Early Buddhist Metaphysics

The making of a philosophical tradition

Noa Ronkin
This book provides a philosophical account of the major doctrinal shift in the history of early Theravāda tradition in India: the transition from the earliest stratum of Buddhist thought to the systematic and allegedly scholastic philosophy of the Pali Abhidhamma movement. Conceptual investigation into the development of Buddhist ideas is pursued, thus rendering the Buddha’s philosophical position more explicit and showing how and why his successors changed it. Entwining comparative philosophy and Buddhology, the author probes the Abhidhamma’s shift from an epistemologically oriented conceptual scheme to a metaphysical worldview that is based on the concept of dhamma. She does so in terms of the Aristotelian tradition and vis-à-vis modern philosophy, exploiting Western philosophical literature from Plato to contemporary texts in the fields of philosophy of mind and cultural criticism. This book not only demonstrates that a philosophical inquiry into the conceptual foundations of early Buddhism can enhance our understanding of what philosophy and religion are qua thought and religion; it also shows the value of fresh perspectives for traditional Buddhology.

Combining philosophically rigorous investigation and Buddhological research criteria, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics* fills a significant gap in Buddhist scholarship’s treatment of the conceptual development of the Abhidhamma.

**Noa Ronkin** received her PhD from the University of Oxford. She is currently a lecturer in the Introduction to the Humanities Programme and a Research Fellow at the Center for Buddhist Studies, Stanford University. Her research interests include a range of issues associated with Indian Theravāda Buddhist philosophy and psychology, the Abhidhamma tradition and comparative Indian philosophy.
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**EARLY BUDDHIST METAPHysics**

_Noa Ronkin_
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This book is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation, ‘A Metaphysics of Experience: from the Buddha’s Teaching to the Abhidhamma’ that was submitted to the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford in spring 2003. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped me bring the dissertation to fruition and complete its preparation for publication. My foremost gratitude and respect are extended to Richard Gombrich, who supervised my D.Phil. and has been an invaluable source of insight and encouragement. He has cultivated my interest in the study of Buddhism, while nurturing my enthusiasm for philosophy in general and comparative philosophy in particular. I am privileged to have been guided by him. I am also grateful to Lance Cousins, who elaborated on the Abhidhamma intricacies, made shrewd observations and invaluable suggestions, and offered useful references. To Paul Williams and Jonardon Ganeri, the examiners of the original thesis, I am indebted for their instructive advice and comments. Thanks are also due to Sue Hamilton, Natalia Isayeva, Ornan Rotem and Helen Steward for their formative remarks on sections of the thesis. Whatever omissions or errors that remain in this work are entirely my own.

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Noa Ronkin
Stanford, March 2004
# ABBREVIATIONS

## PALI AND Sanskrit texts

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INTRODUCTION
Situating Theravādin doctrinal thought – towards a comparative Buddhist philosophy

BUDDHIST THOUGHT IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL ARENA

The Buddha’s teaching, the Dhamma, is presented in the Sutta-pitaka of the Pali Canon as a path to the solution of the fundamental problem of human existence, namely, dukkha, customarily translated as ‘suffering’ or ‘unsatisfactoriness’. In the Nikāyas the processes that bring about the cessation of dukkha are conceived of primarily in terms of spiritual practice and development – such as bhāvanā (literally ‘bringing into being’, rendered as ‘development’), brahmacariya (‘the holy life’), magga (path) or paṭipadā (way) – thus reflecting an interest in the workings and salvific capability of one’s bodily, speech and mental acts. Although the Buddha’s message does contain doctrinal concepts and theoretical statements on the nature of dukkha, its cause, its cessation and the way to its cessation, these statements function as guidelines for comprehending Buddhist thought and do not amount to a systematic theory. The attempt to ground the Buddha’s scattered teachings in an inclusive theory was introduced later on with the advance of the subsequent Abhidharma/Abhidhamma tradition: a doctrinal movement in Buddhist thought and exegesis that gradually developed during the first centuries after the Buddha’s mahāparinibbāna in tandem with distinctive theoretical and practical interests, resulting in an independent branch of inquiry and literary genre, as documented in the third basket of the Pali Canon, the Abhidhamma-pitaka.

While the Nikāyas present the Buddha’s teachings as addressed to specific audiences at specific times and locations, the Abhidhamma seeks to describe the structure underlying the Buddha’s Dhamma fully, in ultimate terms that apply in all circumstances. In this sense it marks the attempt to establish Buddhist thought as a comprehensive philosophy. Since the Buddha’s teaching is primarily concerned with lived, sentient experience, the Abhidhamma’s philosophical rendering of the Dhamma attempts to provide a systematic and comprehensive account of the constitution of that experience. It does so by explicating the nature of all types of physical and mental events that make up one’s conscious world, as well as that of their relationships and interrelationships of causal conditioning. Physical and mental events, the ultimate terms used by the Abhidhamma in its philosophical
enterprise, are known as dharmā/dhammā (hereafter dharmas/dhammas), and hence the overarching inquiry involving both the analysis of all types of dhamma and their synthesis into a unified structure by means of their manifold relationships is referred to as the ‘dhamma theory’. But what exactly is a dhamma as opposed to dharmas? How did the dhamma theory proceed from its Nikāya-based origins and why? What role did early Buddhist tradition’s apprehension of the concept of dhamma play in the formation of the Abhidhamma? What kind of a philosophical system is it that founds itself upon the concept of dhamma, and what are the soteriological implications of this concept for the ensuing philosophical system? Is not the Abhidhamma understanding of the concept of dhamma at odds with the Buddha’s teaching? Yet might not it be misleading to qualify Abhidhamma thought as ‘Buddhist ontology’? In this study I have undertaken to answer these questions.

The present monograph seeks to analyse and provide a philosophically adequate account of the doctrinal transition from the earliest strata of Buddhist thought to the Abhidhamma, thus rendering the Buddha’s philosophical position more explicit and locating the Abhidhamma in relation to its origins. The underlying question taken up here is: ‘How does the Buddha’s experientially oriented and pragmatic teaching become in the Abhidhamma a systematic philosophy?’ What I show is that this doctrinal transition results from early Buddhist tradition’s shifting construal of conscious experience, and is best understood in terms of a change in epistemological orientation and metaphysical outlook. Before we begin reconstructing the making of early Buddhism as a philosophical tradition, though, a preliminary terminological elucidation is necessary in order to locate the subsequent discussion within the realm of philosophy.

First we must attend to the intricacy of the laden concepts of metaphysics and ontology. What is distinctive of philosophical inquiry is the attempt to understand the relation between human thought and the world. This project is constitutive of metaphysics, which is, in its broadest interpretation, the attempt to arrive by rational means at a comprehensive picture of the world. Metaphysics is the most general and abstract part of philosophy, dealing with the features of reality, what ultimately exists and what it is that distinguishes and makes that possible. Western philosophy at its very beginnings with the Pre-Socratics was metaphysical in its nature, but it was Plato’s theory of Forms (or Ideas) that clarified the distinction of metaphysics from physics. The term ‘metaphysics’ originated as a title referring to some of Aristotle’s treatises which followed his works on physics in the catalogue of their edition produced by Andronicus of Rhodes in the second half of the first century BCE. These treatises are heterogeneous: they are concerned with being, both as such and in respect of various categories of it (foremost of which is substance), as well as with other matters coterminous with later metaphysical theories. The general picture of the world which forms the content of a metaphysical system, though, ought to be distinguished from the detailed account of what there is in that world. In contemporary philosophy metaphysics customarily concerns the study of being qua being, being in itself, prior to and regardless of the extension or categories of being and the reality of the world. As
Umberto Eco observes,

[W]hether what we call the outside World, or the Universe, is or is not, or whether it is the effect of a malign spirit, does not in any way affect the primary evidence that there is “something” somewhere (even if it were no more than a res cogitans that realized it was cogitating).1

Metaphysics thus aims at the intension of being per se, the question ‘What is the nature of being?’ which may be designated ‘the definition question’.2

Being per se, however, is unthinkable unless it is organized within a system of entities: entities are the way in which being is revealed to us. The science of actual being, being as embodied in entities, is the subject matter of ontology. Ontology, understood as a branch of metaphysics, captures the question of the extension of being, or ‘the population question’, that is, ‘What are the beings?’, or ‘What does exist?’3 In a derivative, additional sense, ‘ontology’ is used to refer to the set of things the existence of which is acknowledged by a particular theory or system of thought. It is in this sense that one speaks of a metaphysical system as having a particular ontology, such as an ontology of material substances or of events. Metaphysical problems go beyond the realm of ontology; they concern our construal of encountered phenomena and features of our life other than the question of what there is. For instance, questions of how mind and mental phenomena are possible in a world of matter, of how values and norms can agree with scientific facts, as well as issues regarding space and time, change and identity through time, God, the nature of personal identity or immortality.

While it is not uncommon for Western philosophical systems to begin with metaphysical presuppositions and secondarily to generate epistemological criteria by which to verify the particular ontology resultant from those presuppositions, it is occasionally possible to find the reversed situation, wherein the solutions a certain system offers to the abovementioned metaphysical questions derive from epistemological assumptions regarding what is comprehensible or knowable, and the ways in which this is so. Here one must first make such decisions as to which primitive notions the philosophical system will build upon, whether the things spoken of within the system will be restricted in certain ways, or what the limitations of its referential terms are. Metaphysical worldviews and specific ontologies have indeed resulted from epistemological constraints. For instance, it might be argued that Descartes’s metaphysics is founded on epistemological grounds, for his dualism of mind and body as discrete substances is based on the claim that we have a clearer and more distinct idea of our minds than of our bodies. It is Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, though, which exemplarily illustrates the idea of a metaphysics as subject to epistemological constraints, for its primary concern is with the possibility of metaphysics understood as philosophical knowledge that transcends the bounds of sense experience. Rejecting what he considered the speculative metaphysics handed down by the Rationalists, yet being concerned, as the Empiricists had been, with the boundaries
of human understanding, Kant’s transcendental idealism, unlike traditional
metaphysics, sidesteps the trap of using reason beyond its appropriate limits. His critique of the limitations of human understanding and of what is necessary
about it forms a watershed in the history of metaphysics, but is certainly reckoned
as metaphysics.

In the Indian arena philosophical systems ordinarily commence with episte-
malological rather than with metaphysical or ontological assumptions. A primary
concern of classical Indian philosophers is with the nature of right cognition
(\textit{pramāṇa}) and its means, and only once they have established the criteria
for means of valid knowledge do they make metaphysical, ontological or ethical
claims. Although the Indian concept of \textit{pramāṇa} does not neatly overlap with the
Western epistemologists’ standard characterization of knowledge as justified true
belief, the study of the nature of \textit{pramāṇa}, its scope, basis, reliability, etc., corre-
sponds for the most part to what is meant by ‘epistemology’ and may safely be
rendered ‘Indian epistemology’. Different schools hold conflicting views on the
nature of right cognition: the Naiyāyikas, for instance, accept four \textit{pramāṇas},
namely, perception (\textit{pratyākṣa}), inference (\textit{anumāṇa}), analogy (\textit{upamāṇa}) and
verbal testimony (\textit{sabda}), whereas Buddhist epistemologists, having conceived of
\textit{pramāṇa} as valid cognition itself rather than a means to it, recognize the validity
of perception and inference alone. Notwithstanding their different positions,
Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophers alike partake in the general apprehen-
sion of epistemology as setting off philosophizing. What does distinguish
Buddhist thought, however, is that, having recognized that lived experience is
unsatisfactory, it locates the cause of \textit{dukkha} in our lack of insight into the
dynamics of cognition, and its prescribed soteriological solution is therefore to
gain insight into the conditions of our cognitive apparatus. For early Buddhism
epistemology is not only the foundation, but also the most urgent endeavour.

A distinction should thus be drawn – especially when dealing with classical
Indian philosophy – between criteria normally used in confirming perceptual
claims that depend on the use of our sense faculties, by which what exists in some
sector of the world is ascertained (claims such as ‘x is to be found in the room’),
and those ontological criteria by which we claim to ascertain what there really is
in the world. Criteria of this second sort inevitably infect those of the first, but
they may be distinguished from whatever is admitted to be true by those criteria
of the first sort. Hence different ontologies, namely, different accounts of what
exists in actuality, may result from whatever is said to be true about things as
identified in a particular domain. This also means that it may be possible to
endorse an epistemology while remaining neutral on any particular metaphysical
position, or even while shunning ontology altogether. We will see in Chapter 2
that such is the case of the Buddha’s doctrinal and philosophical legacy.

The Buddha, as he is portrayed in the \textit{Nikāyas}, rejects purely theoretical questions
known as the undeclared or indeterminate (\textit{avyākata}) questions – those that are
to be set aside on the grounds that they are not conducive to \textit{nibbāna} – and the
\textit{Dhamma} is accordingly presented as a therapeutic way of life rather than a system
in the traditional sense. The Buddha’s interest is in gaining insight into the conditions of sentient experience in saṃsāra, namely, in experience as lived, not in its foundation in reality, and he suspends all views regarding the nature of such reality, of the person and his or her relation to the environment, and of the ontological status of the encountered world. His teaching is therefore portrayed as pragmatic, empirically focused, concerning itself with the cessation of dukkha and to that end emphasizing issues of cognition, psychology, epistemology and soteriology – characteristics that show family resemblance to some of the motifs of Western phenomenology. Two other ‘phenomenological features’ could be added to the above list: the first is the Buddha’s challenge of the representationalist model of knowledge and of the innocent correspondence of thought, word and world; the second is his emphasis on the intentional structure of consciousness. This emphasis is already present in the earliest stratum of Buddhist epistemology in the taxonomies of the twelve āyatanaś and the eighteen dhātuś, and is retained in the Abhidhamma analysis of citta. In accordance with all these motifs, various scholars have offered a phenomenological reading of Buddhist thought, claiming that the Abhidhamma in particular is a ‘phenomenological psychology’ dealing with conscious reality or the world as given in experience; a ‘metapsychology’ of which the primary objects of investigation are the various concepts and categories of consciousness.

This is not the proper venue for addressing the question as to what order of phenomenology Buddhism is, if any, though one should note that this characterization raises a potential for ambiguity in the distinction between phenomenological attention to the constituents of experience qua the contents that present themselves in consciousness (suspending the question of the existence of the intentional object) and introspective attention to the flow of experience itself, that is, to its status as a process or a sequence of events, etc. Moreover, before we can sweepingly endow Buddhism as a whole with a phenomenological orientation, we must be clear about what a dhamma is, but this is one of the most complex and disputable issues in Buddhist thought. As we shall see in Chapter 2, along with its doctrinal development Buddhist tradition itself was shifting its construal of the concept of dhamma, so that for the Abhidhammikas this concept meant something quite different from what it had originally signified for the Buddha’s immediate community. What I do wish to stress here – and is decisively part of early Buddhist self-portrayal – is, first, that the Buddha’s teaching founds itself upon the observation that there is something fundamentally wrong with the human condition as lived, and, second, that it comprises an account of how conscious experience arises and of how the dissatisfaction involved in this experience can be removed. In the sense of its concern with one’s lived experience rather than with the foundation of this experience in reality the Buddha’s teaching may broadly be qualified as phenomenological.

The first centuries after the Buddha’s parinibbāna, however, witnessed the rise of the Abhidhamma that, subject to the contemporary doctrinal and social conditions, undertook to supplement the principles scattered throughout the Buddha’s discourses with a comprehensive, unified theory. But it is the Abhidhamma’s very
concern with one’s lived experience – the object and so-called phenomenological orientation of the Buddha’s teaching – that has been the subject of a longstanding dispute in modern scholarship.

Educated in the historical and philosophical tradition of the nineteenth century and inspired by New Testament scholarship, the European establishers of the tradition of Buddhist studies, whose interpretation of the Pali Buddhist tradition provided the grounding for a more sophisticated understanding of Pali Buddhism in the future, tended to present Nikāya Buddhism as centred on an ethical doctrine that was gradually distorted by the Buddhist ‘church’ and by the Abhidhamma ‘scholastics’. This portrayal gave rise to the view of the Abhidhamma as a divergent conceptual framework, often contrary to the Buddha’s intentions, that brought about the ossification of the ‘original’ teaching, misconceived it and, to a large extent, lost touch with it.11 Even more recently acclaimed scholarly works show traces of this heritage and tend to support the view that the Abhidhamma systematization resulted in scholasticism and detachment from lived experience. Erich Frauwallner, for instance, characterizes the Abhidhamma method as ‘formal’ or ‘formalistic’ scholasticism’, meaning that its sole aim was to preserve the Buddha’s teaching and illuminate it from different angles. This method, Frauwallner argues, degenerated into artificiality and senseless exaggeration, and replaced genuine thought with redundant, extended mātikās. Moreover, ‘this degeneration was probably at its worst in the Pali school, which confined itself exclusively to the transmitted doctrinal material and never really developed any original thought of its own.’12 More specifically, other Buddhologists opine that while the Buddha refrained from making any ontological assumptions about the grounds of sentient experience in a mind-independent world, the Abhidhamma introduced ontology into its system, so that the dhammas emerged as primary elements to which everything else is reducible, their categorization as a categorial theory describing what really exists. ‘Ontology began to creep back into Buddhism’, Richard Gombrich has thus argued, ‘when texts were compiled making lists of things the Buddha had referred to’.

The present study calls into question some of the claims of ‘distortion’ and ‘ossification’ regarding the Pali Abhidhamma elaboration on the basic principles of Buddhist thought. It shows that a close reading of the Pali treatises with attention to their subtleties and subtexts may exhibit that the Abhidhamma, at least in its canonical period, shares the concerns of the Nikāya mindset, even if it is a product of a different doctrinal-social milieu and is necessarily bound up with an ongoing process of conceptual reframing of the earliest Buddhist teachings. Since the latter are concerned with what may provisionally be called ‘soteriology’, or ‘religious experience’, or yet again ‘mental cultivation of the path to awakening’, Buddhism as a religious-philosophical movement – rather than a closed system in which everything is the logical consequence of initial premises – would develop as dialectic sequences of responses to its founding teachings. Must such a process of conceptual reshaping result in a distortion of the first, ‘most genuine’ teachings? Is the term ‘scholasticism’ neatly attributable to the Abhidhamma?
Does a scholastic method necessarily hinder soteriology and practical concerns with human experience? Should not the encounter with the Nikāya mindset and with the Abhidhamma doctrines broaden one’s apprehension of what philosophy is and deepen one’s understanding of what religion may be? With these questions in mind, let us first examine the meaning of ‘scholasticism’ at issue.

SCHOLASTICISM AND THE ABHIDHAMMA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Scholasticism as a practice, rather than a term for a medieval European philosophical movement, has been spurned by philosophers and intellectuals since the Renaissance: it has represented for modernists a vain engagement with theoretical issues and useless conceptual distinctions, and hence has become an object one should surpass. Nevertheless, intellectual practices that constitute scholasticism may have solid merit and interest. Paul Griffiths suggests that the root metaphor for scholastic intellectual practice is reading: scholastic movements establish certain relations with the texts they read, relations which imply an ontology, epistemology and ethics. The prime element in these relations is that the texts read (these are not necessarily written: they may well be orally transmitted and ‘reading’ is used in a figurative manner) are a stable and vastly rich resource that yields truth, meaning, suggestions and rules of conduct, and that lends itself to a continuous, ever-repeated process of interpretation. Scholastic reading is an active engagement aimed at altering the course of the readers’ cognitive, affective and active life by ingesting, digesting, ruminating over and restating what is read. Hence the significance of commentary to scholastics and its position as their basic literary genre.

In his study of the dGe lugs pa Tibetan Buddhist view of language, José Ignacio Cabezón brings forward the concept of scholasticism as a primary category in comparative philosophy of religion, suggesting that the phenomenon of scholasticism ought to be more broadly construed than its parochial medieval European meaning. The scholastic method in medieval Christian Europe is known for its formal nature, its systematicity, its preoccupation with scriptures and their exegesis in commentaries, its rationalism and reliance on logic and dialectics in defence of its tenets, its penchant for lists, classifications and categorizations, and its tendency towards abstraction. Nevertheless, a broader construal of the phenomenon of scholasticism shows that many religious movements which may be classified as ‘scholastic’ – such as rabbinic Judaism, neo-Confucianism, certain movements within Islam, Mīmāṃsā Hinduism or the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition – are concerned with reconciling the rational and experiential aspects of religious life. ‘Over and above the mere synthesis of experience and reason’, Cabezón states, ‘many scholastic movements would go one step further, claiming that reasoning and systematicity, far from being incompatible with personal religious experience, are the very prerequisites for spiritual realization and action’.
Despite their differences, Cabezón identifies four factors that generally motivate scholastic traditions toward rationalism and systematicity. The first is the basic intelligibility of the universe: reality, for the scholastics, is accessible via rational inquiry, and though the latter may be superseded by intuitive knowledge it is nonetheless necessary. Second, scholastic movements are traditionally oriented: they have a strong sense of history and lineage, and are committed to the preservation of their tradition. To preserve a tradition means to preserve its spirit as it is expressed in experience and practice. Insofar as these are conditioned by doctrine, to preserve a tradition means to establish a rational inquiry into its doctrinal and intellectual underpinnings. In this sense, rational inquiry is essential to the maintenance of the tradition’s self-identity. Third, rational inquiry is also essential to distinguishing the tradition’s outlook from its opponents’ and to defending it against their intellectual criticisms. Fourth, since scholastics deal with large bodies of disparate textual material that is often contradictory, part of their task is to synthesize this material into an ordered, unified whole. In so doing, they usually tend towards textual proliferation and inclusion rather than elimination and exclusion: they prefer to elaborate on and systematize the textual material rather than to limit and ignore portions of it which may be contradictory. Scholastics often attempt to reconcile both the systematic-rational and the experiential-practical dimensions of their respective tradition, and this should naturally lead to a tension that may manifest itself in various ways. This tension, as it occurs within the conceptual framework of the Theravādin Abhidhamma, lies at the heart of the present study. In line with Cabezón’s suggestion, I seek to examine this tension in the light of a broader construal of the phenomenon of scholasticism.

Moreover, the broader notion of scholasticism should include the way Indian philosophical-religious schools understand knowledge and philosophical texts. It has often been pointed out that Indian philosophy developed historically as a commentarial tradition, and that Indian learned traditions seek to restate and explicate their fundamental ideas as given at the beginning of the history of their disciplines. Eliot Deutsch has convincingly argued that this idea of philosophy as ‘recovery’ rather than ‘discovery’ is central to the traditional Indian understanding of a philosophical text. What constitutes the text in Indian thought, Deutsch claims, is the sūtra/kārikā along with the ongoing exegetical work, and hence the basic unit in Indian philosophy is the ‘tradition text’. A tradition text has its authoritative sources grounded in its oral transmission, its summaries and its ongoing written elaborations. The commentaries, sub-commentaries and glosses form integral parts of a continuing argument or text, and in this sense are not merely appendages to a fixed, completed work, but an ongoing, developing text. The tradition text preserves its body of ideas, seeking to expand, refine, explicate and bring greater systematic coherence to it. This kind of preservation is essentially an act of reason: a creative undertaking that innovates something through each vital engagement with the tradition text. From the philosopher-commentator’s standpoint he is making new contributions to the tradition text through his creative appropriation of it, while at the same time remaining faithful
to his authoritative sources. Appropriation, as opposed to mere borrowing and influence, is a creative process of retaining a content that is made one’s own while reframing and reshaping it, thus revalorizing its meaning to one’s own end; it is a dynamic engagement that brings about true synthesis, for what is appropriated is transformed while simultaneously transforming its appropriator-bearer. To appropriate something means to take it as part of one’s own being while redefining one’s self, so that the appropriated content becomes the stuff of personal identity. In this ‘existentialist’ sense, as Deutsch notes, knowledge is a genuine act of creation; it is karma. In the same vein, the Abhidhamma’s alleged scholasticism should be apprehended more broadly, and so its following investigation will be juxtaposed with the key concepts of tradition text and appropriation.

METHOD AND SCOPE

The question of how and why the Buddha’s first teachings resulted in something quite different, namely, the Abhidhamma, spawns a host of subsidiary queries: is it possible to trace the distinct phases of the conceptual transition from the earliest Buddhist teaching, through the Abhidhamma literature and up to the later Theravādin commentarial tradition? What motivated the Abhidhammikas in this process of change? Even if we are entitled to characterize the Abhidhamma as a ‘scholastic’ movement, does its scholastic orientation imply that it is bound to embody a complete misreading of the ‘original’ teaching? To what extent did the canonical Abhidhamma genuinely become ‘removed in spirit’ from early Buddhist teaching and why? What, then, is the place of soteriology within the Abhidhamma framework?

My inquiry into these questions is based on the Pali canonical texts, several para-canonical works and the Āṭṭhakathā. In what follows by ‘early Abhidhamma’ I mean the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, particularly the Dhammasangani, the Vibhanga and the Paṭṭhāna. By ‘later’, ‘mature’ or ‘developed Abhidhamma’ I intend what is referred to in the Āṭṭhakathā, the Visuddhimagga and two of the primary Abhidhamma manuals – the Abhidhammāvatāra and the Abhidhamaṭṭhasaṅgaha. The Petaṭakopadesa, Nettiṭṭpakaraṇa, Milindapañha, Buddhavamsa and the Paṭissambhidāmagga – para-canonical works whose role in the establishment of the dhamma theory is appraised in Chapter 3 – I regard as transitional texts that reflect the canonical Abhidhamma’s formative period. Any investigation into the doctrinal development of the tradition ancestral to the Theravāda must take into account the contemporary Brahmanical backdrop against which it arose and the challenges posed by its rival Buddhist schools. Alongside the Pali sources I therefore use throughout this study such texts as the Upaniṣads, the Nyāyasūtra, the Vaiśeṣikasūtra and works of the grammatical Vyākaraṇa literature, and also look into relevant sources that summarize the views of the Northern Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika schools, as these often highlight distinctive features of the Theravādin position and clarify difficulties of interpretation.
Buddhological literature is replete with discussions of the difficulties associated with the assessment of the early phase of Buddhist literature, and a number of attempts have been made at compiling a detailed chronology of the evolution of the Pali texts. While our understanding of the texts have certainly profited from these attempts, they have not been able satisfactorily to provide a comprehensive chronological stratification either of the earliest phase of Buddhist literature as represented by the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and the four primary *Nikāyas* (along with certain other smaller texts associated with them), or of its second broad phase as documented in the para-canonical texts and the Abhidharma literature.\(^{21}\) I do not wish to enter the methodological, historical and philological maze surrounding this area of Buddhist studies, for my concerns in the present study are elsewhere. Following the commonly accepted, preliminary relative chronology of the Pali sources mentioned above, I shall adopt here the view that while the later works belonging to the second broad phase of Buddhist literature contain much that is apparently new and distinctive to a particular tradition ancestral to the Theravāda, they also contain a fair amount of material that is still part of the common heritage and earliest stratum of Buddhist thought as found in the *Nikāyas* (and *Āgamas*).\(^{22}\)

To make headway in understanding early Buddhism we might as well benefit from a stratification of the ideas and concepts contained in the Pali texts rather than of the texts alone. Thus although linguistic and historical concerns form a necessary part of this inquiry, what I have set out to do here is pursue a conceptual investigation into the development of Buddhist ideas, assuming first that Buddhism and philosophy are comparable and commensurate, and second that such an investigation must, at times, overstep the textual sources and involve philosophical reconstruction. For instance, when I characterize in Chapter 2 the Buddha’s teaching as process philosophy, or when I state in Chapter 4 that the canonical and post-canonical Abhidhamma is concerned with the problems of the intension and extension of individuation respectively, I do not thereby claim that this is what the ancient Buddhists ultimately had in mind, nor that this is how we ought to understand their position. Rather, I offer a possible reading of the development of Buddhist conceptual thought, which makes sense of it in the light of our knowledge of the history of philosophy, while preserving its unique, context-sensitive features. Since my analysis is concerned with the Theravāda views of issues that reside in between the terrains of epistemology and soteriology, philosophy of language, phenomenology of time and consciousness, metaphysics and ontology, these concerns require us briefly to address the question of the place of philosophy in Buddhist thought.

Reflecting on this subject, D. Seyfort Ruegg observes that in deciding whether Buddhist teaching is genuinely philosophical, much will depend on what we think philosophy is about. Representing itself as therapeutic and soteriological, Buddhism is not essentially philosophical if ‘philosophy’ denotes but analysis of concepts, language and meaning.\(^{23}\) As a teaching prescribing a path to the cessation of *dukkha*, Buddhism has had to develop a soteriological method that is
theoretically intelligible and satisfying, and hence within its framework soteriology and epistemology are interconnected. In line with Ruegg’s view, this study assumes that Buddhist thought – albeit irreducible to any single philosophy – can be meaningfully described as philosophical in the sense that philosophical thinking comprises a major part of its procedures and mindset, and that this philosophical dimension is heuristically necessary in the study of Buddhism.24

Weaving Buddhology with comparative philosophy, in addition to the Buddhist and Brahmanical sources I rely on Western philosophical literature from its Greek origins up to contemporary texts pertaining to analytic philosophy, philosophy of mind and cultural criticism. This eclecticism is intentional and methodologically motivated: here I follow Bimal Krishna Matilal’s apprehension of the study of classical Indian philosophy vis-à-vis analytic philosophy as exemplifying the inseparable relation between philosophical theory and Indian thought. Drawing on a wide range of both classical Indian and Anglo-American literary sources, Matilal’s work shows that through the study of such diverse literature and by giving the Indian material a genuine prospect of informing contemporary philosophical discussions, one can become immersed in the process of reinterpreting the values and the fundamental concepts of one’s own culture or tradition, thus revealing its mechanisms of self-awareness and approaching a critical, deeper understanding of the culture itself, perhaps from the inside.25

As for comparative philosophy, this is still in a formative stage and the ‘comparative method’ is far from being a completed project. Comparative studies, and such studies of Western and Indian philosophies specifically, are abundant in discussions of the problems of the comparative method and the various questions involved in it. These include such questions as whether there is a common ground for comparing Western and Indian philosophical-religious traditions and a universal medium through which they can communicate; whether revealing similarities between the two respective traditions is possible only at the cost of obliterating their different contexts, thus of misconstruing their doctrines; whether overemphasizing each tradition’s particular context does not lead one into yielding to the danger of conceptual relativism; whether we can understand, and if so to what extent, the Indian statements by drawing on Western philosophy, or what the study of Indian thought means if it leaves us without the guidance of Western terminology.26 This study presupposes that the questions of philosophy and their treatments by various traditions transcend considerations of time and place, and hence that there is, indeed, a basis for a cross-cultural comparison of such traditions as twentieth-century Western scholarship and early Buddhism. Still, we should bear in mind that the comparative method is not an end in itself. As Wilhelm Halbfass captures this point:

If ‘comparative philosophy’ is supposed to be philosophy, it cannot just be the comparison of philosophies. It cannot be the objectifying, juxtaposing, synoptic, comparative investigation of historical, anthropological data. Comparative philosophy is philosophy insofar as it aims at
self-understanding. It has to be ready to bring its own standpoint, and the conditions and the horizon of comparison itself, into the process of comparison which thus assumes the reflexive, self-referring dimension which constitutes philosophy.27

Cross-cultural comparisons frequently prove to have limited heuristic value. Every comparison ends with the vexing question ‘So what if X and Y are similar/different in such-and-such respects?’, and comparative philosophy should be able to answer that question. This is possible if we are willing to examine our conceptual distinctions that foster the conditions of the very act of comparison. The customary guiding method in dealing with non-Western texts has been to ask to what extent these texts solve our philosophical problems. This question, however, reads into the texts those issues by which the investigator is already seized and generates answers that depend upon his or her cultural determinants. Comparative philosophy should therefore reformulate the question and ask instead to what extent non-Western texts suggest that we should be asking different philosophical questions. ‘By asking this latter question’, Henry Rosemont stresses, ‘comparative philosophers can hope to revitalize philosophy in general by articulating alternative conceptual frameworks, showing how, why and that they make sense; and by so doing begin to develop a new conceptual framework that embodies the insights from a multiplicity of cultures, which can assist the ongoing work of human and biological scientists to solve the puzzles of what it is to be a human being’.28 We must constantly acknowledge the fact that our definitions and presuppositions may not be directly applicable to the Buddhist conceptual infrastructure. The comparative method can then turn terminological and conceptual ambiguities to its advantage by utilizing them to make sense of Buddhist thought and in its mirror to call into question our habitual categories and presuppositions that shape our approach to human experience and its relation to the environment. Comparative philosophy may thus become illuminating and innovative if it turns into a means to gaining self-awareness and novel insights into the nature of philosophy and religion qua thought and religion.

We are now able to describe our research topic more accurately. Although the Buddha is recorded as claiming to have no interest in purely theoretical questions because they are not conducive to nibbāna, this does not necessarily mean that he rejects metaphysical questions, or that in his teaching there is hardly any of what we may nowadays call a philosophy. Setting aside certain matters as unexplained itself has philosophical significance, for in philosophy, semantics and pragmatics the principle of relevance is recognized as essentially philosophical.29 As will be shown, despite the Buddha’s silence on ontological matters he clearly had a distinctive epistemology, subject to the constraints of which there followed, if only implicitly, a particular kind of metaphysics, and indeed a radical one. Subsequent generations continued to grapple with the Buddha’s heritage and to elaborate on his teaching, teasing out from it a clearer albeit different metaphysical theory, and stratifying it with conceptual realism. This process, as we shall see throughout
this book, is evidenced in the canonical Abhidhamma literature. Yet despite the Abhidhamma’s gradual movement towards reification of terms and concepts, we will see that in its early period it remained epistemologically geared, and that if a realist ontology is to be found in Theravādin thought then this is a post-canonical development derivative from the commentarial systematization of the earlier teachings.

Moreover, when dealing with the Theravādin mindset one contends with an ontology remarkably different from its customary construal in Western tradition. In the Theravādin arena ontology is bound up with what we may provisionally call psychology, and although it is concerned with what and how things really are, this reality is not necessarily external. Ontology here is grounded in a conceptual scheme that lacks the postulate of transcendence and holds a special place for the concept of kamma, that is, a particular kind of mentality, one’s ‘act of will’ or intention (cetanā). This means not only that the real is not necessarily external, but also that what something is could be equated with how it acts and what it does, and that the criteria of truth of ordinary judgements about what is real are rooted in one’s consciousness. Rather similar views are nowadays acceptable to Western mind and are even dominant among philosophical circles that, following such figures as Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Quine, endorse behaviouristic, pragmatic and holistic approaches to knowledge, meaning and existence. These views, though, sprang up at a very late stage in the history of Western thought and have been accompanied by a sense of philosophical crisis. They were anticipated by Kant (although he retains the picture of philosophy as an architectonic scheme providing a framework for inquiry in the form of a theory of knowledge), but gained importance as late as the nineteenth century and became dominant only in the twentieth century. The philosophical crisis they induce is connected with the rise of post-modernism, the deconstructionist criticism and the demise of foundational epistemology. These movements are regarded as offensive to the philosophical quest for commensurate truth and to rationality as a whole, because they dismiss both the idea of knowledge as an assemblage of accurate representations of an objective reality and the notion of apodictic philosophy as picking out the foundations of knowledge. Now throughout this study by ‘Western philosophy’ or ‘Western thought’ I mean the classical European tradition that dominated until the end of the eighteenth century. For this tradition epistemology as the foundational discipline of philosophy was thought to be distinct from psychology, and the idea that the world contains mind-independent entities, properties and relations was central to any ontological account of the real. Aligning this line of development in Western thought with the Theravāda thought-world may clarify that what the earliest Buddhist teaching offers is a deflationary notion of knowledge (albeit such that avoids a philosophical crisis or a sense of a threatening conceptual vacuum that needs to be filled), whereas what the Abhidhamma promulgates in response to this radical position is a more commonsensical view – pragmatic at first, and later, in the post-canonical period, a representational model of knowledge and an ensuing psychological ontology. We shall elaborate on this
issue in Chapters 4 and 5 while discussing the Abhidhamma conception of *dhamma* and its following metaphysics of mind.

## THE DOCTRINAL TRANSITION FROM THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING TO THE ABHIDHAMMA: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

It has become widely accepted to present the history of Buddhist thought as a struggle to come to terms with an account of one’s experience based on a conceptual infrastructure that does not presuppose an underlying substantial core unifying that experience. According to this portrayal, the history of Buddhist thought is the history of a continuing debate over the construction of reality and the self in substantial terms. The Buddha presents a vision of human experience as a transitory array of phenomena that are not held together by any underlying substrate. The Abhidharma’s account of this experience, by contrast, is based on the notion of ultimate, self-sufficient elements, that is, *dharmas*. Madhyamaka thought is then seen as a watershed in the history of Buddhist ideas: Nāgārjuna’s notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) demonstrates the logical impossibility of the Abhidharma ontological realism, and shows that the Buddha taught that everything was indeterminate and empty of its own-existence. Finally, the Yogācāra is said to have returned to a positive account of reality, although from the perspective of idealism and based on the workings of the mind, as embodied by the idea of ‘store consciousness’ (*ālaya-vijñāna*) entertained in the works of Vasubandhu. This general portrayal illustrates that the development of Buddhist thought hinges upon a long-lasting debate regarding the tradition’s notion of the term *dhamma*, its signification, and of what its true nature and its ontological status are. As Richard Gombrich has suggested, ‘the development of a Buddhist ontology, perhaps contrary to the Buddha’s intentions, might be traced through considering how the word *dhamma* is used’. This consideration underlies Chapter 2. I wish to take this idea one step further, though, and claim that the concept of *dhamma* lies at the core of a major metaphysical shift undergone by Buddhist thought during the period of the formation and fixation of the Abhidhamma. To make headway in comprehending the changing Abhidhamma doctrines they must be viewed in the light of this metaphysical shift.

What happened during this transitional period in the history of Theravādin thought is that the Abhidhammikas – in their attempt to elaborate on the Buddha’s teaching (*Dhamma*), to construct it in theoretical terms and to provide an all-inclusive systematization of its set of truths and principles (*dhammas*) – inclined towards contemplating these principles as determined particulars, and in due course as primary elements (*dhammas*). They thus put more emphasis on the nature and status of the events constitutive of one’s conscious experience as taught by the Buddha, rather than on how the consciousness process as a whole operates. As Rupert Gethin notes with reference to the transition from using the
singular form *dhamma* to the plural *dhammas*,

[T]he relationship between *dhamma* and *dhammas* has been insufficiently examined by modern scholarship. This is in part the result of a tendency to view *dhammas* as the exclusive domain of the later Abhidhama literature, both canonical and commentarial. The assumption is that the *dhammas* of the Abhidhama constitute a scholastic elaboration somewhat removed in spirit and time from the ‘original’ *dhamma* of the Buddha.\(^\text{33}\)

Contemporary scholars have construed the major difference between the Buddha’s teaching and the Abhidhama in terms of a shift from *how* to *what*: from a concern with how one knows and how one experiences one’s world, to asking what there is in the world. Gombrich has thus indicated that the consistency of the Buddha’s interest in ‘how’ rather than in ‘what’ gains weight by his emphasis on physical and mental processes rather than on objects, as well as by his dismissal of ontological matters.\(^\text{34}\) Along the same line of thought, Sue Hamilton has suggested that the analysis of the human being into five *khandhas* is not an analysis of what the human being consists of, but of the processes or events by which one’s experience is constituted and which one needs to understand.\(^\text{35}\) Yet what are those phenomena – those physical and mental processes – that the Buddha discusses? They are all knowable phenomena as presented in consciousness; they are *dhammas*. Hence, the shifting emphasis from ‘how’ to ‘what’ and the growing interest in ontology hinge, first and foremost, upon the concept of *dhamma*.

This means that at the kernel of what is perhaps the most striking doctrinal transition in the history of Theravādin thought and in the development of early Indian Buddhism in general, underlying the supposedly degenerative and scholastic character of the Abhidhama, lies the tradition’s changing outlook of the nature of a *dhamma*: of what it means to be a specific *dhamma*. This question is crucial to the objective of the present monograph and will be pursued throughout the following chapters.

**AN OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS**

Chapter 1 delineates the historical and doctrinal backdrop of the rise of the various Abhidharma schools: it surveys the contemporary intellectual milieu during the transitional period from the Nikāya mindset to the institutionalized tradition ancestral to the Theravāda, advancing the prevalent scholarly accounts of the evolution of the Pali Abhidhama and its literary genre.

Assuming that at the heart of the doctrinal transition from the first teachings of the Buddha to the canonical Abhidhama lies a shift in the tradition’s construal of the concept of *dhamma*, Chapter 2 explores the development of this concept and the formation of the *dhamma* theory. Examining the evolution of this theory along with two of its closely related doctrines – the doctrine of atomism and the doctrine of momentariness – this chapter shows that the major doctrinal shift in the history of early
Buddhism is best understood in terms of a change in epistemological attitude and metaphysical foundation. Specifically, I find that the Abhidhamma theoreticians drew from the Buddha’s epistemological position a metaphysical outlook that fostered a shift from analysing conscious experience in terms of processes to analysing it in terms of events, that is, from process to event metaphysics. The operative conceptual scheme implicit in the Buddha’s teachings, which I identify with the concept of dhamma as a psycho-physical process, is thus replaced in the early Abhidhamma with the understanding of a dhamma qua an event as analytical primitive.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Theravādin shifting apprehension of the term sabhāva, a key concept in the evolution of Buddhist doctrinal thought, from its earliest occurrences in the para-canonical texts to its elaboration in the Atthakathā and the sub-commentaries. Drawing on the recognition that the doctrine of sabhāva cannot sensibly be isolated from the evolving dhamma theory and its underlying metaphysical shift, I show that the overall treatment of the concept of sabhāva attests to the Theravādins’ concern with matters of epistemology and language rather than of ontology, and that such an interest in ontology arose relatively late and was desultory rather than systematic.

Chapter 4 further investigates the Abhidhamma metaphysical vision. I identify the dhamma theory as centred on the individuation of one’s conscious experience, and examine its application within the Abhidhamma event-based analysis of the consciousness process (citta-vīthi). Discussing the Vaiśeṣika and the early Grammarians’ notions of definition and categorization as sources that are likely to have influenced the Abhidhamma dhamma theory, I clarify in what way the Theravādin conception of ontology is suffused with language and psychology. The chapter concludes with an appraisal of the Abhidhamma’s growing interest in the individuation of nibbāna, thus accounting for the post-canonical, fourfold dhamma typology.

Chapter 5 deals with another major aspect of the doctrinal transition undergone by early Buddhist thought, namely, the development of the Buddhist notion of causation. Having presented the doctrine of dependent co-arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) as an account of causation that relies on the concept of kamma, I investigate the transition from this early doctrine to the Abhidhamma’s complex theory of relations of causal conditioning (paccaya) as represented in its seventh book, the Paṭṭhāna, showing that this theory is not about causation at all but rather forms an integral part of the overarching project of the individuation of the mental.

The book concludes with a reappraisal of the philosophical implications and tenability of the Abhidhamma’s metaphysical vision, pointing to its weaknesses and to ‘proto-Mādhyamika elements’ in the Buddha’s teaching.

The translations from the Pali and Sanskrit are my own unless otherwise indicated.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Eco 1999: 18. Although this by no means implies that that ‘“something” somewhere’ is necessarily unitary.
3 On the formulation of the definition and the population questions see Witt 1989: 7–8.
4 Hamlyn 1995; Walsh 1997: Ch. 1.
7 The ten indeterminate questions are put forward by Māluṅkyaputta (M I 42ff.), Utiya (A V 193ff.), Poṭṭhapāda (D I 187ff.) and by Vacchagotta (S IV 395ff.). Several questions are discussed at S II 22ff. and A IV 68ff. A larger list of undeclared issues is treated in the same way throughout S IV 374–403 and at D III 135ff.
8 For an exposition of the basic principles of phenomenology corresponding to these features and for primary bibliography see: Hammond et al. 1991: 1–3; Howarth 1998 ‘Phenomenology epistemic issues in’: §1–3; Dainton 2000: 1–4; Kopf 2000: 120–1; Moran 2000: 1–22; Schües 2000: 104–5. The doctrines of the twelve āyatana and the eighteen dhātu as well as their relation to the dhamma theory are discussed in Chapter 2. Dedicated to a philosophical exploration of the dhamma theory, Chapter 4 explicates in what sense this theory is a reply to the Buddha’s challenge of the representationalist model of knowledge and conceptual thought.
9 Bodhi 1993: 4 and Piatigorsky 1984: 8 respectively. In the latter place Piatigorsky says: ‘[I]f in the Suttas one is urged, taught or otherwise instructed how to form the conscious experience of one’s life, in Abhidhamma it is the conscious experience itself which is exposed, categorized and classified to be thought of, meditated on, memorized and recollected as such. That is, without any returning to the phenomena of life, taken outside or without consciousness.’ Piatigorsky adds that the Abhidhamma centres on ‘the postulate of “the rise of thought”, the fundamental precondition of any phenomenal existence whatsoever’ (1984: 9). Gradinarov (1990: 11–13) similarly suggests that the dharmas analysed by the Abhidhamma are the phenomenological data which constitute experience and that the dhamma theory is a self-reflective account of this experience. See also Waldron 2002: 12–14 and his recent monograph on the ālayavijñāna in Indian Yogācāra, where he characterizes Abhidharmic discourse expressed in terms of dharmas as depending upon ‘a phenomenological analysis of experience in descriptive terms’ (2003: 53; emphasis in the original). Along the same lines of thought, in his investigation of Yogācāra Dan Lusthaus has recently taken up expressing Buddhism (in general) phenomenologically, since it is ‘a type of phenomenology; Yogācāra even more so’ (2002: viii). Lusthaus argues that ‘Buddhist phenomenology’ is the basic investigation of dharmas as the phenomena that constitute experience, and that this reached its peak in the Yogācāra school (2002: 4 and Ch. 1).
10 Thanks are due to Paul Williams and Jonardon Ganeri for this qualification.
12 Frauwallner 1995: 8 and 11. Yet again Peter Masefield (1986: 162) argues that the Abhidhamma scholastic analysis, misrepresenting the Nikāyas, testifies to an ideal which ‘lost contact with the Dhamma as the Deathless’. See also Collins (1982: 225), who opens his discussion of momentariness and the bhavanga mind by citing the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry on ‘scholasticism’.
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17 Ibid.: 20–1.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.: 171–2. On the mechanism of appropriation see also Stewart 2000: 38 and Stewart and Carl 2003. Thanks are due to David B. Gray for these two references.
21 For a lucid presentation of the historical and critical study of early Pali literature and its problematic aspects see Gethin 1992a: 6–16.
25 For instance, in his paper ‘India without mystification: comments on Nussbaum and Sen’ (2002: 386–401), Matilal says: ‘Communities of human beings constitute the substrata of ethical virtues and values. Hence we cannot talk about values without “humanizing” them. An “unexampled” (apratisiddha) value is a non-value. Our conditions, ways of life, hopes and desires, pleasures and pains, almost weave together in our informal consideration and search for truth and values. Rationality is here immersed in human society rather than detached and standing “on the rim of heaven.” […] The internal reflection process that assesses values gradually reveals hidden inconsistencies, unclarities and confusions, and pushes its way ahead, leading to self-discovery on the basis of shared and sharable beliefs. It will be a self-discovery. […] More interesting, however, is the point where the so-called “internal” critique is supposed to transcend cultural boundaries. We need not quibble about the term “internal.” But the argument seems to be based upon a holistic approach. Criticism leading to value-rejection often looks beyond the sub-cultural boundaries.’ (389 and 391)
26 See, for example, Rosemont, ‘Against relativism’; Krishna, ‘Comparative philosophy: what it is and what it ought to be’; Smart, ‘The analogy of meaning and the tasks of comparative philosophy’; all are in Larson and Deutsch 1988. Also Ruegg 1995: 154–5.
30 Note that ‘psychology’ is just as problematic a qualifier of the Buddhist mindset: we tend to think of psychology as a branch of the social sciences, the science of behaviour, but this is not quite what Buddhism is concerned with in its discussions of the rise and the cessation of dukkha.
31 On this development in the history of modern Western thought see Rorty 1980: Chs 3 and 4.
32 Gombrich 1996: 34.
35 Hamilton 1996: e.g. xxiii–xxiv, 149–51, 169–70 and 194–6; Hamilton 2000: e.g. 82–4, 118–19, 137–8, 161–4 and 177–84.
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THE FURTHER TEACHING

Abhidhamma thought in context

1.1 THE ORIGIN OF THE ANCIENT BUDDHIST SCHOOLS AND THE ADVENT OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

The early history of Buddhism in India and of the school now referred to as Theravāda is remarkably little known and the attempt to construct a consistent chronology of that history still engrosses the minds of contemporary scholars. There is, however, a generally accepted tradition that in the course of the second and third centuries after the Buddha’s mahāparinibbāna (hereafter BE) the Saṅgha divided into a number of teacher’s lineages (ācariyakula), doctrines (vāda; ācariyavāda) and fraternities (nikāya), and was subject to various doctrinal changes, refinements and shifts of emphasis that were part of the gradual systematization of Buddhism and its development from an oral teaching to an institutionalized tradition (sāsana).¹ To understand the processes in question it is necessary first to distinguish the formation of different sects and teachers’ lineages around doctrinal issues from the notion of formal division in the Saṅgha (saṅgha-bheda).

It was but natural that in tandem with the Saṅgha’s spread across Northern India, and subsequently throughout the subcontinent, various groups of monks assembled around charismatic teachers and came to endorse divergent positions on certain points of the teaching. Yet in addressing the complex problem of the origin of the ancient Indian Buddhist schools we must bear in mind that we are dealing with orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy: splitting the Saṅgha is a technically precise matter and is always measured in terms of vinaya alone, so that holding a particular view of any doctrinal matter cannot be the grounds for a schism in or expulsion from the Saṅgha. Noticeably, the fundamental acts of the Saṅgha contrast in their plainness with the ritual elaboration involved in the public religious ceremonies of the lay Buddhist population. Two such communal acts are constitutive of the Saṅgha and form the subject of the first two chapters of the Khandhaka portion of the Vinaya-piṭaka: the first is the higher ordination (upasampadā, as opposed to pabbajjā, a novice’s ‘lower ordination’); the second, which the Buddha saw as the focal point of monastic life, is the fortnightly recital of the pātimokkha, also known as the uposatha ceremony. Since the quorum for
holding a pātimokkha ceremony is four, a Saṅgha can split only when there are at least four votes on each side, and this occurs when a community of monks (and nuns) has a disagreement which causes two groups of more than three monks to hold separate uposatha ceremonies (and other ceremonies as well, but the pātimokkha recital is both the most frequent and the most important). The disagreement is likely to be over a vinaya point, but whatever the source of the disagreement, the result is measured in terms of holding separate pātimokkha ceremonies. It is a monk’s or a nun’s loyalty to a certain pātimokkha code, then, that determines their Saṅgha fellowship. When a body of monks or nuns who share the same pātimokkha code develops as a separate entity by holding its own ceremony of higher ordination, it becomes a sect or fraternity (nikāya), and this is what incites the formation of different lineages within the Saṅgha.² Thus while the division into Sthaviras/Theriyas and Mahāsāṅghikas, to which we shall refer in greater detail shortly, represents a formal splitting of the Saṅgha into two fraternities, under each of these two groups there emerged numerous informal schools of thought and teachers’ lineages.

