Chinese equivalent of this *sutta*, see T. 26, 467a; I am grateful to Kin-Tung Yit for this reference.

⁶⁴ Ps II 230: *yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passatī ti yo paccaye passati. so dhammaṃ passatī ti so paṭiccasamuppanna-dhamme passati.*

⁶⁵ The issue of the development of the ontology of *dhammas* in early Buddhist thought is one that has been partially explored in Gal (2003).

⁶⁶ Cf. Warder (1971, pp. 283, 290).

⁶⁷ M I 167: *dhammo gambhīro duddaso duranubodho santo paṇīto atakkāvacarō nipuṇo paṇḍita-vedanīyo.* S I 138–140: *dhammaññeva sakkatvā garuṃ katvā.*

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ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise stated editions of Pali texts are those of the Pali Text Society, Oxford.

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya
As	Atthasālinī (= Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā)
Bv-a	Buddhavaṃsa-aṭṭhakathā
CSCD	<i>Chatṭha Saṅgāyana CD-ROM</i> , Version 3.0 (Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1999).
D	Dīgha Nikāya
Dhp-a	Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā
Dhs	Dhammasaṅgaṇī
M	Majjhima Nikāya
Moh	Mohavicchedanī
Mp	Manorathapūraṇī
Nidd-a	Niddesa-aṭṭhakathā
Paṭis-a	Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā
PED	T.W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, <i>Pali-English Dictionary</i> (London: Pali Text Society, 1921–1925).
Ps	Papañcasūdanī
S	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Sp	Samantpāsādikā
Spk	Sāratthappakāsinī
Sv	Sumaṅgalavilāsinī
Vibh-a	Sammohavinodanī
Vin	Vinaya
Vism	Visuddhimagga

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