Tradition has it that by the time the Mahāyāna doctrines arose, roughly in the first century BCE, there were eighteen sub-sects or schools of Sthaviras, the tradition ancestral to the Theravāda, although different Buddhist sources preserve divergent lists of schools which add up to more than eighteen. The number eighteen is symbolic and has evidently become conventional in Buddhist historiography.³ In fact, as L.S. Cousins notes, this number is both too small and too large: on the one hand, the texts seem to struggle to identify eighteen different major schools, while, on the other hand, the likelihood is that the earliest Saṅgha was only loosely organized and there must have been large numbers of independent local groupings of monks and monasteries.⁴ The ‘eighteen schools’ were indeed associated with distinct doctrinal views – often on moot Abhidhamma points – but the doctrinal opinion was unlikely to have originally caused their division. As long as distinct groups of monks adhered to essentially the same vinaya and recognized the validity of each other’s ordination lineage, movement between the groups presented no problem and there was no ground for a formal split within the Saṅgha. Moreover, not every school had its own distinctive textual tradition: in fact, the vinaya tradition suggests that there were roughly six distinct canonical traditions in addition to the Pali one. These are the Mahāsāṅghika, the Vatsuputriya-Sammatiya, the Sarvāstivāda, the Kāśyapīya, the Dharmaguptaka and the Mahāsāka.⁵

An account of the first two Buddhist communal recitations or Councils (saṅgīti) is found in all the surviving recensions of the Vinaya-piṭaka, and according to all these versions the decisions taken at the second communal recitation, known as the Vesālī Council (roughly 70–80 BCE), were accepted by all parties.⁶ Later sources, however, suggest that at some point following the Vesālī Council the primitive Saṅgha formally divided into two parties, the Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṅghikas, each of which thenceforth had its own ordination traditions. The traditional accounts of this event are much later, and hence are already the products of the sectarian division in question that have their own underlying ideologies. There are
two inconsistent accounts of the emergence of this first division of the Saṅgha. The first, of Sarvāstivādin origin, is based on the Mahāvibhāṣā (third century CE) and on the Samayabhedoparacanacakra (T 49) – a Northern treatise attributed to a *Vasumitra (third or fourth century CE), extant in three Chinese and one Tibetan translation – as well as on many later sources that follow them. According to this line of thought, the division of the Saṅgha was provoked by a dispute over the ‘Five Points’ advanced by a monk named Mahādeva, concerning the behaviour of an arahat and whether he might be provided by others with material things or with mundane information due to his lack of knowledge and uncertainty, and whether he may make utterances and hear sounds while in a meditative attainment.7

The second account, of TheraṆādin and Mahāsāṅghika origin, attributes the division to a disagreement over certain questions of vinaya. The Dīpavamsa (V 30ff.) (early fourth century CE) thus traces the origin of the Mahāsāṅghikas as deriving from the defeated party at the Vesālī Council, and is followed in this by the later Sinhalese chronicles. Yet, as Cousins remarks, the commentarial tradition of the Mahāvihāra was unlikely to have preserved an account of the origin of the ‘eighteen schools’, for the Samantapāsādika does not explain this issue while the commentary to the Kathāvatthu does, relating in this context to the Dīpavamsa’s and Mahāvamsa’s reports.8 The source that attests to the Mahāsāṅghika version of the first division of the Saṅgha is the Śāriputraparipṛcchā (T 1465: 900b) – an eclectic text of a Magadhan origin extant in Chinese and dated roughly to the third century CE. Unlike the Ceylon tradition, this treatise sees the Mahāsāṅghika not as the defeated party at Vesālī, but as the conservative party that preserved the original vinaya unchanged against reformist efforts of the Sthaviras to create a reorganized and stricter version.9 Yet given the subjective perspective of this source the likelihood is that the Mahāsāṅghikas were but the larger party resisting a reformist change in the discipline than the bearers of the ‘original’ vinaya.10

The emerging picture as portrayed by recent scholarship is that the earliest division of the Saṅgha was primarily a matter of monastic discipline, though the Mahāsāṅghikas cannot directly be traced through the defeated party at the Vesālī Council.11 In view of the growing scholarly consensus that dates the Buddha’s death at the end of the fifth century BCE,12 this fundamental division into Sthaviras and Mahāsāṅghikas occurred some time around the beginning of the third century BCE. Throughout the subsequent two centuries or so doctrinal disputes arose among these two parties, resulting in the formation of additional sub-schools. Again, the sources available to us of the history of these schools are quite late: aside from the references to the Buddhist Councils contained in the vinaya collections of various sects, these include certain inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī or Brāhmī from the Kuṣāṇa period that indicate the presence of certain schools in various places, lists of masters, records of Chinese translators and the diaries of Chinese pilgrims, fragments of Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma texts, and traditional works documenting the disputes among the schools, such as the later strata of the Kathāvatthu, the abovementioned treatise attributed to *Vasumitra, and Bhavya’s Nikāyabhedaḥaviṅgaṅgavyākhyāna (fourth century).13
It is legitimate to assume, though, that the early Buddhist schools must have been for a long period fraternities based on minor *vinaya* differences only, and it may well be the case that at least some of these schools represent *de facto* divisions. Thus rather than portraying the Buddhist community in its early formative period as a homogeneous order within which an initial schism resulted in subsequent fragmentation, it might be better to adopt a model of a haphazardly scattered community in which natural variation in doctrine and in disciplinary codes was interpreted by the later tradition as the foundation of subsequent sects and schools of thought. We are not dealing here with schisms in the tradition, but with doctrinal dissensions; not with disparate denominations, but with informal intellectual branches that developed spontaneously due to the geographical extension of the community over the entire Indian subcontinent and subject to the particular problems each Saṅgha confronted. In fact, differences in the *pātimokkha* code may have arisen not so much from disagreements on *vinaya* matters as from the geographical isolation of different groupings of monks. Each monastic community tended to specialize in a specific branch of learning, had its own practical customs and relations with lay circles, and was influenced by the particular territories, economy, use of language and dialect, the types of clothing and food prevalent in its environment. Indeed the names of the ‘eighteen schools’ are indicative of their origins in characteristic teachings, geographical locations, or the legacy of particular teachers and founders: for instance, Sautrāntikas, Haimavatas, or Vātsīputrīyas respectively.¹⁴

In conformity with the Sammatiya tradition cited by Bhavya and with the Sinhalese ‘long chronology’ which places Aśoka’s accession in 218 BE, all the ‘eighteen schools’ were already in existence by 200 BE, before Aśoka came to the throne. Yet according to both the ‘short chronology’ provided by Sanskrit works of Sarvāstivādin origin and the treatise of *Vasumitra* that places Aśoka’s accession in 100 BE (a suspiciously round figure which should properly be seen as ideal and symbolic), divisions among the Stāviras do not begin until the third century BE, a century after Aśoka came to the throne.¹⁵ Indeed *Vasumitra* presents the early Stāvira schools as eighteen but, as Cousins explains in his study of the early schools ancestral to the Theravāda, he intentionally exaggerates the degree of differences among the various schools and probably their number, thus pursuing his agenda of portraying Mainstream Buddhism as disputatious and dogmatic in contrast with the early Mahāyāna, which was put forward as a non-sectarian movement.¹⁶ It should also be noted that what has been presented as other divergent lists of schools based on additional sources, including the Pali version as found in the Sinhalese chronicles and in the *Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā*, are in fact variations derived from *Vasumitra’s* list. The only available textual source that is independent of *Vasumitra* is contained in the *Tarkajvalā*. Preserved in Tibetan, this treatise is attributed to *Bhavya* or *Bhā(va)viveka* and dates to a period between the seventh and the tenth centuries, although the information it preserves is relatively early.¹⁷

The Sinhalese Theravāda tradition traces its lineage through the Vibhajjāvādins. Inscriptional evidence from Nāgārjunakonda and Amarāvatī *stūpas* confirms that
the Vibhajjavādins were part of the Theriya/Sthavira tradition, and links them to
the Mahāvihāravāsin school at Anurādhapura as well as to the ‘Tambapannakas’—
a name that is likely to have referred originally to monks living in the island of
Taprobane and in the first centuries CE was adopted by their disciples, until it went
out of use among the surviving non-Mahāsaṅghika schools and was replaced by
Theriya and Theravādin or by Mahāvihāravāsin.\textsuperscript{18} Cousins has shown that the evi-
dence arising from a range of sources—the abovementioned inscriptions, various
Pali texts (beginning with the \textit{Cullavagga}, going through the \textit{Dipavamsa}, the
\textit{Visuddhimagga}, the Abhidhamma commentary, and up to later sources from the
thirteenth century), and the doxographical material used in the *\textit{Tarkajvālā}—
combines to present a picture of several related Vibhajjavāda branches, of which
the primary four are the Dharmaguptakas, the Mahāsakas, the Kāśyapīyas
and the Tambapannas, with the first three particularly strong in the North-West and
the last predominating further south.\textsuperscript{19} Roughly in the first century CE, along with the
demise of the other Vibhajjavādin schools in most parts of India, the Sinhalese
Vibhajjavādin tradition was able to spread out in Southern India and parts of
South-East Asia. It is the worldview of this Vibhajjavādin school that is preserved
in the Pali canonical Abhidhamma.

The Sarvāstivādins emerged as an independent school from within the Theriyas
about the second or first century BCE, though this does not preclude the possibil-
ity that a certain group having Sarvāstivādin tendencies had existed within the
Theriyas from an earlier period. The traditional reason given for the recognition
of the Sarvāstivādins as a distinct sect is their ‘All-exists’ doctrine, meaning that
the \textit{dhammas} which constitute everything accessible to sentient experience exist in
the three time periods. According to the Pali sources the Vibhajjavādins or
‘Distinctionists’ were the favoured party in a dispute over this Abhidhamma issue:
they held that \textit{dhammas} exist in the present, denied their existence in the future,
while as regards the past made a distinction between \textit{dhammas} that have issued
their karmic fruit and hence no longer exist, and those past \textit{dhammas} that have
not yet issued their karmic fruit and can still be said to exist. The doctrinal dis-
pute over this Abhidhamma matter is associated with a third communal recitation
that took place at the Aśokarāma monastery (also known as Kukkutārāma) in
Pātaliputra. This Council was presided by Moggaliputtatissa and lasted nine
months, during which he composed the \textit{Kathāvatthu} that epitomizes the
Vibhajjavādin worldview and refutes the positions of rival parties.\textsuperscript{20} The date of
the Third Council is generally given as the year 236 BE, that is, eighteen years into
Aśoka’s reign (or, according to the \textit{Mahāvamsa}, seventeen), but in the \textit{Atthasālinī}
Buddhaghosa prefers the year 218 BE,\textsuperscript{21} while recent scholarship agrees in dating
Aśoka’s inauguration between 136 and 145 BE (277–268 BCE), a chronology that
accordingly locates the third communal recitation between 154 and 165 BE
(259–250 BCE).\textsuperscript{22} At any rate, the Theravādins cannot be directly equated with the
Vibhajjavādins of this ancient dispute, for the traditional Theravādin position on
the existence of \textit{dhammas} in the three times as presented in the \textit{Kathāvatthu} is
that present \textit{dhammas} alone exist.\textsuperscript{23}
In fact, the reason for the dispute underlying the Third Council as given in the Pali sources seems to be far more closely related to a *vinaya* matter. Following Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism, the lavish state patronage and the Sangha’s increasing revenue attracted non-Buddhists who were masquerading as Buddhist monks and teaching their own doctrines without being properly ordained or keeping to the rules of the *vinaya*. It was acknowledged that people who joined the monastic community simply to benefit from its security and the spiritual and material support it enjoyed corrupted the Sangha, and the need to expel these people brought about a change in the early Sangha’s relationship to society. In his social-psychological exploration of the origins of early Buddhism, Torkel Brekke designates it ‘a change from an outwardly minded conversionism to withdrawal and segregation – to introversionism’.24 This shifting attitude included four important aspects of early Buddhist monasticism: the gradual development of strict admission procedures, the emphasis on unity, the mental segregation by outward appearance and the physical segregation by separate dwellings.25 It is in relation to this social backdrop that the Theravādin account of the Third Council should be read.

According to this account discord prevailed among the inhabitants of the Asokārāma roughly for seven years, and since the monks refused to co-operate with the non-Buddhists the *uposatha* ceremony was being celebrated by incomplete assemblies.26 After a violent, failed attempt to rectify this situation, the outsiders were identified and expelled from the monastery under Ashoka’s auspices. Subsequently, other monks (probably from affiliated monasteries belonging to the same *nikāya*) were summoned and declared that the Buddha was a Vibhajjavādin. Having confirmed this, Moggaliputtatissa organized the third communal recitation, during which he composed the *Kathāvatthu*.27 In the Pali *Ṭīkā* the word *vibhajjavādin* signifies both an epithet for the Buddha and a name of the school whose members considered themselves to preserve the undistorted teaching of the founder. Cousins observes that the account of the third communal recitation gains its effectiveness from the double meaning of the word Vibhajjavādin and can only have been composed at a time when the word was already known as the name of that school.28 Indeed, as Richard Gombrich remarks, this account says nothing about Buddhist doctrine or Buddhist sect formation, as the false monks who merit expulsion were never Buddhist at all.29

The story of the Third Council is peculiar to the Theravādin tradition and has been treated by scholars with scepticism because of various implausible features in it.30 Although Ashoka’s so-called Schism Edict buttresses the fact that some sort of dispute did occur at Pātaliputra during his reign, it may be the case, as K.R. Norman suggests, that the account of a third communal recitation as given in the Pali sources conflates two different issues: the exposition of the *Kathāvatthu* and a dispute over a *vinaya* matter.31 Certain Vibhāṣā-based sources from the sixth century ce, such as Paramārtha’s *Commentary on Vasumitra* (T 2300) and his pupil’s San lun hsüan (T 1852), are also suggestive of a dispute at Pātaliputra during Ashoka’s reign, but indicate that it was marked by the controversies provoked by the ‘Five Points’ of Mahādeva.32
The inconsistencies clouding the emergence of the Sarvāstivāda as a distinct sect notwithstanding, archaeological and inscriptional remains show that by the time of the Kuśāna empire (first half of the first century CE) the Sarvāstivādins were well established in both Mathurā and Kaśmīra. Various Sarvāstivādin branches were developed, among which are the Vātsīputrīyas-Sammatīyas and the Sautrāntikas.33 That further divisions among these branches occurred over time is confirmed by the literary record of the debates of Sarvāstivādin groups, but whether these various groups were independent sects in terms of the criterion of independent vinaya and ordination lineage or rather schools distinguished by doctrinal interpretation cannot be determined with certainty. Another notable branch is that of the Mūlasarvāstivādins: the historical and textual relationship between this school and the Sarvāstivādins is by no means clear, but we do know that despite the affiliation between their Canons, these two groups transmitted different Prātimokṣas, Vinayas and Sūtras.34

As for the Mahāsāṅghikas, according to the Sammatīya tradition preserved by Bhavya the Mahāsāṅghikas divided into two schools subsequent to the formation of the Puggalavāda. The same two schools – the Kaukkutikas and the Ekavyavahārikas – are mentioned in the Dīpavamsa and in other Pali sources with reference to the first division of the Mahāsāṅghikas. Several other North-Western sources count a third branch, the Lokottaravādins, while for *Vasumitra there were already eight Mahāsāṅghika branches by the end of the second century BCE.35

The Abhidharma/Abhidhamma texts are by and large compositions contemporary with this formative period in the history of the early schools, providing the means by which one group could define itself and defend its position against the divergent interpretations and criticisms of other parties. Although much of the Abhidhamma mindset and something of its method go back to the earliest substratum of Buddhist thought alongside the Nikāyas, the main body of its literature contains interpretations of the Sutta material that are specific to particular schools of thought, and philosophical elaborations of selectively emphasized doctrinal issues that continued to be refined by subsequent generations of monks who contributed to the consolidation of the schools.

According to Cousins, an analysis of the Kathāvatthu evinces three primary phases in the development of Abhidhamma discussion.36 The first phase is the development of a literary genre consisting of constructed dilemmas, of which some contents proceed from older sources, albeit their formulation is indicative of Abhidhamma fashion. The Puggalakathā and the sections dealing with the Sarvāstivāda attest to the second and preponderant phase, which is marked by a three-way exchange between the Puggalavāda, the Sarvāstivāda and the Vibhajjavāda – the three schools for which we have textual evidence of a coherent doctrinal structure emerging from the early period (but of which the relationship to the Mahāsāṅghikas is unclear). The third phase is the subsequent reshaping of Abhidhamma discussion in response to the growing contacts with the Mahāsāṅghika schools. The Sammatīya tradition cited by Bhavya locates the first phase prior to the Mauryan period, while, approximately in line with Bhavya,
the Pali sources suggest that the second phase corresponds to the reign of Aśoka. This, however, cannot be reconciled with the ‘short chronology’ given by the Sarvāstivādin sources.

The development of the Abhidhamma, though, was given impetus not only by monastic debates concerning the doctrine (abhidhamma-kathā) between the ancestors of the Theravādins and their Buddhist rivals, but also by the intellectual challenges posed by the contemporary Brahmanical darśanas. It thus happened that the Abhidhamma texts became a medium by which Buddhist masters developed their positions through the stimulating debate with non-Buddhist opponents. These, with their evolving traditions of Vedic exegesis, logic and epistemology, impelled the Abhidhammikas to adopt philosophical methods of analysis and discussion, to consolidate the Buddha’s scattered teachings and to ground them in an ordered doctrinal framework. One Brahmanical school notable in this respect, of which interrelations with the Abhidhamma are discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, is the Vaiśeṣika.

1.2 ABHIDHAMMA LITERARY STYLE AND GENRE

The term abhidhamma is multivalent and amenable to various interpretations. Scholarly opinion has generally been divided between two alternative interpretations, both of which hinge upon the denotation of the prefix abhi. First, taking abhi in the sense of ‘with regard to’, abhidhamma is understood as a discipline whose subject matter is the Dhamma or Teaching. Second, using abhi in the sense of preponderance and distinction, abhidhamma has also been deemed a distinct and higher teaching, the further Teaching or its essence; that which goes beyond what is given in the Buddha’s discourses, in a sense somewhat reminiscent of the term ‘metaphysics’.37 One way by which the exegetical tradition describes the difference between the Sutta and Abhidhamma methods of instructing the teaching is in terms of a contrast between something that requires further exposition for clarity, because it is merely ‘a way of putting things’ (pariyāyadesanā), and that which does not need any further explication, because it is couched in non-figurative, definitely put terms (nippariyāya-desanā).38 Another similar commentarial differentiation is that the suttas explain the fundamental principles of Buddhist thought – namely, the five aggregates, the four noble truths, dependent co-arising, the sense spheres, the elements of cognition, etc. – only in part (ekadesen’ eva), whereas the Abhidhamma expounds them in full, not restricting its elucidation to a single aspect (nippadesena), while applying the methods of Suttanta exposition, Abhidhamma exposition and catechism or interrogation (pañhapucchaka).39 Although the canonical Abhidhamma literature does not explicitly make such a distinction between the teaching in application subject to various circumstances versus the higher, ultimate teaching, it certainly contrasts Suttanta and Abhidhamma methods, as the structures of the Vibhaṅga or the Kathāvatthu emblematize.
The prevalent accounts of the historical origin and development of Abhidhamma literature proceed from two explanatory tendencies based on two distinctive characteristics of the genre. According to the first line of thought, there is a close relationship between the evolution of the Abhidhamma treatises and an established feature they manifest, namely, the arrangement of major parts of the material around lists of various types. In fact, such textual structuring dates to the beginning of Buddhist literature: the earliest Buddhist literature is an oral textual tradition and was built up around mnemonic lists. The Nikāyas thus contain numerous classification lists, or, more literally, matrices (mātikā/mātrkā) of doctrinal topics, which offer summaries or condensed shorthand accounts of the Buddha’s Dhamma. Among these lists we find the four noble truths, the four states of absorption in meditation (jhāna), the five aggregates (khandha), the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa), the six sense faculties (saḷāyatana) that along with their six corresponding object fields or sense data make up the twelve sense spheres (also called āyatana), the six higher types of knowledge (abhiññā), the seven factors of awakening (bojjhāga), the noble eightfold path, the twelfold chain of depend- ent co-arising (paticcasamuppāda) or the eighteen elements of cognition (dhātu, namely, the twelve āyatanas plus their six corresponding types of cognitive awareness). There are also composite ‘meta-lists’ that appear to have evolved out of an analysis of extant lists and the categorization of the resultant items into further lists. Such are the analysis embodied in the sattatiṃsa bodhipakkhiyā dhammā, that is, the post-canonical list of the thirty-seven dhammas that contribute to awakening, or the khandhāyatanaṅadhātu threefold scheme that embraces the five aggregates, the twelve sense spheres and the eighteen elements of cognition. The Nikāya lists are organized according to either topical or numerical criteria. Topically, the items enumerated are divided into different types based on some doctrinal principle. Lists of this kind abound in the Saṃyutta-nikāya. Numerically, the lists catalogue groups of identical number of items, or groups of items that sequentially increase in their number, commencing with one or two items and proceeding to higher numbers. This method is employed, for example, in the Saṅgiti and Dassuttara-suttas, as well as in the Ānguttara-nikāya.40

The term mātikā, then, came to denote any ordered table of items summarizing the Buddha’s teaching and sustaining further explication of fundamental doctrinal topics. This usage consolidated in the commentaries, where mātikā means ‘a summary’. The term mātikā, however, originally had a narrower meaning and probably signified a set of key words, similarly to udāna. In the four primary Nikāyas (most extensively in the Ānguttara collection) and in the Vinaya-piṭaka the term mātikā features as the first member of the compound mātikā-dhara, itself part of the stock description of the accomplished, learned senior monk: ‘one who has heard much, one to whom the tradition has been handed down, the bearer of the dhamma, of the discipline and of the mātikā’.41 This implies that monks who pursued the study of the Buddha’s teaching and were involved in the doctrinal elaboration on key words from his sermons were called mātikā-dhara. The commentaries explicate mātikā in the compound mātikā-dhara as referring to the two
\textit{pañimokkhas}, the bare lists of rules for fully ordained monks and nuns extracted from the \textit{Vinaya’s Suttavibhaṅga}. Yet it seems that this interpretation is too restricted and that the sequence \textit{dhamma vinaya mātikā} ought to correspond to the sequence of the three canonical collections, namely, \textit{sutta vinaya abhidhamma} respectively. This surmise is supported by the extant Abhidhamma canonical works.

Towards the end of the Nikāya period, around the third century BCE, a new movement in Buddhist thought and literature emerged, to which the Abhidhamma treatises bear witness. As part of the natural development of the Buddhist sāsana, the tradition ancestral to the Theravāda underwent various doctrinal changes, and this natural course of development was enhanced by the debates that arose both with Brahmanical rivals and with other Buddhist circles. The Abhidhammikas were therefore required to clarify their doctrinal concepts and define them in clear-cut theoretical terms, to analyse each item of the Buddha’s teachings and then synthetically construct its relations to all other items so as to reveal its proper place within the \textit{Dhamma} as a whole. Moreover, the early tradition must have found the extant ordering of doctrinal topics lacking and supported a shift towards a more formal practice of analysing individual \textit{dhammas}. This paved the way for numerous possibilities of \textit{dhamma} classifications and categories, so that the process of drawing out \textit{dhamma} lists became almost infinite – a practice that culminated in the tabulation of far more elaborate and complex \textit{mātikās}.

Since \textit{mātikās} of one or other form underlie almost every Theravādin Abhidhamma work, it has been argued that \textit{mātikā} must have been the early name equivalent to the \textit{Abhidhamma-piṭaka} and that the Abhidhamma texts evolved out of the Suttanta \textit{mātikās}.

The organization of the extant Abhidhamma texts supports this claim, for it derives from numerical and topical arrangement of the various \textit{mātikās} already found in the \textit{suttas}. The \textit{Abhidhamma-piṭaka} comprises seven treatises: the \textit{Dhammasaṅgani}, the \textit{Vibhaṅga}, the \textit{Dhātukathā}, the \textit{Puggalapaññatti}, the \textit{Kathāvatthu}, the \textit{Yamaka} and the \textit{Paṭṭhāna}. This division is given for the first time in the introduction to the \textit{Milindapañha} and is described at length in the \textit{Dhammasaṅgani} commentary. Chapters 2 and 4 are concerned with the development of the \textit{dhamma} theory and with its philosophical construction as based on the \textit{Dhammasaṅgani} and the \textit{Vibhaṅga}, while Chapter 5 focuses on the \textit{Paṭṭhāna}’s theory of relations of causal conditioning. Questions regarding the structure, features and dating of these three canonical works are thus treated throughout the succeeding study. The central motif of the \textit{Dhātukathā} is an investigation into the relations of various \textit{dhammas}, or doctrinal concepts – a partial list of which includes the five aggregates, the twelve sense spheres, sense contact (\textit{phassa}), the nine roots (\textit{hetu}), feeling (\textit{vedanā}) and consciousness (\textit{citta}) – to the eighteen \textit{dhātus}. The classification schema of the \textit{Puggalapaññatti} is based upon six \textit{paññatti}, namely, concepts or designations, the sixth of which, \textit{puggala} or person, is unique to this text that enumerates and classifies different types of person according to various guidelines (for instance, according to the way one
strives for liberation, how one fulfils this wish, or the spiritual level one attains). The Yamaka, ‘Pairs’, derives its name from the method it applies in discussing various doctrinal concepts: it contrasts pairs of dhāmma in numerous combinations and linkages, asking of each pair infinite questions and their inversions, for instance, whether when one dhāmma arises and vanishes so does the other, then whether when the one does not arise the other also does not arise, or whether when the one is cognized so is the other, etc.

Unlike the six texts mentioned above, the Kathāvatthu does not analyse dhāmmas, but rather aims at the refutation of non-Theravādin views, illustrating the second feature of Abhidhamma thought and its literary genre, which is discussed below.45 Excepting the Kathāvatthu, the canonical Abhidhamma works rely on three sets of mātikā: the first two consist of the twenty-two triplets (tika) and one hundred couplets (duka) that set out the basic categories of the dhāmma analysis, as documented at the beginning of the Dhammasaṅgani. This key list is referred to by scholars as the abhidhamma-mātikā. The third supplementary list is of forty-two Suttanta couplets, the majority of which feature in the Sangīti-sutta. One must bear in mind, though, that the affinity between the Abhidhamma treatises and the early suttas’ classification lists may also reflect the influence of Abhidhamma on the suttas themselves, for Abhidhamma-like activities may well have been extant before the completion of the Sutta-piṭaka, and the final redaction of the latter overlaps with the composition of the Abhidhamma works.46 The two triplet-couplet mātikā sets also appear in three other Abhidhamma canonical works: the Vibhaṅga, Dhātukathā and the Paṭṭhāna. The Puggalapaññatti opens with an explicit mātikā arranged by numerical progression. The Kathāvatthu and Yamaka do not have explicit mātikā, although the tradition describes their underlying discussion points and chapters as a mātikā.47

I do not deny the relationship between the mātikās and the evolution of the Abhidhamma, but find an oversimplification in equating the two, or in seeking to identify the more fundamental among the mātikās and on that basis to establish a chronology of the texts. Based on a comparison of the dhāmma analysis of works composed among the Northern Buddhist schools, such as Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa and Asaṅga’s Abhidharmasamuccaya, Rupert Gethin has shown that such an attempt to settle the chronology of the texts amounts to a misunderstanding of ‘the basic principle that determines the way in which the Abhidhamma develops out of the use of mātikās’. This is because various mātikās are fundamental to several texts and the Abhidhamma method consists in the interaction of those various mātikās. Thus, on many occasions the categories of one list are analysed by the categories of another list, which suggests that the mātikās represent but one aspect of the overarching growth of the Abhidhamma movement and its literature.48 As Cousins explains, this method would serve two different purposes: it would both sharpen one’s comprehension and insight while at the same time securing more firmly the historical continuity of the tradition.49

We shall discuss the soteriological function of the Abhidhamma classification schemas and categorizations in Chapter 4. In the meantime suffice it to mention
Gethin’s observation that the mātikās are conducive to Buddhist meditation: the compilers of the mātikās sought to distinguish physical and mental states and events in actual experience, and thus remind one of the richness and subtlety of experience, which, in turn, promotes awareness and provides a clue to the relationship between memory and awareness as expressed in the Buddhist conception of sati/smṛti. With regard to the second element, the historical continuity of the tradition, here arises the Abhidhamma’s self-awareness of the problems involved in the maintenance and continuity of its own oral tradition. The frequent use of standard mnemonic registers of apparent synonyms to define particular mental or material occurrences requires a higher degree of formalization than the Sutta-based topical and numerical lists, and such a formalization can be successful only if the material is both well understood and contains no contradictory or incomplete elements. The Abhidhamma elaboration on the extant mātikās, then, is a conscious attempt to fix the earliest Buddhist heritage and reflects a transition from an oral to a literary approach.

Another explanation of the origination of the Abhidhamma draws on a rather different feature of the Abhidhamma treatises, namely, their catechetical style. Scholars who favour this line of explanation ascribe the evolution of the Abhidhamma movement first and foremost to the influence of the contemporary intellectual milieu. The interaction between the Buddhist and the established Brahmanical schools, with their evolving traditions of exegesis, logic and epistemology, must have been conducive not only to the development of the Abhidhamma but also to its growing bent for discursive hermeneutics through catechetical exposition. Moreover, the process of institutionalization undergone by Buddhist thought and the growth of the Saṅgha induced the rise of monastic debates and discussions concerning the doctrine among the Theravādins and their Buddhist rivals. Such discussions are already represented by the Mahā/Cālavedalla-suttas and the division of the Vibhaṅga-suttas of the Majjhima-nikāya, which are characterized by a catechetical style and are formulated as an exchange of questions and answers. An elaborate catechetical style is the hallmark of the Kathāvatthu, but a similar dialectical format also appears in several other Abhidhamma texts, such as the Paṭisambhidāmagga and the Vibhaṅga. The structure of the last two is based on a series of statements from the suttas (uddesa) and their analytical exposition (niddlesa).

The materials we have considered so far combine to present a picture of early Abhidhamma as a doctrinal movement and a distinct type of exegesis that gradually developed in tandem with particular theoretical as well as practical interests, resulting in an independent branch of inquiry and literary genre. What I wish to emphasize is that the two stylistic features of Abhidhamma literature – the abundant mātikās and the catechetical format – are interconnected, and that it would be inaccurate to relate the origins of the Abhidhamma solely and directly to either one of them. Rather, it is most likely that within the earliest Saṅgha there arose two approaches to discussing the Dhamma: the first intended to summarize and
itemize the significant points of the teaching, the second to analyse and elaborate on the doctrines taught by means of the typical monastic disputations.

Chapter 2 commences our inquiry into the doctrinal shift from the Sutta worldview to the Abhidhamma framework by focusing on the transition in the Abhidhamma construal of the concept of dhamma and on the formation of the dhamma theory.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 For a discussion of the Sangha’s discipline see Gombrich 1988: Ch. 4, esp. pp. 106–12 and the references therein; Frauwallner 1956: Ch. 1; Wijayaratna 1990: 104–6.

3 See Obeyesekere 1991: 152–82.

4 Cousins 2001: 147. We must also take into account that often the name of a school A that divides is retained along with the names of its affiliated schools B and C, while the literature tends to count this as three schools, even though only the latter two schools continue to exist: ibid.147–8. André Bareau’s Les Sectes bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule (1955) collates the available sources regarding the Stavira schools.


7 Cousins 1991: 31 and 34ff. For a different interpretation of the ‘Five Points’ see Lamotte 1988: 274ff. The Theravādin view of the ‘Five Points’ is given at Kv 163–203 (II 1–5). The ‘Five Points’ are first identified by La Vallée Poussin: ‘The “Five Points” of Mahādeva and the Kathāvatthu’, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1910: 413–23. Bareau accepted that this was the cause of the division (e.g. ‘Trois traités sur les sectes bouddhiques attribués à Vasumitra, Bhavya et Vinitadeva’ (1954) and Les Premiers conciles bouddhiques (1955)).

8 Kv-a 2–5 as cited by Cousins 1991: 32.


12 Based on the Dīpavānsa’s ordination data, Gombrich (1992: 246 and 258–9) has deduced that the Buddha’s death took place within five or six years of 404 BCE and that the Second Council took place about sixty years after his death, that is, around 345 BCE. Cousins (1991: 59) has reached a slightly different dating, placing the Buddha’s death in 413 BCE and the Second Council seventy to eighty years later, namely between 343 and 333 BCE.


16 Cousins 2001: 147.

17 Ibid.: 151 and 155–7. The different lists that are in fact based on *Vasumitra are summarized by Lamotte 1988: 529ff.

18 Cousins 2001: 140–5.

19 Ibid.: 146ff.

20 Dip VII 34–7 and 44–59; Mhv V 267–82; Sp I 60–1. The tradition concerning the Pātaliputta Council is closely connected, in the mind of its compilers, with Moggaliputtatissa’s sending out teams of missionaries across India as well as to Ceylon.
See Lamotte 1988: 294–301. Bareau (e.g. in his *Les Premiers conciles bouddhiques* (1955)) concluded that the dispute at Pātaliputta indeed concerned the split between the Vibhajjavādins and the Sarvāstivādins on the Abhidhamma issue of existence in the three times.

21 Mhv V 280; Dhs-a 4.
25 Ibid.: 34–43.
26 Dip VII 34–8; Mhv V 228–30 and 234–5; Sp 53.
27 Dip VII 50; Mhv V 280; Sp 61; Kv-a 7. See also Lamotte 1988: 251–2 and 272–3; Cousins 2001: 137–8.
34 Cox 1995: 25–6. Cox refers to Lambert Schmithausen, who concludes that the simplest explanation for systematic differences and similarities in the literature of the Sarvāstivādins and the Mulasarvāstivādins is to assume that they were separate, albeit interacting, groups with their own progressively revised and mutually influenced collections (p. 45, notes 35–6 and 38).
37 For example, Dhs-a 2–3: *tattha ken’ attthena abhidhammo? dhammātirekadhammavis-esaatta*ṇa. *atierekavisatthadipako h’etha abhi saddo*. ‘What now is meant by “abhidhamma”? That which exceeds and is distinct from the Teaching, for the prefix abhi here illustrates transcendence and distinction.’ On the range of meanings of the term *abhidhamma* and its history in the *Sutta* and *Vinaya-pitakas* see Horner 1941; Muck 1980; von Hübner 1994. For the Sarvāstivādin interpretation of the term see Cox 1995: 3–6. Interestingly, according to the Sarvāstivādin sources abhidharma is a discipline and a contributory means for religious attainment, and is concerned with the discernment of dharmas (here taken in the sense of ‘ultimate individual factors’) according to their intrinsic nature (svabhāva).
38 Dhs-a 154: *ayañ hi suttantikadesanā nāma pariyāyadesanā [...] ayaṃ mana nippariyāyadesanā*. This distinction already features at A IV 449–56. It coincides with other distinctions sometimes drawn in the texts between teachings that are expressed in terms that must be determined (neyyattha) vs. those teachings that are expressed in terms already determined (nītattha) (e.g. A I 60; Nett 21; Ps I 18), and between teachings expressed in conventional terms (sammuti) vs. those that are expressed in ultimate terms (paramattha) (e.g. Vibh 100–1; Mp I 94–7). On the distinction between neyyattha/nītattha and its commentarial elaboration into two levels of truth see Jayatilleke 1963: 361–8.
39 Dhs-a 2: *suttantāti hi patvā pañcakkhandhā ekadesan’ eva vibhattā, na nippadesena; abhidhammaṃ patvā pana suttantabhajāntyābhidhammabhajāntyapaññhapucca-kanayaṇāṃ vasena nippadesato vibhattā. tathā dvādasāyatanāni, atihārasa dhātuyo, cattāri saccai, bāvāsatīndriyāni, dvādasapadiko paccayākāro.*
41 For example, D II 125; M I 221–3; A I 117, II 147 and 170, III 179–80; Vin I 119 and 337, II 98 and 229: *bahussuto āgatāgamo dhammadharo vinayadharo mātikādharo.*
FURTHER TEACHING: ABHIDHAMMA THOUGHT


44 Mil 12; Dhs-a 3–10.


46 Bronkhorst 1985: 318–19: ‘Mātrkās, and even one or more Abhidharma works, were in existence well before the completion of the _Sūtrapitaka[_…] There is evidence that there were Abhidharma-like activities going on well before the _Sūtras_ of the _Sūtrapitaka_ had achieved anything like their present shape[_…] The above observations show how unreliable the _Sūtras_ are as a basis for conclusions about earliest Buddhism if they are not used with the utmost care.’


48 Ibid.: 162–4. Gethin relies on previous findings by P.S. Jaini: see p. 163, nn. 60–2. See also La Vallée Poussin 1988: xl (Introduction to the trans. of the _Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam_).


52 M I 292–305; III 202–57.

2.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DHAMMA THEORY

The scholarly literature on the history of the term dhamma in Buddhist thought is fairly extensive and focuses on the ambiguity of the term caused by the wide range of meanings it covers. Among those meanings are included Buddhist teaching in general, any doctrine which forms part of that teaching, an element of experience, principle, phenomenon, nature, mental object, idea and others.¹ A.K. Warder has shown that the Nikāya usage of the term dhamma (in both its singular and plural forms) is ambiguous and multivalent, and that its alleged ontological dimension is far from being clear. He indicates that

The four old Nikāyas are not as clear about dhamma meaning an ‘element’ as is the Abhidhamma. They seem instead to offer discussions using the word a little more freely, apparently without defining it, out of which the precise concept of the Abhidhamma might have been extracted.²

The prevailing scholarly notion of dhammas in their technical sense – as basic, irreducible and ultimately real elements constitutive of encountered phenomena – is strongly influenced by Theodore Stcherbatsky’s pioneering study of dharma. Stcherbatsky concluded that this sense of element is a satisfactory equivalent for dharma.³ Yet his study, Warder points out, is based on the position of the Vaibhāṣikas as documented by Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakoṣa, and hence Stcherbatsky’s portrayal of what a dharma is should not be taken as valid for the Pali Nikāyas.⁴ But is it valid for the Pali Abhidhamma?

On this question I take sides with Rupert Gethin in his claim that it is not self-evident that the conception of a dhamma as a real, self-existing, irreducible element is fully attributable to the Pali canonical Abhidhamma.⁵ The present monograph shows that while the notion of a plurality of dhammas is clearly more developed in the post-canonical literature than in the Nikāyas, the canonical Abhidhamma is not so clear about the ‘precise concept’ of dhamma as an element. In fact, the term retains its ambiguity and becomes ontologically laden only
in the commentarial period. Despite the numerous extant studies of the term dhamma in Buddhist thought, the notion that this term conveys has remained indistinct. My hypothesis is that to make headway in understanding the notion of dhamma it must be viewed in the light of the broader doctrinal development of early Buddhism. We shall see that this development cannot sensibly be isolated from a fundamental metaphysical shift, while at the same time it is also subject to the Abhidhamma’s soteriological concerns. To trace the development of the dhamma theory let us commence by reviewing the major modifications in the signification of the concept of dhamma.

### 2.1.1 On the changing meaning of dhamma and dhammas

To understand early Buddhist teaching one must see its genesis as conditioned by the religious and social milieu in which it arose, bearing in mind that the Buddha was propounding his ideas in a specific social context and that his central teachings originated in response to a particular spiritual environment. Buddhism, like all other major Indian religions, has elaborated its psychology, eschatology, epistemology and metaphysics within the conceptual framework of Brahmanical thought and practice. This operated within the horizons set up by the fundamental categories of saṃsāra, ‘the round of rebirth’, karma, ‘action’ and ‘moral retribution’, and mokṣa, ‘liberation’. Early Brahmanical religion revolved around the sacrificial activity that came to be regarded as a constructive power essential to the cosmic scheme of things. The two Sanskrit terms that denote ‘the scheme of things’ are, in the Veda, rta, and, in later classical Sanskrit, dharma – the former, deriving from the root ṛ, meaning ‘that which is properly fitted together, ordered’, the latter, deriving from the root dhṛ, meaning ‘that which is (to be) upheld, borne firmly, preserved’. Rta and dharma signify, albeit ambiguously, both the way the universe is ordered and the way it ought to be ordered, thus blurring the distinction between fact and value. In due course the term dharma has become demonstrably beyond simple translation, conflating reality, the way things are, law, cosmic order, (caste) duty, righteousness, prescribed conduct, religious merit and truth in general all rolled into one. It is against this conceptual backdrop – of a closed universe constituted by sacrificial activity through which one creates oneself anew into the ritual world (loka) to perpetuate one’s life and define one’s identity – that the emergence of the Buddhist notion of dhamma ought to be situated.

In the Tipitaka, both the singular and plural forms dhamma/dhammas ordinarily refer to the contents of the Buddha’s talks, to the fundamental principles the Buddha taught. For instance, an exemplary Samyutta passage recounts the Buddha’s description of what ascetics and Brahmans may or may not understand as follows:

Bhikkhus, as regards those ascetics and Brahmans who understand these things (dhamme), their origination, their cessation, the path leading to their cessation: what are those things they understand? They understand ageing-and-death, its origination, its cessation and the path leading to its
cessation. They understand birth...becoming...clinging...craving...feeling...sense contact...the six sense faculties...name-and-form...consciousness...and mental formations, their origination, their cessation and the path leading to their cessation.8

This excerpt is succeeded by a passage that depicts a certain bhikkhu approaching the Buddha and asking him: ‘Venerable sir, it is said “a speaker of the Dhamma, a speaker of the Dhamma” (dhammakathiko). How, now, is one a speaker of the Dhamma?’ The Buddha replies as follows:

Bhikkhu, if one teaches the dhamma for the purpose of withdrawing from ageing-and-death, for its fading away and its cessation, one may be called a bhikkhu who is a speaker of the Dhamma. If one has entered the path for the purpose of withdrawing from ageing-and-death, for its fading away and its cessation, one may be called a bhikkhu who is practising in accordance with the Dhamma. [...] If one teaches the Dhamma for the purpose of withdrawing from birth...from becoming...from clinging...from craving...from mental formations...from ignorance, for their fading away and their cessation, one may be called a bhikkhu who is a speaker of the Dhamma.9

That in this sense the singular and plural forms dhamma/dhammas are interchangeable (like ‘teaching’ and ‘teachings’ in English) is illustrated by recurring passages that refer to the Buddha’s ninefold teaching (navañcabuddhasāsana), that is, the nine divisions of the Buddhist texts according to their form or style, although such passages must belong to a later period in which these distinct nine divisions were acknowledged.10 With reference to the principles taught by the Buddha, the word dhamma retains both the descriptive and normative senses it carries in Brahmanical thought. Thus, when the Buddha preached the Dhamma, he was at the same time describing his experience and prescribing a method to be followed.11 Yet the dhamma principles taught also signify experientially perceived physical and mental processes and states qua manifestations in one’s consciousness: such are the twelve items that form the paṭiccasamuppāda formula, and indeed numerous other phenomena the Buddha discusses, among which are delusion (moha), cognitive awareness in its six modalities (visual, auditory etc., including mental: cakkhuviññāṇa, sotaviññāṇa etc., including manoviññāṇa), one-pointedness of mind (cittass’ ekāgatatā), bringing into being or development (bhāvanā), equanimity (upekkhā), states of absorption in meditation (jhāna), tranquillity (passaddhi), joy (pīti) and many others. Since the paṭiccasamuppāda doctrine explicates how sentient experience is, at bottom, a series of related processes arising and ceasing in a non-random order, and since the Buddha’s teaching is in harmony with how things ultimately are, then knowledge of the Dhamma teaching is knowledge of the experiential world in terms of processes, which is but knowledge of dhammas in their
various modes of operation. A stock phrase in the Nikāyas describes the excellent, distinguished Dhamma teaching of Buddhas as encompassing dukkha, arising, cessation and the path, which is but a shorthand for the four noble truths.\textsuperscript{12} The Nikāyas often explicate the first truth in terms of the five aggregates of grasping (pañc’ upādānakkhandaḥ), the second truth in terms of three kinds of craving (kāma-, bhāva- and vibhava-tanhaḥ), the third truth as the cessation of these types of craving, and the fourth truth in terms of the eight factors of the noble path.\textsuperscript{13} The Dasuttara-sutta explains these categories as five dhammas to be fully known (pariññeyya), three dhammas to be abandoned (pahātabba), nine sorts of cessation referred to as nine dhammas to be realized (sacchikātabba), and eight dhammas to be fully developed (bhāvettabba).\textsuperscript{14} This, Rupert Gethin observes, illustrates the Nikāya notion of the relation of dhamma and dhammas: to know the teaching is to know dhammas in their various aspects.\textsuperscript{15}

Knowledge of the teaching, and subsequently of how things really, truly are, is gained through meditative contemplation in which the practitioner strives towards the realization of the doctrinal points and topics taught by the Buddha. Within this meditative context a clearer distinction was drawn between dhamma and dhammas, whereby the meaning of the latter was gradually expanded and generalized. This tendency is demonstrated in the two standard texts on meditation, the Satipaṭṭhāna- and Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-suttas: here, in the context of the fourth foundation of awareness, namely, the contemplation of dhammas (dhammānu-passanā), the plural form dhammas signifies the mental objects that appear to one’s consciousness in the course of this meditation exercise. These, however, are explicated in terms of the Buddha’s teachings: the texts state that a bhikkhu dwells watching dhammas with regard to the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa), the five khandhas of grasping, the six internal (ajjhatika) and external (bahira) āyatanas (i.e. one’s own physical and mental faculties in contrast to those of others), the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) and the four noble truths.\textsuperscript{16} This implies that dhammas are both elements of the normative system to be applied and objects of experience in insight meditation; that what appears in consciousness to a practitioner while in meditative attainment follows the patterns laid down by the Buddha’s teachings. Training himself along the Buddhist path, a monk moves from thinking about those teachings to thinking with them, as it were, for they are what makes up reality as taught by the Buddha.\textsuperscript{17} Steven Collins comments on this:

The things, then, which a monk ‘sees’ in meditation clearly follow the patterns laid down by Buddhist doctrinal thinking. Dhammā are both elements of the normative system to be applied, and ‘objects’ of experience in insight meditation. For the Theravāda tradition, the ‘ultimate’ psychological reality of these dhammā has never been a matter of question.\textsuperscript{18}

The meditative dimension ascribed to the meaning of the plural form dhammas led to the next step in the process of its generalization, whereby dhammas emerged as ‘good psychological characteristics’, or simply ‘psychological characteristics’.
used for the sake of attaining meditative states. Such characteristics are listed under the seven sets known later on in the post-canonical literature by the collective title ‘the thirty-seven factors contributing to awakening’ (sattatiṃsa bodhipakkhiyā dhammā), among which are included discrimination (pavicaya), concentration (samādhi), joy (pīti), tranquillity (passaddhi) and others.19

While this meaning of the plural dhammas is not peculiarly Buddhist, it was apparently subject to intended appropriation within early Buddhist conceptual framework and came to denote not only the objects that appear in one’s consciousness while in meditative attainment, but also mental objects of the sixth sense faculty, namely, manas, alongside the objects of the five ordinary physical senses.20 Manas is one of the most ambiguous, multivalent terms in the Sutta literature; it may broadly be rendered as mind, suggesting that it undertakes processes that would be classified under one of the arūpakkhandhas or the mental aggregates, while at the same time it is an āyatana, and hence is used as a generic term for the mind in its cognitive capacity as a mental sense that may be viewed as either an antecedent or a subsequent event with respect to the immediately following or immediately preceding phase in the cognitive process. Although when manas is translated as ‘mind’ dhammas tends to be rendered accordingly as ‘thoughts’ or ‘ideas’, note that dhammas qua the object of manas as the sixth sense faculty refer not only to thoughts, ideas or concepts, but to mentality in its broadest denotation: dhammas are the objects when one, for instance, remembers, anticipates or concentrates on something.21 There are six modes of cognitive awareness and five physical sense faculties; anything else is dhamma.

In the canonical Abhidhamma literature the term manas undergoes a process of systematization and is employed conjoined with various suffixes, having different technical meanings in different contexts and resulting in the distinctions between manas, viññāṇa, manodhātu, manāyatana, manoviññāṇa and manoviññāṇadhātu. These compounds already feature in the Nikāyas, but the distinctions between their referents are marginalized by the Abhidhammikas. C.A.F. Rhys Davids observes that the Abhidhamma elaboration on the analysis of the scope of the mental as modelled on sense perception is set out in a fourfold formula taking into account the mental sense faculty, invisible and reacting; the mental object, also invisible and impinging; and the contact between the two. This analysis of sense perception includes (i) the fact of possible sensation, (ii) the actual impact of the appropriate object, (iii) the actual impact of the appropriate sense faculty and (iv) the resultant actual impression and possible results in the four arūpakkhandhas. These four aspects, Rhys Davids explains, bring forward detailed time-reference (‘has seen, sees, will or may see’), so that sense perception is emphatically stated as an experience in time.22 While manāyatana is a generic term referring to the scope of the mental as a whole, and hence embracing the functions of citta, manas and viññāṇa alike, the compound manodhātu (and also manoviññāṇadhātu) is normally used to distinguish manas when it refers to the operation of the sixth, mental sense faculty as a distinct sphere of experience rather than to ‘mind’ in general.
In the suttas, manodhātu is used in two different ways, both of which have been adopted by the canonical Abhidhamma and, later on, by the commentarial tradition. On the one hand, manodhātu is understood as a unique ‘quasi’ sense; the basis of the ignorance-oriented cognitive process that prolongs one’s experience in samsāra. This implies that whether one lives influenced by samsāric cognition or by liberating knowledge is determined by the cognitive faculties of which manodhātu is in some way the sense, and hence the latter plays a unique role in the process of awakening that is not shared by the other sense faculties. On the other hand, manodhātu is also considered the sixth in a series of senses, and hence an ‘ordinary’ sense faculty of which the corresponding objects processed are mental and specific to its nature, just as, for instance, sound is specific to the ear. It does differ, though, from the five distinct sense faculties in that it plays the role of coordinator, synthesizing and unifying all the sense impressions brought in by the other five senses; it is the receiver of these incoming phenomenal data as raw material, prior to any specification as to visible objects, sound, odour etc. In this respect manodhātu is said to be the ‘resort’ (patisaraṇa) for the five physical senses and to ‘realize’ their scope of activity. Acting as their collator, manodhātu renders these data comprehensible to the cognitive faculties. This implies, as has been stated by John Ross Carter and recently by Sue Hamilton, that dhammas as the objects of manodhātu are a pluralistic representation of encountered phenomena; not merely mental objects, but all knowable sensory phenomena of whatever nature, that is, the samsāric world in its entirety as we experience it through the senses, manodhātu accordingly signifying the receiver of these ‘knowables’.

This broad rendering includes the narrower sense of dhammas as objects of manas when the latter signifies mental cognition qua an aspect of discriminative consciousness, or rather mental cognitive awareness (manoviññāṇa, often translated literally as ‘mind-consciousness’). As the sixth cognitive modality based on the faculty of manas, manoviññāṇa refers to the distinctive awareness that is the cognitive basis of sense perception issuing from the contact between manodhātu and its respective dhamma objects. In the Nikāyas, viññāṇa equally refers to this cognitive modality as well as to consciousness in its broad, intentional denotation of ‘consciousness of’. The latter accompanies animated existence and is coterminous with one’s samsāric experience as a whole; it preconditions not only the development of a new sentient body (nāmarūpa), but also the emergence of mental formations (saṅkhāra, albeit it is simultaneously conditioned by kammic activities, viz., anabhisaṅkhāra). The compound manoviññāṇa specifies viññāṇa while functioning as the sixth modality of cognitive awareness, since it is a mental awareness that arises in conjunction with its appropriate mental objects. Viññāṇa as cognitive awareness occurs in six modes: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and mental cognitive awareness, based on the concomitance of their respective sense faculties (the five physical sense organs plus manas) and their appropriate sense objects. A specific form of cognitive awareness arises when an appropriate sensory object enters the field of its respective sense faculty (indriya), impinging upon this unimpaired sense faculty, and there is sufficient attention on the part of the mind. The Nikāyas are at ease with the discordance
between these two senses of viññāna, for at the metaphysical level they are both intertwined and mutually condition one another: viññāna as discriminative, cognitive awareness leads to future rebirths and hence to existence in samsāra, the major medium of which is the continuous stream of consciousness, namely, viññāna, which is, in turn, the very prerequisite for the occurrence of cognitive awareness itself. Both these aspects of viññāna are accommodated within the *paticcasamuppāda* formula.28

Now sentient beings experience the results of qualitatively different mental processes and states of mind in a variety of ways. Leaving aside the extreme cases of the highest, most subtle forms of consciousness possible, consciousness that is conditioned by actively skilful or unskilful mental occurrences is regarded as most commonly experienced in the process of sensory perception. In the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* emphasis is put on manoviññāna in its denotation of mental cognitive awareness and it is deemed the central cognitive operation within the process of sensory perception.29 *Dhammas* as the cognitive objects of *manoviññāna qua* mental cognitive awareness may now be better rendered as apperceptions in the sense of rapid mental events by means of which the mind unites and assimilates a particular perception, especially one newly presented, to a larger set or mass of ideas already possessed, thus comprehending and conceptualizing it. Insofar as these dhammic apperceptions interact with the five sensory modalities of cognitive awareness that arise in dependence upon their corresponding material phenomena, then they are fleeting ‘flashes’ of psycho-physical events.

A comprehensive theory of the consciousness process (*citta-vitti*) using such terms is set out in the Abhidhamma commentaries and manuals – mainly in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* and *Atthasālinī* as well as in Buddhadhatta’s and Anuruddha’s works – but is based upon the description already found in the *Dhammasaṅgani* and the *Paṭṭhāna*.30 This theory portrays each moment of discriminative, cognitive awareness as involving not only the occurrence of sense perception itself, but also the derivation of a series of other related mental events. For instance, visual perception involves not only seeing itself, but such occurrences as adverting to the appropriate sense ‘door’, fixing of the visual object in the mind, examination and recognition of its features and identification of its nature – and all of these are dhammas. For the time being suffice it to say that the canonical Abhidhamma portrays these dhammic apperceptions as diverse capacities or capabilities of psycho-physical events: short-lived minds or consciousness-types (*citta*) that interact with material phenomena, each of which arising and ceasing in sequential series while having its own function and capability. In accordance with this portrayal, manoviññāna is necessarily temporal, processual and discriminative: it is not an act of cognition in the sense of an agent that acts upon its objects by cognizing them, but rather a discerning awareness of distinctions between the stimuli impinging upon the fields of the sense faculties that issues when the requisite conditions come together. This implies that the *dhammas* that condition such contextual distinctions and that co-arise with any given occurrence of cognitive awareness are themselves discrete and distinct psycho-physical events.31
Two striking points emerge here: first, it now turns out that the above dharmic events as presented in consciousness, the product of our cognitive apparatus, are the constituents of sentient experience; the irreducible ‘building blocks’ that make up one’s world, albeit they are not static mental contents and certainly not substances. In this context Alexander Piatigorsky asserts that dhamma has never been meant to be explained or understood as the subject of any philosophical proposition, because it ‘is’ no thing, although it is an object of thought. The second point, as William Waldron observes, is that manoviññāna appears not in conjunction with one, but with two sorts of cognitive object: with a previous moment of sensory cognitive awareness as an object and with its ‘own’ kind of object, namely, its appropriate dhamma that is a mental event. Waldron explains:

When a cognitive awareness of a sensory object occurs, it is often followed by an awareness of that awareness, that is, a reflexive awareness ‘that such and such a sensory awareness (viññāna) has occurred’. This is one of the ‘objects’ of mental cognitive awareness (mano-viññāna). Mental cognitive awareness, however, also arises in conjunction with cognitive objects that occur independently of the sensory cognitive system, such as thinking, reflection, or ideas.

This means that at a meta-reflexive level dharmas are objects of discriminative, cognitive awareness inasmuch as they become objects of thinking and awareness of cognitive awareness itself. It is in this light that we may interpret a statement that recurs in the Dhammasaṅgaṇi and reads: ‘The five physical sense spheres comprise sense data (rupa) that are cognized by mental cognitive awareness (manoviññāna), but all sense data [i.e. manas and dharmas inclusive] are cognized by the element of mental cognitive awareness [literally “mind-consciousness element”].’ Piatigorsky accordingly claims that what stems from the Abhidhamma’s approach to the scope of mind is a meta-psychology, by contrast to a reductionist psychology: meta-psychology investigates the conditions and states of our own thinking about mind, while reductionist psychology studies the substrata of mental processes. ‘From the point of view of consciousness’, Piatigorsky explains, ‘it can be said that, when consciousness is conscious of one’s mind, thought or consciousness directed to their objects, then it is “being conscious of”’ that may be named “a state of consciousness” or a dharma. This, however, must not be seen as a definition of a dhamma, but rather as an indication to where within a descriptive system of interrelated, distinctive definitions it can be sought. From a meta-psychology that establishes the fact of thinking about dharmas, while dismissing the notion of a subject of consciousness or a person underlying the rise of thought, one cannot infer that a dhamma is an object, and this is to be understood ‘in the sense that no psychology can be deduced from meta-psychology’.

I would say that no ontology can be deduced from this meta-psychology (yet). Does the post-canonical Abhidhamma also suspend ontological speculations,
or may it be the case that at a certain stage its meta-psychology turned into a metaphysics conjoined with an ontology? And if so, what sort of ontology is it? The Abhidhamma exegetes distilled from the earlier dhamma analyses, especially those given in the Cittuppādakanda of the Dhammasaṅgani, a comprehensive categorization of individual dhamma instances. They also supplemented the resultant dhamma theory with two major doctrines: the doctrine of momentariness and the doctrine of sabhāva, a laden concept that we may provisionally render as ‘own-nature’.38 Underlying the succeeding two chapters are the questions of whether the post-canonical Abhidhamma assigns the doctrine of sabhāva an ontological dimension, what sort of metaphysics the developed dhamma theory embodies, and what role the doctrine of sabhāva plays in the formation of this metaphysics.

The early canonical position with regard to the dhamma analysis, then, aims at explaining the dynamics of sentient, cyclic experience in samsāra. This explanation appertains not only to human experience, for according to the basic principles of Buddhist cosmology, albeit these are merely scattered throughout the Nikāyas, there is a hierarchy of several different realms of existence: the lower realms of hell beings (niraya), of animals (tiraccchānayoni), of hungry ghosts (pettivisaya), of human beings (manussa), of various kinds of divine being collectively known as the lower gods (deva), and above the various heaven realms of divine beings known as Brahmās. Beings are continually reborn in these various realms in conformity with their actions.39 The Buddha taught that to understand this repetitive condition in samsāra is to see reality as it truly is – not a container of persons and ‘things’, but rather an assemblage of interlocking physical and mental processes that spring up and pass away subject to multifarious causes and conditions. In this respect it might be said that the Buddha had a distinctive, process epistemology: he taught that sentient experience is best understood in terms of dynamic processes that occur in a non-random order, and that to understand the causes and conditions of this dynamism is to gain insight into the way things truly are, which is equivalent to liberating knowledge.

In his talks the Buddha refers to several modes of analysis of sentient experience: in terms of physical and conceptual identity (nāmarūpa), in terms of the five khandhas, in terms of the twelve sense spheres or āyatanas and in terms of the eighteen elements of cognition or dhātus. The last three modes of analysis became the foundation for the later development of the dhamma analysis. In his comprehensive study of the development of the Theravādin doctrine of momentariness, Wan Doo Kim examines the khandha, āyatana and dhātu lists along with their commentarial elaboration, referring to them as ‘totality formulas’, for each of the three represents a standpoint from which sentient experience is analysed in its entirety down to its final constituents. Kim indicates that the Abhidhamma employment of these lists testifies to its growing attempts to encapsulate everything that makes up lived experience in synthetic formulas.40 The present book evinces that along with this concern the Abhidhamnikas were driven by another metaphysical goal, and that the latter is what distinguishes the dhamma theory from the khandha, āyatana and dhātu totality formulas. The
following section appraises these totality formulas inasmuch as they establish the foundations of the dhamma analysis.

2.1.2 Analysing experience: the khandha, āyatana and dhātu formulas

The formula of the five khandha is one of the fundamental doctrinal lists that constitute much of what Buddhism is about, retaining their importance within the Abhidhamma framework, wherein they still serve as categories of analysis. The five khandha are: form (rūpa), which here signifies the physical world as experienced by a sentient being, or rather body-endowed-with-consciousness (sāviññāna kāya); feeling (vedanā); conceptualization (saññā); volitional activities, or mental formations (sañkhāra); and consciousness (viññāna) in the broad sense of sheer sentience that continuously occurs throughout one’s lifetime, and of one’s awareness of oneself as having a series of perceptions and thoughts. The khandha are normally portrayed by contemporary scholarship as the Buddhist alternative model of personal identity: a model that substitutes for an enduring self an assemblage of physical and mental processes. Nonetheless, the preferred Nikāya exposition of the khandha is given in terms of the first noble truth: that is, the khandha explain what dukkha is. As such they are named ‘the five khandha of grasping’ (pañc’ upādānakkhandhā), referring to the fact that prior to awakening one is fuelled by passions, cravings etc. What emerges from the texts, then, is a wider signification of the khandha than merely the aggregates constituting the person. Sue Hamilton has provided a detailed study of the khandha. Her conclusion is that associating of the five khandha as a whole with dukkha indicates that experience is a combination of a straightforward cognitive process together with the psychological orientation that colours it in terms of unsatisfactoriness. Experience is thus both cognitive and affective, and cannot be separate from perception. As one’s perception changes, so one’s experience is different: we each have our own particular cognitions, perceptions and volitional activities in our own particular way and degree, and our own way of responding to and interpreting our experience is our very experience. In harmony with this line of thought, Gethin observes that the khandha are presented as five aspects of the nature of conditioned existence from the point of view of the experiencing subject; five aspects of one’s experience. Hence each khandha represents ‘a complex class of phenomena that is continuously arising and falling away in response to processes of consciousness based on the six spheres of sense. They thus become the five upādānakkhandhas, encompassing both grasping and all that is grasped’.

The five khandha are collectively said to be constructed or conditioned (sañkhata), impermanent (anicca) and insubstantial or not self (anatta). In the Nikāyas the totality of each khandha is referred to by the stock formula: ‘Whatever rūpa…vedanā…saññā…sañkhāras…viññāna are past (atīta), future (anāgata) or present (paccuppanna), internal (ajjhatta) or external (bahiddhā), gross (olārika) or subtle (sukhuma), inferior (hīna) or superior (pañīta), far (dūre) or near (santike).’
With regard to each of the *khandhas* one has to realize that ‘this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self’. The list of the five *khandhas* is largely taken for granted in the *Nikāyas* and hence the series of their descriptive terms is left unexplained. This lacuna is filled by the *Vibhaṅga*, the first of whose eighteen chapters deals with the *khandhas*. The *Vibhaṅga*’ exposition takes the above stock formula as characteristic of the Sutta account of the *khandhas*. We shall have more to say about the Sutta concept of time below, but in the *Vibhaṅga* the terms ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ comply with their commonly accepted definition: the past is that which has come to an end, the future has not yet come into being and the present has not yet passed away. The pair internal/external is explained as relative to one’s point of view, having as its point of reference any given person: one’s own *khandha* are internal, while those of other beings are external. The remaining pairs are also explained as relative, particularly when they are applied to the four mental *khandha*: every instance of each *khandha* is said to be relative to another specific manifestation of that *khandha*. For instance, bad feeling may be gross, inferior and distant from both good and neither-good-nor-bad feelings, while good feeling may be subtle, superior and distant from both bad and neither-good-nor-bad feelings. The *Vibhaṅga*’ second section, the *abhidhamma-bhājaniya*, explicates how each of the five *khandhas* is divisible into various kinds and also applies the *abhidhamma-mātikā* to each of the four mental *khandhas*. This section thus provides hundreds of different sets of divisions for each of the five *khandhas* and a comprehensive analysis, by which any given conditioned *dhamma* can be categorized under one of the five *khandhas*. The *Vibhaṅga* commentary further elaborates on the above canonical list of descriptive terms applied to each of the *khandhas*. It adds eleven pairs to the one triplet and four couplets of the list, thus forming sixteen aspects in terms of which the five *khandhas* are analysed. Six of these additional eleven pairs involve the temporal shape of the origination and cessation of the *khandhas*, their order of succession and limit of duration. This elaboration is pertinent to the Theravādin theory of momentariness, which I discuss below.

The two other totality formulas are the lists of twelve sense spheres, or *āyatana*, and eighteen elements of cognition, or *dhātu*. These reflect sentient experience as encapsulated in the connections between the six sense faculties, their six corresponding sensory objects and six corresponding types, or modalities, of cognitive awareness. The first five sense faculties and their appropriate objects are the eye and visual form, the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, and the body and tangibles respectively. The sixth sense faculty is *manas* and its corresponding mental objects are *dhammas*. The eighteen *dhātu* are formed by substituting the term *dhātu* for *āyatana* and by adding to these twelve sense spheres the six corresponding types of cognitive awareness, that is, visual cognitive awareness, auditory cognitive awareness, etc., up to mental cognitive awareness. This taxonomy is intended to facilitate direct insight into not-self by showing that in the final analysis personal identity is but a continuous sensory and cognitive process, of which any given element always refers to a distinct sphere of experience: a visual object is experientially distinct from an auditory object, from the faculty of sight, from cognitive awareness of
A straightforward passage stating that ‘everything’ (sabba) refers to all that is accessible to the twelve āyatanas is found in the Sabba-sutta of the Samyutta-nikāya:

What is ‘everything’, monks? It is the eye and visual forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangibles, manas and dhammā. This, monks, is called ‘everything’. Whoever should claim thus: ‘having rejected this [version of] everything I shall define another’, his words are unfounded. […] Why is it so? Because, monks, there is nothing beyond this scope.

Another occurrence of the same idea, this time with an explicit reference to the term āyatana, is found in the Niddesa of the Khuddaka-nikāya. The Cūlaniddesa, while commenting on the third pada of verse 1039 in the Suttanipāta, introduces four alternative classifications describing how a monk should be skilled in all dhammas, the fourth of which claims that the twelve āyatanas alone represent the totality of all dhammas. This statement is repeated as part of the exegesis of Suttanipāta verses (46, 181 and 187) in the Mahāniddesa.

The particular taxonomy of all-inclusiveness in terms of the twelve āyatanas, which is probably the earliest exegetical totality statement based on the Sabba-sutta, has been used by the Sarvāstivādins to justify their ontological doctrine of the existence of dharmas in the three times. The Sarva-sūtra, the Samyukta-āgama parallel of the Sabba-sutta (which, unlike its Pali counterpart, does explicitly mention the term āyatana), has become a main scriptural source for the Sarvāstivāda ontology. The Sarvāstivādins identify the term ‘everything’ in the assertion ‘everything exists’ (sarvam asti) with this canonical passage, meaning that everything accessible to the twelve āyatanas exists. The Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāsika exegetical text, the Mahāvibhāsā, discusses in great detail the twelve āyatanas, explaining why of the three primary totality formulas the āyatana taxonomy alone is the most inclusive. The reason given is that the teaching of the twelve āyatanas is best suited to the highest degree of all-inclusiveness: the eighteen dhātus, despite their totality, are difficult to grasp, whereas the five khandhas, though easy to grasp, do not accommodate the unconditioned dharmas (these, according to the Mahāvibhāsā, include space (ākāsa), cessation resulting from consideration (pratisamkhyanirodha) and cessation not resulting from consideration (apratisamkhyanirodha)). The twelve āyatanas, however, encompass all dharmas whatsoever, conditioned and unconditioned alike, and hence embody the highest level of totality.

The Theravādin Abhidhamma rejects the Sarvāstivādin conviction that ‘everything exists’ and accordingly does not pay much attention to the āyatana totality statement. In the Abhidhamma-pitaka there is no reference to the Niddesa declarations, although the āyatanas are conceded as one of the all-inclusive taxonomies. Nevertheless, the Abhidhamma does admit there is something unique
about the inclusiveness of the āyatanas and the dhātus: unlike the khandha formula, these taxonomies subsume nibbāna.\textsuperscript{53} Wan Doo Kim notes on this that

\[\text{[A]lthough they attempted to present all the possible classifications of the dhammas within the confines of the khandha formula, in fact the early Abhidhammikas admitted that it could not accommodate the unconditioned, nibbāna (i.e. asaṅkhata dhamma). Therefore, they looked for another formula and discovered in the canonical texts the twelve āyatanas and eighteen dhātus.}\textsuperscript{54}

Indeed the Abhidhammikas could place nibbāna under the dhammā base in the twelve āyatanas and eighteen dhātus. Nevertheless, these two formulas, too, were found to be inadequate: the Abhidhammikas needed yet another mode of analysis, namely, the dhamma analysis, which turned into a whole theory. For what reason? I wish further to pursue this question.

What the Buddha and his immediate disciples would probably have understood by dhamma, then, was thought to reveal the nature of sentient experience in terms of nāmarūpa, khandha, āyatana and dhātu. These standard modes of analysis represent a subjective and experiential treatment of mental and material phenomena from different standpoints, though none of them is definitive. That is, if each analysis is examined in relation to the others it is found amenable to further analysis. The nāma component is thus analysed into the four mental khandhas; the five khandhas – as implied by that very term, which means ‘a collection’ or ‘mass’ of something – are further analysable into the eighteen dhātus, and the latter are but an elaboration on the twelve āyatanas.\textsuperscript{55}

Subsequent generations demanded further clarification of these modes of analysis and found them lacking. The dhamma theory was an outgrowth of their attempts to draw out the full implications of these types of analysis. The Abhidhammikas thus sought to make sense of meditative contemplation by drawing on yet another mode of analysis, which in their view was the most comprehensive and exhaustive, namely, the analysis of experience in terms of dhammas. In this context, the term dhamma refers to those items that result when the process of analysis is pursued to its ultimate limit, until it is not amenable to further analysis. In other words, dhammas are here the most basic, and in this sense ‘atomic’, physical and mental phenomena that make up one’s experience, and in this sense one’s world. This theoretical inquiry involves the categorization of all possible types of experiential occurrence, the scrutiny into their manifold conditional interrelations and the construction of these into an ordered, unified structure.\textsuperscript{56}

By contrast to the prior listings of doctrinal concepts in the suttas, the Abhidhamma categorization of dhammas results in a comprehensive theory. In this specific context ‘theory’ denotes a systematic structure in which every single topic of the Buddha’s teachings should find its proper place and be explained completely, both as it is in its exclusiveness and in relation to all other topics. The canonical Abhidhamma literature reflects the endeavour to provide such an
all-encompassing theory. The fully fledged theory resultant from this enterprise of analysis and synthesis was finally settled in the commentaries and the later Abhidhamma manuals, and is referred to by modern scholars as ‘the dhamma theory’. The locus classicus of the synthetic method is the Patṭhāna that investigates the dhammas’ manifold conditional relations, with which we shall deal in Chapter 5. The foundations of the analytic method are found in the Dhammasaṅgani. Let us now consider this analytic aspect of the dhamma theory by looking at the Theravādin dhamma typology, the basic principles of which are shared by the Northern Abhidharma systems.

2.1.3 The Theravādin dhamma categorization

We have seen that within the Abhidhamma canonical framework dhammas are reckoned the physical and mental occurrences as presented in consciousness. These occurrences fall into various categories, the number of which is more or less finite: later Theravādin sources count eighty-two categories, whereas the Sarvāstivāda holds there to be seventy-five such categories. It should be noted that each category represents a possible type of occurrence and that the term dhamma denotes both any particular instance of a category of dhammas and the whole category. Thus, according to the Theravādin typology there are eighty-two possible types of occurrence in the encountered world, not eighty-two occurrences. Eighty-one categories are conditioned (saṅkhata), which means that the many and various dhamma combinations they embrace constitute the conditioned cyclic experience in samsāra from the lowest realms of hell to the highest heavens of the devas and brahmas. The eighty-second dhamma category is unconditioned (asaṅkhata) and has one single member, namely, nībbāna.

The eighty-one conditioned dhammas fall into three broad categories: consciousness (citta), associated mentality (cetasika) and materiality, or physical phenomena (rūpa). The five khandhas of the Suttanta method fit within these three categories: the rūpakkhandha is included within the rūpa category that will be divided into twenty-eight types of material phenomena; the viññāṇakkhandha is subsumed by citta that here refers to different types of consciousness distinguished, among other things, by their concomitants; while the remaining three arūpakkhandhas are all accommodated within the cetasika category as mental states that arise along with consciousness performing diverse functions, with the vedanākkhandha and the saññākkhandha each counted as one cetasika, the saṅkhārakkhandha finely subdivided into fifty distinct cetasikas.

Consciousness, citta, encompasses a single dhamma category and, in conformity with the early Buddhist intentional model of consciousness, has the sense of being aware of something. We can never experience bare consciousness in its own moment of occurrence as a single isolated dhamma, for consciousness always directs itself to some object; it cannot eventuate as a dhamma in isolation from other dhammas. Rather, it always occurs associated (sampayutta) with other mental states that enable the mind to be aware of perceived objects. There are fifty-two such dhammas that
form the category of associated mentality. According to the post-canonical Abhidhamma the minimum number of associated mental states required for any thought process is seven: sense contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), recognition or conceptualization (saññā), volition (cetanā), one-pointedness (ekaggatā), life-faculty (jīvitindriya) and attention (manasikāra). These mental occurrences are common to all types of consciousness (sabbacittasādhāraṇa) and perform the essential and most basic cognitive functions without which the thought process would be impossible. Together with bare consciousness, this means that any conscious process requires a minimum of eight dhammas. The number of cetasikas will vary from the minimum seven in the simplest form of sense consciousness up to a maximum of thirty-six in a developed skilful consciousness. They will also vary qualitatively according to the type of consciousness in question.

The third category, materiality, groups twenty-eight types of dhamma. Any given physical occurrence is analysable into these rūpa-dhammas, apart from which no other matter is recognized; the elusive metaphorical entity that we call ‘matter’ is but our own mental construction. For the sake of explanation, each rūpa-dhamma is postulated as if it were a discrete entity, but in actual fact it always occurs inseparably associated with a set of other rūpa-dhammas. A significant distinction is drawn between primary and secondary rūpa-dhammas. The category of primary material dhammas includes the four great elements (mahābhūta), namely, earth, water, fire and wind (paṭhavī-, āpo-, tejo-, vāyo-dhātu) or, according to the Abhidhamma elaborate and more abstract explanation, the elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and mobility. The category of secondary material dhammas, called upādā-rūpa, subsumes those material elements that are always coexistent with and necessarily dependent on the mahābhūtas. Twenty-four such items are enumerated: the first five physical sense faculties and the first four corresponding sense objects (excluding tangibles); three faculties (femininity, masculinity, material faculty of life); two modes of self-expression (bodily and vocal); three characteristics of matter (lightness, plasticity and pliability); four phases of matter (integration, continuity, decay and impermanence); the space element, nutriment and the heart basis. Although the Abhidhamma framework shows more uniformity in the application of the term rūpa than do the Nikāyas (note that rūpa in the sense of subjective phenomena is given up), the diversity of the dhammas grouped under the rūpa category suggests that even in the Abhidhamma the term rūpa was used with some degree of fluidity. The constituents of the rūpa category are not as uniform as might be expected: some represent certain elements of matter and others certain facts (phases, modes, limitation) connected with matter.

The fourfold categorization of dhammas into citta, cetasika, rūpa and nibbāna is already anticipated by the Dhammasaṅgani, though only implicitly: it is not given straightforwardly, but it may be gleaned from the text’s method and structure. The first two categories become manifest if we take into account the fact that the dhammas investigated by the Dhammasaṅgani always prove to be factors of citta in its broadest sense of a series of particular mental occurrences. Indeed, Book I is entirely devoted to the uprising of citta (cittuppāda) and aims at a comprehensive mapping.
of one’s consciousness. That citta is regarded as inseparable from its associated mental states is shown by the couplets enumerated in the māṭikā of the Dhammasaṅgani, known as the abhidhamma-māṭikā, and especially by the couplets of the mahantara-duka, among which we find ‘dhammas that are associated with/dissociated from citta’ (cittasampayutt/-vippayuttā), ‘dhammas that are conjoined with/detached from citta’ (cittasamsatth/-visamsatthā) and ‘dhammas that arise/do not arise simultaneously with citta’ (no citta-cittasahabhuno).64 The Dhammasaṅgani, though, also deals with the category of rūpa: in fact, Book II is devoted to an inquiry into rūpa, while Book III broaches the idea that the entire domain of dhammas is divided with respect to rūpa, for the dhammas are shown to be either rūpino or arūpino. The former group incorporates the four great physical elements and all material form that is derived from them, whereas the latter refers to whatever is included under the four mental khandhas and to the unconditioned element.65 The fourfold dhama categorization can thus be drawn from the Dhammasaṅgani, and in this sense it is also present in the other Abhidhamma treatises which are familiar with the Dhammasaṅgani and presuppose its ideas. It is explicitly stated for the first time, though, in the Abhidhammāvatāra – a post-canonical Abhidhamma manual ascribed to Buddhadatta (c.430 CE).66

The fourfold dhama typology became fundamental to and representative of Abhidhamma thought. One is, then, bound to wonder again: Why did the Abhidhamma theoreticians need this particular fourfold typology if the extant āyatana and dhātu totality formulas could account for human experience in its entirety, nibbāna inclusive? What role did the intellectual milieu at that time play in the development of the dhama categorization? This book argues and demonstrates that the Abhidhammikas sought to establish a metaphysical theory of mental events, and that for this purpose the extant totality formulas were found to be wanting. Motivated not only by a concern with the dynamics of sentient experience in its entirety, but also by a specific interest in accounting for what an awakened mind is as opposed to skilful consciousness experienced by an ordinary being (puthujjana), the Abhidhamma theoreticians attempted to set out criteria for determining what any given dhama that may possibly occur in one’s consciousness is. It is this metaphysical undertaking that distinguishes the dhama analysis from the extant totality formulas. My argument, as primarily unfolded in Chapter 4, is that philosophically the Abhidhammikas grappled with the problem of individuation and that, attempting to reconcile the tension between the systematic-doctrinal and the experiential-practical dimensions of their tradition within the specific context of Buddhist soteriology, they offered a method of individuating the dhamas as a means for individuating the scope of the mental.67

This section has dealt with the major transformations in early Buddhist conception of dhama. We have shown that in the Sutta literature dhama was used as a generic term related to the Buddha’s teachings and enabling one to refer to any subject matter in the broadest sense, similarly to ‘thing’. In the canonical Abhidhamma the concept of dhama underwent a gradual process of concretization and gradually acquired a narrower, more technical meaning. Here a clearer
distinction was drawn between *dhamma* and *dhammas*, and the notion of the plurality of *dhammas* became the basis of an intricate theory of consciousness, or rather a metaphysics of mind. The *dhamma* theory was accompanied by closely related doctrines that together shaped the development of Buddhist systematic thought. The following section examines these doctrines.

### 2.2 ON DHAMMAS, ATOMS, SUBSTANCES AND THE DOCTRINE OF MOMENTARINESS

#### 2.2.1 The intellectual backdrop: the Vaiśeṣika view of atoms and substances

The further systematization of *dhammas* was given impetus by their construal as psycho-physical events *qua* analytical primitives and, in the post-canonical period particularly, by their portrayal as momentary, atomic occurrences subsumed into a comprehensive categorial theory. This theory is not intended to provide an inventory of external existents, but rather distinguish the physical and mental events that may possibly occur in one’s consciousness while making progress on the path to awakening. Yet in their systematization of the *dhamma* theory, the Abhidhammikas must have been influenced by the contemporary Indian philosophical schools and their disputes over the notion of being and its extension. Within the Brahmanical arena, the Nyāya, the Vaiśeṣika and the Pārvamīṃśa take a leading role in the competition against the Buddhist anti-substantialist, process-oriented position. It is the Vaiśeṣika, though, that sets up the most inclusive categorial system in classical Indian metaphysical discourse, and indeed there are conspicuous interrelations between the Abhidhamma’s shift in understanding the concept of *dhamma* and Vaiśeṣika doctrinal thought.

Although the full-fledged expression of the Vaiśeṣika’s ideas as found in the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* and in its ensuing textual tradition is posterior at least to the early strata of the canonical Abhidhamma, the idea of categorization and the conceptual roots of the Vaiśeṣika go back to as early as the ancient Grammarians’ (Vaiyākaraṇa) analyses of language into its various components. The tradition of grammatical thought as documented in the *Mahābhāṣya* (second century BCE?) provides significant counterparts for Vaiśeṣika metaphysics and abounds with analogues of the Vaiśeṣika categorial theory. Modern scholarship has broached arguments in favour of both the thesis that the Vaiśeṣika theory borrows from the *Mahābhāṣya* and was fixed roughly a century later (because it is more elaborate), and the opposite assumption that Patañjali’s grammatical categories presuppose the Vaiśeṣika categories. The extant sources, however, do not enable us conclusively to determine their dating, or the direction of intellectual transference between the Vaiśeṣika, the Grammarians and the canonical Abhidhamma, and hence it would be more appropriate to substitute ‘doctrinal exchange’ for ‘one-sided influence’. At any rate, we may safely assume that the Vaiśeṣika and the Abhidhamma schools
emerged in an intellectual atmosphere that was at least mediated by, if not originated from, ancient linguistic and grammatical circles. This intellectual milieu, on the one hand, fostered doctrinal interrelations between the above schools and, on the other hand, supported metaphysics and the reification of entities and qualities.71

Much of the Abhidhamma doctrinal thought is essentially built upon the analysis of consciousness, and its paradigm for the way consciousness operates is consciousness experienced in the process of sensory perception. The Vaiśeṣika and the Buddhist theories of sense perception show remarkable resemblance, although in the Vaiśeṣika system the concepts of substance and of soul play a major role. Like the Abhidhamma theory of perception, the Vaiśeṣika theory deals with the qualities of the elements that construct the objects of the different sense organs. Underlying this theory is the assumption that things are perceived with their qualities because the sense organs come into contact (saṃyoga) with them. One perceives a certain colour, for instance, when there is a contact between the eye and the substance in which the colour inheres. The Vaiśeṣika position, however, is that substances themselves are perceived, although their perception is necessarily bound up with the perception of their qualities.72 Manas, which is a substance on the Vaiśeṣika list of categories, denotes a sixth, internal organ, intrinsically unconscious and in itself incapable of any cognitive activity. The internal organ receives sensory data from the five physical sense organs and passes them on to the soul or the knowing subject (ātman). It passes only one sensory datum at a time so that the soul will not be swamped with too many data at once – which explains the fact that knowing does not occur all in an instant. Perception thus follows through contact with the objects and is assisted by the internal organ.73

Interrelations are also found between the Vaiśeṣika atomistic theory and the Abhidhamma explication of material reality in terms of atoms, although this affinity may have been mediated by the Sarvāstivāda.74 The Vaiśeṣika deals with the analysis of nature into its ultimate constituents, incorporating the elaborate list of these constituents in a categorial scheme. Postponing the detailed discussion of the philosophical significance of a categorial theory to Chapter 4, in the present context suffice it to say that, ontologically, categories provide a means to analyse reality according to the distinct types of entity that supposedly constitute it. Categories represent the modes of being of all things in the encountered world, and hence are aspects of reality, differently from the items that they enumerate, which are parts of reality. A metaphysical system will arrange its categories in a certain hierarchy: the members of the preponderant category or categories are regarded as what really exists, while the members of the remaining, secondary categories are seen as either dependent upon the former or as illusory.75

The first three categories on the Vaiśeṣika list are substance (dravya); attribute, or ‘quality instances’; and motion, or ‘action-moments’. There are nine types of substance: earth, water, fire, air, ether, time, space, self and mind.76 Substance is defined as that which possesses attribute and motion, and as the inherent cause of all objects.77 It is the locus, the supportive substratum and the constitutive cause of all things. Substances are divided into permanent (nitya) and impermanent
(anītya): all nine classes of substance are essentially irreducible, indestructible elements that occur in their permanent form as eternal, indivisible atoms (paramāṇu). The four primary substances (earth, water, fire and air) also occur as impermanent, destructible compounds of atoms that form the concrete, empirical objects and phenomena we encounter in everyday experience. In both their modes of existence substances are real substrates of real attributes having astitva, ‘isness’.78

The Vaiśeṣika conceives of atoms, then, as infinitely small, eternal and uncaused material substances. According to this mechanistic philosophy of nature, everything in the encountered world is made up of and reducible to these imperishable atoms that conglomerate and separate, but themselves remain unchangeable. The origination and disappearance of all existents depend on the connection and the separation of atoms respectively. The latter also possess definite, permanent qualities (excepting the earth atoms, the qualities of which could change under the influence of heat), so that whatever apparent change in empirical phenomena results from the mixture of different atoms. Through the connection of parts (avayava) of which a thing is composed there ascends a new entity: a uniform whole (avayavī) different from its parts but that inheres in these parts. The new material compound emerges from the substance of its atomic elements, although its qualities, such an extension, may differ from those of its elements.79

The Vaiśeṣika pluralistic realism and atomistic theory, then, are grounded in what may be called a substance-attribute ontology. Such an ontology was dominant in classical Western philosophy for a long period, albeit it founded itself upon a supporting substance metaphysics that does not neatly match ancient India’s conceptual framework, first and foremost in the significance this metaphysics ascribes to the postulate of transcendence. The charges of doctrinal divergence, scholasticism and ‘ontologization’ levelled against the Abhidhamma notwithstanding, it is yet unclear to what extent these charges are justified, let alone in the case of the canonical Abhidhamma. Moreover, even if the later Abhidhammikas did develop what may provisionally be called ‘ontology’, given that their adhered event metaphysics had been rooted in process thought, then the resultant ontology may well be of an order different from substance-attribute ontology. To come to grips with these issues, we must first clarify what the Abhidhamma metaphysics is not, namely, substance metaphysics.

### 2.2.2 Substance metaphysics: an overview

From the time of Aristotle onwards, Western metaphysics has been dominated by the ontology of substance. The concept of substance has mainly been used in philosophical attempts to account for an ordinary, commonsense conceptual scheme that presupposes the existence of individual entities – substantial continuants such as persons, trees, animals, events, times and places. Even though philosophical scepticism, post-modernist movements and empirical science have operated in the direction of eradicating this widespread scheme, it is not clear that the idea of the existence of substances has been completely dispensed with
(consider, for example, science’s reference to ‘particles’). This idea is deeply rooted in the language we operate, of which the basic subject–predicate structure expresses a two-category ontological scheme: there are objects or ‘things’, namely, particulars that exist at unique place-times, and these objects have various attributes, that is, characteristics and modes of action. Our subject terms typically refer to particular objects, our predicate terms to their attributes and properties. Although the concept of substance is multivalent and has noticeably changed throughout the history of philosophy, it has retained the basic metaphysical sense of ‘that which is’: a concrete particular, and the only true particular, in which properties inhere.

Different metaphysical systems propose alternative schemes for the structure of reality. Each such scheme typically exhibits a hierarchy of levels of ontological categories. The topmost category is that of Being or Entity, which instantiates everything that exists. Then some schemes take at a lower level the categories of the Concrete and the Abstract. It is assumed that this division is exhaustive and exclusive: every entity is necessarily either concrete or abstract. A concrete entity, while ‘monopolizing’ its location, as it were, is the totality of the being to be found where its features are. Abstract entities, by contrast, do not exist in space and time, and it is often held that they lack causal powers and hence that they are incapable of entering into causal relationships with other entities. At the next level the Abstract is divided into various types such as Property (e.g. redness, squareness), Relation (e.g. identity), Proposition (e.g. ‘Human beings are mortal’) and Number. The Concrete, on the other hand, includes a different set of categories, the most important of which are Substance, Event (e.g. the eruption of Mt Vesuvius), Time (e.g. instants and durations), Place (points or regions of space), Limit (e.g. corners, surfaces) and Privation (e.g. holes or the absence of something). Finally, the category Substance is divided into Matter that includes all sensible objects, and Mind. Thus, the most fundamental feature of substance to be found in all its different accounts throughout the history of philosophy is that it is a concrete, particular entity; a specific, definite object rather than any other.

The concept of substance has occupied a central position in philosophical attempts to organize and categorize entities into various types. At the opening of *Metaphysics* VII Aristotle situates his inquiry into the nature of substance in relation to the traditional perplexity over the nature of being. What is the nature of being *qua* being, which is universal and necessary to all things? Aristotle maintains that this nature is located only in the primary or first instance, that is, in substance. Aristotle mentions various ways in which being is spoken of, though he focuses on the distinction between essential and accidental being. Substance, as the fundamental kind of being, denotes the subject of accidental change and is contrasted with its accidents: with things such as properties, qualities or attributes of substance, affections of substance, processes towards it and things that are productive of and relative to substance. This asymmetry rests on the assumption that the world contains two sorts of entity – substance and non-substance – that stand in a relation of one-way ontological dependence.
Substance is assigned an ontological priority: whereas all non-substances exist in substances that are their subjects (substrata), substances do not exist in subjects; they are separate and independent of non-substances. In this sense, substances may be reckoned as the ontological foundations of what there is; there is nothing more basic than them. But there are two additional aspects to the priority of substance. The first is a logico-grammatical priority: building on the logical notion of a subject, by ‘sensible substances’ Aristotle intended fundamental objects of predication, things that are neither predicated (said of) a subject nor in a subject. Contrarily, what needs to have a subject included in its definition is not a subject in the primary sense, and hence cannot be a substance. On Aristotle’s view, we can predicate various attributes of sensible substances, but we cannot predicate substances of anything else, and in this sense their being is independent. For instance, we may say of the sky that it is blue, but we cannot say of any other subject that it is sky. This primacy of substance is, then, characterized by a priority in definition: the definition of any non-substantial being will include the definition of a substance, but not vice versa. The second aspect, and the third priority assigned to substance, is epistemological. Here it is stated that the definition of a substance is crucial for knowing what a thing is. We presume we know each entity fully, Aristotle says, when we know what its nature is, for example, what a man is, rather than when we know its accidental features, such as its quality, its quantity or its place.

The elements of Aristotle’s metaphysical scheme laid the conceptual infrastructure of his scholastic heirs’ worldview. Those medieval thinkers kept elaborating on the Aristotelian project of articulating the structure of substance, supplementing and refining Aristotle’s account in accordance with their metaphysical and theological concerns. The scholastics’ concern with the Aristotelian metaphysics of substance was prompted by their interest in the notion of individual substance, and especially in the problem of individuation, which we may provisionally render as the question of what makes an individual substance this very particular rather than any other individual. What the medieval thinkers emphasize is that an individual substance is defined and distinguished from all other substances by its position in a hierarchy of levels of generality among categories. First, it is distinguished by the generic distinction holding among genera, next by the specific distinction holding among species, and finally, within a species, by the numerical distinction among the various particulars (e.g. ‘animal’ → ‘human being’ → ‘Socrates’).

The dawn of modern philosophy brought changes into the traditional articulation of the structure of substance. Nonetheless, the fundamentals of a substance-attribute ontology persisted in subsequent philosophy and retained Aristotle’s authority long after the notion of substance came to be understood differently. René Descartes (1596–1650), the founder of modern philosophy, applies the term substance...
Now Descartes’ idea of substance significantly differs from the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition’s in that substance is no longer assigned an epistemological primacy. ‘We cannot initially become aware of a substance’, Descartes says, ‘merely through its being an existing thing, since this alone does not of itself have any effect on us’. Rather, from the fact that we perceive certain attributes, which must inhere in something in order to have existence, we name the thing in which they inhere ‘substance’ and conclude that it must also exist.\textsuperscript{88} The ontological primacy, though, is retained: whatever is real can exist independently of any other object, and that which can thus exist is a substance.\textsuperscript{89}

Empiricists from John Locke (1632–1704) onwards turned the traditional epistemological and ontological hierarchy between substance and attribute completely on its head. They rejected the ontological priority of substance and instead argued that qualities alone are observed, and hence that qualities alone can be said to exist. In the words of Locke, substance is something the idea of which ‘we neither have, nor can have by sensation or reflection’. It is something we accustom ourselves to suppose to be the support of certain qualities that are capable of producing simple ideas in us, as these are conveyed to us by the senses. Substance is the supposed, though unknown, substratum of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist without something to uphold them.\textsuperscript{90} On Locke’s view ‘substance’ signifies ‘the bearer of properties’ and is approximated to what is indicated by the term ‘object’ – a sense which is remarkably different from ‘the most basic kind of being’.\textsuperscript{91} Qualities or properties, though, are general and can apply to an infinitely large number of individual instances. To pin down a particular by progressively specifying a complete set of its properties thus by no means assures that any group of properties, which is the set of all these properties, has that thing as its unique instance. Qualitatively identical things may be numerically distinct. This implies that the unique individuality of a thing is something over and above its attributes and possible appearances. Thus, although this Lockean line of thought strongly criticizes the concept of substance, once it has admitted the idea of an individuator it is compelled to accept the idea of a unifying substratum.\textsuperscript{92}

To sum up, Western metaphysics has been dominated by the ontological model of substance, which has a marked bias in favour of ‘objects’. The mainstays of substance metaphysics are that the world contains individual entities that endure through time and in which properties inhere (leaving aside whether those entities are material or immaterial and the exact nature of their inherent properties). What is perhaps the main derivative of the concept of substance is the view that reality is such that there is something ‘out there’ which is abiding, enduring and unalterable, despite the diversity and change we witness. Substance is that immutable core, what underlies an object and enables it to remain the same despite the novelty of its features.\textsuperscript{93} The concept of substance is therefore tied in with realism, according to which we are, by and large, capable of acquiring knowledge of the world and of comprehending it, because our categories, beliefs and statements fit with the features of a mind-independent reality. The Vaiśeṣika pluralistic realism and atomistic theory are on a par with these assumptions. The point is that although the
Theravādin Abhidhamma analysis of matter is likely to have been informed by the Vaiśeṣika ontology, it is grounded in a disparate metaphysical approach.

### 2.2.3 The Buddhist notion of atomic dharmas

Within Buddhist circles the idea of material atoms is explicitly stated for the first time in the *Abhidharmahṛdaya* of Dhammaśrī (c. second century CE). It is given a detailed formulation in the *Mahāvibhāṣa* and later on plays an integral part in the works of Vasubandhu and Saṅghabhadra (fifth century CE). The Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika position, as documented by Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakosābhaṣya*, distinguishes between two layers of material entities: the unitary atom (*dravyaparamāṇu*) and the collective atom (*saṅghāta-paramāṇu*). The unitary atom is the smallest unit of matter: it consists of the four primary elements (*mahaṁbhūta*, i.e. earth, fire, water and wind), albeit it is partless and without dimensions; it never springs or passes away in isolation, but is combined with other unitary atoms. A collection of atoms that emanate and discontinue simultaneously with each other is called a collective atom, the smallest of which consists of a minimum of eight elements: the four primary elements and four secondary elements.94 The latter are four of the five types of sense object (form, odour, taste and touch; sound is not regarded as necessary for the occurrence of material objects) – what Nelson Goodman has coined *qualia*, meaning those sensible things such as shades of colour, smells and tastes.95

The *Nikāyas* allude to the distinction between the *mahaṁbhūtas* as primary material elements (*rūpa-dhamma*) and the secondary, derived material elements (*upādā-rūpa*), but no attempt is made to explain how and why the latter are secondary to the former.96 The *Dhammasaṅgani* does not go much beyond the *Nikāyas* in this respect. Preliminary information is found in the *Paṭṭhāna*, wherein it is said that the four *mahaṁbhūtas* stand in relation to the *upādā-rūpas* as causal conditions (*paccaya*) by way of simultaneity (*sahajāta*), support (*nissaya*), presence (*atthi*) and non-disappearance (*avigata*).97 The *upādā-dhammas* thus emanate simultaneously with the *rūpa-dhammas*, but they are elements that describe how material phenomena are perceived through our senses, and hence they are secondary to the latter. The *mahaṁbhūtas* are assigned a primary position in the sense that they are recognized as the ultimate, irreducible data of matter. Although all four primary elements are present in every instance of matter, there is no quantitative difference (*pamāṇa*) between them: they enter into the composition of material things in equal proportion. The diversity of material objects is not due to a difference in the quantity of their components, but in their capability (*sāmatthiyā*). That is, in a given material phenomenon one element is more intense than the others. For instance, if in a given material aggregate the earth element is characterized by a comparatively high degree of intensity or capability, then that material aggregate is also called ‘earth’ or ‘earth-preponderant’ (*adhika*).98

Note that this is not an account of matter as constitutive of external, mind-independent reality, and indeed ontologically it might be said that the schema of
material reality as made up of the atoms of the four elements does not specify the status of material phenomena other than that they arise from the elements. The above Abhidhamma analysis depicts material phenomena as they appear to the different types of cognitive awareness, revealing that every instance of matter in all its possible states other than sound has eight components: four elements and four types of sensible phenomena (form, odour, taste and touch). Sound alone has nine components: the former eight plus sound.99

Nevertheless, the analysis of matter into atomic components undermines this phenomenological dimension. Georges Dreyfus observes that the latter is more distinctly retained in the Sautrāntika divergent version of the atomistic theory. For the Vaibhāṣika the five types of sensible phenomena – and hence the four secondary elements – are included in the list of the seventy-five dharmas under the āyatanas. Therefore they are as real as the four primary elements, despite being composed of, and thus dependent on, the former. But this is contradictory, for if they are merely mental constructs made of unitary atoms how can they be real?100

The Sautrāntika view, as represented by Vasubandhu in his commentary to his own Abhidharmakośa, deals with this problem by distinguishing between two different senses of ‘real’ (dravya): ontological and phenomenological. Although from a phenomenological standpoint the sense spheres constitute one’s experiential world and may be taken as real, ontologically speaking they are not so. Vasubandhu thus refutes the Vaibhāṣika interpretation that large material objects are made up of eight elements. For him, only the four primary elements are real in the full sense of the term; they constitute all material objects that are mere conceptual constructs.

Accordingly, the sense spheres are excluded from the list of real phenomena (dravya). According to this Sautrāntika explanation, infinitesimal atoms and moments of consciousness alone are real. Everything else, such as shapes or shades of colour, is taken as real only inasmuch as it has the efficacy to produce appropriate effects (visual cognitions, in the present example) and is taken as an object of conventional practice. Our perception of sense objects is not due to their reality, but is the result of the causal efficacy of their constituent atoms.101

Whatever disputes may have existed between the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika on these ontological and phenomenological issues, they all agreed on the view that material reality (rūpa-dharma) can be reduced to discrete momentary atoms, namely, the four primary elements. These momentary atoms, through their spatial arrangement and by their concatenation with prior and posterior atoms of the same type, create the illusion of persisting things as they appear in our everyday experience. Atomic reality is thus understood first and foremost as change, though not in the sense of a thing $x$ transforming into $y$. That is, change itself is the very nature of atomic reality rather than its being made of enduring substances the qualities of which undergo change. Atoms that appear to endure are, in fact, a series of momentary events that ascend and fall in rapid succession and in accordance with causal relations. Unlike the atoms of the Vaiśeṣika, the atoms of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and the Sautrāntika are not permanent: they come into being and cease from one moment to the next,
going through a process of birth, continuance, decay and destruction. Yet the material compounds that consist of these atoms are real, if only in the minimal, phenomenological sense.

For our present purpose it is important to note that the Theravādins did not incorporate the Northern Buddhist atomistic theory as such into their system. As Karunadasa indicates, the Theravādin canonical texts do not mention the idea of a unitary atom or the term paramāṇu. Rather, the post-canonical texts employ the term kalāpa (literally ‘package’), which corresponds to the collective atom of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika, that is, the smallest material unit that contains the eight elements. The idea first appears in the commentaries to the Dhammasaṅgāni and the Vibhaṅga, as well as in the Visuddhimagga, using both the singular form and the plural form kalāpā. Yet only in the period of the sub-commentaries and the medieval manuals did kalāpa become the standard term for the collective atom.

Moreover, the four mahābhūtas – although postulated as if they were discrete entities – do not exist independently. Rather, they always occur simultaneously (sahajāta) with each other: the rise or cessation of one always synchronizes with those of the other three. Their relation is therefore described in the Pathāna and in the Abhidhamma commentaries as conditioned by mutuality and simultaneity (aññamañña-, sahajāta-paccaya). Fundamental to these two types of causal conditioning is the principle that the occurrence of one element must simultaneously be accompanied by whatever is related to that element. Each of the primary elements thus becomes at one and the same time the condition as well as what is conditioned in relation to the others. Each element assists the remaining three by performing its peculiar function: the earth element is a condition for the other three primaries by acting as their foundation; the water element acts as their cohesion; the fire element acts as their maintenance; the air element acts as their distension.

Even if this analysis of matter eventually ends in ‘atomism’, the notion of the material dhammas’ simultaneity is not abandoned: the so-called atom is a collection of rūpa-dhammas, each of which is inseparable from the others. Their interconnection is explained with reference to relations of causal conditioning rather than to inherence of some sort, such as that between substances and their intrinsic attributes or qualities. No distinction between substance and attributes is introduced here: instead, a distinction is made between primary and secondary elements. The Buddhist atomistic theory, regardless of its different interpretation by each Abhidharma school, thus stands in contrast to Vaiśeṣika atomism. The Vaiśeṣika theory exhibits the substance-attribute ontological model, whereas for the Buddhists sensibilia are not the attributes or qualities of the mahābhūtas; they are a set of secondary elements dependent on the latter. The Atthasālinī declares: ‘Who has said that visual forms etc., are qualities of heat, and so on? For it is not permissible to say of indivisible phenomena “this is a quality of that.”’ Although the mahābhūtas are deemed the ultimate and primary elements of matter, they are not to be understood as substances. Each element is always found to be conditioned by, related to and co-arisen with the others – and this stands in utter contradiction with the definition of substance as that which
exists independently of any other thing, ontologically, epistemologically and linguistically. All four primary elements are present in each rūpa-kalāpa, the smallest unit of matter, but they are not permanent, independent entities: they are subject to the laws of causal conditioning, liable to destruction and have no underlying, enduring essence. In short, they are characterized by the three marks of anicca, dukkha and anatta.107

The early Theravādin Abhidhamma, then, did not simply adhere to the theory of atomic dhammas and there is no allusion to the unitary atom in the Theravādin canonical texts. Only in the post-canonical literature does the idea of a collective atom (kalāpa) appear, and even the mature theory of rūpa-kalāpas, the Theravādin form of atomism, is incommensurate with a substance metaphysics. Nonetheless, the idea of atomizing the encountered world did leave its mark upon the Theravādin mindset. This is evinced in the Theravādin reconciliation of the dhamma typologies with the doctrine of momentariness espoused by the Northern Abhidharma schools. The next section reviews the salient principles of this doctrine and its metaphysical implications.

2.2.4 The doctrine of momentariness

The doctrine of momentariness does not appear as a topic in its own right in the earliest stratum of Buddhist teaching. It was initially developed within the framework of the Abhidharma traditions and thereafter became an integral part of their doctrinal systems. The theory appears to have originated from the early Buddhist analysis of impermanence (anicca) in terms of the constant rise and fall of all mental and physical phenomena. This analysis, however, was subsequently elaborated by the Buddhist schools into a schematic and radical theory that departed from the ancient view of impermanence as found in the suttas, where it is presented as an empirically oriented teaching about the nature of sentient experience. The Buddhist doctrine of momentariness atomizes phenomena temporally by dissecting them into a succession of discrete, momentary (kṣanika/khaṇika) events that pass out of existence as soon as they have originated. As one event is exhausted, it conditions a new event of its kind that proceeds immediately afterwards. The result is an uninterrupted, flowing continuum (santāna) of causally connected momentary events. These succeed each other so fast that we conceive of the phenomena they constitute as temporally extended.108

There is no surviving textual material that documents how the original Buddhist postulate of impermanence came to be conceived in terms of momentariness. Pioneering research on the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness began in the 1930s, but produced a picture of the final form this doctrine assumed in the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra schools. Alexander von Rospatt’s comprehensive study of the early history of the doctrine of momentariness fills this gap, although it focuses on the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and Yogācāra texts.109 Wan Doo Kim has recently provided an erudite reconstruction of the early formation of this doctrine in the Theravāda tradition.110 The following presentation of the development of
the Theravādin doctrine of momentariness is informed by these two studies, and especially by Kim’s work and its conclusions.

Most scholars agree that the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness cannot be traced back to the early canonical sources, that is, the Nikāyas and their equivalents in other Buddhist traditions. Accordingly, it has been argued that the Theravādins did not develop the doctrine of momentariness in the early stage of their history, that it was adopted from other Buddhist circles following the division into divergent doctrinal movements, and is thus a post-canonical development which dates back only to the first century CE and possibly even later, being introduced by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century CE. In contradistinction to this position, Kim shows that the doctrine of momentariness is embedded in the Old Sinhalese commentaries and has its roots in the Theravādin canonical sources.

The doctrine of momentariness probably originated in conjunction with the teaching of impermanence and the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena (tisaṅkhatalakkhaṇa, namely, anicca, dukkha and anattā). The characteristic of impermanence lies at the root of Buddhist thought and is emphatically insisted upon in the canonical texts. This conviction is expressed by the renowned formula sabbe saṅkhāra anicca. It is part of the basic position of the Buddha’s teaching that all empirical phenomena – physical and mental alike – are impermanent, in a constant process of conditioned construction, and are closely linked, being dependently originated. The Sutta elaboration on these three interlocking ideas results in the statement that conditioned phenomena (saṅkhāra/saṅkhata-dhammā) are of the nature of origination (uppāda) and dissolution (vaya). They are sometimes also depicted as having the nature of ‘change of what endures’ (hitassa aññathatta), as the Buddha says:

Origination of the body, feeling, conceptualization, karmic volition and consciousness is evident, [its] dissolution is evident, [its] change of what endures is evident. Origination of these phenomena (dhammānaṁ) is evident, [their] dissolution is evident, [their] change of what endures is evident.

Kim suggests that this is the stock phrasing that paved the way for further schematization of the idea of impermanence, and from which a redactor or reciter of the Canon eventually derived the prototype tisaṅkhatalakkhaṇa formula of the Aṅguttara-nikāya, later known as the Trilakṣaṇa-sūtra:

There are, monks, these three conditioned characteristic marks of that which is conditioned. What three? Origination is evident, dissolution is evident and change of what endures is evident. These, monks, are the three conditioned characteristic marks of that which is conditioned.

Interestingly, the couplet of origination and dissolution, or rather cessation, also appears in the Yamaka. Each chapter of this canonical Abhidhamma treatise
is divided into three sections: Distribution of Designations (paññatti-vāra), Process (pavatti-vāra) and Comprehension (pariññā-vāra). The rationale of the second section is especially significant for the concerns of this study, as it complies with the earliest Buddhist process metaphysics, that is, the assumption that the encountered phenomena constituting one’s experience are best represented and understood in terms of processes rather than substantial ‘things’. The Process section in each of the Yamaka chapters examines various doctrinal concepts in terms of origination (uppāda-vāra), cessation (nirodha-vāra) and origination-cessation (uppādanirodha-vāra). As Kim notes, this is probably the first occurrence of the term khaṇa in the sense of the subdivision of a moment into origination and destruction moments (uppādakkhaṇa, bhaṅgakkhaṇa). This is also a milestone in the development of a radical theory of momentariness which replaced the early teaching of impermanence.

The full-fledged threefold scheme of subdivision of a moment, adding an endurance moment (ṭhiti-kkhaṇa), first appears in the Pali commentaries. Relying on the recurring canonical doctrine of the three marks of conditioned phenomena, the commentators taught that each moment (khaṇa) of every single phenomenon is subdivided into three different instants of origination (uppādakkhaṇa), endurance (ṭhiti-kkhaṇa) and dissolution (bhaṅgakkhaṇa). The Saṃyutta commentary declares:

Hence the Ancients said:
‘Arising was called birth and dissolution referred to passing away. Change referred to ageing and endurance to maintenance.’

Thus each khandha has three characteristic marks called arising, ageing and dissolution, of which it is said in the passage (A I 152): ‘These are, monks, the three conditioned characteristic marks of the conditioned [khandha].’

On the basis of a stanza handed down by the Ancients, the commentator identifies uppāda with jāti (birth), vaya with bhaṅga (dissolution), ṭhiti with amuppālana (maintenance) and aṇṇathatta with jarā (ageing). Then, referring to the Aṅguttara formula of the tisāṅkhatalakkhaṇa, he reduces these four categories to three, namely, uppāda, jarā and bhaṅga. The Aṅguttara commentary refers to three categories only, glossing uppāda with jāti, vaya with bheda (destruction) and ṭhitassa aṇṇathatta with jarā. It then explicitly refers to time, applying the concept of a moment to each phase of the tisāṅkhatalakkhaṇa: origination is said to appear at the origination moments, ageing at the subsistence (ṭhana) moments and dissolution at the destruction moments.

In the Abhidharma tradition of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika the term ‘moment’ (ksana) is used in a highly technical sense as the smallest, definite unit of time that cannot be subdivided, the length of which came to be equated with the duration of mental entities as the briefest conceivable events. This usage presupposes an atomistic conception of time in the sense that time is not reckoned indefinitely
divisible — indeed kṣaṇa is often discussed in juxtaposition to the concepts of material atoms and syllables, which are likewise comprehended as indivisible. The Sarvāstivādins took the stance that the four samskṛtalakṣaṇas exist separately as real entities within each moment. This induced a host of problems, the primary of which is that such a definition of kṣaṇa is difficult to reconcile with the conception of the moment as the shortest unit of time.

The Theravādins, though, did not share this conception of the moment and instead used khaṇa as the expression for a short while, the dimension of which is not fixed but may be determined by the context. For example, cittakkhaṇa refers to the instant taken by one mental event. In this basic sense as denoting a very brief stretch of time, the term khaṇa does not entail an atomistic conception of a definite and ultimate, smallest unit of time, but leaves open the possibility that time is infinitely divisible. In the canonical texts khaṇa covers a wider range of meaning than merely ‘moment’ and often denotes ‘opportunity’ or ‘auspicious moment’. In the context of the tisaṅkhatalakkhaṇa, khaṇa acquires the specific sense of the threefold subdivision of a moment and is prefixed by the words uppāda, thiti and bhaṅga. Here the three moments of origination, endurance and dissolution do not correspond to three different entities. Rather, they represent three phases (avatthā) of a single momentary phenomenon and are defined as one single consciousness-moment (ekacittakkhaṇa): a dhamma occurs in the first sub-moment, endures in the second sub-moment and perishes in the third one. In this way, the Theravādins avoided the predicament of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣikas, who had to face the difficulties of how to compress the four samskṛtalakṣaṇas – conceived of as four different realities, as really existent entities – into one single indivisible moment, and of how to account for their ontological status.

Despite their different interpretations of the concept of momentariness, the early Buddhist schools all derived this concept from the analysis of impermanence in terms of the dynamics of whatever mental and physical phenomena eventuate. The equation of kṣaṇa/khaṇa with the duration of these transient phenomena as extremely short occurrences – even the shortest conceivable – led to the direct determination of the moment in terms of these occurrences. This, along with the schematization and subdivision of the moment into the phases of origination, endurance and dissolution, resulted in the mature theory of momentariness. In the framework of the Sarvāstivādins, the Dārṣṭāntikas and the Sautrāntikas, the theory is applied to material and mental phenomena alike. These schools portray consciousness as a succession of discrete moments of awareness, that is, single instants of thought, the occurrence and passing away of which transpire extremely rapidly in accordance with a sequence of particular sense objects. Thus, the ratio of change between material and mental phenomena in a given moment is one to one, so that they occur in perfect synchronicity. As opposed to those schools, the Theravādins claim in the Khanikakathā of the Kathavatthu – the earliest evidence of the theory of momentariness – that only mental phenomena are momentary, whereas material phenomena endure for a stretch of time. The Theravādin commentarial tradition subsequently elaborated on this proposition.
and produced the unique theory that a material phenomenon lasts for sixteen or seventeen thought moments.124

So far we have located the Theravādin doctrine of momentariness within the broader intellectual milieu of early Buddhist doctrinal thought. We have seen that this doctrine testifies to a transition from an empirically oriented postulate of impermanence to an all-encompassing schematization of experience-in-time construed in terms of moments: from anicca to khaṇīkavāda. This transition led the Theravādin masters into conceptual reification and hypostatization: although the doctrine of momentariness entails that all conditioned phenomena are intrinsically momentary and subject to constant origination and destruction, each such constitutive moment came to be hypostatized through its analysis into discrete phases corresponding to the characteristics of the conditioned. What is perhaps the most striking embodiment of this doctrinal move is the endurance moment, thitikkhana, and its respective conditioned characteristic of thitassa, aññathatta.

The endurance moment posed a host of problems for the Buddhist schools and was interpreted in various ways.125 The Theravādins explain aññathatta as ageing (jarā) and in accordance with the distinction they draw between the duration of a moment of thought and one of matter, they are particularly concerned with the incongruity of the idea of ageing when it applies to immaterial phenomena. Hence, they claim that the marks of such phenomena as feeling, conceptualization etc. should be understood either in terms of an existence moment (atthikkhaṇa) or in terms of recurrence (santati):

But some declare: ‘The ageing-moment cannot be made known in the case of immaterial phenomena. […] Those [three characteristic marks] are obtained with reference to the moment of existence.’ […] They further say: ‘Or alternatively, “endurance” is a state to be understood in terms of recurrence.’126

It is difficult to determine from this Samyutta commentary passage what exactly is meant by athtikkhaṇa. To judge by the sub-commentary, the term refers to the fact that a mental phenomenon changes so rapidly that there is no separate endurance moment, because the very brief moment of its existence is denoted by the origination moment itself.127 Later sub-commentators, notably Sumanāgala, reject the concept of athtikkhaṇa and interpret the phrase thitassa aññathatta as pubbāparavisesa, namely, the difference between the preceding and the succeeding phase that constitutes a series of dhammas. This position is on a par with the second alternative in the above citation, wherein thiti is understood in terms of continuity.128 Most Theravādin commentators, however, do not endorse this position. The Samyutta commentary thus states that thitikkhaṇa is a state in the occurrence of a dhamma distinct from the stages of its arising and dissolution, during which the dhamma endures ‘in the face of its own dissolution’ (bhaṅgābhimukhāvatthā).129

Another difficulty regarding thitikkhaṇa and its identification with ageing is that ageing implies a qualitative change or modification in a given dhamma during
the moment of its endurance, and change, in its turn, implies numerical difference, that is, the loss of identity and the substitution of the old by the new. The problem is how to reconcile this change with the Buddhist avoidance of the metaphysical notion of substance and its position that, beyond their properties, the dhammas have no underlying substrate which could account for their identity at the time of their origination and dissolution. In this context, both Buddhaghosa and Buddhadatta observe that ageing is manifested as the loss of the newness (navabhāvānapagama) of a dhamma, and not as the loss of its intrinsic nature (sabhāvānapagama). Now the idea that the dhammas retain their intrinsic nature seems to be at odds with the very teaching of impermanence and with the fundamental rejection of an underlying substrate serving as the common thread upholding the moments of those dhammas together. The succeeding chapter takes up the development of the concept of sabhāva, its alleged ontological bearing and its position within the wider context of Buddhist epistemology and metaphysics. What I wish to emphasize here is that there appears to be a disparity between the early Buddhist teaching of impermanence and the later Abhidhamma analysis of each and every phenomenon at the microscopic level into its constitutive moments and their discrete phases. A tendency towards reification and hypostatization of the dhammas is attested by the conceptual shift from anicca to thiti and by the introduction of such ideas as sabhāva and athikkhaṇa.

The development of the theory of momentariness, then, along with its closely related atomistic theory, is part of the gradual systematization of Buddhist thought and ought to be seen in the broader context of the developing dhamma theory. As Gombrich has indicated, this doctrinal shift in the history of Buddhist thought is marked by two factors: the first is what he calls scholastic literalism, namely, a form of exegesis which reads more meaning into words at the cost of disregarding what those words were originally intended to describe. The second factor is debate, that is, the fact that monks were arguing about various doctrinal topics among themselves as well as against rival Buddhist and non-Buddhist circles. The two factors are interrelated: literalism may provide ample matter for debate and induce the preservation and assimilation of more than one side of an argument, whereas debates can often degenerate into excessive schematization and reification of terms. Accordingly, Gombrich suggests that the problem of thitassa aññathatta could be an instance of this doctrinal shift within early Buddhist schools:

It would be possible to see the passage in the Trilakṣaṇa-sūtra in a different light, as consonant with the simple twofold description of all conditioned phenomena as just arising and passing away. This could be done by interpreting thitassa aññathatta as simply synonymous with uppāda plus vaya – another way of expressing the same thing. True, the passage exactly as we have it seems to suggest three perfectly parallel clauses, and since vaya is clearly different from uppāda, parallelism suggests that thitassa aññathatta is different again. However, since the text (in any case not a perfect recording of the Buddha) may have undergone some
slight rephrasing, this is not an overwhelming argument. Moreover, if a true tri-partition were intended, one would expect the chronological sequence: uppāda, thitassa aññathatta, vaya. On our interpretation of the text’s original meaning, thitassa should not be translated ‘of what endures’ but ‘of what there is’.

The theory of momentariness and the dissection of each phenomenal moment at the micro-level, then, are subject to the dhamma theory and its broader vision of analysing experience into its ultimately basic elements. Such a project would be susceptible to the danger of reifying these elements and assigning them an ontological status. This, Gombrich has argued, is precisely what happened in the Abhidhamma. As already indicated, the Abhidhammiiks attempted to construct a systematic theory that would account for meditative experience. In this specific context of meditation the plural form dhammas refers to mental objects; the contents as they appear in the practitioner’s consciousness and that through meditative contemplation are revealed to reflect the Buddha’s teachings in propositional form. The latter, by virtue of their status as propositions, do not have to be conceived ontologically, as ‘things’ existing ‘out there’. Nevertheless, generalizing from this specific context of meditation, Gombrich explains, the Abhidhammikas began to treat these dhamma lists that the Buddha had referred to ‘as an inventory of what the Buddha had taught to exist, as the building blocks of the universe […] There were many more abstract than concrete dhammā, and some were still the names of processes, like anger, but the list was a closed one’. The result is that the Buddha’s empirical approach and original concern with the processes that make up one’s cycle of lives are replaced with scholastic doctrines, schematic analyses and ontological apprehensions remote from one’s conscious, lived world.

In contradistinction to this expository position, L.S. Cousins comments on the Abhidhamma dhamma theory that ‘the aim of this Abhidhamma analysis is not really theoretical; it is related to insight meditation (vipassanā) and offers a worldview based upon processes in order to facilitate insight into change (anicca) and no-self (anattā) so as to undermine mental rigidity’. Rupert Gethin similarly claims that in taking the traditional mātikās and exploring their application,
I suggest that to comprehend the nature of the canonical Abhidhamma and its place in the history of early Buddhist thought we need to reframe our conception of what ontology is, and seriously look into the possibility of grasping the doctrinal shift in the history of Theravāda Buddhism not in ontological terms, but rather in epistemological terms. Indeed the next section shows that the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness, albeit subject to a gradual process of concretization and reification, attests to certain epistemological, rather than ontological, constraints that are common to both early Buddhist teaching and the canonical Abhidhamma.

2.3 BUDDHIST THOUGHT IN THE MIRROR OF PROCESS METAPHYSICS

2.3.1 Time and its experience

The doctrine of momentariness is an elaboration on and an extremely radical formulation of the teaching of impermanence, although it does not challenge our ordinary perception of occurrences as such, but only the interpretation of these occurrences at the micro-level of their constitutive moments. Yet is this doctrine an analysis of time at all? To answer this question one should bear in mind that the doctrine of momentariness and the analysis of each and every dhamma-constitutive moment into its sub-moments originated in conjunction with the tisankhata-lakkhana, or in the Sarvāstivāda framework, the four saṃskṛtalakṣāṇas. In the case of the Sarvāstivāda, the soteriological and epistemological significance of the canonical formula regarding the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena is combined with deliberations on the ontological status of past and future dharmas. The Sarvāstivāda theory of momentariness thus has to be viewed against the backdrop of its notion of sarvam asti, which recognizes the existence of past, present and future dharmas (not the existence of the three times). The Theravādins rejected this notion and admitted only the existence of momentary present dhammas.

Much has been written regarding the Buddhist debate over the existence of past and future dharmas – a complex topic that exceeds the scope of the present study. What I wish to emphasize here is that whatever disputes may have existed between the early Sarvāstivāda and Theravādin Abhidhamma on this issue, no distinction is drawn between a dharma and its temporal determination, and both traditions agree that it is the operation of the characteristics of whatever is conditioned that accounts for a dharma/dhamma being past, present, future or present only. We have seen above that the equation of the ksana/khana with the duration of transient, momentary occurrences led to the direct determination of the moment in terms of the characterization of these occurrences. As Alexander von Rospatt points out:

Thus, the Sarvāstivāda definition of the moment as the time taken by the four characteristics to discharge their function implies that momentary
entities are exposed to the causal efficacy of each of the four characteristics. In fact, these specifications of the moment no longer convey a concrete idea about its duration at all, but only serve to characterize the momentary entity.¹³⁷

On another occasion Rospatt indicates that the object of the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness is not the nature of time, but existence within time. Rather than atomizing time into moments, this doctrine atomizes phenomena temporally by dissecting them into a succession of discrete momentary entities.¹³⁸

Let us now replace the ontological emphasis of this claim with an epistemological focus. While the ontologist asks how time as a transcendental category contains and determines occurrences, the epistemologist searches for features in experience that make us conceive of occurrences the way we do. This epistemological reading of the doctrine of momentariness accords better with the earliest Buddhist process-gearied outlook and demonstrates Gethin’s abovementioned contention that the concerns of the Abhidhamma ensue from the concerns of the Nikāyas. Such a shift of emphasis from ontology to epistemology evinces that the object of the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness is not so much existence within time, nor the passage of time as such, but rather, in a somewhat Bergsonian sense, experience within time or, more correctly, the way we experience events in time. This doctrine does not analyse time in line with classical Newtonian physics as a transcendental category, seeing time as a matrix of order imposed on natural events form without, or as a static container that sets the stage on which such events must play themselves out. Rather, time is itself but an inherent aspect of the manifold patterns of causal conditioning by which physical and mental events interrelate; it is an event-constituted, inherent feature of the structural operation of psycho-physical events.¹³⁹

This means that the doctrine of momentariness deals not with temporality as such, but with the construction of temporal experience; it analyses dhammas as they transpire through time: as psycho-physical events that appear in consciousness and, in fact, construct time. The Suttanta exposition interprets the three times as referring to past, present and future lives, while the Abhidhamma method explicates them as referring to the three subdivisions of the moment undergone by any conditioned dhamma.¹⁴⁰ As Steven Collins remarks, this distinction is made by the commentaries on two canonical texts that list the three times.¹⁴¹ Collins then observes:

‘But,’ the commentary continues, ‘this division into past (present and future), is (a division) of dhamma-s, not of time; in relation to dhamma-s which are divided into past, etc., time does not exist in ultimate truth, and therefore here “past”, etc., are only spoken of by conventional usage’.¹⁴²

Within the Abhidhamma framework, then, the sequence of the three times is secondary, generated in and by the process of conditioned and conditioning dhammas.
We have already seen that the Buddha’s modes of analysis of sentient experience in terms of nāmarūpa, the khandha, the āyatana and the dhātu formulas represent an empirical treatment of mental and physical dynamic processes from various standpoints. The Buddha talks about greed, hatred, delusion, ignorance, grasping, craving, sense perception, becoming, ageing, concentration, non-attachment, dispassion, equanimity, tranquillity, trust, gladness, super-knowledges and liberation-by-insight – to name but a few of the phenomena with which he is concerned. Even though all these may well function as meaningful linguistic referents and be referred to as ‘things’ in the broadest and non-technical sense of that word, they are not ‘objects existing out there’; they are not substances, but rather processes and states that belong to the category of occurrence. This same anti-substantialist thread also runs through Abhidhamma doctrinal thought. Taking the Dhammasaṅgaṇi and the Vibhaṅga as representative of early Abhidhamma thought and of its analysis of human experience into dhammas, one may say that the dhamma theory is meant to individuate one’s conscious experience according to one’s position on the noble path, thus distinguishing the ordinary mind from the awakened mind. The dhammas investigated by the Abhidhamma, too, are subsumed under the category of occurrence: they always prove to be factors of citta, in its broadest sense of a series of particular mental occurrences.

There is, however, a striking difference between the Nikāya and the Abhidhamma views of these occurrences that makes up one’s experience: whereas the suttas depict them as ongoing processes, the Abhidhamma portrays them as evanescent events. This is evidenced in the tradition’s espousal of the doctrine of momentariness and the shift from anicca to khaṇavāda: from seeing phenomena as undergoing a repetitive process of emergence and cessation to regarding them as momentary. Cousins thus observes that the Abhidhamma sets out

a description of mental processes and their interaction with the physical and the transcendent (lokuttara) by giving detailed accounts of specific events. These were seen as short-lived minds (cittas) related to specific sense objects and accompanied by a number of structures composed of basic mental elements (dhammas). These minds are viewed as constantly changing in level, object and content in a sequential stream.143

On another occasion Cousins indicates that the earlier Abhidhamma works ‘seek to describe specific events or occasions using the categories which the suttas rather employ to refer to sequences or processes’, and that it is this shift from a sequential, process orientation to a momentary or event orientated approach which accounts for the most characteristic difference between the two currents of thought.144 But what is the nature of processes and events, and how is the difference between them to be explained?
Towards a distinction between processes and events

Over the last century processes and events have attracted attention among philosophical circles – mainly those concerned with the philosophy of mind – largely because of the demise of the metaphysics of substance and its subsequent recognition that there is no such ‘thing’, strictly speaking, as the mind. Beliefs, desires, feelings, thoughts etc. were no longer conceived of as modifications of a substance such as the soul or mind, but rather as dynamic entities that construct the mind. According to this alternative picture the mind is a collection of mental events, processes and states, about whose nature and connection with physical reality questions can then be raised. Events have attracted most of the scholarly attention and various theories have been offered in order to account for the nature of these entities. What is significant for our concern is the fact that events and processes belong to the category of occurrences: they happen – as distinct from objects, which rather endure, and from states, which rather obtain. This means that events and processes, differently from objects, bear direct relation to time and necessarily involve change. Objects’ relation to time is indirect: they do not occur, begin or culminate; they are located in space, which allows one to say that they are in the world in a very straightforward sense, but they do not take place at a certain time.

Numerous linguists and philosophers have attempted to articulate criteria for the categorization of occurrences into events, processes and states, given their relation to time. The typologies offered are not flawless: they are over-neat and by no means exhaustive. I wish to highlight only those features which are most pertinent to distinguishing processes from events in the context of Buddhist thought. First, any attempt to explain the differences between these entities would have to draw on a richer conception of their temporal character than the one based simply on temporal duration. Although we tend to think of events as relatively short-lived whereas processes are regarded as rather more permanent and long-lasting, these are contingent facts rather than necessary truths essential to the categories of event and process, and hence there can be long events (e.g. wars which last for years) as well as short-lived processes (e.g. drawing breath). It is not the amount of time they occupy, but rather the way they occupy time which marks the distinction between events and processes. As Helen Steward indicates, it is the way in which that item fills the relevant period of time – whether it persists through the time, or occurs during the time, or obtains throughout the time, etc. Continuants, for example, persist through time and exist, as wholes, at every moment of their existence, whereas events occur at times or during periods of time and are unlike continuants in having temporal parts.

Steward renders these differences in the relation of events and processes to time as their ‘temporal shape’.
The temporal shape of events reveals them to be properties of *moments* of time, whereas processes are found to be properties of *periods* of time. The most pertinent questions to be asked about mental and physical processes are of the ‘how’ type: how such happenings are distributed in time, how they unfold, how they come about and how they can be ended. By contrast, once events have been analysed into their sub-phases, they are ordinarily found to be instantaneous. For this reason it does not make sense to ask how they transpire throughout time. Occurrences of an event, such as the ascent of a certain *citta*, can be counted and so it is more appropriate to ask how often a given event occurs. Not so with processes, of which correct measure is not frequency but rather duration. This is demonstrated by the temporally sensitive adjectives applicable to processes. As Steward notes, a process, such as craving, dispassion or auditory perception, can be persistent, continuous, ongoing, incessant, perpetual, unremitting, sporadic, intermittent, irregular, steady. None of these adjectives can be comfortably applied to an event. Processes, says Steward,

are things which, as it were, go on throughout periods of time – and so we can sensibly ask how they went on through that time – whether they went on constantly, or intermittently etc. But events simply happen – there is a ‘when’ and a ‘how long’ to be asked, but it does not make sense to ask a certain kind of ‘how’ question, the kind which asks for the distribution of the happening in time. This is demonstrated by the temporally sensitive adjectives applicable to processes. As Steward notes, a process, such as craving, dispassion or auditory perception, can be persistent, continuous, ongoing, incessant, perpetual, unremitting, sporadic, intermittent, irregular, steady. None of these adjectives can be comfortably applied to an event. Processes, says Steward,

Bear in mind that by contrast to universals – such as qualities and properties, numbers, species and propositions – and along with material objects and people, events are regarded as concrete particulars, that is, occurrences of which nature and individuality can be determined. Hence a rather more suitable set of questions about an event is of the ‘what’ group: what its temporal parts are, what makes it up, what its starting and culmination points are, and above all, what it means to be this particular event. The notion of events as particulars would, in turn, urge one to establish the principles of their categorization into types and the criteria for individuating the innumerable tokens of each type by virtue of their causal origins.

The present section has shown that the preliminary construction of the transition from the Nikāya to the Abhidhamma worldview in terms of a shift from asking ‘how’ to ‘what’ is rooted in a fertile theoretical ground. Accordingly, early Buddhism is an attempt to provide a coherent picture of human experience in terms of a whole conceived as a process. The Abhidhamma is concerned with this very objective, but at the same time seeks to retain the uniqueness of the irreducible events which go into the making of the process. Although processes and events equally belong to the category of occurrence, they should not be understood as composing two exclusive ontological subcategories. Most of the attempts to provide criteria for the identity of processes and events rely on grammatical principles, and these fail to establish the status of processes and events as
ontologically distinct entities. Rather, it would seem that the distinction between
process and event results from the different viewpoints of occurrences that we
have at our disposal and is merely a by-product of our language. In other words, the
distinction is epistemological, not ontological.

In her paper ‘On the Metaphysical Distinction between Processes and Events’,
Kathleen Gill shows the difficulties in the transition from grammatical distinctions
to an ontological categorization of processes and events. First she indicates that
speakers’ choices when describing occurrences are guided by pragmatic interests.
For instance, a certain occurrence may be depicted as having varying degrees of
dynamics, in its part, excluding any reference to an end-point, or in its totality –
all in order to emphasize its different aspects and achieve different effects. ‘Our
choices are not arbitrary,’ Gill notes, ‘they are based on conventions which reflect
our world and our experience of it, e.g. causation and perceptual salience. But they
do not simply mirror an ontological sub-categorization of occurrences’.155

It would be preferable, then, to interpret the question of how events and
processes differ in epistemological rather than ontological terms. This is not to dis-
miss the importance of grammatical distinctions for ontology, nor the repercus-
sions that the bipartition in question has for the problem of what there is. Attesting
to the relation between grammar and ontology is the long-lasting conviction in
classical philosophy that language mirrors reality, and that there must be some sort
of correspondence between what is said and what there is, between grammar and
reality. My claim, however, is that the major emphasis in the sub-categorization of
processes and events is put on the problem of individuation, rather than on ontol-
ogy: on the question of what it means to be something or other according to what
we say about being, rather than on the questions of being per se or of what there
is – and epistemology supplies a perfect lodging for the question of individuation.
As Gill notes, we would gain a better grasp of the distinction between processes
and events if we realized that the relevant philosophical issue involved in it is an
examination of those principles and guidelines that we use in separating off our
experience and in dividing phenomena into distinct occurrences.156

Viewed from this standpoint, the Abhidhamma’s move away from the earliest
Buddhist teachings is not as remote in spirit as it has been assumed to be. Different
as they may be in their metaphysical foundation and, by the time of the commen-
tarial tradition, in their divergent concern with epistemology vs. ontology, both the
Nikāya and the Abhidhamma lines of thought agree in what they are not, namely,
substance metaphysics. They are both subsumed under the category of process
philosophy. To clarify these claims a preliminary discussion of the nature of
process philosophy is due.

### 2.3.3 Process philosophy: basic themes

We have already seen that Western metaphysics has been dominated by a
substance-attribute ontology, which has a marked bias in favour of ‘objects’. Plato’s view of reason and his doctrine of the realm of Forms illustrate the
predominance of the notion of substance, but it is in Aristotle’s writings that substance metaphysics reached its highest perfection, and has thereafter dominated much of traditional philosophy from the ancient Stoics, through the scholastics of the Middle Ages and up to the distinguished authors of modern philosophy. Notwithstanding this dominance and its decisive ramifications for much of Western history of ideas, from as early as the period of the pre-Socratics there has been present another standpoint that goes against the current of much of Western metaphysics. This variant line of thought, designated by modern scholarship as ‘process metaphysics’ or ‘process philosophy’, focuses on the ontological category of occurrences – mainly events and processes – rather than on that of material objects, and is concerned with the notion of becoming rather than of being. Nicholas Rescher has provided a detailed account of process metaphysics and its principles in his two books called Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy and Process Philosophy: A Survey of Basic Issues. The following presentation of the central ideas of process metaphysics largely draws on these two sources.

Process metaphysics has deliberately chosen to reverse the primacy of substance: it insists on seeing processes as basic in the order of being, or at least in the order of understanding. Underlying process metaphysics is the supposition that encountered phenomena are best represented and understood in terms of occurrences – processes and events – rather than in terms of ‘things’, and with reference to modes of change rather than to fixed stabilities. The guiding idea is that processes are basic and things derivative, for it takes some mental process to construct ‘things’ from the indistinct mass of sense experience, and because change is the pervasive and predominant feature of the real. The result is that how eventualities transpire is seen as no less significant than what sorts of thing there are. Traditional metaphysics, drawing on the substance-attribute ontological model, sees processes as the manifestations of the changing properties that inhere in enduring substances. By contrast, process philosophy holds that things are simply what they do and are manifestations of processes: to be a substance (thing-unit) is to function as a thing-unit in various situations, and to have a property is to exhibit this property in various contexts – a reversal of perspective that is buttressed by the fact that processes are pervasive both in nature and in human life. The internal variations in process thought stem from different positions with regard to what type of process is taken as paramount and paradigmatic: some renowned processists, like Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), see physical processes as central and other sorts of process as modelled on them. Those who espouse the approach of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), though, deem biological processes fundamental and conceive of the world in essentially organismic terms. Still others, especially William James (1842–1910) and his followers, base their ideas of process on a psychological model that takes human thought as a paradigmatic process. These differences in style and emphasis notwithstanding, the teachings of the major processists are all variations on a common theme.157
Process philosophy begins with the ancient Greeks, of whom Heraclitus (c. 540 BCE) is recognized as the founder of the process approach. His book *On Nature* depicts the encountered world in terms of opposed forces interlocked in mutual rivalry and constant conflict, and contends that the ultimate ‘stuff’ of which the world is made is not some material substance, but rather the workings of a natural process, namely, fire. The constant variations of fire are the source of all change, which is so pervasive that ‘one cannot step twice into the same river’. The river is not a ‘thing’, but a sort of activity or a changing process and, like a river, ‘everything flows’. Heraclitus’s doctrine stood in sharp contrast to Parmenides’s static system with its claim of the ultimate unreality of change, as well as to the atomism of Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, who set up the paradigm of substance ontology in classical antiquity, having portrayed nature as composed of enduring material atoms whose sole commerce with processes is the alteration of their position in space and time.

Much of traditional Western philosophy since the ancient Stoics has stressed the stabilities and fixities characteristic of the world as based on a lawful order. The new propounder of the process approach in modern philosophy is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1717). Leibniz maintained that everything that figures in our experience consists of monads – centres of force, as it were, or bundles of minute processes and activities, each of which is an integrated whole of non-random change that dominates it as a single, unified, long-term process. The idea of a bundle was also developed by Locke, and indeed process philosophy owes much to his critique of substance. In accord with his empiricist worldview, Locke insisted that we have no experiential contact with substances as such: rather, we can come to grips with their causal impetus alone, and hence it is in their powers that the nature of so-called substances resides, that is, in the effects they produce in us. This position marks a turning point in the history of philosophy, which here begins to see substances as bundles of powers possessing a functional unity, instead of bearers of powers individuated by a qualitative nature of some sort. David Hume (1711–76) later used the idea of a bundle in relation to his notion of personal identity: given that observational confrontation with a personal core substance or a self is doomed to failure – for all we can get hold of observationally about ourselves are the body and its activities and sensations – the human being, on Hume’s view, is but a bundle of different perceptions that succeed each other extremely rapidly and are in a perpetual flux. From a processual standpoint, the person is simply a structured system of processes and activity, so that the unity of person is a unity of experience; the coalescence of one’s diverse micro-experience into one unified macro-process.

Leaping over to the nineteenth century, Bergson is another prominent processist who regards processes and temporality as pivotal features of the world and as central to human life and consciousness. The process approach also plays a major role in the work of the American pragmatists – Charles Peirce (1839–1914), William James and John Dewey (1859–1952) specifically. In recent years, though, ‘process philosophy’ has become a code word for the doctrines of
Whitehead, especially as given in his book *Process and Reality* (1929), and for those of his followers, who have developed a holistic view of science, in which a leading principle is that nature is a process.

In his late philosophical writing, Whitehead developed a metaphysical system called ‘philosophy of organism’ that seeks to obtain an account of human experience by putting its various elements into a consistent relation to one another. Inspired by the paradigm of biological systems, this schema favours the idea of macro-processes that organize micro-processes into systematic wholes. Hence the idea of a system is prominent to it, and it renders witnessed reality as organically integrated systems of coordinated processes, assigning primacy to the categories of occurrence and relatedness. The latter, by contrast to Aristotle’s category of relation, implies that all phenomena are interconnected. The traditional notions of being and substance are thus regarded here as subordinate to and derivative from the notion of interrelations among actualities. On Whitehead’s view the empirical world and whatever things there are in any sense of existence are derived by abstraction from actual occurrences in their process of becoming. Actual occurrences are the microcosmic elements and the ultimately real constituents of the world, although they are not substances, but temporal foci of dynamic, evanescent physical and mental processes that perish as soon as they become determinate and definite. To borrow Rescher’s rendering, on this account a processual occurrence is made into the item it is ‘not through its continuing (“essential”)’ properties, as with a classically conceived substance, but by its history, by the temporal structure of its descriptive unfolding across time’. It might thus be said that the identity of a process is constituted through a sequential pattern of action, and that temporality is the definitive characterizing feature of the processual nature of the real. This ties in with the fact that in the natural philosophy of process the idea of time is correlative with a transient present of ever-changing creativity. Process philosophy abandons the Newtonian hypostatization of time as a container within which natural processes transpire – a view that goes back to the Greek Atomists and plays into the hands of substance ontology. Rather, it sees time as itself an inherent aspect of natural, physical processes and as conditioned by the interrelationships of such processes.

It should be noted that a number of scholarly studies have already suggested that Buddhism belongs to the category of process philosophy. With reference to the Pali tradition these studies centre on the rough analogy between the doctrine of dependent co-arising and the principle of impermanence vis-à-vis the notion of a process. Excepting this analogy, however, they leave much to be desired as regards the relationship between the Theravāda’s idea of a process and its construal of the concept of dhamma, thus overlooking the Abhidhamma’s shift from a process-based to an event-based approach in analysing conscious experience. David Dilworth has drawn a comparison between Whitehead’s process metaphysics and the Abhidharma so-called realism, but his interpretation is ontologically oriented, whereas, as this book illustrates, when addressing the Pali Abhidhamma a distinction should be made between the epistemological concerns
of the canonical Abhidhamma and the ontological orientation of the post-canonical tradition. Western process thought is a reaction to a major current in the history of philosophy that is rooted in presuppositions and concepts which may not be attributable to early Indian Buddhism. The reason I broach process philosophy as part of the present monograph is that as a general line of thought it expounds an anti-substantialist metaphysical attitude conducive to understanding what the Buddha’s successors extracted from his first, implicit teachings, and what they later on developed in accordance with their specific doctrinal and practical concerns.

In sum, what is characteristically definitive of process philosophizing, as Rescher indicates, is an insistence on seeing processes as constituting an essential aspect of everything that exists – a commitment to the fundamentally processual nature of the real. A process philosopher holds that what exists in nature is not just originated and sustained by processes, but is in fact ongoingly and inexorably characterized by them. On such a view, process is both pervasive in nature and fundamental for its understanding.

This implies that process philosophy has two closely interrelated dimensions: the one conceptual, or epistemological, the second ontological. The former draws on the idea that our experience is best represented in terms of processes rather than in terms of things, and that any attempt to explain the idea of a ‘thing’ necessarily has recourse to the notion of process. The suggestion is that substance concepts are reducible to process talk; that it would be more instructive to analyse the items we categorize as ‘things’ in terms of instantiations of process-complexes. The ontological dimension of process philosophy, by contrast, centres on the idea that processes are the ultimate units of which the world consists and are ontologically more fundamental than ‘things’. It holds that the above conceptual state of affairs obtains because all phenomena are reducible to processes. Process philosophy, then, is more a general line of thought and a venture in metaphysics than a thoroughly worked-out system. It can be oriented phenomenologically (seeing processes as fundamental to human experience and cognition), or biologically (seeing processes as fundamental to organic existence), or physicalistically (seeing processes as fundamental to nature and to physical existence).

This book argues and demonstrates that the doctrinal transition from the first teachings of the Buddha to the canonical and post-canonical Abhidhamma is best understood in terms of a change in epistemological attitude and metaphysical foundation. More specifically, what the present study shows is that from the Buddha’s processual and epistemologically geared approach to sentient experience, which is one of the earliest embodiments of process philosophy in the history of ideas, the subsequent Buddhist tradition teases out an underlying metaphysics. The canonical Abhidhamma transforms this process metaphysics into an event metaphysics, albeit its approach to the analysis of sentient experience
is still epistemological, whereas the post-canonical Abhidhamma takes an even further doctrinal step in shifting the emphasis of this event metaphysics from epistemology to ontology. What the Abhidhamma gradually establishes, however, is a metaphysical theory of mental events, that is, a metaphysics of mind rather than a comprehensive ontology. While my argument is demonstrated in the succeeding three chapters, the following section concludes the present chapter with a construction of the transition from the Nikāya mindset to the Abhidhamma framework in terms of process philosophy.

2.3.4 The Abhidhamma path from process to event metaphysics

Tying in together the motifs of this chapter – the Buddhist tradition’s changing conception of dhamma, the doctrines of atomism and of momentariness, the principles of process philosophy and the philosophical distinction between process and event – we are now in a position to recognize that the Nikāya and the canonical Abhidhamma part from one another in their metaphysical foundation: from the implicit, process-based epistemology, or conceptual scheme, operative in the Buddha’s teaching the Abhidhammikas distil an underlying metaphysics in which the idea of a psycho-physical process is replaced by the notion of a dhamma qua a mental event as analytical primitive. Yet in the canonical Abhidhamma the focus of this event metaphysics is still epistemological. Only in the commentarial period does this event metaphysics yield an ontological model, though the question remains as to what sort of ontology this is.

Indeed, the shift from the Nikāya mindset to that of the canonical Abhidhamma is metaphysical, for in their notion of a comprehensive picture of the world – and thus in their metaphysical vision – these two traditions draw on two divergent foundations. Whereas the Nikāyas describe sentient experience in terms of empirically discernible physical and mental processes, the Abhidhamma texts dissect these processes into their constitutive stages, shifting the focus to the micro-scale of each and every moment undergone by each particular psycho-physical event. Such a shift, however, is not necessarily destined to distort the ‘original’ teaching. Processes and events are not incommensurable categories: after all, one single occurrence can equally be described as a process or as an event, and the fact that we separate off our experience into distinct occurrences does not necessarily reflect what exists ‘out there’. In fact, a major part of the early Buddhist teachings may be expressible in momentary terms, for to a large extent the Buddha’s teachings, to which the dhammas of the old mātikās refer, expressed stages in transient meditative attainment. Indeed both the Nikāya and the canonical Abhidhamma lines of thought are accommodated within the category of anti-substantialist philosophy, and in both cases their analysis of sentient experience is epistemological rather than ontological, that is, concerns the conditions of the psycho-physical occurrences that arise in consciousness – and in this sense form one’s ‘world’ – not with what exists per se in a mind-independent world.
To endorse an event metaphysics need not necessarily imply that a momentary event must be seen as a philosophical point-instant. This view may characterize the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāsika construal of the dhammas, but is not directly attributable to the Theravādī Abhidhamma, particularly in its canonical period. In fact, the Pāli Abhidhamma does not take much interest in ontology, if ‘ontology’ means a preoccupation with the classical substance-attribute model and the question of being. If any notion of ontology is to be found in the Abhidhamma framework, then it is one of which demarcation from psychology is far less clear than what is customarily conveyed by its standard meaning; indeed, a notion similar to the sense of ontology prevalent in philosophical discourse nowadays. In this context Paul Williams observes that:

What is involved in seeing dhammas as events, in seeing all as based perhaps on an event-ontology, rather than a substance-ontology, seems to be relatively unexplored in the Pāli Abhidhamma or indeed in the Theravāda thought which follows it. To that extent, one could argue, the everyday practicalities of insight meditation remain paramount. An interest in specific questions of the ontological nature of dharmas is found not so much among Theravādins, but among Sarvāstivādins and their rivals.

This means that the canonical Abhidhamma event metaphysics and its ensuing dhamma analyses are systematized in the post-canonical literature and result in a metaphysics of mind that may have an ontological dimension, although it is not a comprehensive ontology as such.

Underlying the doctrinal shift from the first teachings of the Buddha to the Abhidhamma are not two different ontologies, but rather two different viewpoints into human experience and its relation to the environment. Since events and processes are not two ontologically exclusive categories, then an elemental experience dissolves into manifold processes, which in turn divide into their constituting sequential events, each of which is a living unit of elemental experience that can be further analysed into its sub-phases according to the way it transpires in time and thus constructs time, rather than is contained in time. In Western thought, with its marked bias in favour of substantial objects, it is customarily accepted that what holds for discrete events also holds for discrete objects, which are then explained in terms of substances and essences. But substance metaphysics is not the only conceptual scheme at one’s disposal. Both early Buddhist teaching and the canonical Abhidhamma originate from a common source that may be referred to as process philosophy: a general line of thought that hinges on the notions of becoming and change, construing sentient experience as a dynamic flow of physical and mental occurrences, rather than in terms of persons and objects. Still, the two traditions differ in their orientations, emphases and concerns: the Nikāyas’ predominant concern is with one’s experience throughout one’s present birth and rounds of rebirth. From this perspective the crucial question is how exactly this recurring process of becoming and dissolution is triggered and how it may be brought to a halt. The
Abhidhamma, albeit it is concerned with the same process, shifts the focus to the micro-scale of its inside constituents, zooming in, as it were, on the evanescent, one-time particular events of which it consists. Like the earliest Buddhist teaching, the Abhidhamma also accounts for conscious experience, but from a different perspective, along a different timescale and urged by a different motive, namely, to account for the nature of this experience. The Abhidhammikas thus had to individuate every possible occurrence in one’s consciousness, and for this purpose an analysis into events is more appropriate than into processes. Events and processes alike are dynamic happenings that involve change and are directly related to time. Processes, though, are properties of stretches of time, while events are properties of moments, and hence they suit better as the unit of analysis when consciousness is investigated at the micro-level of its constituents. The Abhidhamma is indeed led from construing the consciousness process as a flow of brief events (the duration of which is unspecified) to its portrayal as a complex sequence of momentary particulars.

This undertaking, as we shall see in the course of the next three chapters, is not necessarily ontological, at least not in the canonical Abhidhamma. Yet the Abhidhamma appears to have been liable to the risks of reification and doctrinal excrescences, to such an extent that its process-based worldview has been criticized as a scholastic development that resulted in but another version of substance ontology. Can this development be traced to its exact phases and grounded in the Abhidhamma treatises? What are the implications of this development for the Abhidhamma soteriology? One of my objectives in this study is to reconsider the position of soteriology within the Abhidhamma framework, and examine how the Abhidhamma contends with the controversial question, prevalent during the centuries after the Buddha’s death, of what Buddhism is all about. To progress towards this end we continue in Chapter 3 with an investigation into one of the concepts that shape the shift in Buddhist tradition’s doctrinal concerns, namely, sabhāva (Skt. svabhāva), which we may provisionally translate as ‘own-nature’. This concept is bound up with the advent of the dhamma theory and its ancillary doctrines of momentariness and atomism. Sabhāva is also inextricably related to the alleged Abhidhamma ontology. It is therefore necessary to locate this concept as part of the broader doctrinal transition from the early Buddhist teaching to the canonical Abhidhamma and up to the commentarial tradition.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 For example, Carter 1978; Conze 1962: 92–106; Warder 1971; Watanabe 1983: 9–17. The study of Buddhist dharma begins in the nineteenth century with the works of E. Burnouf and R.S. Hardy. Following them are W. and M. Geiger’s Pāli Dhamma (1920) and Th. Stcherbatsky’s The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word ‘Dharma’ (1922).
2 Warder 1971: 278.
3 Stcherbatsky 2001: 73.
4 Warder 1971: 273 and 287.

8 S II 16: ye ca kho keci, bhikkhave, samanā vā brāhmaṇa vā ime dhamme pañjānenti, imesam dhammanam samudayaṃ pañjānenti, imesam dhammanam nirodham pañjānenti, imesam dhammanam nirodhatāgāminim pañipadam pañjānenti, katame dhamme pañjānenti, katamesam dhammanam samudayaṃ pañjānenti, katamesam dhammanam nirodham pañjānenti, katamesam dhammanam nirodhatāgāminim pañipadam pañjānenti? jāramarāṇaṃ pañjānenti, jāramarāṇaṃsaṃudayaṃ pañjānenti, jāramarāṇaṃnīrodhatāgāminim pañipadam pañjānenti; jātiṃ . . . bhavaṃ . . . upādānaṃ . . . taṅhaṃ . . . vedanāṃ . . . phassaṃ . . . saḷāyatanam . . . nāmarūpam . . . viññānam . . . saṅkhāre pañjānenti . . . saṅkhāraṇīrodha- 

9 Ibid.: 18: jāramarāṇassa ce bhikkhu nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhaṃ dhammaṃ deseti, dharmamathiko bhikkhū ti alāṃ vacanāya. jāramarāṇassa ce bhikkhu nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhaṃ patipanno hoti, dharmāṇuddhammapatipanno bhikkhū ti alāṃ vacanāya. [...] jātiyā ce bhikkhu . . . pe . . . bhavassa ce bhikkhu . . . upādānassā ce bhikkhu . . . taṅhaṇāya ce bhikkhu . . . vedanāya ce bhikkhu . . . phassaṃ saḷāyatanassā ce bhikkhu . . . nāmarūpassa ce bhikkhu . . . viññānassā ce bhikkhu . . . saṅkhāraṇānaṃ ce bhikkhu . . . avijjāya ce bhikkhu nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhaṃ dhammaṃ deseti, dharmamathiko bhikkhū ti alāṃ vacanāya.

10 In the Alagaddipama-sutta (M I 133) we find the following statement: idha, bhikkhave, ekacce moghapurisā dhhammaṃ pariyyānanti – suttam, geyyaṃ, veyyākaraṇaṃ, gāthāṃ, udānaṃ, itivuttakam, jātakam, abhutadhammaṃ, vedallaṃ, te tam dhamaṃ pariyyāṇuttvā tesāṃ dhammānaṃ paññāya atthaṃ na upaparikkhanti. ‘Having learnt that dhamma, they do not examine the meaning of these dharmas with wisdom.’ The singular form dhamma is similarly applied to these nine types of text at: A II 103, 178 and III 88; Vin III 8. See also D II 100, where the Buddha says to Ānanda that he has taught the dhama (sing.) without making either esoteric or exoteric statements, and has no holding back with regard to the teachings (pl.): desito, ānanda, mayā dhammo anantaram abhāhiram karitvā. naṭṭhānanda, tathāgatassa dhammesu ācariyamuttaḥ.


12 For example, M I 380, II 145; D I 110 and 148, II 41–2 and 44; Vin I 16, 18–20 and 181, II 156 and 192: atha yā buddhānāṃ sāmukkhaṇīkā dharmadesanā taṃ pākāsēti – dukkham, samudayaṃ, nirodham, maggaṃ.

13 For example, D II 305–13; M I 48–9; S V 420; Vin I 10.

14 D III 278, 275, 290 and 286 respectively.

15 Gethin 1992a: 151–3 and 350–1; Anderson (1999: Ch. 3) shows that in the Nikāyas the four noble truths are part of the entire dhama matrix, and in this sense the teachings intersect and produce an account of human experience.

16 M I 55 and D II 290 respectively. The first three foundations are the contemplation of the body (kāya), of feeling (vedanā) and of citta, here broadly signifying ‘mind’. See also D III 58, 141, 221 and 276; M I 339–40; S V 141–92 and 294–303.


18 Collins 1982: 115.

19 For example, D II 120, III 102 and 127–8; M II 238–9 and 245; S III 96.

20 For example, M III 62; S I 113 and 115–16, II 140ff. (here all the senses are referred to as dhātu), IV 114 and 163ff.; A I 11. Gombrich (1996: 35) notes that this denotation of the plural form dharmas lacks the normative aspect and is purely descriptive. The twelve āyatanas along with the two other totality formulas of the five khandhas and eighteen dhātus are discussed below (§2.1.2).

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23 For example, S III 46: atthi bhikkhave mano atthi dhammā avijjādhātū. The editor notes that avijjādhātū is found only in one manuscript, while others read vijjādhātū: see Hamilton 1996: 26–8 and 39 n. 134.
25 Carter 1978: 2 and 62; Hamilton 1996: 28–9. Hamilton notes, though, that ‘there is no evidence that mano dhātū has what we would call the mental faculties of grasping and knowing’ (p. 29).
26 For example, S II 13, 65 and 101, III 53 and 143. See Waldron 2003: 21–8.
27 For example, D III 243 lists the six types of cognitive awareness: cakkhuviññānaṃ sotaviññānaṃ ghānaviññānaṃ jivhaviññānaṃ kāyaviññānaṃ manoviññānaṃ. This denotation of manoviññāna recurs throughout the Nikāyas. Some such occurrences are found at: M I 111–12 and 190; S II 72–5, IV 32–4 and 66–9; D II 62–3. See also Waldron 2003: 29.
29 For example, Vibh 10, 14–15, 54, 60–2 and 71; Dhātuk 7–8, 34, 41, 63 and 67; Kv 12ff., 19–20 and 67. On manoviññāna/manoviññānadhatū and its role in the consciousness process according to Buddhaghosa see Guenther 1974: 20–9.
30 The Abhidhamma analysis of the consciousness process is discussed in Chapter 4. See §4.2.2 and §4.4.2 below.
32 Why this analysis does not consist in substance metaphysics is clarified in §2.2 above.
34 Waldron 2003: 29.
35 Dhs 132, 229 and 178: rūpāyatanam saddāyatanam gandhāyatanam rasāyatanam phothisāyatanam manodhātuviññeyyam rūpaṃ, sabbam rūpaṃ manoviññānadhatūviññeyyam rūpaṃ.
36 Piatigorsky 1984: 182.
37 Ibid. Here also springs the phenomenological dimension of Abhidhamma thought. See Introduction n. 9 above.
38 I discuss below the dhamma categorial theory and the doctrine of momentariness in sections §2.1.3 and §2.2.4 respectively, investigate the doctrine of sabhāva in Chapter 3 and assess the analysis of the category of consciousness in Chapter 4.
40 W.D. Kim 1999: 37. In adopting this terminology Kim follows Gethin (1986: 40) who renders the mātīka of the five khandhas as a ‘totality formula’.
41 S V 421; Vin I 10: idaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, dukkham, ariyasaccam: jāti pi dukkha, jarā pi dukkha [...] yam picchaṃ na labhati taṃ pi dukkham – samkhittena paṭic’ upādānakkhandha dukkha. ‘This, monks, is the noble truth of dukkha: birth is dukkha, ageing is dukkha...not obtaining what one wishes is dukkha – in short, it is the five khandhas that are dukkha.’
43 Gethin: 1986: 49.
44 The compound anattā usually functions as a karmadhāraya meaning ‘not self’. Alternatively it is understood as a bahuvrihi, having the adjectival meaning ‘without self’. Cf. CPD vol. 1 s.v. anatta(n). One should therefore translate anattā differently according to the stratum of the text in which it appears. The above semantic shift has major implications for the interpretation of the early Buddhist teaching and for the Mahāyāna claim that ‘all things are empty’ (niḥsvabhāva).
For example, A II 171 and 202; M I 138–9 and 421, III 16–17 and 19–20; S II 125 and 252, III 47 and 68.


Hamilton (1996: 14–22) claims that in the four principal Nikāyas the six āyatanas refer to the faculties of vision, hearing, smell, etc., in the sense of potentialities which determine the nature of one’s psycho-cognitive processes, rather than to sense organs.

Cousins 1983–4: 98.

S IV 15: kiṁ ca bhikkhave sabbāna? cakkhum c’ eva rūpā ca, sotāna ca saddā ca, ghānaṁ ca gandhā ca, jīvhaṁ ca rasā ca, kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca, mano ca dhammaṁ ca. idam vuccati bhikkhave sabbāna. yo bhikkhave evaṁ vadeyya: ahaṁ etam sabbāna paccakkhāya anāṁ sabbāna paññāpessāmi ti tassa vāccāvathur evassa [...] tam kissa hetu? yathā tam bhikkhave avīsayasmin ti. Based on the CD-ROM of the Pali Canon, W.D. Kim (1999: 45) indicates that this is the only sutta which explicitly states that the six sense faculties and their six corresponding sense objects are all-inclusive.

Nidd II, 38: atha vā sabbadhammā vuccanti dvādasāyatanāni. Also Nidd I, 1/133, 2/430 and 441. The latter says: sabbadhā samo ti sabbāna vuccati dvādasāyatanāni.

W.D. Kim 1999: 46.

Dhātuk 9: dukkhasaṅcaṁ ca nirodhasaṅcaṁ ca asaṅkhatam āhārataḥ khandhataḥ ṭhapetvā pañcahi khandhe hi dvādasaḥāyatanah āthārāsahāh dhātāhiṃ sangahītaḥ. ‘The truth of suffering and the cessation of suffering – namely, the unconditioned, having been excluded from the khandhas – are encompassed by the five khandhas, twelve āyatanas and eighteen dhātus.’ The detailed dhamma typology and the position of the unconditioned element in it are discussed below.


Abhidh—av 1: cittaṁ cetasikam rūpam nibbānam ti niruttaro catudhā desayi dhammme catusaccapakkāsanno. ‘The incomparable teacher, the expositor of the four truths, showed the dhāmmas in four ways as: consciousness, associated mentality, materiality and nibbāna.’ Abhidh—s 1: tattha vuttaḥdhammatthā catudhā parammatthato cittaṁ cetasikam rūpam nibbānam iti sabbathā. ‘The topics of the Abhidhamma, spoken of therein in their entirety, are four from the point of view of ultimate truth: consciousness, associated mentality, materiality and nibbāna.’

Dhs-s 63: cittaṁ ti ārāmanāṁ cinteti ti cittaṁ. ‘It is called citta because it cognizes an object.’

Abhidh—s 6: phasso vedanā saṁññā cetanā ekaggatā jīvintiṅdiyam manasikāra ca ti satt ime cetasikā sabbacittasaṅgānārṇā nāma. The Dhammasaṅgāni allows a minimum of six associated cetasikas, excluding manasikāra: Dhs 87.

Abhidh—s 8–11.

Dhs 175 and 177; Vibh 82–4; Dhs-a 333–6; Vism 364ff. (XI 87 and 93); Moh Bś CSCD 92. See also Karunadasa 1967: Ch. 2, esp. pp. 16–19.

Dhs 125ff, Vism 443ff. (XIV 34ff.). The twenty-fourth dhāmma, hadaya-vatthu, is formally added as an upādā-rupa by the time of the commentarial period, e.g. Vism 447 (XIV 13). See also Karunadasa 1967: Ch. 3, esp. pp. 34–5.


Dhs 5.

66 Cf. n. 57 above. According to L.S. Cousins (private communication), Buddhadatta, as Buddhaghosa’s contemporary, should be dated to the fourth century. Cousins places Buddhaghosa not in the fifth but rather in the fourth century, on the grounds that his thought-world does not fit in with the fifth century intellectual milieu as represented by Vasubandhu, Asanga, Sanghabhadra etc., but is well accommodated within the intellectual setting of the fourth century. Buddhaghosa’s date obviously influences the chronology of his contemporaneous commentators.

67 In ordinary parlance the term ‘individuals’ signifies living beings, but throughout this study I use it in a narrower, technical sense to signify the class of things in general that can be identified and uniquely referred to, material and immaterial alike. Whatever is individual is also singular and particular. This use is explained in detail in Chapter 4.

68 Cf. §4.3.2.1–2.


70 Matilal (1971: 105) notes that the Mahābhāṣya was composed at a time ‘when the Vaiśeṣika theories were on the eve of being strictly systematized. Thus it is not always clear precisely what elements in Patañjali’s writings belong to the Vaiśeṣika school proper’.

71 See Gombrich 1996: 36.

72 VS 4.1.8–9. This holds good for the other sorts of sense perception, excepting auditory perception, because the ear is part of Ether in which sound inheres, so that its perception directly follows from this inherence. See Frauwallner 1974: 124–5.


74 The affinity between the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika’s and the Vaiśeṣika’s metaphysical systems with respect to their extensive schemes of enumeration, as well as their adhering to pluralistic realism and atomism, has been addressed in the extant literature: e.g. McGovern 1923: 125–8; Frauwallner 1974: 55; Halbfass 1992: 53–4 and 61; Hattori (1988: 37–9) remarks that the doctrine of atomism, which gained dominance among the Sarvāstivādins, was most likely instigated by the Vaiśeṣika.


76 VS 1.1.4–5: dharmaviśeṣaprastūtād dravyagyunakarmasamāyatiṣaṃsaṃvāyāvānāṃ padārthāṅām sādharmyavaidharmyābhāṅāṁ tattvaṅjñāṅāṁ niḥśreyasam// prthivyāpaś tejo vāyur ākāśām kālo dig ātmā mana iti dravyāṇi// ‘The highest good is achieved through the knowledge of reality resulting from the distinct excellence of dharma as derived by likeness and difference of the categories: substance, attribute, motion, universal, individuator and inherence. Substance includes: earth, water...self and mind.’ On the meaning of guṇa and karma in this context see Matilal 1986: 357–9.

77 VS 1.1.15: kriyāguṇavat samavāyikāraṇam iti dravyalakṣaṇam//

78 Ibid.: 4.1.


80 Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1994: 1 and 5.


82 Aristotle 1966: 1028a10–15; 1028b2–7: ‘And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of doubt, viz. what being is, is just the question, what is substance?’


87 Descartes 1984: 2/114 (‘Second Set of Replies’ of Objections and Replies (AT VII, 161)).

88 Descartes 1985: 1/210 (Principles of Philosophy 1.52).

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90 Locke 1975: 1.4.18, 2.13.19 and 23.1–2.
94 W.D. Kim 1999: 51 based on AKB 1.43 (pp. 31–4) and 2.22 (pp. 52–4).
96 For example, M I 52 and 185. The following review of the Abhidhamma view of matter relies on Karunadasa 1967: Ch. 3, esp. pp. 31–2.
97 Tikap 3–4 and 6–7. These relations of causal conditioning are discussed in Chapter 5.
98 Dhs-a 333–4; Vism-mh Bh CSCD 434 and 441: evam adhikata ca sāmatthiyato, na pamāṇato. This idea is also accepted by the Northern Buddhist schools, where it is referred to as tulya-bhūta-sadbhāva. See Karunadasa 1967: 27–9.
99 Dreyfus 1997: 84.
100 Ibid.: 84–5.
102 For example, Dhs-a 82, 208, 313, 334; Vibh-a 66, 161, 266, 296; Vism 364–5 (XI 88), 553 (XVII 156), 626 (XX 76–8).
103 Tikap 3; Vism 535 (XVII 76–7).
105 Ibid.: 15 and 25.
107 Vism 308 (XI 104): [mahattā bhūtattā] khayatthena anicca, bhayatthena dukkha, asārakaththena anattā. ‘The primary elements are impermanent in the sense of being subject to destruction, are suffering in the sense of causing fear and are not self in the sense of having no substance.’ See Karunadasa 1967: 30; Potter 1996: 127.
109 Rospatt 1995 and the bibliography therein.
110 Kim 1999.
112 A I 286; M I 230, 336; D II 157; Dhp 277. W.D. Kim 1999: 60.
114 For example, D II 157; S I 6, 158 and II 193.
115 S III 38: sādhu sādhu, ānanda. rūpasa kho, ānanda, uppādo paññāyatī, vayo paññāyatī, ūthitassa aṅñathattam paññāyatī, vedanāya... saññāya... sankhārāṇām... viññānassa uppādo paññāyatī, vayo paññāyatī, ūthitassa aṅñathattam paññāyatī. imesaṃ kho, ānanda, dhammānam uppādo paññāyatī, vayo paññāyatī, ūthitassa aṅñathattam paññāyatī ti. Trans. by W.D. Kim 1999: 62.
119 Mp II 252: uppādo ti jātī vayo ti bhedo ūthitassa aṅñathattam nāma jāra [...] uppādādayo sankhatelakkhaṇā nāma. tesa uppādakkhaṇe uppādo, ṭhānakkhaṇe jāra, bhedakkhaṇe vayo. In the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika tradition there is a debate over the number of the characteristics of the conditioned. The majority of their Abhidharma texts take jāra as distinct from sthiti and acknowledge four sankṣṛtalakṣaṇas: birth (jātī), endurance (sthiti), ageing (jāra) and impermanence (anītya). Yet certain
texts of the same school acknowledge only three such characteristics, omitting endurance. W.D. Kim 1999: 66–8; von Rospatt 1995: 42–3.


122 Dhs-a 57. This employment is attested by the Dhammasaṅgaṇi commentary, which explains khaṇa as the right occasion for the rise of skilful consciousness in the meditation. Cf. Nyanaponika Thera 1998: 93–8 for a discussion of the Atthaśālīni’s use of khaṇa as distinct from samaya and kāla; for a study of the various definitions and uses of the term kṣaṇa in Buddhist sources see Rospatt 1995: 94–110.

123 Vibh-a 7–8; Vism 473–4 (XIV 190 and 197); Abhidh-s 106. Rospatt 1995: 60.

124 Kv 620 (XXII 8); Vibh-a 25–8; Vism 614 (XX 24–6). For a detailed discussion of the developing theory of momentariness and the relative duration of material and mental phenomena see W.D. Kim 1999: 79–80 and §3.1.


128 Cousins 1995 s.v. ‘Abhidhamma’.

129 Cousins 1995 s.v. ‘Abhidhamma’.

130 Collins 1992: 227. The texts are Sv 991 on D III 216 and It-a II 30–1 on It 53. Trans. by Collins (1992: 227), who cites the version at It-a II 31: ayam hi attādibhede nāma dhammānaṁ hoti, na kālassa. attādibhede pana dhamme upādāya paramatthato avijjamāna pi kālo idha ten’ eva vohareṇa atito ti ādīnā vutto.
151 Steward 1997: 98.
152 Davidson 2001: 181ff. (‘Events as particulars’).
156 Gill 1993: 382–3. See also Hacker 1982b: 479. Chapter 4 is devoted to the problem of individuation and its treatment by the Abhidhamma.
159 Ibid. Interestingly, the Abhidhamma framework demonstrates that atomism of dhammas may accord with a processual approach.
163 Whitehead 1985: xi and xiii.
165 Rescher 2000: 40.
170 Ibid.: 27 and 33.
171 Ibid.: 22.
172 Cousins 1983: 8.
The preceding chapter has shown that the Buddha clearly had a distinct epistemology, from which the canonical Abhidhamma distilled a well articulated metaphysics. We have identified this conceptual framework as process metaphysics and observed that its basic units analysing experience, the *dhammas*, fall into the category of occurrences rather than of substance. This has revealed that the primary difference between the Nikāya worldview and the canonical Abhidhamma is epistemological, not ontological: the Nikāyas construe the occurrences that make up conscious experience as mental and physical processes, whereas the Abhidhamma sees them as short-lived, psycho-physical events. Throughout the Abhidhamma’s formative period Buddhist thought was subject to a gradual process of institutionalization, schematization and conceptual assimilation, part of which were a growing tendency to reify those *dhammic* events and an increasing interest in establishing their true nature. Fundamental to this doctrinal development is the concept of *sabhāva*. This concept plays a major role in the systematization of Abhidhamma thought, is closely related to the consolidation of the *dhamma* theory and is regarded as that which gave an impetus to the Abhidhamma’s growing concern with ontology.

The present chapter traces the evolution of the concept of *sabhāva* in Pali literature and appraises its implications for the alleged Abhidhamma ontology. Various renderings of *sabhāva* are found in the extant scholarly literature, the paramount of which are ‘particular nature’, ‘own-nature’, ‘self-existence’ and ‘individual essence’. We shall examine the different senses of *sabhāva* and their philosophical significance in the para-canonical texts and in the commentaries, with an emphasis on the distinction between *sabhāva qua* nature as opposed to essence. The starting point of this investigation is the assumption that the concept of *sabhāva* ought to be understood in the wider context of the *dhamma* theory and its underlying process philosophy. We shall see that *sabhāva* occupies a primary position in a conceptual scheme that seeks to explain the workings of the mind rather than reflect the structure of an external reality. My claim is that if Buddhist thought eventually teased out an ontology from the concept of *sabhāva* and the *dhamma* theory – a possibility that calls for a reassessment of what is meant by ‘ontology’ – then this state of affairs may apply to the post-canonical period, but
should not be read into the early Abhidhamma, the primary interest of which in
the notion of sabhāva is epistemological rather than ontological.

To judge from the suttas, the term sabhāva was never employed by the Buddha
and it is rare in the Pali Canon in general. Only in the post-canonical period does
it become a standard concept, when it is extensively used in the commentarial
descriptions of the dhammas and in the sub-commentarial exegesis.1 Ēśānamoli
notes that there is merely a single occurrence of the term sabhāva in the Tipiṭaka,
namely, in the Paṭisambhidāmagga.2 Yet the term does feature on various occa-
sions in four other canonical or para-canonical texts: the Petakopadesa, the
Nettipakarana, the Milindapañha and the Buddhavaṃsa. These texts, of which
the Paṭisambhidāmagga and the Buddhavaṃsa are included in the Khuddaka-
nikāya, are customarily thought of as later additions to the Canon.3 Yet they may
be dated back to a relatively early period, or may at least contain parts that pre-
date the latest works of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka and that are certainly older than
the main Pali commentaries. Any attempt to trace the doctrinal transition from the
suttas, through the canonical Abhidhamma and up to the Atṭhakathā must
therefore examine these para-canonical texts.

3.1 THE CONCEPT OF SABHĀVA IN THE
PARA-CANONICAL TEXTS

3.1.1 The Paṭisambhidāmagga

Although included in the Khuddaka-nikāya, the Paṭisambhidāmagga is clearly a
work of the Abhidhamma.4 Erich Frauwallner explains the absence of this treatise
from the Abhidhamma-piṭaka as due to its being the latest of the Abhidhamma
works, and dates it to a time when the compilation of the Canon had essentially
been completed.5 A conceptual mapping of the Paṭisambhidāmagga, though,
suggests that at least parts of the text are earlier than the main body of the
Abhidhamma-piṭaka. If so, then this early textual layer belongs to and may shed
light on the formative period of the Abhidhamma and its doctrinal move away
from the Nikāya thought-world. To settle this hypothesis we should briefly deal
with the Paṭisambhidāmagga’s method.

Translated as The Path of Discrimination, the Paṭisambhidāmagga’s purpose is
to expound the actual way by which one comes to discriminate and comprehend
the Buddha’s teachings. This type of discrimination (paṭisambhidā) has four
aspects. The first aspect is the discrimination of dhammas, wherein dhammas in
this context refer to the principles or elements constituting human experience,
such as the sense faculties, knowledge or recognition, but also to such items as
the four noble truths, the five ‘spiritual’ faculties (indriya) and five powers (bala),
the seven factors of awakening or the eight factors of the path. These are taken in the
sense of objects of thought, and testify to what Gombrich has identified as a shift
from thinking about the Buddha’s teachings to thinking with them, thus seeing the
world through Buddhist spectacles, as it were.6 The second aspect is the discrimination of the dhammas’ attha. Attha here signifies the dhammas’ operation or function, for the enumerated atthas are those of establishment (upathānaṭṭho), of investigating (pavicayatṭho), of calm (upasamaṭṭho), of non-distraction (avikkhepaṭṭho) and others, all with reference to their corresponding dhammas.7 The discrimination of attha, then, concerns what the dhammas do and how they act – an aspect fit for the processual construal of the dhammas as dynamic occurrences. The third aspect is the discrimination of the language (nirutti) expressing the dhammas and their atthas, and the fourth is the discrimination of perspicuity or penetration (paṭibhāna). The latter is ‘meta-knowledge’, namely, the apprehension of instances of the first three types of discrimination, which are regarded as its supporting object (ārammaṇa) and its domain (gocara). Discrimination of penetration, then, is the knowledge of the differences between the various types of dhamma, their functions and the language in which they are articulated.8

It is worth noting that the same four types of discrimination are also discussed at the Vibhaṅga 293–305 (chapter XV). The Vibhaṅga, however, portrays the discriminations of dhammas and attha differently from the Paṭisambhidāmagga. On the one hand, dhammas are the physical and mental events constituting human experience, whereby their discrimination is the knowledge of the causal conditions (hetu) through which these dhammas have been originated and the discrimination of attha is the knowledge of the conditioned occurrences, namely, the eventuating dhammas.9 On the other hand, dhammas here are also the Buddha’s statements and doctrines, and so attha refers to the corresponding meaning of whatever dhamma has been spoken.10 The different views of the two discriminations taken by the Vibhaṅga and the Paṭisambhidāmagga may suggest that these two texts developed their positions independently of each other.11

The Paṭisambhidāmagga presents a practice based on the coupling of calm (samatha) and insight (vipassanā), which is made possible when the practitioner gains such fourfold discrimination of the nature of reality as taught by the Buddha.12 Its move away from the suttas is evinced by the attempt to provide a more systematic and all-embracing account of this path than previously supplied by the Buddha’s scattered descriptions on various occasions. To this end, the Paṭisambhidāmagga distinguishes and discusses the prior doctrinal concepts in their manifold aspects. Commenting on this method, Frauwallner opines that the Paṭisambhidāmagga differs from the older Abhidhamma works in that ‘several “excrescences” of the “method” which are so unpleasantly obtrusive in the old Abhidharma are missing here’.13 Following this statement Frauwallner says:

The systematic approach as such is purely superficial […] In addition, the attempts at treating larger complexes of problems systematically, signs of which we have seen in the Dhammasaṅgani in particular, were not continued here. There is nothing that goes beyond the pedantic treatment of the individual doctrinal concepts.14
The *Patisambhidāmagga*’ alleged systematization falls short even compared to the *Dhammasaṅgani*, which is the first and probably the oldest work in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*.¹⁵ Frauwallner is, indeed, right in his criticism of the *Patisambhidāmagga*’s systematization and in claiming that it is found to be wanting compared to the *Dhammasaṅgani*. But the reason for the undeveloped systematic structure of the *Patisambhidāmagga* may be that major parts of it overlap with, or perhaps even predate, the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. If the *Patisambhidāmagga* is markedly earlier than Frauwallner assumes it to be, then it may be the first Pali text to use the term *sabhāva*. The dating of this work is therefore worth further consideration.

The *Patisambhidāmagga* is not of one piece and is probably not all of the same date. Like the other canonical Abhidhamma works, it is likely to have grown by expansion of its *mātikās* and it presupposes much of the *Sutta-piṭaka*: in fact, its first part is based on the *Dasuttara-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.¹⁶ The *Patisambhidāmagga* presupposes the *Dhammasaṅgani*, for it is acquainted with the latter’s analysis by ‘planes’ or ‘spheres’ (*avacara*) and with its first triplet (I 83–5), and occasionally quotes descriptions or definitions from it.¹⁷ Alternatively, the two texts may have originated from a common source. The *Dhammasaṅgani* is a remarkable example of the increasing emphasis on the formalization and elaboration of the practice of listing *dhammas*: the text enumerates and describes the *dhammas* by applying to them the triplet-couplet *abhidhamma-mātikā*, as well as anticipates the fourfold *dhamma* categorization into *rūpa*, *citta*, *cetasika* and *nibbāna*, although it does not employ it explicitly.¹⁸ On the other hand, the *Dhammasaṅgani* does not yet embody the full-fledged *dhamma* theory, as this is found in the commentaries, and its method is open-ended. It does not enumerate all possible *dhammas*, but rather ends the lists by mentioning ‘these or whatever others may occur on that occasion’, while these ‘others’ are not specified.¹⁹ Yet even compared to this somewhat loose method, the *Patisambhidāmagga* manifests a lesser degree of systematization in its *dhamma* categorization. Although it employs several *dhamma* definitions and categorizations that also feature in the *Dhammasaṅgani*, on the whole the work does not seem to be aware of the *Dhammasaṅgani*’s elaborate triplet-couplet *mātikā*.²⁰

Moreover, to judge from the *Patisambhidāmagga*’s method of explaining the *dhammas*, the work is likely to antedate the Āṭṭhakathā period.²¹ In the commentaries the method of *dhamma* exegesis is based on a fourfold scheme specifying the defining characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*), the mode of manifestation (*paccupattihāna*), the immediate cause (*padatīhāna*) and the quality (*rasa* in a special, technical sense) that are peculiar to each *dhamma*. Concentration (*samādhi*), for example, which is equated with one-pointedness of mind, is assigned the defining characteristic of non-scattering or non-distraction, the quality of combining co-arisen *dhammas*, the manifestation of calm or knowledge and being the immediate cause of happiness.²² Thus, each *dhamma* is defined by means of a particular characteristic peculiar to itself, in addition to the *tisanikhatalakkhana* shared by all conditioned phenomena, namely, *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. The idea of
lakkhaṇa as a defining characteristic of a set of dhammas, and later on as the own-mark (salakkhaṇa) of any given dhamma, is closely related to the concept of sabhāva and to the development of the dhamma theory, and will have played a major role in the tradition’s changing view of the plurality of dhammas. We shall refer in greater detail to the idea of lakkhaṇa below.

In the Patisambhidāmagga, though, the method of explaining the dhammas consists in stating their atthas, following the second of the four discriminations.23 The lakkhaṇas of the dhammas are, indeed, brought forward, yet they do not refer to the actuality of these dhammas as entities of any sort, nor to particular, distinguishing features peculiar to each and every dhamma. Rather, they signify the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of the dhammas in their totality, as well as their origination, cessation and ongoing change, which they all have in common. For instance, the term lakkhaṇa is repeatedly employed throughout Chapter 6 of Treatise I in the first division of the text, which deals with the knowledge of the rise and fall (udaya-bbaya-ñāna) of dhammas. There it is stated of each of the five khandhas, which are qualified as presently arisen (paccuppanna) and as born (jāta), that the defining characteristic (lakkhaṇa) of its origination is rise whereas the defining characteristic of its change is dissolution.24 Further on, in Treatise XII of the second division, which concerns the four noble truths, we also find an extensive use of the term lakkhaṇa. It is there said that the four truths have two lakkhaṇas: the conditioned (saṅkhata) and the unconditioned (asankhata). The conditioned are, in their turn, qualified by the marks of rise (uppāda), fall (vaya) and change of what is present (ṭhitassa aṅñathatta). In the case of the unconditioned it is said that no such marks are discerned.25

Lakkhaṇas as the characteristics of dhammas are but concepts referring to the common features of the conditioned dhammas in their totality rather than to the individuality or actual existence of any given dhamma. The idea of lakkhaṇa thus falls short of being either an epistemological determinant ascertaining the discernibility of a dhamma’s particular nature or an ontological determinant attesting to a dhamma’s existential status. What does point to a doctrinal novelty is the occurrence of the characteristic of ṭhitassa aṅñathatta that is intimately connected to the Theravādins’ espousal of the doctrine of momentariness, and which illustrates the commentaries’ growing tendency to reify and hypostatize the dhammas. The very idea of assigning each dhamma an endurance phase is at odds with the Buddha’s teaching, let alone when the commentators load on this phase the idea of an existence moment (attikhāṇa) – although they describe each phenomenon dissected within their system as a wave that follows patterns of recurrence rather than of continuity, having phases of origination and of dissolution.26 The Patisambhidāmagga’s use of the characteristic of ṭhitassa aṅñathatta thus showcases what are perhaps the earliest traces of the later relationship between the Theravādin endorsement of the mature theory of momentariness, on the one hand, and the commentarial inclination towards ontological interpretation of sabhāva and dhamma, on the other hand. This new tendency notwithstanding,
within the framework of the *Patisambhidāmagga* ṭhitassa aṅnaṅathatta is a lakkhaṇa, that is, a characteristic mark of whatever is conditioned, just like the other two marks of origination and cessation. None of these three characteristics is associated with time or with the idea of momentariness. This part of the text, then, belongs to a layer composed before the establishment of the theory of momentariness.

Assuming that a chronology of Buddhist doctrinal development may be deduced from conceptual systematization, elaborate categorizations and contemplation of the *dhammas* as definite constituents that exist as real entities by virtue of their particular characteristics and unique functions, then not only is the *Patisambhidāmagga*’s method of explaining the *dhammas* earlier than that espoused in the *Aṭṭhakathā*, but it also predates the one found in the final, extant version of the *Dhammasaṅgani*. In the light of these findings, Warder has suggested that ‘a substantial part of the *Patisambhidāmagga* may have been elaborated in the same period of the composition of the *Dhammasaṅgani*, parallel to it and using some of its contents in an earlier form’. Moreover, as already indicated, the *Patisambhidāmagga*’s position on the discriminations of *dhamma* and *attha* is different from the *Vibhaṅga*’s, and was probably constructed independently of it. The *Patisambhidāmagga* thus represents a doctrinal progression parallel to the *Dhammasaṅgani* and the *Vibhaṅga*, relying on a source common to these two texts, albeit taking a divergent course of development. In this connection, Warder suggests that the *Patisambhidāmagga* goes back to as early as the third century BCE, adducing in support of this possibility the text’s position on the nature of insight (*abhisamaya*). The text bespeaks the Theravādin idea that the penetration of the four noble truths in the path moments occurs as a sudden flash of intuition, or a single breakthrough to knowledge (*ekābhisamaya*), rather than as separate intuitions of each truth. The idea of a spontaneous insight emerged in relation to the Sarvāstivādin view of the spiritual path and is propounded for the first time in the *Kathāvatthu*. This strengthens the impression that the *Patisambhidāmagga* was composed during the period of the great doctrinal divisions as a summation setting out the doctrines accepted by the Theravāda, perhaps as a positive counterpart to the *Kathāvatthu*. Cousins also notes that the *Patisambhidāmagga* is certainly a work of the period of the first doctrinal division related to the Second Council of Vessāli that took place roughly in 70–80 BE. On the basis of all these pieces of evidence the suggestion that the *Patisambhidāmagga* dates to the period of the Abhidhamma’s formation and of the doctrinal divisions among the ancient Buddhist schools is more convincing than the claim that this text is the latest of the Abhidhamma works.

Nevertheless, this suggestion primarily applies to the first division of the *Patisambhidāmagga*, but some parts of the second division are probably later than the earliest compositions of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, for they introduce several concepts that are not to be found in the latter. The last major stage of the *Patisambhidāmagga*’s composition is likely to have taken place in the early or mid-second century BCE, with only minor later additions. The *Patisambhidāmagga* is a transitional text residing somewhere in between the *suttas* and the *Aṭṭhakathā*.
It introduces new concepts and ideas that depart from the Nikāya outlook, while at the same time its method of explaining these concepts and ideas is not yet as consolidated as that of the commentaries, and the ideas themselves are not fully worked out, or indeed are still latent. One such concept that belongs to the textual layer posterior to the Dhammasaṅgāni is sabhāva.

The term sabhāva is introduced in the Suññakathā of the Patisambhidāmagga, Treatise XX at the end of the Patisambhidāmagga’s second division, which discusses the qualifier ‘empty’ (suññam).33 The treatise opens with a quotation of a Saṃyutta passage describing an occasion on which Ananda, referring to the alleged claim ‘The world is empty’ (suñño loko ti), asks the Buddha to explain in what way it is so. In reply, the Buddha affirms the validity of that claim on the grounds that the world ‘is empty of self or of what belongs to self’.34 He then expounds what exactly it is that is empty of self or of what belongs to self, enumerating the six sense faculties (saḷāyatanas) along with their appropriate sense objects, that is, the twelve aṭāyatana-s, adding their six corresponding modalities of cognitive awareness, thus referring to the eighteen dham- mas. Included in the above list is also whatever feeling originates from the contact between the sense faculties and their appropriate objects, whether pleasant, or painful or neither.35

At this stage the Buddha lists various types of the state of being empty, one of which is empty in terms of change (viparītāma-suñña). His reply to the question ‘What is empty in terms of change?’ is:

Born materiality is empty of sabhāva (sabhāvena suñña); disappeared materiality is both changed and empty. Born feeling is empty of sabhāva; disappeared feeling is both changed and empty…Born conceptualization…Born volitions…Born consciousness…Born becoming is empty of sabhāva; disappeared becoming is both changed and empty. This is ‘empty in terms of change’.36

Obviously the entire meaning of this excerpt depends on how the phrase sabhāvena suñña is interpreted. Taking into account the context, namely, expounding the predication of the world by the term ‘empty’, and which dharmas are listed in the above mātikā, this extract means that the totality of human experience is devoid of an enduring substance or of anything which belongs to such a substance, because this totality is dependent on many and various conditions, and is of the nature of being subject to a continuous process of origination and dissolution. Bear in mind that the twelve āyatanas and eighteen dhātus (along with the five khandhas) are totality formulas, methods of classifying the totality of dharmas that make up all conditioned phenomena. Hence the passage deals with the totality of dharmas and with classes of them as they work together, not with each and every single dhamma separately. Inasmuch as the issue at stake is the dharmas in their totality and their being subject to constant change, it is close in spirit to the teaching of impermanence as expressed in the Nikāyas.37 There it is frequently repeated that impermanent, conditioned phenomena are of the nature of
origination and decay, whereby the word employed to denote this nature is *dhamma*.\(^{38}\)

In this context, then, the term *sabhāva* appears to be interchangeable with *dhamma* in its sense of ‘nature’. This sense may be taken as roughly corresponding to the non-technical, broad meaning of *pakati*. In the Pali texts *pakati*, the equivalent of the Sanskrit *prakṛti*, is not a technical philosophical term and, unlike in the Śāṅkhyā-Yoga, it has a limited metaphysical bearing. *Pakati* denotes the regularity with which things normally occur in nature: the normal custom or innate predispositions of persons, the order of occurrences in the environment and that which is common to all or shared by all. For instance, *pakati* is employed with reference to the innate character – virtuous or bad – of people, to the inborn capacities of sense perception or the natural strength of the body; when a habit has become so natural that one performs it automatically and effortlessly, or when it is raining during the rainy season. In this respect the Pali usage of *pakati* is similar to the meaning of the term *dhammatā*, namely, the regular orderliness of the encountered world. The word *dhammatā* is used in the *suttas* to denote events which are natural, normal and regular, such as the flowing of water, the blowing of wind or the behaviour of a monk endowed with right view. These events should not be understood as occurring because of *dhammatā*; rather their happening is itself *dhammatā*. In the commentaries, this sense of *dhammatā*, which has no metaphysical or ontological bearing, is equated with *sabhāva qua ‘nature’* and with *niyama* in the sense of the ‘order of things’.\(^{39}\)

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* endorses a broad notion of *sabhāva* as the nature that the *dhammas* essentially share, but it is by no means clear that this nature necessarily defines what a *dhamma* is, or that a *dhamma* exists by virtue of this nature which it possesses.\(^{40}\) Nor is the relation between *lakṣaṇa*, *sabhāva* and *dhamma* spelled out. Nowhere is it stated that a *dhamma* is defined, determined or exists by its *sabhāva*; or that it is marked by a set of *lakṣaṇas* or by any single, unique *lakṣaṇa*; or that a *dhamma*’s *sabhāva* is to be identified in any way with its set of *lakṣaṇas*; or yet again that the latter is possessed by or constitutes those *sabhāva* and *dhamma*. The text presents the Buddha as saying that things have no *sabhāva*, in a way that parallels his saying that they have no *attā*.\(^{41}\) This suggests that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s author is simply showing that this basic point applies equally when one uses the Brahmanical term *svabhāva*. As *ātman*, too, was a Brahmanical term, history is more or less repeating itself.\(^{42}\)

That this notion of *sabhāva* represents a shifting point between the Sutta and the Āṭṭhakathā periods, and does not yet carry the technical sense attached to it in the commentaries, is shown by comparing the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* with its exegesis in Mahānāma’s Commentary, the *Saddharmapuṇṇaṁti* (sixth century CE). In this work Mahānāma seeks to present the text as a systematic exposition of the way to *arahantship*. In doing so, he draws heavily on the *Visuddhimagga* and his exegesis is often laden with metaphysical implications that exceed the laconic, aphoristic account of the original text.\(^{43}\) Mahānāma initially analyses the compound *sabhāva* as *sayam bhāvo*, or *sako bhāvo*, that is, ‘essence by itself’ or ‘essence of itself’, explaining this to mean ‘arising by itself’ (*sayam eva uppādo*)
or ‘own-arising’ (attano yeva uppādo). Given this interpretation, to translate bhāvo as ‘nature’ is inappropriate, for the commentator points to the narrower and more technical sense of essence. Mahānāma then turns to an explication of the coupling sabhāvena suññaṃ. First, he states that essence, bhāva, is but a figurative designation for dhamma, and since each single dhamma does not have any other dhamma called ‘essence’, it is empty of essence other than itself. This, in fact, reveals a different analysis of sabhāva, as ‘the essence that it has of itself’ (sakassa bhāvo). It thus follows that every single dhamma has a single ‘essence-hood’ (ekassabhāvatā).

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

Mahānāma oscillates between an epistemological and ontological interpretations of sabhāva as essence: his initial explanation of sabhāva as sayam/sakobhāvo draws on the epistemological sense of essence as an individuator of a dhamma. His analysis of sabhāva as sakassa bhāvo/ekassabhāvatā, though, relies on the ontological aspect of essence as the cause of a dhamma’s being. The meaning suggested here is that a dhamma is independent of other dhhammas for its existence; it bears its own reality all by itself. The sabhāva is the cause of the dhamma’s actual existence and its evidence. The commentator begins by analysing sabhāva as sva+bhāva, ‘own-nature’, but eventually divides the compound into sat+bhāva, ‘real essence’. The latter has ontological repercussions for the dhhammas’ existential status that the former explanation lacks.
This exegesis over-interprets the concise indications of the original text and may induce the impression that Mahānāma was here trying to accommodate the text to the intellectual milieu of his own epoch. Interestingly, he next offers an alternative elucidation of sabhāvena suññattha – and a preferred one, as implied by the particle athavā that normally introduces the preferred explanation in a commentary – namely, ‘empty through having emptiness as its individual essence’. This interpretation is more in harmony with the Paṭisambhidāmagga’s spirit. Yet even here Mahānāma discloses the influence of his contemporary intellectual milieu: first, he refers to ‘every single dhamma’ (ekassa dhammassa), thus attesting to the view that the emptiness of essence is a distinguishing mark unique to every single dhamma. The Paṭisambhidāmagga, as already noted, is concerned with the totality of dhammas and the universal nature they all share. Second, Mahānāma rejects the argument that the latter rendering of sabhāvena suññattha means that the dhammas are completely empty, having no reality at all, by claiming that dhammas exist as real actualities, though only momentarily. The commentator refers to dhammas as sat, real existents, whereas the Paṭisambhidāmagga neither ascribes to the dhammas any ontological status nor mentions the doctrine of momentariness.

In summary, the Paṭisambhidāmagga sheds light on the origination of the concept of sabhāva, for it contains one of the rare canonical occurrences of the term sabhāva in Pali literature; indeed it may be the first one. The text exemplifies the conceptual shift from the Nikāyas to the Abhidhamma, anticipating the later Theravādin description of the dhammas according to their own-nature, quality and defining characteristics (sabhāva-rasa-lakṣaṇa). This conceptual framework, though, gained currency only at a later stage in the history of Theravādin doctrinal thought, so that in the Paṭisambhidāmagga the above concepts are indistinct and not yet endowed with their later technical meanings as found in other para-canonical texts and in the Atīthakathā.

Let us turn to two other para-canonical texts in which this doctrinal elaboration is carried out, namely, the Peṭakopadesa and the Nettippakaraṇa. These texts represent a watershed in the development of the concept of sabhāva and of the dhamma analysis as a whole.

### 3.1.2 The Peṭakopadesa and the Nettippakaraṇa

The Peṭakopadesa and the Nettippakaraṇa are hermeneutical manuals primarily concerned with methodology rather than with Buddhist doctrine as such; they deal with all aspects of interpretation of the Buddha’s teaching and set forth a method of correct reformulation, explanation and expounding of the Dhamma. The Burmese Buddhists classify both works as canonical, forming part of the Khuddaka-nikāya, but other Theravādin traditions consider them to be non-canonical. Yet they are traditionally ascribed to the Thera Mahākaccāyana, who is identified in the Theravāda tradition as the Buddha’s disciple, albeit this attribution is more explicit in the case of the Peṭakopadesa. Although this traditional
dating is by far too early, the Petakopadesa and the Nettippakaraṇa are considerably
prior to the main Pali commentaries: they were probably composed in North India
around the first century BCE and, because they are both known to Buddhaghosa, were
reintroduced to Ceylon well before the fifth century CE, though not necessarily at
the same time. Therefore they are invaluable documents for the study of the
history of Pali exegesis and of the shift from the Nikāya worldview to the
Abhidhamma framework.

Conceptually supporting a relatively early dating of the Petakopadesa is the text’s
discussion of the idea of ekābhīsamaṇa, a simultaneous flash of knowledge of
the four noble truths. Like the Patisambhidāmagga, the Petakopadesa also espouses
the view that the penetration of the four noble truths occurs as a sudden flash of intu-
ition – an idea expounded for the first time in the Kathāvatthu, the earliest portion
of which is likely to date from the third century BCE or very soon thereafter, which
suggests that if parts of the two texts originated around the same period then the
Petakopadesa is rooted in a fairly old tradition. Ńāṇamoli indicates that the words
Tipitaka or Piṭakattaya are found in Pali only in the main commentaries, but the
word petakin, ‘one who knows the Piṭakas’, appears in an inscription at Sāṇcī dated
from the first or the second century BCE, and hence the work could be as early as
that date. Oskar von Hinüber points to additional philological evidence in support
of this date, indicating that the Petakopadesa bridges the gap between Southern
(Burmese) and Northern Buddhist texts like the Mahāvastu and the Udānavaṃga.
On this basis he concludes that the Petakopadesa was most probably composed in
India roughly in the first century BCE.

Stefano Zacchetti has recently discussed the dating of the Petakopadesa as part
of his exploration of the Yin chi ru jing (T 603, hereafter YCRZ), an early Chinese
text corresponding to Chapter 6 of the Petakopadesa, translated by An Shigao, the
earliest translator of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese (active since 148 CE, during
the Later Han Dynasty). Based on his examination of this Chinese parallel,
Zacchetti argues that the extant Petakopadesa is the result of a long formative
process and that it presupposes the prior existence of its sixth chapter. The latter
represents a particularly ancient layer of Buddhist exegesis and had probably been
an independent text by the time it was introduced into China around the second
half of the second century CE. This old mātrikā-based work translated by An
Shigao as the YCRZ, Zacchetti conjectures, had been one of the sources of the
Petakopadesa’s method, and only at a later stage was it inserted into the latter text
as one of its chapters. This means that the extant Petakopadesa should be dated
somewhat later than has been assumed in the past by Ńāṇamoli.

Buddhological scholarship has repeatedly discussed the relation of the Petakopadesa and Nettippakaraṇa deriving from the resemblance in their contents,
but their relative chronology remains, on the whole, obscure, despite the extant
significant sources for studying the tradition from which they ensue. Ńāṇamoli,
who challenges E. Hardy’s position on this matter, argues that the Petakopadesa
predates the Nettippakaraṇa, for the latter is far better organized, thus making the
exegetical method more comprehensive and applicable to a wider range of texts

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(a superiority that may explain why of the two texts only the *Nettipakāraṇa has a commentary). More recently, however Hinüber has adduced an important point in favour of the view that the *Nettipakāraṇa is the older of the two works: the same āryā verses occur in both texts, but while these are well arranged at the beginning of the *Nettipakāraṇa, in the *Petakopadesa they are dispersed all over and are badly preserved, which shows that the *Petakopadesa took over those verses and rearranged them, and hence that it is the younger text. Yet Hinüber qualifies this conclusion by suggesting that the two texts may not depend on each other, but rather deal separately with the same material derived from a common source used for the same purpose. In this context he draws attention to Lamotte’s mention of Kumārajiva’s fifth-century translation of the *Upadeśa (T 1509), which refers to Mahākātyāyana as the compiler of a Pi-lē corresponding to ‘Petaka’ that had been used in South India. Kumārajiva’s quotations from this *Petaka in Pali literature, however, cannot be traced to the extant *Petakopadesa, and hence, Hinüber opines, there could even be a third text similar to the *Nettipakāraṇa and the *Petakopadesa.

Supporting this possibility is Zacchetti’s investigation of the *Petaka passages of a Chinese text called *Da zhidu lun (T 1509, hereafter DZDL), in which he exposes traces of such a ‘third text’. Zacchetti shows that the *Nettipakāraṇa makes use of material that is not found in the *Petakopadesa but is in part paralleled by the *Petaka quoted in the DZDL. This points to a third text in addition to the *Nettipakāraṇa and *Petakopadesa, thus corroborating the hypothesis that all these works independently adopted some material from a possibly fairly old common tradition in which it was not yet systematically organized, and that the *Nettipakāraṇa ought not to be considered as a direct revision of the *Petakopadesa; rather, the history of this textual tradition must have been more complex. Nevertheless, removed as they may be in their place or time of composition, both the *Nettipakāraṇa and the *Petakopadesa set forth virtually the same method and may be considered in tandem regarding their application of the term sabhāva. For a brief outline of this hermeneutical method I shall refer to the *Petakopadesa.

The *Petakopadesa provides two exegetical principles for ascertaining the Buddha’s statements: one with reference to their phrasing (vyañjana), the other with reference to their meaning (attha). The analysis of these two aspects of the Dhamma by means of five meaning guidelines (naya) and sixteen phrasing categories (hāra, or in Nānamoli’s rendering ‘modes of conveying a communication’) reveals its unity and inner structure. This method introduced new concepts that played a significant role in the subsequent development of Theravādin doctrinal thought and its dhamma exegesis. One of these concepts we have already encountered, namely, lakkhaṇa, is intimately related to the concept of sabhāva.

The term lakkhaṇa features in the fifth of the sixteen categories of investigation, namely conveying the characteristics of an utterance (lakkhaṇo hārō). This mode of investigation is intended to clarify whether a word or a phrase states the unique feature of a set of dhāmas. The text says: ‘when one dhāma is
mentioned, all those *dhammas* which have the same characteristic are mentioned by that. This is the category called “characteristic”. Here emerges the notion of a general characteristic common to a set of *dhammas* and distinguishing them from other such sets, namely, a class-inclusion concept that determines a *dhamma* type, cataloguing all those *dhammas* that possess the same characteristic mark as a set that belongs to the same class. Given the purpose of the *Petakopadesa*, it is more likely that *dhammas* here refer to the statements comprising the Buddha’s teachings rather than to ‘thoughts’ or ‘ideas’ (as Nāṇamoli renders them). The fifth category of ‘conveying characteristics’ is thus intended to scrutinize the phrasing of the Buddha’s utterances by pointing out their shared characteristics. What is asserted by utterances are propositions, and propositions are logico-linguistic entities that do not themselves have an ontological status. Hence a *dhamma* in this sense of phrasing need not be apprehended ontologically and does not signify an actual substance, either ‘out there’ or in some ‘inner’ reality. By the same token, the characteristic mark of a *dhamma* is not an instance of an existing universal, but rather a class-definition statement.

The term *sabhāva* first appears in the *Petakopadesa* within the framework of the fifteenth category of phrasing investigation, that is, ‘conveying requisites’ (*parikkhāro hāro*). This category is expounded as the search for the cause (*hetu*) and condition (*paccaya*) of a *dhamma*. The *Nettippakaraṇa* further explains that a *dhamma* generating some other *dhamma* is its requisite and that there are two sorts of generating *dhammas*: a cause and a condition. That is, the topic under discussion is dependent co-origination, wherein an attempt is made to distinguish between the cause and the condition of a *dhamma*. Two notable issues unfold in this context: the first is that the distinction between *hetu* and *paccaya* as cause and condition respectively attests to a watershed in the development of Buddhist doctrinal thought. A widespread view in modern scholarship is that this distinction is already present in the earliest strata of the Canon, but, in fact, no such distinction is to be found in the *Nikāyas*, where *hetu* and *paccaya* are regarded as synonymous and are used interchangeably along with a series of other terms – like *karaṇa* and *nidāna*, to name but two – all of which denote causal relatedness. Only in the Abhidhamma literature do *hetu* and *paccaya* become distinct and signify ‘cause’ and ‘condition’ respectively – a distinction later taken up by the commentaries. The *Petakopadesa* and the *Nettippakaraṇa* are the only canonical or semi-canonical texts upholding this demarcation outside of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*.

The second notable issue concerns the term *parikkhāra* in the title of the category of investigation under discussion. *Parikkhāra* is an early Vinaya term denoting the set of four necessities of a wandering *bhikkhu*. The employment of this term in the present context may point to the tradition’s growing concern with doctrinal thought: a term that was originally applied to the practical, daily life of monks now signifies a category of philosophical investigation. von Hinüber indeed observes the possible connection between the *Nettippakaraṇa* and the *Parivāra* (Vin V) – a Vinaya handbook providing a systematic survey of monastic laws and legal matters. Whereas the *Parivāra* summarizes the *Vinaya* for practical
purposes, the *Nettipakaraṇa* – and, by the same reasoning, the *Petakopadesa* well – may be reckoned as Suttanta handbooks applying pragmatic Vinaya terms to metaphysics.\(^6\)

The investigation into the distinction between a *dhamma*’s cause and condition under the category of conveying requisites begins thus:

*What is the difference between cause and condition? The cause is the own-nature (*sabhāva*), whereas the condition is the other-nature (*parabhāva*). Although the other-nature’s condition is a cause, too, the condition of any other-nature whatsoever, excepting the own-nature’s cause, is not called ‘cause’; it is called ‘condition’.\(^6\)*

That is, the own-nature is the necessary condition of the occurrence of a specific *dhamma* series under certain circumstances, whereas the other-nature is the contributory condition of the eventuation of this circumstantial setting, and this condition is another *dhamma*. The own-nature is further explained as internal (*ajjhātikā*) to a stream of *dhammas*, as unshared or not held in common (*asādhārāṇo*) by them, and is likened to a producer (*nibbattako*) and to a resident (*nevāsiko*). By contrast, the other-nature is said to be external (*bāhiro*) to a stream of consciousness, held in common (*sādhārāṇo*) by its constitutive *dhammas*, and is likened to a receiver (*patiggaḥhako*) and to a visitor (*āgantuko*) respectively.\(^7\) In the *Dhammasangāṇi* the terms *ajjhātikā* and *bāhiro* form one couplet of the *abhidhamma-mātikā*, based on which internal *dhammas* are explicated as the six sense faculties (*cakkhāyatanaṃ* etc., up to *manāyatanaṃ*), external *dhammas* as the six corresponding object fields (*rūpāyatanaṃ* etc., up to *dhammāyatanaṃ*).\(^8\) In accordance with this sense of *bāhiro*, *sabhāva*-as-cause characterizes a set of *dhammas* constituting a certain series consciousness, as opposed to *parabhāva*-as-condition that marks some other set of *dhammas* external to that series.

*Hetu* is identified as a cause in the sense of a *dhamma*’s own-nature: that which operates within the *dhamma*’s series and determines what it is to be that specific *dhamma*. *Paccaya*, by contrast, is regarded as a condition in the sense of other-nature: what operates in conditioning the series of another *dhamma*. Despite its contribution to the occurrence of that series, the condition is not what makes any given *dhamma* of that series what it is as this particular event, and so it may well be a contributory condition of other *dhammas*. This distinction between *hetu* and *paccaya* was further elaborated into a demarcation between *hetu* in the sense of ‘horizontal causation’ coordinating the *dhammas* of a certain consciousness series, and ‘vertical causation’ precipitating the activation of a common effect by that series. This elaboration marks a turning point in the history of Buddhist thought and is coupled with the increasing doctrinal systematization characteristic of the Abhidhamma. Chapter 5 deals with the distinction between *hetu* and *paccaya*, grappling with the question of whether the idea of horizontal causation harmonizes with what is ordinarily intended by
What I wish to emphasize in the present context is the Petakopadesa’s acknowledgment of the idea that the dhammas possess particular natures intrinsic to them. The ambiguity encompassing the Patisambhidamagga’s treatment of sabhāva (which gave its commentator much trouble) fades away here. Instead of the mere, vague sense of ‘nature’, sabhāva is now assigned a narrower, more technical sense of own-nature qua an individuator. This may eventually have led the later tradition into drawing conclusions with regard to the ontological status of the dhammas, stating that sabhāva is the cause of its dhamma’s actual presence as an independently existing reality. This signification, however, is not yet worked out in the Petakopadesa, and what is insisted upon is sabhāva as an individuator rather than as an ontological determinant of primary existence: sabhāva is what determines the individuality of a dhamma as this particular instant rather than that, and what makes it discernible as such. Sabhāva therefore serves as a guideline we use for marking off our experience and separating it into its constitutive momentary events. Moreover, the sabhāva-possessing dhammas are not point-instant, continuously existing entities, but the Buddha’s teachings to be applied and the contents of one’s experience as they appear to one’s mind. Let us now look more closely into the Nettippakarana’s employment of the terms sabhāva and dhamma.

The Nettippakarana contains a parallel discussion of the distinction between cause and effect under the same category of conveying requisites. It repeats the idea that the cause, as opposed to the condition, is not held in common by the dhammas. This is expounded by the following simile: ‘While earth and water are common to the occurrence of every sprout, the seed is unique to a particular sprout. For earth and water are each a condition of a sprout, but own-nature (sabhāva) is its cause.’ The seed is the sprout’s own-nature and the cause of its occurrence. One may argue that insofar as sabhāva is interpreted as the cause of a dhamma’s actual production or existence, then explicit metaphysics indeed creeps into this framework. As we shall see in Chapter 5, though, it is not self-evident that the early Buddhist concept of causation has the sense of production, for it concerns physical and mental processes whose eventuation follows patterns that are causally conditioned, not substances whose production is causally determined. Moreover, the above statement is ambiguous and oscillates between two senses of sabhāva: one is indeed ontological, but the other is epistemological. Ontologically, the passage introduces the notion of a seed as a particular entity and the cause of the existence of another such entity, namely, the sprout. Epistemologically, the passage implies the idea of a seed-nature as a principle that determines and distinguishes the sprout-natured phenomenon conditioned upon it. Åcariya Dhammadāla’s commentary to the Nettippakarana (sixth century CE) testifies to this ambiguity: ‘The same existing own-nature, the seed, is the cause. But is it not a fact that the seed is not like the sprout, etc.? There is no (saying) that it is not; for there is no arising of that kind (of sprout) from any other kind (of seed).
A second occurrence of the term sabhāva in the Peṭakopadesa further supports the epistemological interpretation of sabhāva as a particular nature. Here, explicating the idea of one’s being afflicted, tormented or disturbed (saṃkilesa), sabhāva features in a section dealing with the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa), where it is stated that ‘there are four hindrances that are afflictions by own-nature (sabhāva), but sloth-and-torpor (thīna-middha) are afflictions by being subordinate to the hindrances’.77 This claim is then explained with reference to the four corruptions (āsava): the four hindrances, we are told, are corruptions by their own-nature, that is, due to their possessing the nature of āsavas, but afflictions such as sloth-and-torpor are corruptions because they pertain to citta that is subject to the āsavas.78 Here, too, the text does not interpret the dhammas ontologically, as ‘things’. No certain conclusion can be drawn from the above employment of the term sabhāva as regards the meaning of dhamma in the dimension of existence (bhāva). The dhāmas to which the term sabhāva is applied are the five hindrances, that is, states of mind and mental events. Nothing is explicitly stated regarding their status as real existents: they are not said to possess a peculiar characteristic marking them as irreducible realities, neither as a class nor as individuals, and sabhāva in this context does not determine the existence of these dhāmas. What the text does mention is their own-nature as an intrinsic essence, and this, as we have seen above, does not necessarily have to be reckoned in ontological terms. Sabhāva is first and foremost what demarcates, distinguishes, determines and defines the individuality of its dhamma, thus rendering it as knowable and nameable.

Both the Peṭakopadesa and the Nettippakaraṇa establish the epistemological significance of sabhāva as a category determining what a dhamma is, but its identification with hetu in the sense of cause introduces the metaphysical dimension of sabhāva as the cause of a dhamma’s individuality; that which in the internal constitution of a dhamma makes it the individual it is. Although the metaphysical sense of sabhāva as the principle of a dhamma’s individuality may lead one to construe both sabhāva and dhamma as existing entities, at this stage their ontological status is not yet discussed. Even the Nettippakaraṇa commentary is hesitant on this issue, wavering between the epistemological and metaphysical interpretations of sabhāva. This is further evidenced by the qualification of sabhāva qua cause as ‘internal’ (ajjhattiko) to a consciousness series, in contrast with that of parabhāva qua condition as ‘external’ (bāhiro) to that series. It appears that in the Peṭakopadesa the idea of sabhāva does not go much beyond than this contrast between ‘internal’ and ‘external’.79

In fact, on certain occasions the couplet ‘internal’ and ‘external’ may even have a meaning more straightforward than that. We have already seen that the couplet ‘internal’ and ‘external’ features repeatedly in the Nikāyas as part of the characterization of the five khandhas. Therein any given person is the point of reference of whatever is external, whereas one’s own experience is the point of reference of whatever is internal, and so one’s own khandhas are internal, while those of other beings are external.80 Whereas in this case bāhira and bāhiddhā are interchangeable, in
the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi bāhira*, as noted above, is part of the couplet-*mātikā* and relates to a *dhamma*-set of a certain consciousness series. *Bahiddhā*, though, is part of the triplet-*mātikā* and simply means ‘belonging to one’s own experience’, or ‘personal’ (*puggalikam*).81

In this connection, Hamilton has suggested that *ajjhatti*ka and *bahiddhā* should not be interpreted as implying an idealistic ontology, or in fact any ontology whatsoever. She relies on a convention found in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, usually in contexts that are concerned with meditation, of using the terms ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to refer to oneself in contrast to others. Hamilton offers the example of the fundamental canonical texts on meditation, the *Satipatthāna*– *Mahāsatipatthāna-sutta* (M I 55ff. and D II 290ff. respectively), in which the two terms are used to indicate that the meditation exercises are to be practised both on one’s own physical and mental faculties as well as on those of others.82

I argue that the *Petakopadesa*’s and the *Nettipakarana*’s concept of *sabhāva* in the sense of ‘internal’ is narrower than the general denotation of what marks one’s set of things as opposed to someone else’s: rather, it is used to distinguish the *dhammas qua* psycho-physical, short-lived events, and hence specifically refers to what is internal or external to a consciousness series. This interpretation fits in both with the first occurrence of *sabhāva* in the *Petakopadesa*, as discussed above, and with its third appearance, within a passage concerned, indeed, with meditation. In a section dealing with the nine successive attainments (*anupubbasamāpattiyo*), the question raised is ‘What is proficiency in meditation?’ (*katamaṁ jhānakosallam*), in reply to which a series of skills is offered. Among these skills is included ‘skill in the *sabhāva* of *jhāna*’ (*jhāne sabhāvakoṭallam*).83 Nānamoli’s translation of this phrase is ‘skill in the meditations’ individual essences’, but what this skill in fact means is ‘knowing which *jhāna* one is in’.84 To know what distinguishes a certain *jhāna* as opposed to any other conscious state, whether ordinary or meditative, requires a practitioner to differentiate and define each occurrence appearing in her consciousness, not merely to focus attention on her own faculties and states of mind as a point of reference rather than on someone else’s.

The significance of the *Petakopadesa* and the *Nettipakarana* lies in their establishing the idea of an own-nature intrinsic to a consciousness series, as opposed to the other-nature that is external to that series. Both texts entertain a notion of an own-nature essentially had by sets of *dhammas*, and do so more clearly and distinctly than the *Paṭissambhidāmagga*, which may hint that they are posterior to it. Still the idea of own-nature emerging here is not worked out ontologically, for what is insisted upon is that this particular nature defines what a given set of *dhammas* is; what it means to be *this* series of *dhammas* rather than *that*. Since human experience is seen as an ongoing flow of a consciousness stream made up of interlocking series of *dhammas*, an attempt is made to individuate this process by defining its constitutive *dhammas* in terms of their *sabhāva*. The process itself, however, is not yet dissected into distinct phases, and *sabhāva* does not yet determine what each and every *dhamma* is, either ontologically or epistemologically.
Let us now examine the apprehension of sabhāva within the framework of the Buddhavaṃsa, another para-canonical text comprising the Khuddaka-nikāya.

### 3.1.3 The Buddhavaṃsa

The mythically constructed biography of the Buddha includes, among other components, tales that trace the various lineages culminating in the birth and life of the ‘historical’ Buddha Gotama. While the Buddha’s jātaka lineage is constituted by events that took place in his previous lives, according to the Theravāda he was also the successor of a series of Buddhas stretching far back into the past. The notion of this Buddha lineage is rooted in the Mahāpadāna-sutta, in which Gotama is the seventh in a series of former Buddhas, but the later Theravāda has focused its attention on an extended set of twenty-four former Buddhas with Gotama as the twenty-fifth. The tradition concerning this lineage of twenty-four previous Buddhas, which both encompasses and adapts the lineage associated with the Mahāpadāna-sutta, is expressed in the Buddhavaṃsa, a text dated to the late second century or early first century BCE and that is one of the last additions to the Canon. Each of the Buddhavaṃsa’s twenty-four stories relates an encounter between one of the former Buddhas and the future Gotama in one of his previous rebirths. In each case the future Gotama renews his commitment to the practice of the ten perfections and his vow to attain Buddhahood, and in each case the Buddha in question predicts that in the future Gotama will achieve his goal.

In the Buddhavaṃsa the term sabhāva is mentioned twice. It first occurs in the story of Buddha Maṅgala, who is known for ‘having shown people the own-nature (sabhāvatta) of conditioned phenomena’. The abstracted form sabhāvatta does not add much beyond the signification of sabhāva in the previously discussed texts. Once again sabhāva here signifies own-nature in its rather broad sense, referring to the nature of clusters of conditioned dhammas. In his commentary on this passage, Buddhadatta accordingly expounds sabhāvatta as ‘the common characteristics of impermanence etc’.

The term sabhāva recurs on another occasion, where it has undergone an interesting elaboration. The context is Bodhisatta Sumedha’s account of the ten perfections conducive to awakening. Having related these ten perfections Sumedha says: ‘While I was reflecting on these principles (dhammas) having their own-natures, qualities and characteristic marks (sabhāva-rasa-lakkhana), the earth and the ten-thousand worlds quaked because of the effulgence of the dhamma.’ Compounding the category of sabhāva with rasa and lakkhana, the above statement anticipates the position of the latter as two of the post-canonical basic categories of dhamma exegesis and the primary role of sabhāva in the developed dhamma analysis as a categorial determinant. In addition to the doctrine of sabhāva, the commentarial method of dhamma exegesis is based upon a fourfold schema that assigns each dhamma a defining characteristic (lakkhana), a mode of manifestation (paccupaṭṭhāna), an immediate cause (‘footing’,

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padatṭhāna) and a quality (rasa). This method had already been anticipated by
the Petakopadesa’s use of the characteristic, manifestation and immediate cause
of certain dhammas. The fourth aspect of analysis added in the commentaries
is rasa as ‘quality’ in a narrow, technical sense. In the Nikāyas the term rasa
usually means ‘taste’ or ‘flavour’; the object sphere of the tongue (jīvāh), that is,
one of the six object fields corresponding to the six sense faculties (saḷāyatana). It is also used figuratively in the compound vimutti-rasa, the
‘taste of liberation’. The Paṭisambhidāmagga employs the term rasa in a sense
residing somewhere in between ‘quality’ and ‘accomplishment’. This is shown
in Treatise X, the topic of which are the ‘fine extracts that are an elixir’ (maṇḍa-
peyyan); the extracts in question are the attainments constituting the brah-
macariya life of a monk, among which are included resolution, exertion,
non-distraction and so forth. The text states: ‘That which is the accomplishment
of meaning, of dhamma and of liberation is the elixir.’ In this context, rasa
acquires a qualitative sense denoting the achievement of the finest part of
anything.

In the commentaries, though, rasa is endowed with the technical denotation of
the unique capability or function of any single dhamma. The commentaries
distinguish between two shades of meaning of this function: the first is rasa in
the sense of ‘action’ (kicca) of the dhammas under discussion, namely, their contrib-
utory operation in conditioning other dhammas; the second is rasa in the sense of
‘achievement’ (sampatti) of those dhammas, that is, in the qualitative sense of the
defining nature of those dhammas, whereby rasa is interchangeable with sabhāva
qua ‘own-nature’. For instance, when Buddhaghosa explicates the concept of
virtue (sīla) by analysing it according to its distinguishing characteristic, function,
manifestation and immediate cause, he asserts:

Its function (rasa) is spoken of in the sense of action (kicca) and of
achievement (sampatti), that is, as the undoing of misconduct and as the
quality of being faultless. So what is called ‘virtue’ should be understood
to have the nature (rasa) of uprooting misconduct as its function in the
sense of action, and the nature (rasa) of being faultless as its function in
the sense of achievement. For with regard to characteristic, etc., function
is either called action or achievement.

The Buddhavamsa employs the terms sabhāva, rasa and lakkhana as ordinary
and familiar aspects of the perfections of a Buddha. This usage indicates that the
text presupposes the method of dhamma exegesis based on these concepts in
a somewhat casual manner, building upon a conceptual schema that had already
been well established by the time of its composition. Indeed, in his commentary
to the Buddhavamsa, Buddhadatta explains the compound sabhāva-
rasa-lakkhane as follows: ‘In the case of “own-nature, function and defining
characteristic”, the meaning is: “While he was reflecting on what is called
(saṅkhāta) own-nature with its function and characteristic mark”.’ The
commentator uses the term sabhāva as if it were an accepted convention and, differently from its previous occurrences, here, for the first time it refers to one particular set of dhammas – the ten perfections making a Buddha, rather than to the totality of dhammas or to numerous classes of them working together. Likewise, the term lakkhana now signifies a defining characteristic or a class-inclusion concept specific to each dhamma, whereas in its earlier appearances it denoted the universal marks shared by all the conditioned dhammas. The point is that this is the first instance in which sabhāva determines, along with a dhamma’s characteristic mark and quality, what that particular dhamma is. In the present context it determines what each of the ten perfections is, and these perfections in their turn define what a Buddha is. Yet no conclusions regarding the ontological status of each of the defined dhammas can be drawn from this usage of sabhāva. The ten perfections are doctrinal concepts or principles, not existing ‘entities’. Nothing necessarily implies that they exist by virtue of their sabhāva and, in fact, they are not apprehended ontologically at all. The sabhāva of each of the ten perfections marks it off from the remaining perfections; it is an epistemological guideline that makes each dhamma knowable and discernable, rather than what testifies to its reality or actual existence.

3.1.4 The Milindapañha

Another para-canonical text employing the term sabhāva is the Milindapañha. This text is a heterogeneous work of which the earlier and later parts are strikingly different in their style, indicating that it is not a unified product of one author. By comparing the fourth-century Chinese version of the text, which contains only the first part of the Pali equivalent, it has been deduced that the Milindapañha is, in fact, a collection of discrete texts. This first and earliest part of the work is quoted in the Old Atṭhakathā and must have been composed in India between 150 BCE and 200 CE. The four remaining parts can be traced very roughly: they are quoted in the Atṭhakathā and surely existed after the Canon had been settled into five Nikāyas, but there is no evidence that they preceded Buddhaghosa.97

Although the Milindapañha frequently employs the term sabhāva (it features more than twenty times throughout the text), there is no semantic unanimity across its occurrences: despite its prevalence by the time this text was compiled, it had a fluctuant, context-depending meaning. On the majority of its occurrences sabhāva denotes ‘nature’ in its broadest sense. To mention but two instances of this usage: in one passage solitary meditation (patisallāna) is discussed and is said to be endowed with twenty-eight qualities, one of which is that ‘it shows the nature of conditioned states’. Later on this nature is identified as ‘ultimate emptiness’.98 On another occasion the text reckons twelve kinds of people who do not pay respect, among whom is one ‘who is inferior due to his inferior own-nature’.99 In this passage, and in several other places in the text, sabhāva signifies the non-technical and somewhat vague term ‘nature’ (pakati) in the sense of
'natural disposition' or 'character'. In fact, on one occasion it is compounded with the very word pakati: discussing the nature of Buddhas, Nāgasena proclaims that ‘It is the nature and own-character (sabhāva-pakati) of Buddhas, of Blessed Ones, that only one Buddha appears in the world at a time. For what reason? Because of the omniscient Buddhas’ grandeur of qualities. What is magnificent and different in the world, your majesty, is one only.’ I take the compound sabhāva-pakati as a kammadhāraya, whereby the two members reflect each other’s meaning.

In all the preceding passages sabhāva denotes a broad range of meaning, is not predicated of particular dhammas and does not convey any ontological allusions. Yet on several occasions in the Milindapañha the term sabhāva is used in a narrower and more technical sense than mere ‘nature’. For instance, in the opening of the section that deals with the dilemmas (meñdaka-pañha), it is declared: ‘In the teaching of the King of Dhamma there are speech that expresses indirectly, speech that is allusive and speech that is the literal truth (sabhāva).’ In this context sabhāva denotes the qualitative sense of ‘essence’ signified by the term rasa when it figuratively refers to the finest, distilled part of anything, as we have already come across in the Patisambhidāmagga. On another occasion the text broaches the relation between the Tathāgata and the saṅgha, whereby the following idea is said to have occurred to the Tathāgata: ‘The saṅgha is to be honoured by virtue of its nature (sabhāva). I shall honour the saṅgha by means of my property.’ Once more, sabhāva may be taken here as tantamount to rasa in the figurative sense of the finest part of anything. And again, the same shift from this figurative sense to the narrower and more technical meaning of capability or function takes place here, whereby sabhāva is explicitly compounded with rasa.

In this passage, Nāgasena discusses with Milinda the fear of death and says to the king:

Death, your majesty, is the cause of fear among those who have not seen the truth […] That, your majesty, is the power of the own-quality and own-nature (sarasasabhāva) of death, because of which beings with defilements tremble at death and are afraid of it.

This coupling of sabhāva and rasa is reminiscent of the Buddhavaṃsa’s similar compounding the two terms along with lakkhāṇa, the conceptual triad customary of the commentarial dhamma analysis.

The Milindapañha also employs sabhāva in connection with lakkhāṇa, though it is uninformative as regards the distinction between them. For instance, assuming that both terms are interchangeable, in a section dealing with non-injury (ahiṁsa) Nāgasena quotes the Buddha’s statement that non-injury is approved by all Tathāgatas as conducive to one’s welfare, then tells king Milinda: ‘This is the instruction and dhamma teaching, your majesty, for the dhamma has the defining characteristic (lakkhāṇa) of non-injury; this is the statement of its own-nature (sabhāva).’ The last occurrence of sabhāva worth mentioning with respect to
this issue is one in which it features in the full compound sabhāva-rasa-lakkhaṇa, insinuating the same meaning we encountered in the Buddhavamsa. Here the topic under discussion is the Buddha’s instruction to the monks not to be given to delight in others’ praises of him, of the dhamma or of the saṅgha. Nāgasena then addresses King Milinda:

The former statement, your majesty, was spoken by the Blessed One when he was illustrating correctly (sabhāvam), truly, as is the case, truthfully and as really is the own-nature, the quality and the defining characteristic (sabhāva-sarasa-lakkhaṇa) of the dhamma.105

Note that sabhāva is mentioned twice in this sentence and that on its first occurrence it is used as an adverb in the sense of ‘genuinely’, ‘correctly’ or ‘as it is’. This signification is one of the acknowledged meanings of sabhāva recurring several times throughout the Milindapañha.106

Now this sense of sabhāva relates to an interesting doctrinal development. In the suttas the Buddha’s teaching is referred to either by the Buddha himself or by others as that which is ‘true’ and ‘real’ in the ultimate sense, employing in this connection such qualifiers as bhūtaṃ, tacchaṃ or tathāṃ. As part of the doctrinal systematization of Buddhist thought, however these qualifiers were gradually endowed with a metaphysical significance and became interchangeable with the term sabhāva, so that by the time of the commentaries and sub-commentaries they were all connected with a realist ontology. What initially meant ‘correct’ or ‘true’ came to denote ‘what is the case’, ‘real’ and finally ‘what there is’. We shall discuss this terminological expansion in the following section.107

To sum up, the Milindapañha employs the term sabhāva more frequently than any of the para-canonical texts we have previously explored, which indicates that by the time of its composition the term had already gained currency and become regularly used. The text is heterogeneous and accommodates various senses of the term sabhāva, albeit with little doctrinal elaboration. On the whole there is not much innovation in the Milindapañha’s use of sabhāva, and nearly all its denotations mentioned had already been promulgated in prior texts. Moreover, no certain conclusion with regard to an ontological interpretation of sabhāva can be derived from this text. The Milindapañha uses this term in a looser manner than the previous works we have considered: sabhāva here features in much less technical contexts and is not applied to the dhammas in their narrower, metaphysical sense acquired subject to the dhamma theory. The text does not see the dhamma analysis as its primary concern, nor does it take much interest in the ontological status of the dhammas. It was during the post-canonical period that marked changes occurred in this respect along with the commentaries’ extensive use of the term sabhāva and as part of the fixation of the dhamma theory. The following section traces the conceptual transformations involved in these doctrinal developments.
3.2 BUDDHIST DOCTRINAL THOUGHT IN THE ĀTHAKATHĀ

3.2.1 From the canonical Abhidhamma to the Pali commentaries

The composition of the original versions of the commentaries in Old Sinhalese ended in the first century CE. These Sinhalese originals were eventually replaced by their Pali versions made in the fifth century CE. The commentarial period witnessed the attempts to explicate the theoretical position implied by the canonical Abhidhamma, and so in many cases the exegetical system manifests a move away from the standpoint found in the Abhidhamma-piṭaka. Whereas the early Abhidhamma offers a mapping and analysis of the material found in the suttas, elaborating on it for consistency, the commentaries seek to consolidate, fill in and explain that material. The commentarial attempt to reduce the oral tradition to a written body of knowledge, to interrelate the original, scattered teachings and to create an all-embracing, comprehensive and consistent theory in which every doctrine should find its proper place, shaped the changing nature of the resultant exegetical works. This change is reflected in the commentaries’ introduction of new ideas that are at times remote from the scant indications of the original texts.

The paramount new ideas espoused by the commentaries are related to the changing meaning of the key concept dhamma and the harnessing of the term sabhāva for its explanation. These ideas draw on the already extant dhamma analysis, as developed by the early Abhidhamma and presented in the Abhidhamma canonical books, particularly the Dhammasaṅgani, the Vibhaṅga and the Paṭṭhāna. Since the dhamma theory analyses conscious experience into dhammas, the Abhidhamma treatises consist of innumerable dhamma lists and categorizations based on the assumption that each dhamma is to be known separately as well as in all its relations to other dharmas. The system, then, draws on the two complementary methods of analysis and synthesis. The analytical method dominates the Dhammasaṅgani that supplies a detailed categorization of the dharmas forming the contents of one’s consciousness. Later on, the Dhammasaṅgani commentary expands the laconic definitions of these dharmas by employing the scheme, already anticipated by the Petakopadesa, of stating the characteristic, manifestation, immediate cause and function of each dhamma constituting the smallest psycho-physical unit, that is, a single moment of consciousness. The locus classicus of the synthetical method is the Paṭṭhāna, which supplies a thorough account of the dharmas’ conditional relations across the momentary thought process.

The framework emanating from the juxtaposition of the two methods accords with early Buddhist teaching of the middle way: it avoids both the eternalist view (sassata-vāda) which maintains that everything exists absolutely, and the opposite annihilationist view (uccheda-vāda) which holds that things, having existed, cease
to exist. Moreover, at least in this early phase of its evolution the Abhidhamma is not so much a dogmatic system, but a conceptual framework assimilative of its preceding, scattered teachings. In this connection Gethin argues that the Dhammasaṅgāṇī’s analysis of dhammas should not be taken as a closed system offering an enumeration of a final number of irreducible elements. Although the text enumerates particular numbers of items in various lists, these are not irreducible elements and in the final analysis it turns out that the lists are changeable and open-ended.\textsuperscript{110} This suggests that the canonical Abhidhamma is more exploratory in nature than is usually thought, aiming at an unlimited inquiry into the true nature of human experience. To some extent this state of affairs is also applicable to the commentarial outlook, as presented in the Dhammasaṅgāṇī commentary. It is true that the Ātthasālinī seeks to provide an exhaustive analysis of all possible types of dhamma and to complete those dhamma lists left open by the original text, as evidenced by the phrase ‘these or whatever others may occur’. Yet even in the commentary these so-called exhaustive lists often employ alternative definitions, so that the conclusions regarding the status of the dhammas they enumerate are, to some extent, merely tentative.\textsuperscript{111}

Nonetheless, the Abhidharma schools, the Theravādin Abhidhamma included, generally agree that the dhammas are knowable in an ultimate sense and are not further resolvable into any other constituent. The dhammas thus emerge as the final limits of the Abhidhamma analysis of conscious experience.\textsuperscript{112} We have previously seen that the advent of the dhamma theory and its associated doctrines of atomism and momentariness gradually led the evolving Abhidharma schools into reifying experience, if in a different manner from the advocates of eternalism and the holders of substance metaphysics. This tendency to reify experience formed part of a broader process of terminological and doctrinal generalization, in which the concept of svabhāva played a dominant role. It is within the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika framework that one finds what may be reckoned the culmination of this process.

The Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika introduced a distinction between two fundamental types of existence: substantial or primary existence (dravyasat) and conceptual or secondary existence (prajñaptisat). The category of primary existence includes dharmas, namely, the irreducible components of the empirical world, whose existence is certain and independent of both conceptual analysis and physical fragmentation. Secondary existence, by contrast, is dependent upon mental and linguistic construction. Thus all things are either primary existents, dharmas, or secondary existents composed out of dharmas. Only dharmas have svabhāva and can be primary existents, and obviously no dharma can be a secondary existent, but all existents are sat.\textsuperscript{113} The Sarvāstivādins are renowned for arguing that the dharmas exist as past, present and future, but it should be noted that they conceived of svabhāva as an atemporal category transcending the present moment and time in general. That is, the presence of a svabhāva indicates that a dharma is a primary existent, a dravyasat, irrespective of its temporal status, namely, whether it is a past, present or future dharma. This temporal status is determined
by the presence or absence of function (kārita): past and future dharmas have only their svabhāva, while a present dharma also has a function. That is, the distinction between the modes of existence of a dharma as past and future and a dharma as present corresponds to the opposition sasvabhāvamātradraya:: sakāritradraya.\textsuperscript{114}

The Sarvāstivāda version of the dharma theory introduces a metaphysical dimension to the contemplation of dharmas; it paves the way for a distinction between substance and quality, and eventually results in a transformation of the dharma theory into a svabhāva-vāda, ‘doctrine of particular nature’.\textsuperscript{115} According to this doctrine, each and every dharma is itself unique (though amenable to categorization), possesses its own defining characteristic (svalakṣaṇa) that marks only dharmas of its kind, and is identified by its svabhāva, which here may be rendered ‘ontological determinant’, for it determines that the dharma consists in substantial reality (dravya). The exact difference between svalakṣaṇa and svabhāva is somewhat vague: the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya equates svabhāva with svalakṣaṇa, setting it in opposition to the common characteristics (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) that pertain to all conditioned dharmas (impermanence etc.). Moreover, on various occasions the same illustrations are given for both concepts: for instance, solidity is brought forward as the svabhāva and svalakṣaṇa of earth.\textsuperscript{116} But there is a remarkable difference between the two: the svabhāva is an ontological determinant of primary existence, although it does not have an ontological status and is not an ontological category in its own right. To have a svabhāva is to be a primary existent. Hence the svabhāva is the determinant of a dharma which is dravya, a substantially real entity, and is what defines a dharma as having primary existential status regardless of its temporal status.\textsuperscript{117} Now both svabhāva and dravya are used to describe the existence of a dharma recognized as a primary existent. The difference is that they characterize the reality of a dharma from two different perspectives: svabhāva refers to the dharma’s individual essence that distinguishes it from all other dharmas. Dravya refers to any primary existing dharma that so exists by virtue of its own individual essence, as distinct from those dharmas that exist merely as provisional designations (prajñapti).\textsuperscript{118} The svalakṣaṇa, on the other hand, is an epistemological, linguistic determinant of a dharma: it is by means of its own-characteristic that a dharma becomes uniquely discernable, verbally definable and knowable. The svalakṣaṇa renders a verbal description unique to each dharma and makes it possible to refer to that dharma as distinct from any other dharma. The difference between svabhāva and svalakṣaṇa has also been explained by the fact that svabhāva is atomic and refers to the primary existence of a dharma, whereas svalakṣaṇa is regarded as the sensible distinguishing characteristic possessed by the atomic svabhāva. For instance, blue ‘atoms’ are the svabhāva of blue, while the perceptible blue colour as the unique, distinguishing characteristic these atoms possess is the blue’s svalakṣaṇa.\textsuperscript{119} This explanation, though, implies that not only is svabhāva an ontological determinant, but that it also has an ontological status of its own.
Buddhological studies often give rise to the impression that, in the final analysis, the Sarvāstivādin conception of *dharma* is what prevails in Buddhist thought. Bear in mind, though, that the Theravādins did not subscribe to the Sarvāstivāda metaphysics: they did not incorporate the Sarvāstivāda atomistic theory directly into their system, and rejected the claim that the *dharmas* exist as past, present and future. Most importantly for the present context, they did not use the category of *sabhāva* to denote *dravya* and rejected the very Sarvāstivāda equation of a *dharma* with *dravya*. Yet the Sarvāstivādin metaphysics did leave its mark on the Theravādin position. Paul Williams argues that the position on the role of *svabhāva* as positing primary existents is common to both the Sarvāstivāda and the Theravāda:

> [T]he two schools disagree by implication on questions of temporal determination and ultimately on the possibility of reference to non-existents, but not over the primary status to be given to the entity which possesses the *svabhāva*. For both it is the presence or absence of the *svabhāva* which renders the entity a primary existent, and if the Sarvāstivādin sees the Theravādin as destroying the opposition *sasvabhāvamātradravya*: *sakāritradravya* and thus rendering impossible the tenseless usage of our language and many of our everyday cognitive experiences, nevertheless the disagreement is epistemological and linguistic, not ontological.

As we shall see below, the Sarvāstivāda indeed influenced the Theravādin Abhidhamma version of the *dhamma* theory. This Sarvāstivādin influence is embodied in the Pali post-canonical, commentarial literature, where the term *sabhāva* came to be excessively used for the sake of further elaboration on the nature of the *dhammas*. But would it be true to interpret the Sarvāstivāda and Theravādin Abhidhamma consent in terms of ontology? Were the later Abhidhammikas motivated by an interest in the ontological status of the *dhammas* as primary existents and did they employ the concept of *sabhāva* for that purpose? Chapter 2 has revealed that the Pali Abhidhamma does not take much interest in ontology, if by ‘ontology’ we mean the classical treatment of the question of being and existence. My claim is that the Theravādin commentarial construal of *sabhāva* derives from the canonical Abhidhamma *dhamma* analysis and that therefore *sabhāva* is predominantly used for the sake of determining the *dhammas*’ individuality, not their existential status. Even when the post-canonical texts introduce what may be rendered as a realist ontology, this ontology is bound up with the Abhidhamma analysis of consciousness, wherein *sabhāva* is what determines the individuality of the *dhammas* as psycho-physical events as they appear in consciousness, not their existence *per se*. I agree with Williams that the disputes between the Sarvāstivāda and the Theravādin Abhidhamma are basically epistemological rather than ontological. My suggestion, though, is that the Abhidhamma’s refraining from challenging the *dhammas*’ ontological status demonstrates its indifference to and neutrality
on ontological matters, not necessarily its assent to the Sarvāstivādin notion of the *dhammas* as *dravya*.

While our reconstruction of the Abhidhamma *dhamma* theory and its derivative doctrine of *sabhāva* as centred on the philosophical problem of individuation is presented in Chapter 4, the next section recounts the Theravādin commentarial elaboration on the concept of *sabhāva* and its customary ontological interpretation.

### 3.2.2 The concept of *sabhāva* in the *Āṭṭhakathā*

A recurrent definition of *dhammas* in the exegetical literature is: ‘*dhammas* are so called because they bear their particular natures’. An extended variation on this definition found in the *Atthasālīni* states that ‘*dhammas* bear their own particular natures’. Does not the very use of the term *sabhāva* overstress the reality of the *dhammas* and imply that a *dhamma* is a discrete entity, a ‘thing’ existing in its own right? Moreover, do not these definitions amount to the admission of a duality between a *dhamma* and its *sabhāva*, between the bearer and the borne, thus implying a distinction between substance and quality – a duality which is at odds with the Buddhist doctrine of no-self?

It may be argued that to read such a duality into the recurrent definition of the *dhammas* as given above is to misunderstand it. Nyanaponika Thera remarks that this definition testifies only to the *dhammas* not being reducible to any other substantial bearers of qualities, and by no means implies that these *dhammas* themselves are such substances or bearers, nor that they are distinct from their particular natures or functions. In fact, the commentaries equate the *dhammas* and their *sabhāva*. The *Visuddhimagga* thus states that ‘*dhamma* means *sabhāva*’. Similarly, the *Mūlaṭākā* on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇa* says: ‘There is no other thing called *dhamma* apart from the particular nature upheld by it.’ Moreover, as Karunadasa shows, the prevalent commentarial definition of a *dhamma* ought to be seen in the context of the logical scheme employed by the Abhidhammikas in defining the *dhammas*. This scheme consists of three main types of definition named after what they attribute to the definiendum: agency definition (*kattu-sādhana*), instrumental definition (*karaṇa-sādhana*) and definition by nature (*bhāva-sādhana*). For instance, Sumanāgala’s commentary to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* expounds *citta* as follows:

Consciousness (*citta*) is that which is conscious; the meaning is that it knows (*vijñāti*) an object. […] Or else consciousness is the means by which the associated *dhammas* are conscious. Alternatively, consciousness is the mere act of being conscious (*cintana*). For it is mere occurrence in accordance with conditions that is called ‘a *dhamma* with its own particular nature’ (*sabhāva-dhamma*).

The agency and instrumental definitions are deemed a figurative manner of speaking; conventions (*vohāra*) that are based on tentative attribution (*samāropana*)
and employed for the sake of facilitating instruction in the Buddha’s teaching. They endow a *dhamma* with a duality that is merely a mental construct, insinuating that a *dhamma* is a substance with inherent attributes, or alternatively an agent performing some action, while, in fact, it is a psycho-physical occurrence devoid of any such duality. By contrast, a definition in terms of the particular nature of a *dhamma* is recognized as valid in an ultimate sense, for it brings to light the true nature of a given *dhamma* in its impermanence and non-substantiality, and as a unique occurrence devoid of any duality. Having explicated *citta* as cited above, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* commentary continues thus:

> In consideration of this, it is the definition of the particular natures of ultimate *dhammas* that is taken as absolute; the explanation by way of agent (*kattar*) and instrument (*karana*) should be seen as a relative manner of speaking. For a *dhamma*’s being treated as an agent, by attributing the status of ‘self’ to the particular function of a *dhamma*, and also its being [treated] in consequence as an instrument, by attributing the state of agent to a group of conascent *dhammas*, are both taken as a relative manner of speaking. The explanation in these terms should be understood as for the purpose of indicating the non-existence of an agent, etc., apart from the particular nature of a *dhamma*.\(^\text{129}\)

It is in the context of this explanatory apparatus, Karunadasa maintains, that the definition of a *dhamma* as that which bears its particular nature has to be understood. This definition is an agency definition, and hence it is merely provisional: the duality between *dhamma* and *sabhāva* is conventional, whereas in actual fact *dhamma* and *sabhāva* have two different senses referring to the same meaning. The *dhammas* are invested with the function of bearing their particular natures in order to convey the idea that there is no enduring agent behind these *dhammas*. They should also not be regarded as quasi-substances, for the extended definition, as mentioned above, states that a *dhamma* is that which is borne by its own conditions.\(^\text{130}\) This addition illustrates the impossibility of the occurrence of a *dhamma* without its own-nature: a *dhamma* with no *sabhāva* would be indeterminate and ineffable. That a *dhamma* may equally be defined as an agent bearing its *sabhāva* and as a passive object, that which is borne by its *sabhāva*, attests to the relativity and the conventional status of these two definitions: since both are equally applicable, neither is essentially true. This state of affairs reflects the interdependence between a *dhamma* and its *sabhāva*, and hence *dhammas*, as they really are in their true natures, should not be conceived of in terms of a one-way dependency of substance and attribute. A *dhamma* is an occurrence of a dynamic psycho-physical event under appropriate conditions and its *sabhāva* determines its individuality as distinct from any other such occurrence.

Nevertheless, despite all the qualifications imposed on the usage of the term *sabhāva*, the latter testifies to a striking doctrinal change in the exegetical literature. This change is complex and has to it several different aspects. The first of these
aspects is embodied in the commentaries’ usage of sabhāva as a synonym for a dhamma and in their defining any given dhamma by virtue of its sabhāva. That the equation of dhamma with sabhāva becomes a regularly familiar notion in the commentaries is indicated by the fact that both terms are taken as interchangeable within a vast array of texts. As noted above, the Visuddhimagga proclaims that dhammas mean ‘particular natures’, and the sub-commentary to the Dhammasaṅgani indicates that there is no other thing called dhamma apart from the particular nature borne by it. The same idea is expressed by such statements as ‘The word sabhāva denotes the mere fact of being a dhamma’, or ‘There is no such thing called “activity” apart from the dhamma’s particular nature.’¹³¹ In the commentaries sabhāva has a narrower sense than in the earlier para-canonical texts: no longer does it signify some vague ‘nature’, nor the nature of clusters of dhammas, but an atemporal category determining what each and every single dhamma is. The concept of sabhāva is employed here for the first time as a determinant of a dhamma’s individuality. Note that it determines what a dhamma is – what it means to be this particular dhamma rather than any other – and not that a dhamma is. As such the concept of sabhāva attests to the Theravādins’ interest in unveiling the nature of conscious experience: this, they presumed, could be carried out by enumerating the possible types of those events constituting one’s experience and by individuating them. To individuate the dhammas the Abhidhammikas had to provide a method for determining what any given dhammic instance of every possible event-type is and what makes it so, and for this purpose they used the concept of sabhāva. It is my contention that this empirically based interest in conscious experience motivated the Abhidhammikas more than any possible concern with ontology, namely, with the question of the dhammas’ being and existence – either their primary existential status as ultimately real experiential constituents or their temporal existence. Chapter 4 buttresses this claim by a close study of the canonical and post-canonical Abhidhamma’s treatment of the problem of the dhammas’ individuation.

The mature Abhidhamma’s interest in conscious experience accords with the canonical Abhidhamma worldview, but the commentaries elaborate on and expound the concepts of dhamma and sabhāva, while in the canonical and para-canonical texts neither concept is fully worked out. Moreover, this further systematization of the concept of sabhāva ties in with the second aspect of doctrinal change manifested in the commentaries, namely the introduction of the idea of ‘individual characteristic’ (salakkhaṇa) and its association with the dhamma theory. An alternative definition of dhamma prevalent in the commentaries states that ‘dhammas are so called because they bear their individual characteristics’.¹³² The commentaries draw a distinction between two senses of lakkhaṇa: between the universal characteristics (sāmañña-lakkhaṇa) of the totality of dhammas, on the one hand, and the particular characteristic (salakkhaṇa) of each and every dhamma, on the other hand. The former consist of the tisaṅkhatālakkhaṇa:

The characteristics of the dhammas are shown by the Blessed One as two on account of being general (sāmañña) and individual (paccatta). As for
the materiality aggregate, the individual characteristic is pointed out, for
the characteristic of materiality is not like that of feeling (vedanā) etc.,
and hence it is called ‘individual characteristic’. But feeling etc. have the
characteristics of impermanence, dukkha and no-self, and hence those
are called ‘universal characteristics’.

The own-characteristic is comprehended through a process of sense perception
that one experiences for oneself, whereas the universal characteristics are known
through a process of reasoning. This concern with the dhammas as discrete,
particular events distinguishable by unique marks is new to the commentaries, for
the earlier texts mainly dealt with the dhammas as totalities or clusters working
together and having various attributes in common, and did not associate these
attributes with the concept of sabhāva.

This association is promulgated in the commentaries. Thus, the Atthasālinī
observes: ‘It is the particular nature or the generality of such and such dhammas
that is called their characteristic.’ The Mūlaṭīkā comments on this point:

The own-nature of solidity [in the case of earth] or touch [in the case of
contact] etc., is not common [to all dhammas]. The generality is the
own-nature consisting in impermanence etc., which is common. In this
connection [i.e. Dhs §1], the characteristic of being skilful ought to be
regarded as general because it is the own-nature common to all that is
skilful. Alternatively, it is the particular own-nature because it is not
shared by what is unskilful.

Along the same lines of thought, the Paramatthamaṇḍūṣā, the Mahāṭīkā to the
Visuddhimagga, clarifies this:

The dhammas’ own-nature (sabhāva) consists of their particular nature
(sako bhāvo) and common nature (samāno bhāvo). Therein by the
former is meant the characteristic of solidity [with reference to earth] or
of touch, etc. [with reference to bodily contact etc.]. By the latter is
meant the common characteristics of impermanence, dukkha etc. What
is called ‘knowledge’ has the characteristic of penetration in accordance
with both of these, as was said: ‘Knowledge has the characteristic of
insight into the dhammas’ own-natures.’

This assertion is reminiscent of the distinction drawn in Western philosophy
between ‘nature’ and ‘essence’, as indicated above, and therefore sabhāva in the
sense of sako bhāvo may be rendered here as ‘individual essence’, albeit this
should be qualified to the epistemological denotation of essence. Bear in mind
that essence singles out what necessarily determines an individual as that very
item it is, whereas nature is a broader term and may be regarded as the sum total
of the concurrent attributes an individual possesses. The commentaries, then,
use the term sabhāva to signify both the common nature that is generally predicable of dhammas in their totality and, when taken as equivalent to salakkhana, the narrower meaning of ‘essence’ – in its epistemological denotation – that is not predicable of any other dhamma. In this latter sense, to have a sabhāva is to possess an essential characteristic individuating a certain instance of empirical occurrence as unique and distinct from any other instance of its type. ‘What is called salakkhana’, so it is argued, ‘is the sabhāva that is not held in common by other dhammas.’

Note that this is a point on which the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika differ. In the Sarvāstivādin framework, as we have seen above, the svabhāva is an ontological determinant of primary existence, of a dharma being a dravya. The svalakṣaṇa, on the other hand, is an epistemological, linguistic determinant of a dharma as that which is discernable, definable and knowable. The Theravādins do not seem to hold such a distinction: salakkhana and sabhāva are both taken interchangeably as epistemological and linguistic determinants of the dhammas: as what renders any given dhamma distinguishable and definable. This understanding may have been influenced by the Indian Grammarians (Pāṇinīyas) and logicians. In ordinary Sanskrit lakṣaṇa means a mark, a specific characteristic or evidence that enables one to identify the object or objects indicated (laksya) as distinct from others. The Grammarians employ this pair of terms in a slightly different sense: the sūtras that embody the rules of grammar are called lakṣaṇa, and these indicate the forms that are grammatically correct, that is, laksya, so that the incorrect forms are excluded. This is also connected with the logicians’ use of the same pair of terms in the sense of ‘definition’ and ‘definiendum’ respectively. Here lakṣaṇa may be rendered as a ‘definition through characterization’ that differentiates a certain concept or logical category. Matilal explains in his discussion of the Indian theory of definition:

If a specific evidence, say $a$, is what allows us to ascertain that something is $A$, [...] then $a$ would be a defining character of $A$. In other words, with the help of $a$, we would be able to differentiate $A$ from what is not $A$, and a definition sentence could be given as: ‘$A$ is what has $a$.’

This notion of lakṣaṇa must have been insinuated into the Theravādin exegetical system, thus affecting the use of the term salakkhana and its identification with sabhāva in the sense of a dhamma’s distinguishing definition. This is evinced in the Visuddhimagga. For instance, in discussing the contemplation of the body’s impurity Buddhaghosa says:

In the place where the bloated sign of impurity (uddhumātakam asubhanimittaṃ) has been laid down, one registers any stone, or ant-hill, or tree, or bush or creeper, each with its own sign and object. Having done that, he characterizes (upalakkheti) the bloated sign of impurity by its having a defining own-nature (sabhāvabhāvato).
This is further explained thus:

Having thus registered [each with its] own sign and object, it should again be brought to mind that it has a defining own-nature, its own state of being bloated, which is not held in common by anything else, since it was said: ‘he defines (vavatthapeti) it by its having a defining own-nature.’ The meaning is that it should be defined according to its own-nature (sabhāva) and own-quality (sarasa), as ‘the bloated’.143

Seen in the light of this exegetical usage of the term lakṣaṇa, inasmuch as sabhāva is identified with salakṣaṇa, its dominant function is that of an epistemological and linguistic determinant of the dhammas as individuals, rather than an ontological determinant of the dhammas as primary existents. The Theravādin Abhidhamma’s employment of sabhāva in connection with salakṣaṇa attests to its interest in assigning any given dhamma a characteristic that is applicable solely to it, and which is referred to by a unique verbal description. Sabhāva is therefore neutral to the question of the existence of the defined dhammas as real entities. I discuss this epistemological aspect of sabhāva in Chapter 4.

Nevertheless, the later Abhidhammikas and Theravādin commentators were led into drawing metaphysical conclusions from the foregoing epistemological doctrine of sabhāva. In tandem with the interpretation of dhamma, sabhāva and lakṣaṇa at the level of epistemology and language, the post-canonical texts accommodate another line of thought about these concepts – one that seems to introduce ontology into the Abhidhamma system. The commentators indeed qualified the usage of the term sabhāva, rejected substance metaphysics and its associated substance-attribute ontological model, and apprehended the dhammas as psycho-physical events. Yet the overall picture painted by the main commentaries accommodates another motif, namely, the reality of the dhammas. Consider, for instance, the Atthasālini’s explanation of the Dhammasaṅgaṇī’s distinction between the categories of citta and cetasika:

When the first of the great skilful cittas of the sense-sphere arises, at that time the fifty and more dhammas that have arisen by way of factors of citta are indeed ultimate constituents (dhamma) in the sense of self-existents (sabhāva). There is nothing else, whether a being, or an entity, or a man or a person.144

This statement alludes to the Theravāda debate with the Puggalavāda. As recorded in the Kathāvatthu, the Puggalavādins claimed that ‘The person is known in the sense of a real and ultimate fact.’145 The Theravādins emphatically refuted this claim, but in doing so they implied that only the dhammas are known in the sense of a real and ultimate fact. This means that the dhammas are not further resolvable into any other kind of underlying substrate; that they are the ultimate limits of the analysis of conscious experience.146 This may lead to the conclusion that
within the confines of human experience there is no other actuality apart from the dhammas. As noted by Gethin, the force of sabhāva in the above Atthasālinī’s statement appears to focus not so much on the essential nature of particular dhammas, but on the fact that there is no being or person apart from dhammas; that dhammas alone are what exist. 147 The dhammas that once used to refer to propositions, doctrines or principles, which need not be conceived of ontologically, are here acknowledged as primary existents – the ultimate constituents of one’s experience. Moreover, the evidence for the very existence of each such constituent is its sabhāva: the sabhāva indicates that its respective dhamma does not depend on any other item for its existence. Dhammas are self-existents; this is the meaning of their upholding their sabhāva, that is, they uphold their own-nature and thus their self-existence. This implies that not only does any given dhamma represent a distinct, knowable and nameable fact about the experiential world, but it also comes to represent in its own right a distinct instance of empirical occurrence that is not shared by any other dhamma. In this context sabhāva may be rendered as ‘own-essence’. Unlike the earlier occurrences of sabhāva as essence in the sense of a dhamma’s individuator, here it acquires an ontological significance. On this line of thought the sabhāva provides a causal account of its associated dhamma’s mode of being: rather than categorizing a given dhamma by explaining the intension of its individuality within its domain, it explains what constitutes this individuality and thus why that dhamma exists as a particular event, as an actual individual. It is then found to be the cause of this existence.

This idea is not an organic development or a natural outgrowth of the Nikāya mindset, or even of the early Abhidhamma. To judge from the sermons documented in the suttas, the Buddha never claimed that the dhammas are the only realities or primary existents, though some of his statements may have lent themselves to such an interpretation. 148 In the suttas the Buddha’s teaching is referred to either by the Buddha himself or by others as that which is ‘true’ and ‘real’ in the ultimate sense, employing such qualifiers as bhūtaṃ, tacchaṃ or tathaṃ. For instance, in the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta we find Poṭṭhapāda stating that ‘The ascetic Gotama teaches the path which is real and true, namely, the way things are and the way they work.’149 Along with the doctrinal systematization of Buddhist thought, these qualifiers came to be connected with the term sabhāva. We have already encountered the use of sabhāva in the sense of ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ within the context of the Milinda-panha, where it is not yet endowed with an ontological bearing. 150 The commentators took this denotation of sabhāva one step further and invested it with an ontological dimension. Referring to the above statement of the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta, the commentary explains that bhūta means ‘occurring according to own-nature (sabhāva)’, and that tacchaṃ and tathaṃ are synonyms for this. The sub-commentary then moves towards an ontological interpretation, rendering ‘occurring according to own-nature’ as ‘existing according to ultimate individual essence’. 151 The Visuddhimagga commentary also embodies the same shift towards realism and ontology. While Buddhaghosa equates dhamma with sabhāva in its sense of ‘own-nature’, which does not necessarily have an
ontological significance, the Mahātīkā invests this equation with ontology. Sabhāva is now not only an epistemological determinant of a dhamma’s distinct nature, but also attests to the dhamma’s real existence; it is an ontological determinant and may accordingly be rendered as individual essence at the level of ontology:

The act of becoming (bhavana), which constitutes existingness (vijjamānatā) in the ultimate sense, is essence (bhāva); it is with essence, thus it is an individual essence (sabhāva). The meaning is that it is possible in the true sense, in the ultimate sense. For these are called dhammas because they bear their own individual essences.152

Similarly, the Mūlaṭīkā on the Dhammasaṅgani glosses the meaning of sabhāva in the compound sabhāvarasālakkhaṇa as ‘it is with essence, namely definite existence (avipartatā vijjamānatatā)’.153 This compound thus means ‘defining rasa with its existence’.

The commentators, then, first endow the final products of their analysis with the status of ultimate facts, but from this they draw the conclusion that the dhammas are also ultimately real existents. If the Buddha’s Dhamma accords with how things ultimately are, if grasping his teaching means ‘seeing things as they really are’ (yathābhūtadassana), and if the dhammas are the building blocks of the way things ultimately are, then to know the Dhamma is to understand things in terms of ultimately real, that is, existing, dhammas.154 This doctrinal shift must have had several distinct stages: the phrase ‘seeing things as they really are’ initially indicated ‘comprehending the Buddha’s teaching completely’, that is, fully grasping the four noble truths. Later on it gained a stronger metaphysical bearing and began to signify ‘understanding how things operate’ and ‘what is the case’. Finally the phrase was ontologically interpreted as ‘knowing what there is’.

The move towards realism and an ontological conception of dhamma and sabhāva is inextricably related to another crucial development in the commentaries, namely, the fixation of the mature theory of momentariness. We have noted that the origins of the theory of momentariness lie in the Pali canonical sources and its explicit beginning is found in the Abhidhamma texts, including the Dhammasaṅgani, the Paṭṭhāna and the Kathāvatthu. Analysing the psycho-physical processes described by the suttas at the micro-level of their constitutive phases, the canonical Abhidhamma focuses on the dhammas as evanescent events. Note that at this stage the listed dhammas signify short-lived occurrences that come to pass on certain occasions (samaya), then pass away on others.155 Along with the introduction of the doctrine of momentariness the concept of samaya is gradually replaced by that of khaṇa, but the temporal dimensions of the moment remain unspecified. The commentators, however, espouse the full-fledged theory of momentariness: here, based on the threefold scheme of sub-division of a moment, each and every phenomenon is dissected into three distinct instants.
of origination (uppādakkhaṇa), dissolution (bhaṅgakkhaṇa) and endurance (ṭhitikkhaṇa).\footnote{156} The establishment of the mature theory of momentariness is closely connected with the commentarial interpretation of the concept of sabhāva along ontological lines. As part of the reification of the dhammas, the sabhāva of any given dhamma comes to be seen as constitutive of a dhamma’s endurance-moment and as the point of reference of its two other sub-moments. These instants are now understood as the phases of the actual existence of that momentary dhamma. A dhamma is here unequivocally assigned an ontological status and the very fact of its possession of sabhāva is evidence for its existence throughout the three sub-moments. This is illustrated by the commentarial definitions of the three times, namely, past, present and future: ‘In the triplet of “past”, the word “past” means having passed beyond its own-essence, or beyond the origination-moment etc. “Future” means not yet having reached those two, and “present” means having arisen conditioned by this or that cause.’\footnote{157} Thus, before a dhamma eventuates it does not yet obtain a sabhāva and when it ceases it is denuded of this sabhāva. As a present occurrence, though, while possessing its sabhāva, it exists as an ultimate reality and its sabhāva is evidence of its actual existence as such.

The Visuddhimagga further testifies to this doctrinal development on various occasions, as shown, for instance, in its following claim with respect to the twelve āyatanas:

Here all formed bases should be regarded as having no provenance and no destination. For they do not come from anywhere prior to their rise, nor do they go anywhere after their fall. On the contrary, before their rise they had no individual essence, and after their fall their individual essences are completely dissolved. And they occur without mastery [being exercisable over them] since they occur in dependence on conditions and in between the past and the future.\footnote{158} The āyatanas, then, exist as realities in between their origination and cessation moments. In this connection, Karunadasa notes that ‘the kind of existence implied here is not past or future existence, but present actual and verifiable existence (saṃvijjamānatā). This emphasis on their actuality in the present phase of time rules out any association with the Sarvāstivādins’ theory of tri-temporal existence.’\footnote{159} Another evidence of the shifting ontological notion of dhamma and sabhāva is found in the Visuddhimagga chapter dealing with various kinds of recollections (anussati) as subjects of meditation. There, with reference to mindfulness of breathing, the phase of breathing in and out is explained as contemplation of impermanence. It is then observed:

Herein, the five aggregates are the impermanent. Why? Because their essence (bhāva) is rise and fall and change. Impermanence is the rise and fall and change in those same aggregates, or it is their non-existence
after having existed; the meaning is, it is the break-up of produced aggregates through their momentary dissolution since they do not remain in the same mode.\textsuperscript{160}

To identify impermanence as the \textit{bhāva}, namely, the essence of conditioned \textit{dhammas} – in this case the five aggregates – is not a new idea. The innovation is that this \textit{bhāva} of impermanence is now tied in with the theory of momentariness and the denotation of \textit{dhammas} as real existents, for this impermanence is identified as the \textit{dhammas}’ non-existence after having existed as ultimate realities.

Commenting on this passage, the \textit{Mahāțikā} repeats the idea that the five aggregates are called ‘impermanent’ because their essence are their emanation, cessation and continuous change. It then proclaims:

\begin{quote}
The meaning is that their individual essences (\textit{sabhāva}) have rise and fall and change. Herein, conditioned \textit{dhammas}’ arising owing to causes and conditions, their coming to be after non-existence, their acquisition of an individual self (\textit{attalābha}), is ‘rise’. Their momentary cessation when arisen is ‘fall’. Their changedness due to ageing is ‘change’.\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

That is, \textit{sabhāva} determines the rise, fall and change of the \textit{dhammas}, and ‘rise’ means the phase of their actual existence as ultimate realities. The commentary even goes as far as naming this phase ‘the acquisition of a self (\textit{attā})’. The commentary to the \textit{Abhidhamma-mātikā} repeats this idea, stating that “To arise” means to reach beyond the origination-moment etc. by having manifestation, or else to obtain a self”.\textsuperscript{162} Finally, the \textit{Anuṭikā} on the \textit{Dhammasāṅgaṇī} explicates the meaning of ‘\textit{dhammas arisen}’ thus:

\begin{quote}
The meaning of ‘\textit{dhammas arisen}’ is having the state of a \textit{dhamma} that is being grasped (\textit{gahita}), a \textit{dhamma} that is occurring (\textit{vattamāṇa}). Since what is called ‘an arisen \textit{dhamma}’ is that which has reached the origination-moment etc., which upholds its own-essence and is upheld according to conditions, the meaning of ‘the essence of \textit{dhammas arisen}’ should be understood as having the state of being present (\textit{paccuppannabhāvo}).\textsuperscript{163}
\end{quote}

The commentaries’ employment of the term \textit{sabhāva} in connection with the doctrine of momentariness and subject to the \textit{dhamma} theory assigns it new significance that is removed in spirit not only from the Buddha’s ‘original’ teaching, but also from the early Abhidhamma.

To sum up, a close investigation into the concept of \textit{sabhāva} in relation to the \textit{dhamma} theory shows that Buddhist thought underwent a remarkable doctrinal change. We are now in a position to observe that the difference between the earliest strata of Buddhist teaching and the canonical Abhidhamma is primarily
epistemological, not ontological. It consists in the shift from a process-based to an event-based approach to the analysis of sentient experience. This shift challenged criteria for distinguishing every possible event presenting itself in consciousness and for specifying what makes it the very particular it is. Aiming at this objective, the Abhidhammikas developed the dhamma categorizations and, in the transitional, para-canonical texts, broached the category of sabhāva. Yet the early Abhidhamma dhamma analysis also intends to ascertain that every psycho-physical event is knowable and nameable, and that the words and concepts employed in the systematic discourse that is thus developed uniquely define their corresponding referents. In this respect the dhamma analysis, as we shall see in the next chapter, paves the way for conceptual realism – a worldview that is based on the notion of truth as constituted by a correspondence between our concepts and statements, on the one hand, and the features of an independent, determinate reality, on the other hand. Conceptual realism does not necessarily have implications for the status of this reality as externally existing. But to espouse such a position is to make a noteworthy move away from the earliest Buddhist teaching.

If Pali Buddhism was, in the final analysis, led into adopting metaphysical realism and introducing ontology into its framework, then these developments are the product of the later systematization of Buddhist thought that took place during the exegetical period. In the commentaries the early Abhidhamma inclination towards conceptual realism is strengthened: the developed dhamma theory and the doctrine of sabhāva emerge as an abstract, atemporal discourse representational of all possible instances of encountered phenomena. The post-canonical Abhidhamma steps further away from the suttas and from the canonical Abhidhamma likewise, reckoning the final units of its analysis, the dhammas, to be the ultimate, independently existing constituents of experience. Here emerges the idea that the phenomenal world is, at bottom, a world of dhammas qua individuals. It may be suitable to describe this scheme an ‘ontological model’, but in the Buddhist context this rendition is not neatly matched by the customary meaning of ontology in Western philosophy. If the concept of sabhāva has any ontological bearing, then this is markedly different from the idea of ontology as the branch of philosophy that is concerned with being and what there is. Rather, ontology here resides between the realms of psychology, soteriology and language, for the Theravādins apply the dhamma analysis to their investigation of consciousness as part of their sophisticated meta-psychological system. Explicating these claims, Chapter 4 rethinks Abhidhamma metaphysics.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Warder 1997: xvii; Ñānamoli 1991 (Vism trans.): 789, n. 68 on Vism 293 (VIII 246).
3 The Khuddaka-nikāya remained open for additions and the actual number of texts contained in it is not uniform across the Theravādin countries. For instance, in Burma the Suttasangaha, Nettippakaranā, Petakopadesa and the Milindapañha have also been added to it. See Hinüber 1997: 42, 59–60 and 76; Lamotte 1988: 158–9; Buswell and Jaini 1996: 99; Warder 1970: 299. For the list of books subsumed in the Khuddaka-nikāya according to the Pali tradition see Dhs-a 18.

4 Frauwallner 1995: 42.

5 Ibid.: 42 and 87.


7 When employing the word atthā I follow the convention that the cerebral form atθa is used mainly in compounds, very frequently at the end of a compound, although there are also instances where it occurs at the beginning of a compound, such as atθhakathā. Cf. NPED s.v. atθa.

8 Patis I 88–91, esp. 88: dhammanānatte paññā dhammadipasambhīde ṇañañam [...] atθhanānatte paññā atθhappasambhīde ṇañañam [...] niruttinānatte paññā niruttipāṭi-

sambhīde ṇañañam [...] aṁñāni dhammesu ṇañañi, aṁñāni atthesu ṇañañi, aṁñāni niruttisu ṇañañi. yena ṇañena ime ṇañā ṇañañ āṅtā, ten’ eva ṇañena ime ṇañā ṇañañ paṅvidītā ti. tesa vuccati paṭībhānanānatte paññā paṭībhānapāṭisambhīde ṇañañ. Also II 149–58, esp. 150: paṁcascu dhammesu ṇañañi, paṁcascu atthesu ṇañañi, dasasu niruttisu ṇañañi. imāni visati ṇañañi paṭībhānapāṭisambhīdāya ārammāna c’ eva honti gocara ca. ye tassā ārammāna te tassā gocara. ye tassā gocara te tassā ārammāna. tesa vuccati paṭībhānesu ṇañam paṭībhānapāṭisambhādā.

9 Vibh 293: hetum hi ṇañañam dhammadipasambhīdā, hetuphāle ṇañañam atθhappasambhīdā.

10 Ibid.: 294: tattha katamā dhammadipasambhīdā? idha bhikkhu dhammam jānāti – suttaṁ geyyaṁ veyyākarānaṁ gāhaṁ udānaṁ itivuttaṁ jātākam abhutad-

hammaṁ vedallaṁ. ayaṁ vuccati dhammadipasambhīdā. so tassa tass’ eva bhāsitissa atθhamjānāti – ayaṁ imassa bhāsitassa athto. ayaṁ imassa bhāsitassa athto ti. ayaṁ vuccati atθhappasambhīdā.

11 Warder 1997: x–xii.


13 Frauwallner 1995: 88. Among the missing ‘excrescences’ mentioned are ‘the excessively extended mātiṅkās and ‘the endless stringing together of all the different combinations of elements which hardly say anything about the nature of things’.


15 The Dhammasaṅgani is presupposed by the other works of the Abhidhamma-pitaka (with the exception of the Puggalapaññatti) and is the only Abhidhamma work that has a commentarial supplement appended to the original text. Dhs-a 6 classifies this supplement as the fourth division (vibhatti) of the treatise, designating it Elucidation (atθhuddhāro) and Commentarial Chapter (atθhakathākānta). Dhs-a 409 ascribes this chapter to Sāriputta. With regard to the dating of the Dhs see Cousins 1983: 8 and 1983–4: 108, n. 5.


17 For example, Patis I 119 on the knowledge of dukkha; III 186–8 on the knowledge of joy (piṭi) and happiness (sukkha); III 190–1 on citta and samādhi. These definitions appear at Dhs 16 and 9–11 respectively. See also Warder 1997: xxvi.

18 See §2.1.3 above.

19 For example, Dhs 1: ye vā pana tasvim samaye aṁñē pi atθthi. This formula is repeated in all the dhamma lists. Only in the commentaries are the previously mentioned ‘others’ fully specified. On this point see Warder 1970: 303 and 323. Yet even in the commentaries the purpose is to set up the criteria for individuating whatever dhammic events may possibly occur, not enumerate whatever such dhammas there are.
in actuality. The same type of *dhamma* can vary greatly, even infinitely, and hence it is impossible to reach an actual, final number of the *dhammas* themselves. More in this connection is discussed in the next chapter, §4.1.3.

20 It employs only the first triplet of *kusala/akusala/ayākata*, which is very ancient: Paṭīs I 84–5. See also Warder 1997: xxxv.

21 Hinüber (1978: 49 and 57) distinguishes three periods in the history of Pali literature:

(1) the Aluvihāra (or Ālokavihāra) council (29–17 BCE), where the Pali Canon was written down for the first time in Ceylon, which he reckons the starting point of the tradition handed down by the monks of the Mahāvihāra; (2) the Āṭṭhakathā; (3) the Tīkā. The original commentaries were put into Old Sinhalese and their composition ended in the first century CE. See also Warder 1970: 321–2; Lamotte 1988: 292–5; Adikaram 1946: 2 and 33ff.

Dhs-a 118–19: *āyam cittass’ ekaggatāsāṅkhāto samādhi nāma avisāralakkāno vā avikkhepalakkāno vā, sahajātādhammānaṃ sampiṇḍanaranaso, upasamapatṭhānō nānapaccapatthānō vā […] visesato sukhapadatthānō. Also 63, 137–8, 193 and 332; Vism I 20. This scheme is anticipated in the *Petakopadesa* 128–30.

23 For example, Paṭīs I 15ff.


26 See §2.2.4 above, esp. n. 126.

27 Warder 1997: xxxv.


29 Paṭīs I 94–6, where the attainment of arahantship is described as the result of ‘immediate concentration’ (*ānantarikasamādhi*); II 105 depicts the four noble truths as having ‘a single penetration’ (*cattāri saccāni ekapatṭivedhāni*). See also Cousins 1983–4: 103.


31 Cousins 1991: 39, n. 53. On the date of the Second Council see §1.1, n. 12 above. Norman (1983: 88) notes that the Paṭīs is mentioned on a list of texts stated by the *Dīpavamsa* (Dīp V 37) to have been rejected by the Mahāsāṅghikas, and that it was likely to be recognized as canonical before the composition of the *Apadāna, Buddhavaṃsa, Cariyāpitaka* and *Khuddakapāṭha*.


33 Paṭīs II 177–83.

34 Ibid.: 177: *yasmā kho, ānanda, suññanā attena vā attaniyena vā, tasmā ‘suñño loko’ ti vuccati. The citation is of *S IV 54.*

35 Ibid.: *cakkhu kho, ānanda, suññanā attena vā attaniyena vā. rūpā suñña attena vā attaniyena vā. cakkhuviññānaṁ suñña attena vā attaniyena vā. cakkhusamphasso suñño attena vā attaniyena vā. yam p’ idam cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṁ sukhaṁ vā dukkhaṁ vā adukkham asukhaṁ vā, tam pi suññaṁ attena vā attaniyena vā, sotam suññaṁ…pe…saddā suñña…ghanaṁ suññaṁ…gandhā suñña…jīvā suñña…rasā suñña…kāyo suñño…phoṭṭhabbā suñña…mano suñño…dhammā suñña…mano viññānaṁ suññaṁ…manosamphasso suñño. yam p’ idam manosamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṁ sukhaṁ vā dukkhaṁ vā adukkham asukhaṁ vā, tam pi suññaṁ attena vā attaniyena vā. Again, this entire extract appears at *S IV 54.*
36 Patis II 178: katamaṃ vipariṇāmasuṇāṇam? jātaṃ rūpaṃ sabhāvena suṇāṇ. vigataṃ rūpaṃ vipariṇātana ṭeva suṇāṇ ca. jāta ṭeva sabhāvena suṇāṇ. vigata ṭeva sabhāvena vipariṇatā ṭeva suṇāṇ ca...pe...jāta saṅkharā...jātaṃ viṇṇāṇaṃ...jātaṃ cakkhu...pe...jāto bhavo sabhāvena suṇīno. vigato bhavo vipariṇato ṭeva suṇīno ca. idam vipariṇāmasuṇāṇaṃ. The five khandhas are followed by the six sense faculties and their corresponding objects, the six respective modalities of cognitive awareness and so forth, concluding with the patīcassamuppāda twelvefold formula. Succeeding consciousness are 199 of the 201 dhammas listed in Treatise I 5–8, excluding the last two nidānas of the patīcassamuppāda formula. This mātikā draws on earlier dhamma sets from the suttas and resembles the Abhidhamma ‘with questions’ mātikās. In these lists the dhammas are elaborated in the form of questions and answers by ascribing to them the triplet-couplet mātikā, as opposed to the ‘without questions’ lists, in which the dhammas are expounded by relevant passages from the suttas. Both types of list are found in the Vībhanga.

37 And as represented by the formula sabbe saṅkhāra anicca. See §2.2.4 above.

38 D II 157; S I 6 and 158, II 193: aniccatvata sankhārā, uppādavayadhāmin. The Buddha’s last words on his deathbed are: ‘conditioned things are of the nature of decay’ (vayadhammā saṅkhārā, D II 156).

39 This sense of dhammatā occurs at D II 12ff.; M I 324. Both commentaries gloss dhammatā as sabbhāva: Sv II 432 and Ps II 401 respectively. On the meaning of dhamma and its sense of sabhāva see Rahula 1974: 182–4. For pakati in the sense of the innate nature of the person or of a normal, ordained monk as distinct from one who is on probation see: Vin II 4–6, 22–5, 173–5 and 178; as intrinsically virtuous nature: D II 12, M III 120, Nett 191; as natural law or the regular order in nature: Mil 120–1. On the meaning of pakati in the Pali texts see Jacobsen 1993: 78, 80–1 and 83–5.

40 As is the case in the Dhammasaṅgani. See Gethin 1992a: 150.

41 For example, in the Anattalakkaṇha-sutta (S III 66ff.) as later interpreted with anattā taken as a bahuvrīhi.

42 This idea was suggested to me by Richard Gombrich in a personal communication.

43 Warder 1997: xiii.


45 Patis-a III 634: bhāvo ti ca dhammapariyāyavacanam etāṃ. ekassa ca dharmassa aṇīṇa bhāvasaṅkhāro dhammo natthi, tasmā sakassa aṇīṇena bhāvena suṇāṇaṃ, sako aṇīṇena bhāvena suṇīno ti atttha. tena ekassa dhammassa ekasabbhāvatā vuttā hoti.

46 Van Fraassen 1978: 8. The notion of essence and the distinction between essence and existence is further discussed in Chapter 4.

47 This point was suggested to me by L.S. Cousins in a personal communication.

48 Patis-a III 634: athavā sabbhāvena suṇāṇan ti. suṇāṇasabbhāvene eva suṇāṇaṃ. kim vuttaṃ hoti? suṇāṇasabbhāvena eva suṇāṇaṃ, na aṇīṇā pariyāyasabbhāvena suṇāṇaṃ ti vuttaṃ hoti. ‘Or else, sabbhāvena suṇāṇa means “empty through having emptiness as its individual essence.” What does it mean? The meaning is “empty owing to emptiness qua emptiness only, not owing to some other figurative sense of emptiness.”’

49 Ibid.: III 634–5: sace pana keci vadeyyuṃ sako bhāvo sabbhāvo, tena sabbhāvena suṇāṇan ti [...] tāṃ vacanam kaccavaram iva chāḍhitabbaṃ. [...] dhammā sakakkhane vijamānā evā ti niṭṭham ettha ganttabbaṃ. ‘Should some say: “sabhāva is its own existence and hence it is empty of its existence” [...] this statement is to be rejected as nonsense [...] the conclusion thus ought to be that dhammas only exist at single moments.’

50 See Buswell and Jaini 1996: 98.
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51. Ānāmoli 1979 (Introduction to the Peṭ trans.): xi and xxiii–xxiv; Norman 1983: 108; Warder 1970: 316. Warder here notes that the Peṭ should be situated in the context of parallel developments at that period in the Brahmical tradition of Vedic exegesis (mīmāṃsā) and of the organization of knowledge in general, such as the methodology of constructing a branch of science as it appears in Kautilya’s Arthāśāstra.

52. See n. 3 above.

53. In the Petakopadesa Mahākaccāyana’s name and titles suttaviccayo/suttavebhaṅgin are mentioned in the opening to several chapters (e.g. Peṭ 22, 73, 80, 111, 241), and even the name of the monastery where he is supposed to have lived (Jambūvana) is given (Peṭ 260). In the Nettippakarana his identification as the composer of the text is much more implicit and is merely mentioned at its very end (Nett 193). See Hinüber 1997: 78–9 and 82. Lamotte (1988: 189) notes that there is no reason why we should not see in the Petakopadesa ‘a distant echo of the Abhidharmic work carried out in Ujjayinī by the Buddha’s great disciple Mahākātyāyana, the missionary from Avanti’.


56. Ānāmoli 1979: xi–xii.


63. Ibid.: 80.

64. According to Peṭ 2–3 one’s right view of the Buddha’s teaching is based on wisdom arising from what is heard (sūtamaṃī paṇṇā), namely, from the wording of the doctrines taught, and on wisdom arising from reasoning (cintāmaṃī paṇṇā) owing to inward appropriate attention given to the meaning of those doctrines. See also Ānāmoli 1979: xxiii; Buswell and Jaini 1996: 99; Norman 1983: 109.


66. Nett 78.

67. For example, Vin III 89, 99, 132, 211 and IV 154; D I 61 and III 268; M II 102; S IV 288 and 291; A I 49: cīvarapindaṭṭā-senāsana-gilanapaccayabhesajja, that is, robe, alms-bowl, lodging and medicines as support in weakness.


70. Ibid.: ajīhāṭṭiko hetu, bāhīro paccayo. sabhāvo hetu, parabhāvo paccayo. nibbatṭako hetu, patiggāhako paccayo. nevāsiko hetu, āgantuko paccayo. asādhūraṇo hetu, sādhūraṇo paccayo.

71. Dhs 211.

72. See §5.2.2 below.

73. Nett 78ff.

74. Ibid.: 78–9; yathā ānukurassa nibbatisi yā bījam asādhūraṇaṃ, pathavi āpo ca sādhūraṇaṃ. ānukurassa hi pathavi āpo ca paccayo sabhāvo hetu. See also p. 74 for another occurrence of sabhāva.

75. Ānāmoli 1962: 110 n. 453/1.

76. Nett-a B° CSCD 115: sabhāvo hetu ti samānabhāvo bījam hetu. nanu ca bījam ānurādisaṃsa na hoṭi ti? no na hoṭi, aṇṇato hi tādisassa anuppaṭṭajjano. Trans. by
Nāṇamoli. I have changed Nāṇamoli’s rendering of sabhāva from ‘essence’ to ‘own-nature’.

77 Pet 158: cattāri nivaranāni sabhāva-kilesā tuṁha-middham nivaranā-pakkhōpakilesa. The four remaining hindrances are: sensuous desire (kāmacchanda), ill-will (vyāpāda), the four remaining hindrances are: sensuous desire (kāmacchanda), ill-will (vyāpāda), and worry (uddhacca), and doubt (vicikicchā).

78 Ibid.: yathā cattāra āsavā sabhāvāsavatāya āsavā no tu citta-sāsavatāya āsavā sabhāvatāya āsavā. The four āsavas are: sensuality (kāmāsavā), lust of rebirth (bhavāsava), of speculation (ditthāsava) and of ignorance (avijjāsava).

79 Warder 1970: 318–19. Warder adds that only later did the Theravāda and other schools begin to put new significance into the idea of own-nature.

80 See, for instance, Vibh 2–3, 5, 8 and 10, where ‘internal’ is explained as what, ‘for whatsoever other being’ (tesaṃ tesam parassattānaṃ). See also §2.1.2, n. 45 above.

81 The four remaining hindrances are: sensuous desire (kāmacchanda), ill-will (vyāpāda), the four remaining hindrances are: sensuous desire (kāmacchanda), ill-will (vyāpāda), and worry (uddhacca), and doubt (vicikicchā).

82 Hamilton 1996: xxvi and 173; Gethin 1992a: 53–4. The commentaries state that ajjhātam means ‘percepptual’, ‘perceptual’ means the same, only ‘for whatsoever other being’ (tesaṃ tesam parassattānaṃ).

83 Pet 152. This recalls a similar list of skills in concentration (samādhī) given in Paṭis 1 48–9, although in the latter the term sabhāva does not feature.

84 Thanks are due to L.S. Cousins for this clarification. For Nāṇamoli’s rendering see 1979: 208, §617.


87 Reynolds (1997: 37, n. 23) notes that the Buddhavamsa’s stories should be classified as apadāna: stories in which the future Buddha has a soteriologically efficacious interaction with a significant ‘field of merit’, that is, a certain Buddha of the past.

88 Bv IV 31: saṅkhrāraṇaṃ sabhāvaṃ dassayivtā sadevakā.

89 Bv-a 153: sabhāvattan ti aniccādīsaṃmaññalakkhanām.

90 Bv II 167: ime dhamma sammasato, sabhāvarasalakkhaṇe dhammatejena vasudhā dasasahassī pakampatha.

91 Pet 128–30. See §3.1.1, n. 22 above.

92 For example, M I 259, 266; M III 280ff, 287ff.; the Salāyatana Vagga of S IV.

93 At Vin II 239 it is said that just as the ocean has one taste, that of salt, so the Dhamma and discipline have but one taste, that of liberation: seyyathāpi bhikkhave mahāsāmuddo ekaraso lonaraso, evam eva kho bhikkhave ayaṃ dhammavinayo ekaraso vimuttiraso. See also A IV 203.


SABHĀVA AND BUDDHIST DOCTRINAL THOUGHT

96 Bv-a 114: sabhāvasarasalakkhane ti sabhāvasaṅkhātena sarasalakkhāṇena samma-santassā ti attrho. See also Warder 1997: xxxvii–xxxviii.

97 Horner 1963 (Introduction to the Mil trans., vol. 1): xx–xxii; Hinüber 1997: 83–6; Norman 1983: 110–12. As Cousins notes (2003: 3), Buddhaghosa’s visit to Ceylon is usually dated to the reign of Mahānāma in the early fifth century CE, but this dating is dependent upon a tradition not recorded until some seven hundred years later. It is therefore better to take Buddhaghosa’s floruit as in the fourth century CE (but not earlier, assuming he is posterior to the extant Dipavamsa).

98 Mil 139–40: atthavīsati kho pan’ ime, mahārāja, paṭisallānaṅguṇā [...] katame atthavīsati? [...] sankhārānaṃ sabhāvaṃ dassayati; also 413: sankhārānaṃ sabhāvaṃ paramasūnnaṭaṃ gahetabbaṃ. A similar usage of sabhāva is found on p. 417, where it is said that the yogin is one whose wish is to see into ‘the nature and meaning of conditioned phenomena’ (sankhārānaṃ sabhāvatthaṃ).

99 Ibid.: 180: hīna sabhāvāvatāya.

100 Ibid.: 239: buddhānaṃ bhagavatānaṃ sabhāvapakati esā ayam eko yeva buddho loke uppajjati. kasmā kāraṇā? maḥantatāya sabbaṅgubuddhaṅgam. aṅnam pi, mahārāja, yaṃ loke maḥantam, taṃ ekam yeva hoti. For other occurrences of sabhāva in the sense of nature see pp. 118, 129, 263, 272, 355, 360, 380, 383 and 398.

101 Ibid.: 90: pariṇyāyahāsitaṃ attthi, attthi sandhāyabhāsitaṃ sabhāvabhāsitaṃ attthi dhammaṁ rājassa sāsane.

102 Ibid.: 241: api ca, mahārāja, tathāgatassa evaṁ ahosi sabhāvapatiptujāniyo saṅgho, mama santakena saṅghaṃ patipūjessāmi ti.

103 Ibid.: 149: maraṇaṁ ti kho, mahārāja, etat aditthasaccānaṃ tāsanīyatthānaṃ [...] so mahārāja sarasasabhaṅvatejō, tassa sarasasabhaṅvatejena sakilesā sattā maraṇassa tassanti bhāyanti.

104 Ibid.: 185: ahimśayaṁ param loke piyo hohisi māmako ti sabbesaṃ, mahārāja, tathāgatānaṃ anumataṃ etat, esā anusīthi esā dharmadesaṇā, dharmo hi, mahārāja, ahimsālakkhano, sabhāvavacanam etat. On another passage (ibid.: 159) sabhāva recurs in a phrase meaning ‘own-essence and special quality’, where it is compounded with the word guna rather than with lakkhaṇa: puna ca metteyassa bhagavato sabhāvagunam paramipayamāṇena bhagavatā evāṁ bhuṇitaṁ (‘Moreover, this was said by the Blessed One when he was illustrating the own-essence and special qualities of the Buddha Metteyya’).

105 Ibid.: 184: pathhamam, mahārāja, bhagavatā dharmassa sabhāvasarasalakkhāṇam sabhāvam avitatham bhūtām taccham tathathām paridipayamāṇena.

106 For example, ibid.: 171, 212–13, 217 and 248. See also PED s.v. sabhāva.

107 See nn. 149–53 below.

108 Adikaram 1946: 2–3


111 See n. 19 above. The attempt to complete the dhamma lists is manifested, for instance, at Dhs-a 132–4, whereas the flexible definitions appear in such cases as Dhs-a 118–21 and 193.

112 Karunadasa 1996: 10–11.


114 Ibid.: 240–1.


The AKB employs two phrases to present the existential status of a dharma: sarvakālāsītī (a focus of much controversy, interpreted either as 'the existence of all time periods' or 'the existence of dharmas in all time periods'; AKB 5.25a, p. 295.6) and svabhāvaḥ sarvadā cā 'sti ('the particular nature of factors exists at all times': AKB 5.27c, p. 298.21). Cited and discussed in Cox 1995: 139, 143 and 153, n. 28.

Hirakawa 1980: 159–60 and 169–70, with reference to AKB 2.9 and 8.18.


See §2.3.4 above, particularly Williams's words as cited in n. 173.

For example, Nidd-a I CSCD vol. I 16: attano pana sabhāvam dhammā. Dhs-a 40: sabbā eva hi ete sabhāvadhāraṇādīna lakṣaṇaṇa dhammā ('For these are all dharmas by virtue of the characteristic of bearing their particular nature etc.'). Likewise, Vism-mṭ B° CSCD I 347 (on Vism 293 (VIII 246)): te hi attano sabhāvassa dhammā ti.

Dhs-a 39: attano pana sabhāvam dhārentī ti dhammā. dhārīyanti vā paccayehi, dhārīyanti vā yathāsabhāvato ti dhammā. Also Paṭis-a I 18; Moh B° CSCD 9.


Vism 293 (VIII 246): dhammā ti sabbāvā; Dhs-mṭ B° CSCD 28 (on Dhs-a 40): na ca dhārīyamānasabhāvā añño dhammo nāma athī.


Abhidh-s-mṭ 2: cinteṭi ti cittam; ārammanām vijaṇṇīti ti athō. [...] cintenti vā etena karanabhūtena sampayuttadhāmmanā ti cittam. athāvā cintanamattam cittam. yathāpaccayaṃ hi pavattimattam eva yadidam sabhāvadhhammo nāma. Trans. by Wijeratne and Gethin 2002: 7–8. See also Vism-mṭ B° CSCD I 166 and II 113.


Vibh-a 45; Vibh-mṭ B° CSCD 35; Moh B° CSCD 175; Nidd-a CSCD II 72; Paṭis-a I 79; Vism 481 (XV 3); Vism-mṭ B° CSCD II 171: attano lakkhaṇaṃ dhārentī/ dhārīyanti ti dhammā.

Spk II 291–2: iti bhagavataḥ yāni imāni sāmaṇṇāpaccattavasena dhammānaṃ dve lakkhaṇāni. tesaṃ rūpākkhandhassu tāva paccattalakkhaṇaṃ dassitaṃ, rūpākkhandhaṃ/evr eva hi etam na vedanāddanaṃ, tasmā paccattalakkhaṇaṃ ti vuccati. aniccadukkhānattalakkhaṇaṃ pana vedanādīnaṃ pi hoti, tasmā tathā sāmaṇṇālakkhaṇaṃ ti vuccati.

Sv-pṭ B° CSCD I 192: tatttha sabbhāvalakkhaṇāvabodho paccakkhaṇāṇaṃ, sāmaṇṇālakkhaṇāvabodho anumānāṇaṃ. Also Karunadasa 1996: 18–19. The distinction between paccakkha (Skt. pratyakṣa) and anumāṇa in the sense of perception vs. reasoning is basic to early Nyāya epistemology. Pratyakṣa and anumāṇa are two
of the means of valid knowledge (pramāṇa) accepted in classical Indian logico-epistemological tradition. They are discussed exhaustively in Ākṣapāda Gautama’s Nyāyasūtras and its commentaries by Vātsyāyana and Uddyotakara. See Matilal 1986: Chs 3–4.

135 Dhs-a 63: tenām dhammānaṁ sabbhāvo vā sāmaññaṁ vā lakkhaṇaṁ nāma. Also Moh B° CSCD 15.

136 Dhs-mt B° CSCD 64: sabbhāvo kakkhalādiṇiphanādiko asādhārano. sāmaññaṁ sādhārano api aniccādīsabhāvo. idha ca kusalalakkaṇhānaṁ sabbakusalāsādhāranaṁ asabhāvattā sāmaññaṁ daṭṭhabbhaṁ, akusaladīhi asādhāranaṭṭaya sabbhāvo vā.

137 Vism-mt B° CSCD II 76 (on Vism 438 (XIV 7)): dharmānāṁ sako bhāvo samāno ca bhāvo dhammasabhāvo. tattha paṭhaṃmena kakkhalaphusanādisālakkaṇhām gaṇitām, dutiyaṇa aniccadukkhatalādisāmaññaḷakkaṇhām. tadubhyavasa ca yāthāvato pattiwijhanalakkaṇhā paññā ti aha dhammasabhāvapātivedalakkaṇhā paññā ti. Abhidh-av-t B° CSCD II 295: sabbhāvapāṭivedhanāti sako bhāvo samāno vā bhāvo sabbhāvo (‘Sabbhāva’ in “penetration of sabbhāva” means either particular nature or common nature’).

138 See §3.1.1, n. 46 above.

139 Vism-mt B° CSCD II 137: salakkhaṇaṁ nāma dhammānaṁ anāññasādhārano sabbhāvo. Similarly, sabbhāva is also referred to as ‘particular’ (Abhidh-av-t B° CSCD II 296 and 373: āveniko sabbhāvo) and ‘not held in common’ by other dharmas (Dhs-mt B° CSCD 64; Yam-mt B° CSCD 142: asādhārano sabbhāvo).

140 Matilal 1985: 177–8. See also Vātsyāyana’s bhāṣya on Nyāyasūtra 1.1.3: ‘The science of reasoning proceeds by three processes: by enunciation, by definition (lakṣaṇa) and by examination. Enunciation is the mere mention by name of the categories; definition consists in that character or property which serves to differentiate that which has been enunciated; and examination is the investigation, by means of argumentation, of the question as to whether or not the definition is applicable to the thing defined.’ Trans. by Jhā 1999, vol. 1: 97–8.

141 Matilal 1985: 184.

142 Vism 180–1 (VI 19): yasmin padese uddhummatakan sasubhaminiyaṁ nikkkhitaṁ hoti, tasmin padese pāsānaṁ vā vammikaṁ vā rukkhaṁ vā gacchaṁ vā latam vā sanimittaṁ karoṁ, sārmanamanaṁ karoṁ. sanimittam katvā sārmanamanaṁ katvā uddhumātakaṁ asubhaminiyaṁ sabbhāvābhāvato upalakkheti.

143 Ibid.: 183 (VI 35): evam sanimittam sārmanamaṁ ca katvā pana sabbhāvabhāvato vavatthapeti ti vuttattā yvāsā sabbhāvabhāvo anāñnasādhāro anātinamo uddhumātakaṁ, tena manasikātubbaṁ. vanitam uddhumātakaṁ ti evam sabbhāvena sarasena vavatthapatteban ti attho. The commentary (Vism-mt B° CSCD I 205) glosses rasā in the sense of kicca.

144 Dhs-a 155: yasmin samaye kāmāvacaram paṭhamānaṁ mahākusalacittam uppajjati, tasmin samaye cittaṁgavasena uppannātāti rekapannāsasabhāvato sabbhāvataṁ dhammā eva hoti. na aṁno koci satto vā bhāvo vā poso vā puggalo vā hoṁti ti.

145 Kv 1: so puggalo upalabbbhāti saccikaṭṭhaparamatthena.

146 See Karunadasa 1996: 10–11.

147 Gethin 1992a: 150.


149 D I 190 and 191: api ca samāno gotamo bhūtaṁ taccam tathāṁ paṭipadaṁ paññaṇepeti dhammaṁtihatam dhammanyāmatam. Also S V 230.

150 See n. 105–6 above.

151 Sv I 378: bhūtaṁ ti sabbhāvavo vijjamānaṁ. taccam, tathan ti tass’ eva vevacanam. Sv-pt B° CSCD I 491: sabbhāvavo vijjamānaṁ ti paramatthasabbhāvavo upalabbbhāmānam. Note that upalabbbhāti is the passive form of upalabbbhāti. Whereas the active voice signifies the epistemological meaning ‘to perceive’ or ‘understand’, the passive voice
also denotes the ontological sense of ‘is found’, ‘exists’. Cf. NPED s.v. *upalabhāti*. In the present case the latter is the intended meaning.

152 Vism-mt B° CSCD I 347 (on Vism 293 (VIII 246)): *bhavanāṃ paramatthato vijjamānatā bhāvo, saha bhāvenā ti sabbāvā*, sacchikaṭṭhaparamatthato labbhamānarūpāti atho. te hi attano sabbāvassā dhāraṇato dhammā ti. Trans. by Ṉānāmoli 1991: 789, n. 68. See also Sv-p t B° CSCD I 491.

153 Dhs-mt B° CSCD 25: *sabbāvarasalikkhaṇe ti ettha bhāvo ti aviparttattā vijjamānatā, saha bhāvena sabbāvā.*


155 The regular construction is *yasmīṃ samaye... tasmiṃ samaye*; For example, Dhs 9. On this point and for a discussion of the term *samaya* see Nyanaponika Thera 1998: 93–5.

156 §2.2.4, n. 117ff. above.

157 Dhs-a 45: *attattatikе attano sabbāvam uppādādikkhaṇaṃ vā patvā atikkantā ti attā. tadubbhayam pi na āgatā ti anāgatā. taṃ tāṃ kāraṇaṃ paticca uppannā ti paccuppannā.* Also Moh B° CSCD 120.


161 Vism-mt B° CSCD I 343: *uppādavayaṇṇathat-tabhāvā ti, uppādavayaṇṇathat-tabhāvā ti attho. tattha saṅkhataṇḍhamānāṃ hetupaccayehi uppaṭijanaṃ ahutvā sambhavo attalābho uppādo. uppaṭijanaṃ tesāṃ khananirodho vināsā vayo. jarāya aṇṇathābhāvo aṇṇathattām. Trans. by Ṉānāmoli 1991: 788, n. 65. In this connection, the commentator emphasizes that there must be no break in the object between the instants of origination and dissolution, for otherwise it would follow that one thing originates and another dissolves.

162 Moh B° CSCD 466: *uppajjati ti pākaṭabhbāvato uddham uppādādiṃ pāpunāti, attānaṃ vā paṭilabhatī.

163 Dhs-anuṭ B° CSCD 49: *uppannadhammabhāvo uppannā dhammā ti padena gahitadhammabhāvo, vattamānādhhammabhāvo ti attho. yo vā uppādādippatto attano ca sabbāvam dhāreti paccayehi ca dhārīyati, so uppannadhammo ti paccuppanabhāvo uppannadhammabhāvo ti evam ettha attho daṭṭhabbo.*
The preceding chapters have dealt with the various doctrinal developments, refinements and shifts of emphasis undergone by the canonical and post-canonical Abhidhamma as part of the systematization of Buddhism and of its consolidation from an oral teaching to an institutionalized tradition (sāsana). We have seen that the doctrinal transition from the Sutta mindset to the Abhidhamma worldview is best understood in terms of a change in epistemological attitude and metaphysical foundation (albeit both lines of thought belong to the category of process philosophy), and that at the hub of this change lies the question of what a dhamma is. While in the Sutta period the dhammas served as guidelines for construing sentient experience based on an anti-substantial conceptual scheme, within the Abhidhamma framework the dhammas emerged as particulars – distinct, evanescent constituents of experience – and were gradually assigned a growing metaphysical dimension in the form of their sabhāva.

To grasp the significance of this metaphysical shift we must account for the philosophical motivation underlying the Abhidhamma vision as embodied in the dhamma theory. This, I demonstrate in this chapter, is rooted in the problem of individuation, and specifically in the Abhidhamma’s attempt to individuate one’s mind from the standpoint of its event metaphysics. Inspired by Peter Strawson’s seminal book *Individuals*, the present chapter first explicates the concept of an individual and introduces Western philosophy’s approach to the problem of individuation.

The complex problem of individuation involves several questions, two of particular relevance to the Buddhist material are the question of the intension of individuality and the question of the principle or cause of individuality. The second division of this chapter shows that the early Abhidhamma dhamma analysis, as presented by the Dhammasaṅgani and the Vibhaṅga, focuses on the intension of the dhammas’ individuality. I explore the philosophical meaning of a theory of categories and explain why it befits individuation of particulars. In this context I discuss the ancient Indian Grammarians’ notion of categories and the Vaiśeṣika categorial theory as sources that are likely to have interacted with the Abhidhamma dhamma analysis.
The third division of this chapter presents the developed, post-canonical Abhidhamma as preoccupied with the question of the principle of the dhammas’ individuality and shows that the Theravādins broach sabhāva as this principle. In this connection I invoke the concept of lakkhaṇa and the relation of individuation to definition. I then explain how the developed Abhidhamma event-based analysis of the consciousness process (citta-viṭṭhi), the doctrine of sabhāva and the theory of momentariness are all interconnected and subject to the interest in the principle and the cause of the dhammas’ individuality. Lastly, I address the Abhidhamma’s individuation of nibbāna and account for its developed fourfold dhamma typology.

4.1 THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUATION

In his book Individuals Strawson explores what he calls ‘descriptive metaphysics’, namely, that branch of metaphysics of which purpose is to describe the structure of our thought about the world in an attempt to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual scheme.¹ This scheme, Strawson argues, is based on the category of particulars and necessitates methods of their identification as well as criteria for their individuation. By ‘particulars’ is meant specific persons, occurrences, material objects, places and things to whom or which a unique reference may be made by certain expressions: proper names, proper nouns, descriptive phrases beginning with the definite article and expressions compounded of these. Once the reference is understood, the particulars in question can be identified. The class of things in general that can be identified and referred to Strawson calls the class of individuals. Whenever something can be introduced into a proposition and brought under some principle of collection along with other things, that thing assumes the role of an individual, logical subject. For Strawson only some individuals are particulars: following Kant, particulars are empirical and uniquely situated within a spatio-temporal matrix in which unity is an inseparable feature of our conceptual scheme. The class of individuals is broader and embraces non-particulars: qualities, properties, propositions, numbers, relations, facts and species. The point is that we think of the world as containing particulars and of the world’s history as made up of particular episodes; and we think of these particular things and occurrences as included within our common discourse, as items we can identify and about which we can talk. As Strawson puts it, particulars are the paradigm of logical subjects, or rather, ‘the fundamental objects of reference’.²

Particulars are therefore fundamental to our conceptual scheme, to the way we cognize and interpret encountered phenomena. This implies that particulars are effective conceptual instruments for explicating human experience: in fact, every explanation of such experience necessarily involves particulars. Drawing on these assumptions, Strawson further claims that a certain category of particulars is especially basic to our identification of other categories of particulars, namely,
the category of material bodies. These basic particulars are such that ‘as things are, it would not be possible to make all the identifying references which we do make to particulars of other classes unless we made identifying references to particulars of that class, whereas it would be possible to make all the identifying references we do make to particulars of that class without making identifying reference to particulars of other classes.’3 Strawson emphasizes that the term ‘basic’ is strictly taken in terms of particular identification; that he does not wish to say that non-basic particulars are in any sense less real than the basic, material ones. Yet he does admit that it would seem ‘unobjectionable’ to say that basic particulars are also ‘ontologically prior’ to other types of particulars in our conceptual scheme.4 Such a concession leads to ontological reductionism that not only sees everything as reducible to basic particulars, but also holds that the former conceptual state of affairs obtains because basic particulars are the ultimate, existing ‘building blocks’ of reality.

Nevertheless, even in its stronger, ontological version the main thrust of a theory of particulars hinges not upon the notion of existence but of individuation. The reason is that in order to include a given type of particulars within our conceptual scheme and its implied ontology, and in order to say something of metaphysical significance about their existence, one must first be able to say what exactly these particulars are and what makes them so. One must know some individuating fact, or facts, other than that X was the particular being referred to. Strawson explains:

To know an individuating fact about a particular is to know that such-and-such a thing is true of that particular and of no other particular whatever. [...] One who could make all his knowledge articulate would satisfy this condition for particular-identification only if he could give a description which applied uniquely to the particular in question and could non-tautologically add that the particular to which this description applied was the same as the particular being currently referred to.5

The recourse to individuation is necessary because the definition question ‘What does it mean to be a particular thing of that kind?’ is prior to the ontological, population question ‘What is there?’6 In proving the existence of certain particulars one has not yet made any commitment with respect to the nature of those entities. An existential proof does not involve a theory about the nature of entities of that kind, and until such a theory is given it would be impossible to determine whether or not, in establishing the existence of these items, there has been established something of true metaphysical importance. What must be shown is not just that there is such-and-such a particular, but also that it comprises a unique category that no other already admitted existent truly belongs to. What is necessary for determining this singularity, then, is a categorization of the items that constitute the empirical world. Such a categorization will consist in a theory about what it is to be a particular of any given kind (P). In the course of saying what this is, the categorial theory – in distinction from a mere characterization of
particulars—will reveal how items of that kind (Ps) stand in relation to members of other kinds and whether or not the Ps are among those members of other kinds. This engenders the metaphysical convictions (i) that each and every particular has a unique nature that accounts for its individuality; (ii) that this nature determines the particular’s status within our conceptual scheme and its implied ontology; and (iii) that this unique nature can be defined and communicated.

Here it should be noted that one cannot directly attribute Strawson’s view of a plurality of particulars to the Abhidhamma, for the latter by no means allocate material bodies the role or the status Strawson does—a difference that essentially stems from the fact that Strawson’s understanding of particulars is laden with the fundamental notion of substance, while the exemplary particulars the Abhidhamma is concerned with, namely, the dhammas, are psycho-physical events couched in anti-substantialist terms. Another complexity may result from the application of Strawson’s idea of basic particulars to the Abhidhamma framework, but for the time being we shall defer the question of whether the dhammas’ primacy is solely conceptual or perhaps also ontological until later in this chapter, after having clarified the philosophical problem of individuation and its treatment in the canonical Abhidhamma. These difficulties notwithstanding, it is primarily with respect to Strawson’s recourse to individuation that I appropriate his concept of particulars.

As for individuation, this should not be conflated with identification: the question of identity consists in asking whether something can be referred to as the same thing at different times, and this is quite unlike asking what makes an object precisely what it is rather than any other. W.V.O. Quine has discussed the logical primacy of identification over existence: before we say that a so-and-so is present we must ask whether this is the same so-and-so as that and whether one such thing is present or two. He has coined this primacy ‘No entity without identity’. By the same token, the logical primacy of individuation may be rendered as ‘No entity without individuality’. This also calls to mind Donald Davidson’s remarks on the nature of events and event-description: ‘Before we enthusiastically embrace an ontology of events, we will want to think long and hard about the criteria for individuating them.’

Davidson’s statement is equally applicable to whatever entities constitute the world according to one’s conceptual scheme—be they substances, propositions, processes or events. I argue that the problem of individuation underlies the development of the Abhidhamma event-oriented epistemology and its later metaphysical vision of the dhammas. To provide a comprehensive account of human experience, the Abhidhammadikas had to establish an apparatus for the individuation of one’s mind. This is what the dhamma theory and its subordinate doctrine of sabhāva are intended for.

Before we turn to the complexity of individuation, a terminological clarification is due. In what follows the term ‘individuals’ denotes the class of things in general that can be identified and uniquely referred to, material and immaterial alike. Whatever is individual is also singular and particular, though not necessarily vice versa. Singularity is the opposite of plurality, while individuality is the opposite
of universality. Even universals are singulants, for they are not aggregates, but they are certainly not individuals. Particularity has no appropriate opposite in this context, and hence there is little advantage in distinguishing between particularity and individuality. I shall use ‘individuation’ to signify the process by which an individual acquires its inner constitution that renders it as such, and ‘individuality’ to denote this constitution. The problem of individuation, then, is concerned with individuality, with that which makes an item what it is. Individuality is often regarded as interchangeable with nature, but nature normally refers to the characteristics that are common to things of various kinds. It can be specific or generic: the specific nature consists of the characteristics that distinguish a thing from a larger group of things and make it part of a smaller such group (e.g. rationality in humans). The generic nature is shared by several species and makes their members belong to a larger group distinct from other larger groups (e.g. having a body in humans). By contrast, what sets a thing apart from all other things, including those falling with it under the same group, constitutes the thing’s individuality. A consideration of X’s specific nature will focus on how and in what respects X is the same as other particulars – for example, on what renders X indistinguishable from other human beings and distinguishable from non-human beings. A consideration of X’s individuality will focus on how and in what ways X is unique; on what distinguishes X from any other particular, whether human or not. It is only when ‘nature’ is used in this less prevalent sense of ‘own nature’ that it may be taken as equivalent to individuality. The clusters of philosophical issues concerned with generic or specific natures are named ‘the problem of universals’, whereas those concerned with individuality are termed ‘the problem of individuation’.

In his two volumes *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages* and *Individuation: An Essay on the Foundation of Metaphysics*, Jorge Gracia has provided a comprehensive investigation into the problem of individuation in medieval and early modern philosophical literature. The following discussion relies on these two sources.

The problem of individuation involves several questions, the most prominent of which are:

1. The intension of individuality: what it means to be this very particular and no other, what the nature of an individual is.
2. The discernibility of individuals: how we distinguish individuals, what is the cause or principle by which we become aware of an individual as an indivisible unit numerically distinct from everything else.

The first question is logico-epistemological, for it concerns the clarification of the concept of individuality; the second question is purely epistemological, as it pertains to the conditions for the discernibility of individuals.

3. The extension of individuation: whether there are any entities that possess individuality and exactly which these are.
The ontological status of individuation: whether there is some distinction in reality between individuality and the individual’s nature, and what the basis of that distinction is.

The cause or principle of individuation: what, in the internal constitution of an individual, makes it the very item it is.

This latter question should not be conflated with the issue of numerical differentiation between individuals that have many properties in common. Even if there existed just one individual, there would still arise the problem of accounting for the individuality of that single individual. The last three questions are metaphysical: they involve the description of reality and the status of individuality in it. The two issues pertinent to the Abhidhamma are the intension and the principle of individuation. I deal with the latter in sections 4.3.1–2 below.

In Western tradition all the questions regarding the problem of individuation have been formulated within the framework of substance metaphysics and answered in view of the substance-attribute ontological model that it begets. Consider the treatment of the intension of individuation: here much effort has been put into explicating the meaning and true nature of individual substances. To apprehend what an individual is, what it means to be a particular item rather than any other, has been equated with knowing what it means to exist as an individual substance. Let us examine more closely how this idea came to pass.

4.2 THE INTENSION OF INDIVIDUALITY

4.2.1 What is an individual?

It was Plato who made the distinction between universal and individual central for ontology. His answer to the question ‘What is real?’ denied particular, sensible objects reality in its full sense and ascribed that reality to transcendent, universal Forms. Forms (also rendered as Ideas) are the true natures all things participating in the same class have in common and in virtue of which those things are what they are. Holy things, for example, are such because they are instances of the Form Holiness. Forms alone can be the object of genuine knowledge. By contrast, the sensible particulars of everyday experience are said to imitate or copy the Forms and be knowable by mere belief or opinion. Plato relegates them to the realm of appearance, subjectivity and relativity.

In the *Philebus* Forms are said to be at once one, many and unlimitedly many: one, insofar as they are a genus; many, insofar as the genus consists of many species; and unlimitedly many insofar as the species subsumes unlimitedly many individual members. Aristotle adopts this division of things into genera, species and individuals, but rejects Plato’s metaphysics of transcendent Forms and turns the Platonic priority relation between Forms and individuals on its head: he assigns the individuals an ontological priority. Although he accepts that without the
universal there is no genuine knowledge, he argues that our employment of universal names does not require a corresponding universal Entity transcending the particulars in which it is instantiated. Every epistemic inquiry begins with concrete particulars of the empirical world, and seeks to account for some encountered state of affairs whose essential structure is made up of instantiations of universal natures. Hence, no universal can exist without being individualized by its inherence in this or that empirical individual: there is no Wisdom, for example, other than the wisdom instantiated in individual subjects in the everyday world. This equally applies to species and genera: neither ‘animal’ nor ‘man’ exists apart from individual animals and individual men.17

Aristotle is the first to use the term ‘individual’ in its technical sense of a singular, particular item. This usage originated from a literal translation of the Greek word atomon, which had already been used to denote indivisible magnitudes. In the Categories Aristotle glosses ‘individual’ as ‘that which is numerically one’, in contrast to the universal, which is ‘the one about the many’.18 The members of a genus can be divided into their species to the extent that they lack specific unity, and a species can be divided into its subjective members to the extent that they lack numerical unity. These, when distinguished according to numerical difference, are indivisible individuals. In the Categories, then, an individual is the indivisible, subjective part of a species.19 Although in this treatise Aristotle assumes the existence of individual non-substances, such as properties and quantities (e.g. the individual property of ‘paleness’, say, of Socrates), still he speaks of individuals as if they were the concrete particulars of ordinary experience: tables, horses, trees and human beings. He further declares that individual objects alone can be reckoned as primary substances, because they underlie everything else. Individual substance is the preponderant of the ten categories enumerated in the Categories, and the one that is assigned a logical, epistemological and ontological primacy.20 For Aristotle, then, the extension of ‘individual’ is restricted to a primary substance and its intension is ‘an indivisible, primary substance’.

This Aristotelian notion of individual substance was adopted by Boethius (c.480–524 CE) and by him passed down to the medieval scholastics, whose views on this matter have been preserved in philosophical discourse to the present day.21 The scholastics elaborated on Aristotle’s legacy, formulating a standard, fivefold definition of individuality: a substance’s individuality consists in its instantiability, impredicability, indivisibility, numerical distinction and identity, that is, its capacity to remain the same through time and under change.22 If a primary substance is to be an individual then it must be unique, distinguishable and identifiable. This sense of an individual, as demonstrated by Strawson’s denotation, is preserved in contemporary philosophy. It is also fundamental to the Abhidhamma dhamma analysis.

The main argument in this chapter is that the Abhidhamma metaphysics concerns not so much the ontological status of the dhammas as primary existents, but first and foremost their status as individuals. To individuate something is uniquely to distinguish it from all other things; it is to specify what that thing
is by clarifying its true nature. This issue is epistemological, but it has ontological implications: the individuation of a certain item is bound up with the conditions for bringing that item, or an item of its kind, into being. On the Western, substance-attribute ontological model substances are the ultimate genera of what there is, or of what may be referred to by categorial designations, and hence the phrase ‘what it is’ must be a variant of the term ‘substance’. It is easy to see why this would be assumed when the category of substance is assigned an ontological and epistemological primacy.23

Substance metaphysics, however, is not the only possible type of metaphysics: equally tenable is a metaphysical system in which processes rather than substances best represent encountered phenomena. The problem of individuation may well ensue from such a system, though one would then ask what the nature of individual occurrences that make up experience is and what in experience individuates each such occurrence, not what the nature of a substance is or what in objects makes them substances qua individuals.24 Buddhist thought has thrived on such an anti-substantialist, processual outlook: the dhammas that the Buddha discusses and that the early Abhidhamma categorizes are not the Aristotelian primary substances, but mental and physical occurrences, whether processes or events. The Abhidhamma’s shift from analysing human experience in terms of processes to analysing it in terms of events led to the view that each and every phenomenon is an interlocking complex of momentary, psycho-physical events that are distinguishable and identifiable. If this account of human experience is to be adequate and warranted, then it must be grounded in a theory of the nature of this experience. If dhammic events are individual objects of thought, the question is in what sense they are so and what makes a certain dhamma instance different from any other instance of its kind. The present chapter shows that the Abhidhamma dhamma analysis purports to establish a theory of individuation of one’s mind, specifically of those events arising in the mind as it progresses along the path to awakening. Here, too, there arose a distinction between the intension and the principle of individuation. In the following sections we shall see that the early, canonical Abhidhamma is primarily concerned with the problem of the intension of individual dhammas, whereas the post-canonical Abhidhamma focuses on the question of the principle of the dhammas’ individuality.

We now turn to an examination of the canonical Abhidhamma position as gleaned from the Dhammasaṅgaṇī and the Vibhaṅga.

4.2.2 The canonical Abhidhamma and the intension of individuality

4.2.2.1 The Dhammasaṅgaṇī

The dhammas reviewed by the Dhammasaṅgaṇī always prove to be factors of citta in the broad sense of psycho-physical events that present themselves in one’s consciousness. In fact, the term citta is used here in two different senses: first, as
one of the eighty-one conditioned dhammas that is a name for the bare phenomenon of consciousness of which essential characteristic is the cognizing of an object; second, as a term for a given combination of consciousness and its accompanying mental factors. Although citta as bare consciousness is a single dhamma and a discrete category, it can never be experienced as such in its own origination moment, for, according to the Buddhist intentional model of consciousness, consciousness is always directed to some particular object. Any given consciousness moment cognizes its specific object by means of certain mental factors. Citta, therefore, always occurs associated with its appropriate cetasikas: mental factors that perform diverse functions and that emerge and cease together with it, having the same object (either sensuous or mental) and grounded in the same sense faculty.

Any given consciousness moment – any assemblage of citta and cetasika – is divided according to various classification schemes and falls under a certain broad category of consciousness. Fixed by the post-canonical Abhidhamma, this analysis is based on the Dhammasaṅgāni’s schema of dhamma analysis, particularly in its application to consciousness as prescribed in Book I, the Cittuppādakaṇḍa, which for this purpose utilizes the triplet-couplet abhidhamma-maṭṭika and a number of other variables. At this point it would be useful to turn to the analysis of consciousness as given in the commentarial literature. From here it may be easier to approach the origin and significance of the early, canonical Abhidhamma notion of the intension of individuality.

The developed Abhidhamma system describes eighty-nine basic types of consciousness. These are divided according to various guidelines, the most fundamental of which reveals a fourfold hierarchy according to the four planes (bhūmi) of consciousness. The first three planes are also qualified by the term avacara that means ‘a sphere of action or movement’, ‘scope’, or ‘moving in the sphere of’. The sphere frequented is the plane of existence (also called bhūmi) that, according to Buddhist cosmology, is designated by the name of its appropriate, characteristic sphere of consciousness, that is, the sensuous, the form and the formless consciousness spheres (kāmavacara-, rūpavacara- and arūpavacara-citta respectively) that correspond with the sensuous, the form and the formless planes of existence respectively. A particular consciousness sphere encompasses those citta types that are typical of the corresponding plane of existence and which act in, or frequent that plane by tending to arise most often there. Although consciousness of a particular sphere is not necessarily unique to the corresponding plane (for instance, form and formless-sphere cittas may arise in the sensuous plane), a sphere of consciousness is typical of the plane that shares its name and the actively skilful or unskilful cittas of a particular sphere tend to condition rebirth into the corresponding plane of existence.

Thus at the bottom level of this hierarchy there are the fifty-four types of sensuous-sphere citta – a broad category characteristic of the normal state of mind of human beings, but also of other beings in the realms of the five senses, such as hell beings (niraya), animals, hungry ghosts (petti-visaya), jealous gods
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(asura) and the lower gods (deva). Next there are the fifteen classes of form-sphere citta, followed by the twelve classes of formless-sphere citta. Both these categories characterize the state of mind of divine beings collectively known as Brahmās, as well as of ordinary beings when attaining the five rūpayajñānas and the four formless attainments (arūpasamāpatti). Each jhāna is defined by way of a selection of associated mental factors called the jhāna limbs (jhāna-pīgā) that, of the variety of mental factors associated with each jhāna consciousness, distinguish the specific jhāna from the others and induce the process of concentration absorption (appanā-samādhi). The first jhāna contains five factors: initial directing thought, sustained thought, joy, pleasure and one-pointedness of mind (vitakka, vicāra, piti, sukha, citta’s’ ek’-aggatā). The four higher jhānas are attained by successively eliminating the grosser jhāna factors and by refining the subtler factors through deeper concentration. The factors of vitakka, vicāra and piti are removed in the second, third and fourth jhānas respectively, while in the fifth jhāna sukha is replaced by equanimity (upekkhā). The rūpayajñānas are so called because they are normally attained while in meditation by concentrating on a material object as a contemplation device (kāśa), such as the four great elements, the four colours blue, yellow, red and white, light and limited space. The four formless attainments, which allow for the further refining and stilling of the mind and are presented as essentially modifications of the fourth jhāna, are the bases of boundless space, of boundless consciousness, of nothingness, and of neither-conceptualization-nor-non-conceptualization (aikkānañcayatana, viññānañcayatana, aṅkañcayatana, nevasaṅgañcayatana).31 Finally, there are the eight kinds of supra-ordinary or transcendent (lokkutta) consciousness: these have nibbāna as their object and are experienced only at the time of attaining the four paths and their respective four fruits, namely, stream-attainment (sotāpatti), once-return (sakkagāmitā), non-return (anāgāmitā) and arahant-ship.

This fourfold hierarchy is organized in accordance with the first triplet of the abhidhamma-mātikā into skilful (kusala), unskilful (akusala) and indeterminate/undeclared (abyākata) types of citta. The undeclared class is twofold, comprising cittas that are resultant (vipāka) and those that are purely activity (kiriyā). Various other variables operate within these broad categories, though not all of them are equally significant in each category. germane to our present objective are the method by which the Abhidhamma categorizes citta and the status of the categories engendered. These are embodied in the categorization of sensuous sphere citta:

I  Kusala-citta  The skilful sensuous-sphere citta is eightfold according to whether it is accompanied by and associated with happiness (somanassa), equanimity (upekkhā), knowledge (ñāna) and instigation (saṅkhārika).32

II  Akusala-citta  Unskilful consciousness pertains to the sensuous sphere alone and is threelfold according to its being rooted in greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) or delusion (moha). There are twelve types of unskilful citta: eight are rooted in greed and are distinguished according to whether they are associated
with happiness or equanimity, accompanied by wrong view (diṭṭhi) and instigated or uninstigated. Two types are rooted in hatred: accompanied by unhappiness (domanassa) and associated with aversion (patigha), they are distinguished according to whether they are instigated or uninstigated. The remaining two types of unskilful citta are rooted in delusion: accompanied by equanimity, they are associated with either doubt (vicikicchā) or restlessness (uddhacca).33

III  Vipāka-citta  This is consciousness that results from previously active skilful or unskilful citta. At the sensuous sphere there are sixteen kinds of skilful resultant and seven kinds of unskilful resultant citta. These are further divided according to being either motivated (‘with root-cause’, sahetuka) or unmotivated (‘without root-cause’, ahetuka). Six dharmas are regarded as hetus in the sense of motives: greed, hatred, delusion and the opposites of these three, namely, non-attachment, friendliness and wisdom.34 Thus, a motivated resultant citta has greed, hatred etc. as its cause, whereas an unmotivated citta is devoid of a hetu as its cause. Eight types of skilful resultant citta are unmotivated: these include the modalities of cognitive awareness (cakkhuviññāna, sota-, ghāna-, jivhā-, kāya- accompanied by pleasure), the mind element (manodhātu) that is a receiving (sampāticchana) consciousness, and the element of mental cognitive awareness (manoviññānadhātu) that is an appraising (santirāna) consciousness and can be accompanied by either happiness or equanimity. Eight kinds of skilful resultant citta are motivated: these parallel the unmotivated resultants, but are distinguished from them by mirroring actively skilful citta according to its association with feeling, knowledge and instigation. The seven unskilful resultant kinds of citta are unmotivated only. They mirror the respective skilful motivated resultants, except that body discrimination is here accompanied by bodily pain and the appraising consciousness is of one kind, accompanied merely by equanimity.35

IV  Kiriyā-citta  Kiriyā is a technical term unique to the Pali Abhidhamma, and already features in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī and the Vibhaṅga.36 Cousins notes that the term kiriyā denotes a type of mentality that does not take part in the kammic process. Kiriyā-citta is a class of consciousness that is neither productive of any result in the future, and hence is not actively skilful or unskilful, nor is it resultant from previously active skilful or unskilful citta: it is neither kamma nor vipāka. This type of consciousness normally applies to the state of mind of the arahant and is ‘intended to designate the spiritual sensitivity of a man of developed wisdom, who responds to every situation with appropriate activity without partiality of any kind’.37 There are eleven types of sensuous-sphere kiriyā-citta. They, too, are distinguished according to their being motivated or unmotivated. The motivated ones mirror their respective types of actively skilful citta and are unique to the arahant’s mind. The unmotivated ones are essential to cognition and are experienced by all beings in ordinary consciousness: these are the citta.
that adverts to the five ‘sense doors’ and the citta that adverts to the ‘mind door’. Thus there are altogether fifty-four types of sensuous-sphere consciousness.

Each of the next two broad categories of form and formless-sphere citta embraces skilful, resultant and kiriyā types of consciousness. The category of skilful form-sphere consciousness includes five types of citta, distinguished according to the number of jhāna factors with which they are associated. The skilful formless-sphere consciousness is divided into four types, distinguished according to their association with the four formless attainments. The form and formless-spheres resultant and kiriyā types of consciousness correspond with their respective types of skilful citta (kiriyā occurring only for arahants). Finally the transcendent consciousness consists of eight types of citta: four skilful are experienced at the time of attaining the four paths, and four resultant when attaining the respective four fruits.

The schema of eighty-nine categories of citta was organized by the commentarial tradition, but, like the developed dhamma categorization in general, is gleaned from the Dhammasaṅgañi. Hence the principles underlying the practice of categorizing the dhammas, and consciousness specifically, are already found in the early Abhidhamma, if only implicitly. The Cittuppādakaṇḍa of the Dhammasaṅgañi analyses the varieties of citta and is structured according to the first triplet of the abhidhamma-mātikā. The first part inspects the skilful states of consciousness, the second one the unskilful states and the third one the undeclared states. On the whole, the variables operating within these three broad categories are later adopted by the commentarial tradition.

The Dhammasaṅgañi does not enumerate all existing dhammas, but rather analyses those mental occurrences that appear in one’s mind conditioned by one’s progression along the path to awakening. Each such occurrence represents an interlocking complex of phenomena made up of the appropriate type of citta, a number of necessary cetasikas and various kinds of material phenomena. All these components must therefore be identified and distinguished. The Cittuppādakaṇḍa investigates the nature of the appropriate types of consciousness and their accompanying mental factors, whereas the second division, the Rūpakaṇḍa, scrutinizes those material phenomena that are a species of dhamma, namely, rūpino dhammas. Divisions I and II elaborate on the nature of the dhammas that are skilful and produce good kamma, those that are unskilful and produce bad kamma, and those that are undeclared and produce no kamma. This constitutes the first triplet of questions in division III, the Nikkhepakāṇḍa, which further categorizes the dhammas by systematically exploiting the mātikā’s numerous variables. Consider, for instance, a few of the questions asked in the first chapter: ‘What are the dhammas that are impure and defiling?’ In addition to the three roots, the answer also includes ‘the defilements that are associated with them, the four mental khandhas when these are associated with them, and whatever bodily, speech or mental act originate from them.’ Other questions are: ‘What are the dhammas that are to be abandoned by mental cultivation (bhāvanā)? And by insight?’; ‘What are the dhammas the causes of which are to be abandoned by mental cultivation?’; ‘What
are the dhammas that are inferior, mediocre or excellent?; ‘What are the dhammas that are bound up with what is wrong?’ The lengthy list of questions multiplies the number of possible dhama types almost indefinitely. These, albeit they all fall into one of the broad categories of skilful, unskilful or undeclared, differ from one another in their quality and intensity – an issue we shall immediately address. What the Nikkhepakanda summarizes, then, is, the entire treatise as an inquiry into the distinctions between instances of citta based on the differences in their relative strength or intensity. More than ‘an inquiry (not necessarily exhaustive) into the concrete, or, as one might say, the applied ethics of Buddhism’, to quote C.A.F. Rhys Davids, this book is, first and foremost, soteriological: it reveals the ways in which consciousness operates and fuels its continuation into the future, and hence it is but an elucidation of the noble truths of the origin and cessation of dukkha.

Rather than an inventory of the dhammas that exist ‘out there’, the Dhammaπi is, at bottom, an investigation into the constituents and workings of the mind. The Dhammaπi’s dhamma typology yields a manual, as it were, of whatever objects of thought that may possibly present themselves in consciousness only on those occasions that are significant within the context of the Buddhist path to awakening and for the practice of mental cultivation. The dhamma analysis is therefore by no means a closed, exhaustive theory. The text does not intend to offer a final list of the actual existing dhammas in their totality, but account for the true nature of those basic kinds of dhamma that make up ordinary consciousness as opposed to the awakened mind of Buddhas and arahants.

As observed in Chapter 3, it was the task of the commentary to furnish the dhamma analysis with those dhammas that the Dhammaπi had merely mentioned as ‘others’. Yet even in the Athasalinī the purpose is to fix all possible types of dhammic occurrences and not all possible dhamma tokens. It would be impossible to give a final number of the actual dhammas themselves, for the same dhamma type can vary considerably, even infinitely, so much so that it may subsume countless, phenomenologically distinct instances. The Abhidhamma texts show that the dhamma categorizations are merely presented as basic schemes for practical purposes of exposition. In fact, even the developed division into eighty-nine classes of citta is not regarded as ultimate: the post-canonical literature acknowledges an alternative schema of 121 types of citta, which results from a division of the transcendent citta into forty sub-types. The point is that the dhamma categorizations are not meant to be final or absolute: the tradition, from as early as the Dhammaπi onwards, deliberately supports the proliferation of categorization schemes and the multiplication of the dhamma types generated by them. In the Abhidhammavatāra, for instance, Buddhadatta proclaims that once additional variables pertaining to the sensuous sphere beyond the customary ones are taken into account, then the eight types of actively skilful citta can be divided into 17,280 distinct categories. It thus follows that the corresponding eight types of resultant citta can similarly be divided into a very large number of types.

This method is not mere scholastic proliferation: in view of the Abhidhamma pragmatic interest in mental cultivation, it emerges that the inflation of types of
citta and the apparent openness of the dhamma lists are intentional and aim at the postulates of impermanence and of no-self. The dhamma lists are not to be read as a catalogue instructing us about the ultimate entities we would come across as inhabitants of our world. In fact, the full recitation pattern (or ‘portion of recitation’, bhāna-vāra) is given only for the first type of citta presented and it is unclear just how many citta types there are, let alone how many actual dhamma tokens there are, for obviously there are more than the eighty-nine major citta types and infinitely many different dhammas. The dhamma lists should rather be meditated upon and hence revealed to act out the idea that there are no ultimate, irreducible entities, because all experienced phenomena – their constitutive dhammas inclusive – are always reducible to other phenomena upon which they depend for their occurrence and are always amenable to further division. As noted by Gethin, this is a reminder of the richness and subtlety of experience, as well as a challenge to perceive and investigate that richness and subtlety for oneself.47 By creating ever more complex divisions of citta and dhamma the Abhidhamma texts intend to avoid too fixed a view of things. The Buddha’s teaching suggests that the fundamental problem of human existence results from emotionally and intellectually grasping at and fixing the world of experience. In order to put an end to this problem we have to undermine and break up the apparently solid and static world that we make up for ourselves, thus seeing it as it really is: inherently impermanent and insubstantial. This, Gethin claims, is what the Abhidhamma lists, which are born out of vibhaṅga, ‘analysis’ or ‘breaking up’, are meant for:

Sometimes the texts suggest the world is to be analyzed and seen in terms of the five aggregates, or the twelve sense-spheres, or the eighteen elements; sometimes in terms of wholesome, unwholesome and indeterminate dhammas [. . .] In offering these different methods the texts seem to want to remind one that when the world is broken up into parts, these parts are not to be mistaken for inert lumps; they are moving parts and what is more they are parts that continuously change their shape and colour depending on the perspective from which they are being viewed. [. . .] Try to grasp the world of the Dhammasaṅgani, or the Paṭṭhāna, and it runs through one’s fingers. In short, the indefinite expansions based on the mātikās continually remind those using them that it is of the nature of things that no single way of breaking up and analyzing the world can ever be final.48

The early Abhidhamma dhamma categorization has, however, another pressing significance that points to the very heart of the intension of individuation, namely, the question of what a dhamma is. The dhamma analysis prescribed in the Dhammasaṅgani is more than a mere catalogue of what dhammas there are according to their kinds. The attempt is not to reveal the absolute number of dhammas in their totality, but to know fully what goes on in the mind when one tries to train it. If the person is but the sum total of processes that makes her up, and if the consciousness process is seen as a temporal series of distinct consciousness
moments, ‘then when an ordinary being (puθujiθana) is experiencing wholesome consciousness, what at that moment distinguishes him or her from an arahant?’49 This concern emanates directly from the concerns of the Nikāyas, but differently from the Sutta worldview the Abhidhamma shifts the emphasis from asking ‘How does the mind work throughout the transition from ordinary consciousness to the awakened mind?’ to ‘What is the nature of one’s mind at every moment of that transition?’ If the latter question is to be answered adequately, a condition that needs to be satisfied is that the operating dhammas that make up one’s mind must be identifiable and distinguishable: what mental forces, what kammic qualities make up this process, and exactly how do they differ from one another?50 To answer these questions the first step would be to account for the intension of individuality, namely, for what it means to emerge as a distinct dhama that presents itself in one’s consciousness. This question is predominant in the early, canonical Abhidhamma.

We have seen that the Western approach to the question of the intension of individuation has been to absorb the concept of individuality completely within the all-embracing bosom of a substance, substituting ‘individual substance’ for ‘individual’. The early Abhidhamma, by contrast, answers this question in terms of the Buddhist process-oriented approach to sentient experience. Shifting from process to event-oriented metaphysics, as well as from an empirically oriented postulate of impermanence (anicca) to a schematization of experience-in-time construed in terms of moments (khaṇīka-vāda), the Abhidhamma focuses on the large-scale process of the path to awakening and, zooming in, identifies its constitutive events. It divides the entire process into the processes operating within it, categorizes these sub-processes according to their different types and analyses each of these into the fleeting events that originate on that occasion. The Cittuppādaṇḍa of the Dhammasaṅgāti well represents this practice.

The Cittuppādaṇḍa distinguishes the dhammic events constituting different varieties of consciousness. Each type of citta is analysed by way of what the commentary calls three ‘great sections’ (mahā-vāra): the section that determines what dhammas contribute to the citta under discussion (dhamma-vavatthāna), the section on groups (saṅgaha) or items (koṭṭhāsa), and the section on emptiness (suññatā).51 A comprehensive elaboration of all the three sections is given only in the case of the first type of skilful sense-sphere citta. The first section simply lists fifty-six dhammass that occur at a single instance of this type of consciousness: contact, feeling, apperception, volition, consciousness, applied thought, sustained thought, joy, pleasure, one-pointedness of mind and numerous other dhammas, ending with awareness, attention, calm, insight, exertion and balance.52 Then there follows a ‘word-analysis’ (pada-bhājanīya): of each of the fifty-six dhammas it is asked what it is on that occasion and each is defined in its turn. At times the definition also refers to the appropriate conditions for the dhama’s emergence on that specific occasion. For instance, to the question ‘What on that occasion is feeling?’ the reply is:

The pleasing mentality, the pleasurable mentality that, on that occasion, is born of contact with the appropriate mind-consciousness element; the
pleasantness, the pleasure that is experienced and has arisen from contact with thought; the pleasant, pleasurable sensation arisen from contact with thought – this, on that occasion, is feeling.\textsuperscript{53}

In this way all the fifty-six \textit{dhammas} that make up the first type of sensuous-sphere \textit{citta} are defined.

The second section classifies the fifty-six \textit{dhammas} according to the following items: the \textit{khandhas}, the spheres, the elements, the nutriments, the faculties, the \textit{jhāna} factors and the path factors. Those \textit{dhammas} that do not fall into any of the above items are reckoned as single factors.\textsuperscript{54} Then it is asked of each of these items what it is on that occasion and each is again analysed into its constitutive \textit{dhamma} assemblages. Some definitions are interchangeable with those given in the first section, but in others the \textit{dhammas} are newly expounded. To get a sense of the intricacy of these concentric levels of analysis consider, for instance, the treatment of the \textit{khandha} of mental formations (\textit{saṃkhāra}) on that occasion: this is broken down into fifty \textit{dhammas}, some of which are not mentioned in the first section, such as the fear of sin (\textit{ottappa}), serenity of body and mind (\textit{kāya-, cittapassaddhi}), their wieldiness (\textit{kāya-, cittakammaññatā}) or their fitness (\textit{kāya-, cittapāguññatā}).\textsuperscript{55} This analysis is then repeated in the section on emptiness, wherein similar questions are put forward regarding each of the previous sets. Here the emphasis is laid on the idea that the type of \textit{citta} in question is a combination of these phenomenal sets and nothing more; that there is no enduring entity underlying the \textit{dhamma} assemblages.\textsuperscript{56} Gethin indicates that the various groups or sets brought out in the \textit{kotṭhāsa-} and \textit{suññatā-vāras} are directly related to the correspondences between some of the fifty-six \textit{dhammas} given by the preceding section of word analysis. For instance, the word analysis of \textit{vitakka} presents it both as a \textit{jhāna} factor (\textit{vitakka}) and a path factor (\textit{samma-saṃkappa}); one-pointedness of mind (\textit{cittass’ ekaggatā}) is seen as at once a \textit{jhāna} factor (\textit{cittass’ ekaggatā}), a faculty (\textit{samādhindriya}), a power (\textit{samādhi-bala}) and a path factor (\textit{samma-samādhi}). The sections on sets and on emptiness reiterate this multiplicity of aspect that the fifty-six \textit{dhammas} possess.\textsuperscript{57} A consideration of the \textit{Cittuppādakaṇḍa} treatment of the remaining seven types of skilful sensuous-sphere \textit{citta}, as well as of the skilful form-sphere, formless-sphere and transcendent types of \textit{citta}, reveals that the above multi-level analysis repeats in each case, yielding a copious categorization of the varieties of \textit{citta} arising throughout the progression along the five \textit{jhānas} of the form sphere, the four formless attainments, and the eight paths and fruits of the transcendent consciousness. The same principles of analysis are applied to the remaining basic categories of \textit{citta}: the unskilful, the resultant and the \textit{kiriyā}. In what sense, then, does the early Abhidhamma \textit{dhamma} analysis confront the question of the intension of individuality?

The pivotal point is that this analysis illustrates that any actual occurrence of consciousness consisting of an assemblage of \textit{citta} and \textit{cetasika} is unique. The \textit{Dhammasaṅgaṇī}’s repetitious question ‘What is such-and-such a \textit{dhamma} on that occasion?’ is directed to the intension of the \textit{dhammas}’ individuality, that is, what a particular, individual \textit{dhamma} is. The text shows that any moment of
consciousness may be similar in many respects to some other occurrence within that series of consciousness moments, but it is not identical with any other; it is the specific result of a singular complex of conditions that can never be exactly replicated. Although all possible dhammas fall into a finite number of event-types, within each such category there may be infinitely many different dhammas, for even the same dhamma can vary considerably.58

There are various examples of this principle. For instance, the dhamma of one-pointedness of mind contributes to several different types of consciousness, but on each occasion it is distinguishable from every other instance. This is how the Dhammasaṅgani defines this dhamma when it is involved in the skilful sensuous-sphere consciousness:

The endurance, stability, steadfastness of mind that, on that occasion, is the absence of distraction, balance, unperturbed purposefulness, calm, the faculty and the power of concentration, right concentration – this, on that occasion, is one-pointedness of mind.59

In its treatment of the section of skilful consciousness the Atthasālinī accordingly glosses citta’s ekaggatā as a synonym for concentration (samādhi).60 One-pointedness of mind, though, is also involved in the constitution of the unskilful types of citta. Just as concentration facilitates moral action, so it is essential to effective immoral action. If the mind is not distracted, the commentator remarks, the murderer’s knife does not miss and the theft does not miscarry.61 The Dhammasaṅgani renders one-pointedness of mind involved in the first type of unskilful citta (rooted in greed, accompanied by happiness, associated with views and uninstigated) exactly as in the abovementioned case of skilful consciousness, substituting ‘wrong concentration’ for ‘right concentration’.62 Nevertheless, the definition of this same dhamma when contributing to the eleventh type of unskilful citta (rooted in delusion, accompanied by equanimity and associated with doubt) is quite different: it includes ‘the persistence of mind occuring on that occasion’, but omits the remaining synonyms and qualifiers formerly given, ‘concentration’ inclusive.63 Buddhaghosa explains in what sense one-pointedness of mind now differs from its previously mentioned instances. He indicates that it is not always appropriate to call this dhamma ‘faculty of concentration’ (samādhindriya), for it is sometimes too weak to warrant that name:

In the exposition of one-pointedness of mind, because this [dhamma] is weak, and because only the degree of endurance [necessary] for the occurrence of citta is found here, therefore one term alone, ‘endurance of mind’, is stated, without the terms ‘stability’, etc. For that reason, in the outline [of this eleventh citta], too, ‘the faculty of concentration’, etc., are not mentioned.64

To broach another example of the variability of one and the same dhamma, the root of non-hatred (adosa) is equated with loving kindness (mettā) only in some
of the \textit{citta} types in which it partakes. Non-hatred is necessarily included in all the five \textit{jhānas}, but loving kindness involves happiness, and hence it cannot be present in the fifth \textit{jhāna}.\textsuperscript{65} Similarly, the complete balance of mind (\textit{tatra-majjhhattatā}) is reckoned as neutral feeling or equanimity (\textit{upekkhā}) only in the fourth \textit{jhāna}, although it also occurs in the first three \textit{jhānas}.\textsuperscript{66} These and other examples are discussed by Gethin, but one example is particularly worth mentioning here in greater detail: the groupings of the faculties and the powers (\textit{indriya; balā}).\textsuperscript{67}

The distinction between the otherwise identical lists of faculties and powers (\textit{saddhā, vīriya, sati, samādhi and paññā}) is made with reference to their relative strength or intensity: the powers are explained as essentially the faculties made strong.\textsuperscript{68} Elsewhere the faculties are understood in the sense of predominance (\textit{adhipati}), the powers in the sense of being unwavering or unshakeable (\textit{akampiyatta}).\textsuperscript{69} Now this distinction – just like the entire \textit{dhamma} categorization – makes sense only if the strength of the \textit{dhammas} varies. It is only with regard to consciousness that has a certain strength or intensity that one can draw the distinctions the \textit{Dhammasaṅgani} makes. Underlying the treatise’s method is the fundamental notion of what the \textit{dhammas} really are: not static contents of the mind and certainly not substantial elements, but basic forces that collectively arise and present themselves in consciousness for a short while before they fall away to be followed by some other such assemblage of forces. \textit{Dhammas} are the diverse capacities or capabilities of mental events, and hence in order to define what an individual \textit{dhamma} is one must determine what it does.\textsuperscript{70} The distinction between different instances of the same \textit{dhamma} is made on the grounds of some difference in the quality and intensity of the \textit{dhamma}’s operation (\textit{pavatti}). Actively skilful and unskilful \textit{dhammas} produce future \textit{kamma} and are also distinguishable by the intensity of their \textit{kammic} outcome, but even \textit{dhammas} that do not produce \textit{kamma}, such as those that constitute \textit{kiriyā citta}, still operate and are distinguishable in virtue of their relative strength of operation.

In parallel with this principle, the fourth chapter of the \textit{Cittuppādakāṇḍa} analyses the skilful types of \textit{citta} pertaining to the first three spheres in terms of their degrees of efficacy. Each \textit{citta} is marked off according to whether it is of low, medium or excellent efficacy and whether its dominant influence – one of the four bases of meditational success or power (\textit{iddhi-pāda}), that is, the desire to act (\textit{chanda}), vigour (\textit{vīriya}), thought (\textit{citta}) or investigation (\textit{vīmaṃsā}) – are of low, medium or excellent strength.\textsuperscript{71} The commentary clarifies that this threefold gradation refers to the \textit{citta}’s relative efficacy or intensity of \textit{kamma}.\textsuperscript{72} Since the analysis of skilful \textit{citta} is a paradigm for the categorization of consciousness in general, one may assume that the same rationale is also applicable to the other broad categories of consciousness, excepting \textit{kiriyā citta}. This shows that the Theravādins regard every instance of \textit{dhamma} as distinguishable from every other instance, even in cases where they seem to be essentially identical. If we compare an instance of one-pointedness of mind in the eleventh unskilful \textit{citta} with its other instances in the skilful resultant sensuous-sphere \textit{citta}, then there is no
difference in this dhamma. Still each of these instances is phenomenologically distinguishable from the others owing to subtle kamma-based variations in the dhamma’s operation within its own series and outside of it. A certain dhamma instance of a given citta type may fulfil its capability differently from some other dhamma instance of the same type, so that these two dhamma tokens would behave as two singular, phenomenologically distinguishable events.

To summarize, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī not only delineates which dhhammas qualify for inclusion in the categorization of primitive event types, but also shows that each dhhammic instantiation or exemplification of those event types is a unique individual and provides a method of distinguishing any such individual dhamma as that particular instance. Any given consciousness moment is understood as falling into a certain broad category of citta, the number of categories depending on how many variables are taken into account. These variables engender differences in the quality, degree and intensity of the dhhammas’ operation, by virtue of which any given dhamma is not only numerically distinguishable from any other, but also individually distinguishable (note that individuation should not be conflated with numerical difference). These manifold distinctions ‘must be understood as in some sense inherent to the very nature of any actual instance of a dhamma, and they, in addition to spatio-temporal location, distinguish that particular instance from other instances’.

The Dhammasaṅgaṇī testifies to the early Abhidhamma emphasis on the logico-epistemological question of the intension of individuation. The text repetitiously asks: ‘What is such-and-such a dhamma on such-and-such an occasion?’ in an attempt to provide a method of defining a dhamma’s individuality; of stating what it means to occur as this particular event subject to a given set of conditions. As Piatigorsky remarks, ‘What was thought of or meditated upon was far more important than how something was thought of or meditated upon. The object of thinking prevailed over modes of thinking.’ And it is this dependence of ‘how’ on ‘what’ that led to the idea that different events taking place within one and the same ‘field of thinking’ might have been presented to the thought of the investigator as discrete occurrences or series of occurrences. Viewed in this light, each of the three broad citta categories (skilful etc.) embraces several basic types of citta – categories themselves. These second-order categories, such as ‘the first type of skilful sensuous-sphere citta’, are designating names that refer to certain patterns or modes of occurrence by which psycho-physical events present themselves in one’s mind. The events instantiated in each type of citta are third-order categories themselves, each of which designates a distinct type of event embracing innumerable phenomenologically distinguishable individual instances. For example, ‘one-pointedness of mind’ is a categorial name referring to an event of a certain kind that is instantiated in infinitely many unique instances individuated on account of some difference in their operation and efficacy.

Indeed the Dhammasaṅgaṇī’s dhamma categorization enables one to distinguish any given dhamma as instantiating one of the dhamma types: it does so by assigning that dhamma a categorial name that reflects what essentially it is based
on the fact that it shares the same defining characteristic that is common to all instantiations of its kind. In this respect the *dhamma* analysis works similarly to other systems of categorization.\(^\text{77}\) This analysis, however, is not merely a theory of types, but would be better rendered as a theory of individuals, for the concept of *dhamma* is closely related to the conceptually cognate notion of *sabāva qua* an individuator of a particular *dhamma* token. Although all possible *dhammas* fall into a finite number of categories or event types, within each such category there are countless different *dhamma* tokens, for – given the notion of *dhammas* as objects of thought and as the diverse capabilities of mental events – even the same *dhamma* can vary infinitely, because as an object of thought it would be seen as different when involved in different instances of ‘rise of thought’. Piatigorsky explicates this point as follows:

One ought to be aware of a clear methodological difference between our own and Buddhist approaches to the idea of ‘a different object’. For, given all varieties and variations, we would call an object ‘different’ because of its *objective* difference (or differences) from other objects. While from the Buddhist point of view, it would be seen as different, in principle at least, when present in another situation of thought, and/or another state of consciousness (i.e. dharma). That is, we may say, that to an Abhidharmist, any object of another thought (or even another moment of thought) would be another object, for this mere reason.\(^\text{78}\)

Before we appraise the exact relation between categorization and individuation, let us review the treatment of the intension of individuation in the *Vibhaṅga*.

### 4.2.2.2 The Vibhaṅga

When the *Dhammassaṅgaṇī* and the *Vibhaṅga* are considered together it emerges that the two works are mutually dependent. The *Vibhaṅga*’s scope is shaped by a perspective different from the *Dhammassaṅgaṇī*’s and includes only several of the topics that are outlined by the *abhidhamma-mātikā*, but it retains the same principles of *dhamma* analysis. The *Vibhaṅga* contains eighteen chapters, each of which examines a different topic, in most cases by means of three modes of analysis arranged in three distinct sections: Suttanta Analysis (*bhājantya*), Abhidhamma Analysis and Interrogation (*pañhāpucchaka*) – a section that shows in detail how each of the terms used ought to be defined within the framework of the *Dhammassaṅgaṇī*’s triplets and couplets. The list of the eighteen analyses is regarded as a separate mātikā and is based on an early Saṃyutta method of compiling *sutta* material according to the following lists: (i) the five aggregates; (ii) the six sense faculties; (iii) the twelve links of the dependent co-origination formula; (iv) the four applications of awareness; (v) the four right endeavours; (vi) the four bases of success; (vii) the five faculties; (viii) the five powers; (ix) the seven factors of awakening; (x) the noble eightfold path. This meta-list is
the kernel of such canonical Abhidhamma works as the Vibhaṅga and the Dhātukathā and is termed by modern scholarship ‘the core mātikā’.79

An examination of the Vibhaṅga’s core mātikā reveals that the text inquires into the processes that make up an ordinary mind vis-à-vis an awakened mind: vibhaṅgas 1–6 deal with the processes that bind one to samsāra, while vibhaṅgas 7–16 analyse the skilful processes that liberate one, with the last two vibhaṅgas revisiting miscellaneous topics that have implicitly arisen in the preceding sections. Much of the Vibhaṅga’s material assumes the Dhammasaṅgaṇi’s method: the Interrogation sections employ the triplet-couplet mātikā in their dhamma analysis and the Abhidhamma Analysis sections closely follow the Dhammasaṅgaṇi’s structure, asking of each phenomenon or process what it is then dissecting it into its operating dhammas. Each such analysis yields a definition of the process in question, specifying what mental forces and qualities constitute it, the nature of these mental forces and qualities, and the conditions for their emergence.80 Moreover, the Abhidhamma Analysis sections draw on the Dhammasaṅgaṇi’s citta categorization. This is evidenced in the sixth vibhaṅga, which opens with a mātikā indicating 144 variations of the dependent co-origination formula, built up systematically around sixteen basic variations, each of which is further subject to nine variations.81 The subsequent exposition then applies each variation in turn to the various citta types as given in the Cittupādakāṇḍa.82

The Dhammasaṅgaṇi equally assumes the Vibhaṅga core mātikā, especially in the sections on sets and emptiness, which derive their dhamma groupings from the core mātikā.83 Gethin has observed that the Dhammasaṅgaṇi treats the core mātikā in terms of the abhidhamma-mātikā, whereas the Vibhaṅga treats the abhidhamma-mātikā in terms of the core mātikā. The Abhidhamma method is thus informed by the interaction of the two lists.84 This textual exchange, though, also reflects the early Abhidhamma preoccupation with the intension of the dhammas’ individuality. The following representative case, whose principles feature throughout the Vibhaṅga’s Abhidhamma Analysis sections, buttresses this claim.

The Abhidhamma analysis of the aggregate of consciousness (viññāṇa) presents it in its various aspects according to numerical arrangement. The aggregate of consciousness is said to be singlefold as associated with sense contact; twofold as accompanied or not accompanied by a root; threefold as skilful, unskilful and neither-skilful-nor-unskilful; fourfold as belonging to the four spheres; fivefold as associated with the five controlling feeling faculties; sixfold as the six modalities of cognitive awareness; sevenfold as the first five modalities of cognitive awareness plus the element of mental cognitive awareness (mind-consciousness-element) and the mind-element; eightfold when adding to the above tactile cognitive awareness accompanied by pleasure and pain; ninefold when instead adding the element of mental cognitive awareness that is skilful, unskilful and neither-skilful-nor-unskilful; and tenfold when combining the last two divisions.85 Then there follows a lengthy series of intricate variations on the above numerical divisions, the majority of which are based on the triplet-couplet
abhidharmma-mātikā. For instance, when analysed with reference to the couplets, the aggregate of consciousness turns out to be twofold in many respects: as associated with or dissociated from a root; as that which is not a root but is accompanied by a root; as that which is neither a root nor accompanied by a root; as ordinary and transcendent; as the object of the attaching dispositions (āsava) or that which is not their object; as associated with or dissociated from the defilements; as that which is dissociated from the defilements but is their object, and so on and so forth. These elaborations become even more complex once additional variables are taken into account. The aggregate of consciousness is found to be twentyfold, then thirtyfold, and eventually simply ‘manifold’, wherein it is not clear how many distinguishable varieties it possesses.

Not only does the Vibhaṅga employ the same principles as the Dhammasaṅgani dhamma analysis, but it also hovers over the question we have previously identified as intrinsic to the Dhammasaṅgani. The Vibhaṅga, too, seeks to account for the ordinary mind as opposed to the arahant’s awakened mind. It therefore sets up a manual of the events occurring in one’s consciousness when one follows the path to awakening: from ordinary, unawakened mind to a critical point where ‘waking up’ is understood to be near, so that it is only a matter of time until the occurrence of final, perfect awakening. The Vibhaṅga’s dhamma lists are, again, expository categorizations of mental and physical events. They illustrate that an essentially the same dhamma is, in fact, a category of event of a certain kind, marked by the diversity of its innumerable instances. Like the Dhammasaṅgani, the Vibhaṅga focuses on the intension of a dhamma’s individuality. It is structured around the question ‘What is such-and-such a dhamma?’ and prescribes a method of explicating what it means to originate as this particular event rather than any other, either of the same type or of other types.

In summary, the early Abhidhamma account of the intension of the dhammas’ individuality is a categorial theory that enables its users to distinguish and define any given dhamma taken to be significant for mental cultivation. So far I have stressed that this concern is logico-epistemological and follows directly from the Nikāyas. Yet the Abhidhammikas invest it with a metaphysical vision that paves the way for conceptual realism and leads to a significant move away from the Sutta worldview. Conceptual realism presupposes that we are, by and large, capable of understanding the world, and that the notion of truth consists in a correspondence between our concepts and statements, on the one hand, and the features of a determinate reality, on the other hand. The Abhidhamma’s undertaking of the dhammas’ individuation is not concerned with the ontological status of any external reality, although it does have implications for the reality of those dhammas, since it assumes that every dhamma is necessarily an individual of a kind and is not further resolvable into any other kind of thing; that the dhammas are the ultimate limits of the analysis of experience. The Abhidhamma categorial theory distinguishes the different ways in which we can call up the dhammas as subsistent individuals for discussion. Moreover, it assumes that every dhammic event occurring in one’s consciousness is knowable and nameable. This conceptual
realism with regard to individual dhammas implies realism with regard to their kinds – dhammas are the only kinds of thing there are and each kind is signified by a categorial designation, a concept of a distinct sort or kind of individuals. In adopting this position the early Abhidhamma is likely to have been influenced by the contemporary Brahmanical schools, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika specifically. This requires us to survey the philosophical significance of categories, their exact relation to the problem of individuation and their construal in the contemporary Indian philosophical milieu. To these issues we now turn.

4.3 THE CANONICAL DHAMMA ANALYSIS AS A CATEGORIAL THEORY OF INDIVIDUALS

4.3.1 On categories and categorizations

If something is to be a distinguishable individual then its proper nature must be determined. To establish the nature of a particular individual one must, first, ascertain that things of its kind, and only they, compose a unique category, and second, distinguish within that category the individual from other members of its kind. What is required, then, is a categorial theory of the particulars constituting the domain in question, be it the empirical world or one’s consciousness. But how does a categorization differ from classification and why is it an appropriate means for individuation?

Aristotle was the first to have used the term ‘category’ in the sense of an ultimate genus’s name (e.g. ‘quantity’), or of what that name signifies, that is, the ultimate kinds of being. To elucidate the meaning of Aristotle’s categories it has become customary to turn to an early treatise within the Organon, which, by its very title, Categories, seems to unfold this matter. The treatise opens by presenting a list of ten categories: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state (possessing or having), activity and passivity. Although Aristotle’s doctrine of categories is ubiquitous in his writings, nowhere does he attempt to justify these ten categories – a vacuum that has led generations of scholars into offering logical, grammatical and metaphysical interpretations of their nature.

It is generally accepted that Aristotle’s doctrine of the categories concerns the question ‘What is being?’, that it aims at providing a systematic account of the fundamental kinds or modes of being, and that it sorts out every existent into one such irreducible kind. Commentators tend to identify the categories with the types enumerated, but the categories may also be the truth conditions for basic assertions (ways of being true about something), or else classes of categorial expressions signifying the various items grouped under such headings as ‘substance’, ‘quality’ or ‘quantity’. It is also possible that the categories are not classes at all, either of entities or of expressions, but predicates that apply to either of them. The latter suggestion is supported by the fact that the doctrine of the
categories is supplemented with a semantic theory. This has to be so, because being is thinkable only when it manifests itself in language. The sole possible definition of being that Aristotle offers in the *Metaphysics* is, accordingly, the observation that ‘being can be said in many ways’ and ‘in many senses’.

The *Categories* prescribes the different ways of calling up subsistent beings for discussion by assigning them predicates; the basic ways of saying something about any given object according to its diverse modes of *being expressed* by a categorical designation. A thing’s different categorial names bring it up in capacities that may each be distinguished in one and the same subsistent thing. We may refer to an object, for instance, by saying that it is a substance (e.g. a tree), a quality of something (green), a quantity of something (the size of two feet), etc. Still any reference thus made is always to a substance, and hence categorization brings together language and ontology.

In the *Categories* Aristotle presents a fourfold semantic diagram of ‘the things named’: individual substances (e.g. ‘this man’), individual non-substances (properties and quantities, for example, Socrates’s being pale), general substances (species and genera, the kinds into which subjects fall) and general properties (e.g. the generic name ‘knowledge’). Aristotle, though, withholds ontological status from non-substantial universals and at the *Metaphysics* VII even claims that genera and species, namely, substantial universals, do not exist apart from individuals. Hence the *Categories*’ underlying semantics can be accommodated by a world of individuals only, for the above division of things is reducible to two types of existents: individual substances and individual non-substances. To be an item in a category is, in the first instance, to be an individual: a non-recurrent particular, whether substantial or non-substantial. Moreover, since the investigation into substance is centred on the population of primary substances, the world of the *Categories* is essentially a world of concrete, sensible particulars.

Now it is impossible to pin down an individual by progressively specifying its properties, for properties are, by definition, general: they can apply to an indefinitely large number of individual instances. To ascribe a property to a thing is to classify it by its comparison with other similar things. A class subsumes members that are characterized by some similarity in respect of which they fall under that same class (e.g. ‘table’, ‘sparrow’), and it is therefore unnecessary to observe each individual in a class. The characteristics that distinguish a thing from a larger group of things and make it part of a smaller such group construct its specific nature. But the specific nature is not an individuator: it is always a contingent fact that the complete set of a thing’s properties will be sufficient to individuate it. We have no conclusive assurance that any group of properties has one, and only one, instance, let alone that every set of all the properties of some individual has that individual as its unique instance. Classification is thus incompatible with a statement of uniqueness. Rather, the class concept is adequate to account for plurality and diversity; it amounts to a unification in terms of some common nature, to an ordering of things that fall into it in their totality. The totality formulas of the *khandha*, *āyatana* and *dhamu* are, for this reason, classifications: they sort out all
the dhammas in their totality into three groups, each of which is characterized by the tisaṅkhatalakkhaṇa. If one’s purpose, however, is to account for a thing’s individuality, then one would have to provide a categorial theory of that type of thing, not totality formulas and classifications. This is why the Abhidhammikas needed the dhamma categorizations and, later on, the developed fourfold dhamma typology. Motivated not only by a concern with the totality of what there is, but also by an interest in the individuality of each and every dhammic instance in one’s consciousness, they had to account for what an individual dhamma is, and for this purpose the extant totality formulas were found to be wanting.

By contrast to the class concept, the category concept allows one to explain singularity. Whereas the members of a class are marked by a specific nature they all have in common, a category embraces diverse items that display the same pattern of affirmation, or the same mode of being, though each is distinguishable on account of its own particular nature. One prevailing approach to offering a categorial theory of individuals in Western scholastic philosophy is called ‘the blueprint approach’. On this approach, the categorization of an individual substance within the complex makeup of things is reached by providing a blueprint for bringing that individual, or an individual of its kind, into being. Just as a recipe in a cookery book lists ingredients and their modes of combination, so the blueprint for an individual substance would account for the constituents of that item and the modes of unification whereby those constituents encompass a distinct kind, a category.

Our exploration of the Dhammasaṅgaṇi and the Vibhaṅga reveals that when confronted with the question of the dhammas’ individuality the early Abhidhamma, too, developed a categorial theory. This theory lends itself to interpretation in accordance with the blueprint approach to individuation, though with one significant exception: it is rooted in a process-based, event metaphysics and is subject to the Abhidhamma soteriological constraints. It does not provide a blueprint for bringing into being enduring individual substances, but rather for the occurrence of evanescent individual events in one’s consciousness. The dhamma categories are therefore names designating ‘modes of rise’, or ‘modes of occurrence’ that may proceed at different levels of generality: they may account for each dhamma type that originates (e.g. what the origination of one-pointedness of mind means), or else for particular individuals (e.g. what it is for a particular instance of one-pointedness of mind to partake in the first type of skilful sensuous-sphere citta). The Dhammasaṅgaṇi and the Vibhaṅga prescribe a method of distinguishing any given dhamma according to its modes of being expressed by a categorial designation. Here, too, the same dhamma may be brought up by different categorial names, and these indicate diverse capacities – unique kammic qualities and intensities – that distinguish any instance of that dhamma from any other instance of the same kind.

The Abhidhamma notions of the dhammas’ categorization and individuation were developed in an Indian philosophical milieu: they were probably moulded by intellectual exchange with the Sarvāstivādins and the Brahmanical schools, specifically the Grammarians and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. We shall now look in this direction.
4.3.2 Categories in Indian philosophy

4.3.2.1 The linguistic origins of categories

The Vaiśeṣika set up the most inclusive categorial system in classical Indian metaphysical discourse, but the idea of categorization and the term *padārtha*, the Sanskrit rendering for ‘category’, date as early as the ancient Grammarians’ (Vaivāyakaṇās) analyses of language into its various components. *Padārtha* literally denotes a referent, that which stands for the meaning of a word, but it also signifies a predicament, that is, the character or status assigned by a predication, and, within classical Nyāya framework, a basic issue or a topic of discourse; sixteen such topics are enumerated at the beginning of the *Nyāyasūtra*.105 In discussing the etymology of Vedic words, Yāska’s *Nirukta* (fifth century BCE?) presents a fourfold categorization of the parts of speech (*pada*) into nominal words (*nāma*), verbs (*ākhyāta*), prefixes (*upasarga*) and particles (*nipāta*).106 The term *padārtha* features in this early text on one occasion: the context is an analysis of prefixes, wherein the Grammarian Gārgya is quoted as saying that prefixes have various different referents (*padārthā*). It is then explained that the change in the meaning of the noun or the verb to which prefixes conjoin is the referent inhering in those prefixes and which they utter.107 Yāska, however, does not identify the ultimate meaningful constituents of Sanskrit – a task left to the later Grammarians, foremost of whom is Pāṇini.

*Sūtra* 1.2.45 in Pāṇini’s *Asṭadhyāyī* recognizes three meaningful linguistic entities: verbal roots (*dhātu*), nominal stems (*prātipadika*) and affixes (*pratyaya*). Taking ‘stem’ to refer to both verbal roots and nominal stems, this means that for Pāṇini only stems and affixes have meaning, while words and sentences have at best meanings that are derived from these constituents.108 In contradistinction to Pāṇini, Patañjali, in the first Āhnika of the *Mahābhāṣya* (second century BCE), embraces Yāska’s categorization of the parts of speech as prescribing the ultimate meaningful linguistic constituents, proclaiming that ‘Words are fourfold only. The four kinds of word are noun, verb, prefix and particle.’109 In the second Āhnika, though, Patañjali presents a different fourfold typology of words according to their referent: (i) words that refer to arbitrary proper nouns (*yadṛcchāsabda*); (ii) words that refer to an attribute or quality (*guṇasabda*); (iii) words that refer to an action or motion (*kriyāsabda*); and (iv) words that refer to a genus or generic property (*jātiśabda*).110 Whatever is meaningfully expressible falls into one of these four categories. Significant for our present interest is the fact that categorization of words from the point of view of their referents would necessarily have relevance not only to semantics but also to ontology. This connection between semantics and ontology as embodied in a categorial theory becomes apparent from the time of Patañjali onwards.111

To begin with the first category, Patañjali distinguishes two possible referents of proper nouns: generic form, or configuration (*ākṛti*), and individual substance (*dravya*). This distinction is found in his discussion of part of a *vārttika* in the first Āhnika, which reads *siddhe sabdārthasāṃbandhe*.112 Analysing this as *siddhe*
śabde ‘the sambandhe ca and rendering siddha as ‘eternal’ (nītya), Patañjali glosses the compound in the vārttika as stating that a word, its referent and the relation between the two are eternal. To be eternal, he continues, the referent would have to be a generic configuration, not an individual substance. The latter is perishable, but the ākṛti is common to many individuals, and hence even though it may be destroyed with one individual, it continues to exist in others. In tandem with this statement, however, Patañjali proclaims that dravya in the sense of substrate, or the stuff out of which a thing is made, can also be considered eternal: the shape of a lump of gold, for example, may be altered in various ways into a variety of jewels, but the gold itself remains the same. Hence he settles on neither ākṛti nor dravya as the exclusive meaning of a word. Patañjali considers ākṛti and jāti synonymous: preceding his commentary on the abovementioned vārttika is a passage in which he ascribes to Pāṇini the idea that a word’s referent may be both a generic form and an individual substance, and where he uses ākṛti and jāti interchangeably. The two terms, though, do not yet denote a universal in the sense of an abstract entity or a class-notion that makes up various particulars members of a single class, but rather the visible form by which the members of a class are recognized.

The term dravya has its own history of semantic intricacy. Narain remarks that in Pāṇini’s Asṭādhyāyī the term dravya, on one of its three occurrences (sūtra 5.4.11), denotes substance, but that the latter concept is also expressed by such terms as sattva, adhikaraṇa and bandhu. It is a different sūtra, though, that may clarify Pāṇini’s and the later Grammarians’ apprehension of dravya in the sense of substance. As Matilal observes, Helārāja, Bhartṛhari’s commentator (c. tenth century CE), claims that in order to understand the Grammarians’ notion of substance it is necessary to analyse Pāṇini’s rule prescribing ekaśesa (sūtra 1.2.64). Ekaśesa is a grammatical operator by which two or more words referring to two or more substances are reduced to one word in its dual or plural inflection as appropriate. In his Vārttika, Kātyāyana (third century BCE?) comments that Pāṇini’s prescribing this ekaśesa operation is motivated by the idea that each nominal word is a proper name or a singular term referring to one individual substance at a time. A substance, then, is that which is distinguishable by its nominal signifier.

Moving on to the Mahābhāṣya, here, referring to conceptual developments in the early, scarcely documented history of the philosophical systems and summarizing centuries of earlier debates in the history of Indian theories of language, Patañjali is aware of different senses of both dravya and ākṛti as well as of corresponding variations in the relationship between these two terms. On the one hand, he recognizes dravya as substance qua the substratum (adhikaranā) of attributes, that in which attributes inhere; it is the underlying stuff, the shapeless – albeit determinate – material of which things are made, while ākṛti here means the particular and transitory form such material may assume. On the other hand, he employs dravya as a substance in the sense of an individual: a particular, concrete entity that has its generic identity or class membership owing to a permanent generic form (ākṛti) intrinsic to it. For Patañjali’s linguistic and
semantic approach, this second sense of substance is more significant and he attempts to explain it in various ways. First, by attribute he primarily intends the sensory qualities (colour, sound, taste etc.), and defines substance as what is essentially different from these qualities. On another occasion he refers to substance as a bundle of attributes (gunaśamudāya); a conglomeration or assemblage of qualities. According to a third definition substance is the permanent, enduring core of things: while attributes emerge and disappear, substance is what remains unchangeable; it does not lose its essence (tattvan), that is, its being (bhāva), when different attributes come to be associated with it. Interestingly, this definition suggests that what Patañjali intends by substance as an individual is, in fact, svabhāva qua own-nature; that which is unique to a particular individual and accounts for its peculiarities (as opposed to jāti); what makes it distinguishable from any other individual, either of the same or of a different kind. I argue below that while the Vaiśeṣika doctrine of categories is coloured by the Vaiśeṣika apprehension of substance in the sense of a substratum, the Abhidhamma dhamma categorization places at the forefront the concepts of individual and of svabhāva, albeit these are subject to the Buddhist postulate of impermanence and to its anti-substance metaphysics.

As for the remaining two linguistic categories, Patañjali’s most comprehensive definition of guṇa or attribute is found in two verses that read thus: ‘Attribute is what abides in substance (sattva), perishes, is to be found in a variety of genera, is a predicate, is not produced by action, and is essentially different from substance.’ The category of kriyā, or action, is explicated with reference to its instantiation in activity (īhā), movement (cesṭā) and operation or exertion (vyāpāra).

The tradition of grammatical thought as documented in the Mahābhāṣya provides significant counterparts for Vaiśeṣika metaphysics: as we shall see presently, each of Patañjali’s four categories of the meaningful parts of speech has its analogue in the Vaiśeṣika categorial theory. Yet despite its grammatical correlations and linguistic implications, the Vaiśeṣika theory is not a grammatical or linguistic theory, and the school’s approach to categorization is remarkably different from the Mahābhāṣya’s. Our present concern, though, is with the inter-relations between the origins of the Vaiśeṣika metaphysical categorial theory and the Abhidhamma dhamma theory. As this relation may have sprung from, or at least been mediated by linguistic and grammatical circles, let us now consider the doctrinal exchange between Buddhist thought and early Indian theories of language.

Bronkhorst adduces textual evidence of Patañjali’s acquaintance with Buddhist doctrine, and even suggests that Patañjali may have borrowed his philosophical ideas about the nature of composite linguistic units and their ontological status from the canonical Sarvastivāda. First, he points to Mahābhāṣya passages which attest to Patañjali’s familiarity with the Buddhist postulate of impermanence and its later elaboration in the form of the doctrine of momentariness. For instance, a passage in the commentary to Pā. 4.1.3 reads as follows: ‘Activity is constant, for nothing in this world remains in its own identity even for a moment. Either it rises for as long as it should rise, or it is destroyed.’

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Second, Bronkhorst discusses the possibility that Patañjali’s understanding of the nature of linguistic entities relies on the Sarvāstivādin notion of linguistic dharmas.128 We have already come across Patañjali’s analysis of the vārttika that reads siddhe sabdārthasambandhe, where he concludes that a word, its referent or denoted object, and the relation between the two are eternal, thus implying that a word is an independently existing, eternal entity.129 Patañjali also acknowledges two sorts of linguistic entity, namely, varṇasamghāta and paddasamghāta, but it is not clear which of the two designates a word.130 Discussing the single Mahābhāṣya passage in which the expression paddasamghāta is used, Bronkhorst mentions the conventional interpretation that paddasamghāta means ‘a collection of words’, but then introduces an alternative interpretation: paddasamghāta is a non-technical synonym of pada used primarily by non-grammatical circles, and which Patañjali employs in the sense of a single word as an indivisible entity.131 On this assumption varṇasamghāta would refer to a single speech sound conceived of as a single, indivisible entity; what collects sounds, uniting all the constituent elements of a single sound so as to form one sound. A correct interpretation of varṇasamghāta and paddasamghāta, Bronkhorst suggests, could be gleaned by examining the canonical Sarvāstivādin linguistic dharmas: specifically vyañjanakāya and padakāya/nāmakāya.132 These are subsumed under the Sarvāstivādin category of ‘factors dissociated from thought’ (citta-viprayuktasamskāra), and initially named single sounds and single words conceived of as single, indivisible, existing – albeit momentary – entities.133 The Sarvāstivādin doctrine of momentariness implied that words and sounds, because they are extended in time, could not have real existence. The Sarvāstivādins solved this problem by postulating that words and sounds had real existence as separate, linguistic dharmas.134 Assuming that Patañjali’s varṇasamghāta and paddasamghāta, on the one hand, and the Sarvāstivādins’ vyañjanakāya and padakāya, on the other hand, are related concepts, it is difficult to determine who borrowed from whom, and chronological considerations cannot provide any conclusive answer. Yet since varṇasamghāta and paddasamghāta play no role in Patañjali’s discussions and are introduced as examples only, and because they represent a concern with ontological questions which do not otherwise characterize Patañjali’s work, Bronkhorst concludes that Patañjali derived his ideas concerning varṇasamghāta and paddasamghāta from the Sarvāstivādins. This derivation, though, was probably indirect, which may explain the differences between Patañjali’s and the Sarvāstivādin Buddhists’ views, foremost of which is the fact that for Patañjali the word is eternal, for the Buddhists momentary.135

Another issue indicative of the doctrinal interrelation between Patañjali and the Sarvāstivādins, which we shall here note only in brief, is the resemblance between the Sarvāstivādin notion of dharma as dravya and Patañjali’s understanding of dravya as an individual substance (excepting the latter’s eternality): a particular, concrete entity which keeps its distinctive identity through change and has its attributes and qualities. Moreover, this notion is reminiscent of Patañjali’s distinction between sphota and dhvani: a word or phoneme (śabda) is sphota, that
is, a permanent, independently existing entity, whereas sound, dhvani, is that word’s actual, ephemeral and changing manifestation when uttered; it is the śabda’s quality. The idea is that the variability due to utterance by different speakers under different circumstances belongs to the audible part of speech, while sphota is the invariable sound-pattern, what remains constant and unaffected. Patañjali, then, acknowledges an independently existing word-entity, an essence-possessing substance distinct from the changing ‘noise’ that characterizes it when uttered on different occasions.136

Our present concern, though, is with the Theravādin Abhidhamma. The affinity between the Grammarians’ ideas and the Abhidhamma is subtler than that between the former and the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika, and was probably transmitted into the Pāli texts via Sarvāstivādin sources. One notable example of this intellectual exchange, already discussed by P.S. Jaini, is the correspondence between the Vaibhāṣika sanskāra of nāmakāya and the Theravādin dhamma called nāmapaññatti.137 The term paññatti, which we may provisionally render as ‘concept’, features in the Pāli suttas with reference to designations, names or concepts that are themselves unreal albeit used in everyday discourse.138 The idea of paññatti is further developed in the canonical Abhidhamma. Paññatti forms one of the abhidhamma-mātikā couplets and is defined in the Dhammasaṅgī as follows:

What are the dhammas that are paññatti? A definition, a designation, a concept, a current term, a name, a denomination, the assigning of a name, a manner of speaking, a letter, a phrasing on this or that dhamma – these dhammas are paññatti. All dhammas are nameable.139

The commentary elaborates on this salient closing point:

One single dhamma encompasses all dhammas, and all dhammas fall into one dhamma. How so? This nāmapaññatti is a singular category encompassing all dhammas belonging to the four spheres. There is no being, no conditioned phenomenon that may not be designated by a name.140

This is remarkable evidence of the conceptual realism creeping into early Abhidhamma framework. Conceptually, dhammas are the ultimate units of categorization, analysis and distinction of experience, so that each and every phenomenal occurrence, each dhammic event, is knowable and nameable: it is regarded as a discernible object of knowledge and assigned a unique name expressing its proper nature. This notion would pave the way for metaphysical realism, whereby dhammas alone are what ultimately exists, and, rather similarly to Leibniz’s monadology, to have primary existence is to be the bearer of a singular definition; to be uniquely describable and differentiated from any other entity. The Abhidhamma tendency for conceptual realism points to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, according to which system all objects are characterized by existence,
knowability and nameability, as a source of doctrinal influence, although such influence may have been mediated by the Sarvāstivāda-Vaihbāṣika. Let us now turn to the Vaiśeṣika categorial theory.

4.3.2.2 The developed Indian categorial theory: the Vaiśeṣika

We have already referred to the Vaiśeṣika atomistic theory and to the list of categories (padārtha) presented at the opening of the Vaiśeṣikasūtra: substance (dravya), attribute or quality instances (guna), motion or action-moments (karma), universal (sāmānya), individuator (viṣeṣa) and inherence (samavāya). In the Vaiśeṣikasūtra the enumeration of all substances, attributes and motions precedes the definitions of these three categories – a structure that, as Halbfass notes, attests to the Vaiśeṣika’s cosmologically and ontologically oriented approach to categories, which is markedly different from Patañjali’s linguistic approach.

We have also come across the significance of the majority of these categories throughout this study, for they concur with the fundamentals of the substance-attribute ontological model as previously explained. The Vaiśeṣika ontology is rooted in a substance metaphysics that, conjointly with a realist outlook, engenders a plurality of independently existing particulars. The Vaiśeṣika system lists the ultimately existing substances, incorporating them – both in their permanent form as eternal, indivisible atoms (paramāṇu) and as impermanent, destructible compounds of atoms – in a more comprehensive enumeration of types of entities, namely, the six padārthas.

The first padārtha, substance, is ninefold, embracing earth, water, fire, air, ether (ākāśa), time, space, self (ātman) and mind (manas). The first four are primary, material, elemental substances: they consist of irreducible, invisible and permanent atoms (paramāṇu). The encountered world in its entirety is made up of composite substances, that is, imperishable compounds of atoms that conglomerate and separate but in themselves remain permanent. Thus the identity of a substance through time is based on the identity of its constitutive atoms. Ether, space, time and self are immaterial, that is, non-atomic, unitary, all-pervasive, indestructible substances and a receptacle for material phenomena. The self, of which there is a plurality, is permanent and eternally existing. Mind, countless, infinitely small atoms of which populate the world, is considered as an unconscious instrument transmitting perception to the self, albeit being distinct from it. Mind is deemed material, although its atoms do not combine to produce composite substances as the other physical substances do. Substance is next defined as that in which attribute and motion inhere and as the common cause of substance, attribute and motion, that is, of all constructed phenomena.

The number of attributes varies slightly in different texts. Praśastapāda’s classical list includes twenty-five attributes, of which the following ten are mūrtaguṇa inhering in material substances: colour (rūpa), taste (rasa), odour (gandha), touch (sparśa), proximity (paratva) and distance (aparatva) – (priority and posteriority in space and time), gravity (gurutva), fluidity (dravatva), viscosity
(sneha) and speed (vega). Ten amūrtaguṇa inhere in immaterial substances: intellect (buddhi), pleasure (sukha), pain (duḥkha), desire (icchā), aversion (dveṣa), endeavour or volitional disposition (prayatna), merit (dharma), demerit (adharma), effect or ability (bhāvanā) and sound (śabda). The remaining five ubhayaguṇa inhere in both material and immaterial substances: number (saṃkhyā), dimension (parimāṇa), separateness (prātthaktva), conjunction (saṃyoga) and disjunction (vibhāga).146 Attribute is defined as that which inheres in a substance, possesses no attributes itself, and is not the cause of conjunctions and disjunctions because of its being dissociated from them.147 It is a property-particular, such as a particular shade of green colour that by its inherence in one substance is distinct from the green contained in another. Since substances in themselves have nothing that allows their discrimination, attributes enable us to classify substances into kinds and to differentiate them as numerically distinct particulars. Some attributes inhere in one individual substance but some, such as conjunction and number, may inhere in several entities jointly and simultaneously. 

Motion or action is of five types: moving upwards, moving downwards, contraction, expansion and simple locomotion.148 It exists momentarily and inheres in material substances alone. Each action-moment inheres exclusively in one substance, does not itself possess attributes, and is the constitutive cause of conjunctions and disjunctions.149 The category of action furnishes the basis for the changing object: the only changes in the cosmos are changes in the arrangements and the positions of attributes and of atoms, and it is action by virtue of which atoms and their assemblages adhere together and rearrange. Hence action is significant in the causal mechanism of conjunctions and disjunctions – two attributes that, in turn, are crucial to the explanation of qualitative change. Unlike attributes that are static (albeit not necessarily permanent or coeval with their substrates), motion is dynamic and momentary. Yet attribute and action alike are particulars endowed with an ontological status, although they exist as individual realities only insofar as they inhere in substances.

Inherence is a relation of two distinguishable entities that cannot occur separately. Being a relation of container to contained, it also indicates an order of dependence: the contained provides unity and identity, the container the reality of the entity. Unlike the relations of conjunction and disjunction, inherence is permanent. It is essential both to the organization of the Vaiśeṣika categories and to the ontological priority of substance, for it is the one omnipresent principle that accounts for the fact that the encountered world is a world of concrete objects rather than of isolated constituents.

The fully developed Vaiśeṣika view of universals is that they are real, independent, timeless and ubiquitous entities which inhere in a plurality of substances, attributes and motions. In the Vaiśeṣikasūtra, however, the term sāmānya signifies recurrent generic properties, such as substantiality (dravyatvam), whiteness etc., which account for the fact that numerically distinct substances may be identified as members of the same class and be referred to by an identical concept. The various sorts of sāmānya fall into a hierarchical series: cowness, for instance, is a genus
relative to a particular cow, but is a species relative to the more inclusive genus of substantiality. It is thus stated that the essences of substance, attribute and action may be viewed as both general and particular.\textsuperscript{150} The highest, most inclusive universal is existence (\textit{bhāva}), which inheres in all substances, attributes and motions. Thus we are told that ‘Existence is a universal only, for it generates nothing but recurrence [or inclusion, i.e. inclusive awareness, \textit{anuvṛtti}].' Lower, specific universals (\textit{sāmānyaviśeṣa}) produce exclusion and distinction as well as inclusion.\textsuperscript{151} We may then say that universals are limits on the degree of the atoms’ possible distinction and change: one thing \textit{a} can become another thing \textit{b} if and only if a universal is instantiated in both \textit{a} and \textit{b}, namely, if \textit{a} and \textit{b} are of the same type. The universal inheres in a plurality of objects and, having the same form in all, brings the idea of itself in any one. Unlike the attribute in which it is instantiated, nothing is instantiated in the universal. That is, it is not a locus of inherence; it is not an object. For this reason, and also because the universal is independent of its substrates, it is eternal.

Particularities are factors of individuality which, like universals, are eternal and inhere in substrates without themselves being inhaled in. By contrast to universals, though, each particularity inhere exclusively in one substrate. Particularities therefore reside only in substrates that are eternal, non-composite substances, namely, the individual atoms, souls and minds, and the unitary substances ether, space and time. We have seen above that attributes differentiate but do not necessarily individuate; they do not account for what it means to be this very entity rather than any other, nor for what makes it so. Now since the scope of \textit{viśeṣa} is extended over the eternal substances alone, we may say that this category is not concerned so much with the numerical differentiation of encountered existents in general or with their identity, but rather with the individuation of those existents that are eternal substances. \textit{Viśeṣa}, then, points to the question of what the true nature is of a given primary existent and of what makes it the very particular it is.\textsuperscript{152}

The \textit{Viśeṣika} notion of substance, then, is remarkably different from that of Patañjali. As mentioned above, by \textit{dravya} Patañjali primarily intends substance in the sense of an individual \textit{qua} a bundle or a collection of qualities. A collection depends upon the collected elements, and hence a substance depends upon the qualities it collects. By contrast, in the \textit{Viśeṣika} system of categories, qualities, actions and even generic properties (universals) inhere in substance, and the substance is said to be the substratum of these properties. Moreover, the relation of inherence by which these properties are tied to the substance is a real relation, and hence for the \textit{Viśeṣika} substance as a substratum is not a mere bundle of qualities, but a real, systematic whole having a structure of its own and which is, by definition, independent of its qualities, motions etc.\textsuperscript{153}

Let us now move on from the specificity of each of the above categories to their overarching meaning as the basis of a categorial theory. What distinguishes a categorial system from other taxonomies? Indian philosophical literature abounds with lists, enumerations, catalogues and classifications, and the \textit{Viśeṣika} doctrine of categories is no exception in this respect. As Ganeri notes, though, taxonomies
are cheap, for there are many ways of dividing objects into groups. The choice of one particular way of dividing from the others is the selection of an ontology.\textsuperscript{154} Ganeri thus suggests that, since the \textit{padārthas} are given rather than chosen for all but the original compilers of the \textit{Vaiśeṣikasūtra}, one should focus on the tradition’s methods of rationalization and revision, that is, on how the predetermined list of \textit{padārthas} is made sense of and modified in accordance with the principles by which it is rationalized. In the case of classical Vaiśeṣika the \textit{padārthas}’ later rationalization is even more pressing an issue, for in the \textit{Vaiśeṣikasūtra} a complete list of all the six categories referred to by the term \textit{padārtha} is found only in one single \textit{sūtra} which is probably a later interpolation.\textsuperscript{155}

We have seen that, linguistically, categories prescribe the basic ways of calling up subsistent beings for discussion and in this sense establish the basis for meaning and reference, but also that categorization is therefore inevitably bound up with ontology. Indeed a consideration of the later Vaiśeṣika rationalization of the categories shows that for this school the dominant connotation of the predetermined list of the six \textit{padārthas} is ontological rather than linguistic.

Already in the \textit{Vaiśeṣikasūtra} existence (\textit{bhāva}) is acknowledged as the highest, most inclusive universal. The text, though, considers \textit{bhāva} and \textit{sattā}, that is, being and reality, as interchangeable, for the statement succeeding to the above assertion reads thus: ‘Reality (\textit{sattā}) accounts for our application of the notion “real” (\textit{sat}) to substances, qualities and motions, and is something different from the members of these three categories.’\textsuperscript{156} The \textit{Vaiśeṣikasūtra}, then, implies that whatever exists falls into the categories of substance, attribute and action. Moreover, in both their modes of existence – as eternal, indivisible atoms and as impermanent, destructible compounds of atoms – substances are real substrates of real attributes and real motion or action-moments. \textit{Bhāva/sattā} accounts for the fact that all substances, attributes and motions are referred to as real in thought and speech. ‘It circumscribes’, Halbfass explains, ‘the totality of entities at the cosmological level of enumeration and classification, and it is added to these entities as if it were an enumerable, cosmological entity itself.’\textsuperscript{157}

By the time of Candramati’s \textit{Daśāpadārthaśāstra} (fifth century CE?) – a treatise that survived in Hsüan-tsang’s Chinese translation – a terminological change occurred, as the term \textit{sattā} is here used to refer to the universal inhering in the first three categories. Candramati identifies his \textit{sattā} with Kaṇḍa’s \textit{bhāva}, presenting reality/existence as the highest universal and a separate \textit{padārtha}, while class-properties like substantiality, whiteness etc. are subsumed under the category of limited, specific universal (\textit{sāmāṇyaviśeṣa}).\textsuperscript{158} The \textit{Daśāpadārthaśāstra} is one of the only two independent works belonging to the later period of classical Vaiśeṣika. The second independent work is Praśastapāda’s compendium of categories, the \textit{Padārthadharmasamgraha}. Praśastapāda became the Vaiśeṣika’s most influential systematizer and his compendium is the most authoritative presentation of the classical system and its ontology.

Praśastapāda interprets reality, \textit{sattā}, as a generic property comparable to, though more extensive than other universals, thus bringing reality/existence,
generic properties (e.g. ‘blueness’) and the generic class-properties (substantiality etc.) under one category of universal (sāmānyas). He therefore distinguishes between two kinds of universal: ultimate (parasāmānya) and non-ultimate (aparasāmānya). Reality is the ultimate universal because it produces only inclusion and because of its wide domain of instances: all particular, cosmologically distinct entities (sats) are regarded as sattās. Generic and class-properties as well as their inseparable inherence in particulars are recognized as real in the sense of their being mind-independent, but their reality is non-ultimate owing to its restricted extension and because these universals produce not only inclusion but also distinction (vyāvyātta).159 In addition to sattā and bhāva Prāṇastapāda introduces several other ontological notions not found in the Vaiśeṣikasūtra. The first is the second-order concept of astitva, ‘is-ness’, also rendered as actuality or objectivity. Unlike sattā/bhāva, astitva applies not only to the first three categories of substance, attribute and motion, but also to the other three categories of universal, particularity and inherence. As a common denominator of all six categories, astitva is coordinate with knowability (jñeyatva) and nameability (abhidheyatva). It is therefore attributable to whatever is an enumerable and classifiable world-constituent, including reality, satta, itself; any nameable world ingredient ‘is there’ insofar as astitva can be ascribed to it.160 Prāṇastapāda also broaches two other notions of being in order to distinguish existents from generic class-properties and universals: he characterizes substances, attributes and motions as having sattāsambandha, ‘connection with reality’, universals, particularities and inherence as having svāmasattva, ‘reality by virtue of one’s own-identity’. Any cosmologically distinct ‘real’ (sat) is the substrate (āśraya) of sattā and the logical subject (dharmin) of sattāsambandha. The latter is a temporal condition connecting a particular entity with the eternal, immutable universal satta; it ascertains that entity’s presence and that sattā is actually present in it. Unlike in the case of the first three categories, the existence of universals, particularities and inherence does not consist in their connection with reality but in their own-identity or essence.161

A perusal of the classical Vaiśeṣika construal of the six padārthas, as Halbfass summarizes, reveals that these categories are regarded as the most comprehensive units of enumeration, the ultimate divisions of reality and the most fundamental correlates of thought and speech. The totality of all particular, enumerable ‘reals’ is subsumed under the reified sattā universal, which is, in turn, integrated into the ontological meta-category of astitva. The categories are thus intended to establish a basis for a system of enumeration; an exhaustive inventory of all world constituents within the limits of astitva.162 Although the Vaiśeṣika doctrine of categories may be understood as analysing the concrete objects of our experience in an attempt to form a theoretical basis for our philosophical discussion, in the final analysis the categories are not mere cognitive-linguistic projections, but existents that are the direct correlates of our perceptions and conceptualizations; the referents of whatever is knowable and nameable. ‘The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers believe’, as Matilal puts it, ‘that if we can analyze and classify the concrete
objects of our experience in this manner into substance, quality and action, we
would achieve a satisfactory explanation of “what there is”, i.e., an explanation of
what is meant when we say, “that object exists”.'

The Vaiśeṣika pluralistic realism and atomistic theory are grounded in a
substance-attribute ontology that posits an objective reality in which all con-
stituent substrates are objects of knowledge and are communicable through
linguistic expressions. Its categorial theory focuses on the ontological question of
being, that is, ‘What is there?’, rather than on the question of individuation, ‘What
is it?’ The works of Praśastapāda’s commentators, such as Vyomaśiva’s
Vyomavati (ninth century CE?) and Śrīdhara’s Nyāyakandālī (991 CE), attest that
central to classical Vaiśeṣika self-understanding is the idea of a comprehensive
meta-enumeration yielding an all-inclusive inventory, not only of particular types
of entity but of whatever has the character of being. The six padārthas distinguish
whatever existents there are; they are modes of existence. Exceptional in this
respect is the category of particularity, viśeṣa, which does account for what a given
existent is in distinction from any other existent of its kind. Nevertheless, viśeṣa –
residing exclusively in the permanent, non-composite substances – is a category
that individuates primary existents alone. That is, for classical Vaiśeṣika primary
existents alone possess individuality and the category of viśeṣa enables its users to
ascertain that something is a primary existent. Hence in this context individuality,
to borrow Quine’s words regarding identity, is ‘of a piece with ontology’.

In this respect and in its reliance on substance metaphysics the Vaiśeṣika
categorial theory parts from the early Abhidhamma dhamma analysis. Yet the
Abhidhamma idea of dhamma categorization and its admission of conceptual
realism evoke the Vaiśeṣika system, or at least its early origins, as a source of
doctrinal influence. This influence becomes clearer in the mature, post-canonical
Abhidhamma, which explicitly inclines towards realism and reification of the
dhammas. Moreover, in this later period the Abhidhamma focuses on a different
aspect of the problem of individuation, namely, the principle or cause of the
dhammas’ individuality. The next sections clarifies what this issue involves and
examines its treatment in the Theravādin commentarial literature.

4.4 THE PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUALITY

4.4.1 What makes an individual what it is?

Following Aristotle, the scholastics regarded the identification of principles and
causes as the primary function of a scientific investigation. Thus the question of
the cause or principle of individuation, that is, ‘What is the cause of something’s
being an individual substance?’, or ‘What makes an individual the very item it
is?’, attracted the utmost attention of Western medieval authors and has exclu-
sively been understood as ‘the pure problem of individuation’. For Aristotle,
knowledge (epistéme) is explanatory: to know something is to grasp its constituting
principle; to comprehend why something is or has happened.\textsuperscript{165} This implies that a definition, as the term features in Aristotle’s writings and later pervades the works of his scholastic heirs, is causal and real rather than nominal: it does not convey the linguistic meaning of a word but rather the cause of what that word refers to.\textsuperscript{166} Hence an investigation into the notion of individuality ought to reveal the internal, structural component that is its cause. Emphasized here is the metaphysical foundation of individuality in individuals themselves. The position adopted with respect to this question will depend to a large extent on the intension of individuality and the ontology adhered to. On a substance-attribute ontological model the pivotal issue is the inner structure of an individual: what feature in it ontologically constitutes it as such.\textsuperscript{167}

The concern with the principle of individuation can be traced to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. In this treatise Aristotle denies that universals really exist, and hence individuals can no longer be reckoned as the ultimate, indivisible parts of species and genera.\textsuperscript{168} Aristotle, though, continues to maintain that properties exist and recognizes that an ordinary object of experience cannot be what underlies individual properties, because the object, by definition, includes properties and thus cannot be what makes them the properties of a single individual object. Aristotle here asks what underlies an individual substance. He calls this underlying principle the ‘whatness’ of things, an essence. The essence that is formulated by a definition is equated with the substance of each thing. It is this ‘substance of a substance’ that is regarded as an individual.\textsuperscript{169} In the *Metaphysics*, then, ‘individual’ refers to the principle that accounts for the individuality of ordinary individual substances – an internal, structural component in virtue of which its associated substance is the very particular that it is.\textsuperscript{170} Chapters 4–6 of *Metaphysics* VII analyse the internal structure of substance into form, matter and the compound form-and-matter. For instance, the matter of a bronze statue is bronze and its form is the shape of its outward appearance. Form is the substance’s internal organization or structure that determines its capacity to behave or function in a characteristic way as it does. Aristotle chooses form as the essence and the cause of a substance’s individuality, although it is far from clear how the form satisfies the conditions he lays out for ‘essencehood’.\textsuperscript{171}

Aristotle’s conception of form is but a theory of essential individuation, one of the various theories of individuation developed by the medieval scholastics and by modern philosophers. The difficulty with this theory is that we only have an individual object because it has its own unique form or individual organization, which ought not to be shared by other objects. The way in which an object has an essence must be essentially different from the way in which it possesses any of its qualities. Yet forms, ways of being organized, dispositions or capacities – detailed as their specification is – can be had by several objects.\textsuperscript{172} An alternative theory is that of bare particulars: this holds that substances must contain something in addition to their characteristics, a bare particular that is the bearer of the characteristics co-present with it. A bare particular, while possessing the characteristics associated with the substance, confers individuality upon it, for it alone is unique.
to that substance. Still, bare particulars are only cognizable with reference to their characteristics. To avoid this difficulty the scholastics brought up theories of characterized particulars, such as the theory of accidental individuation. Accidents are the contingent characteristics that are separable from an essentially characterized particular and that may change while the latter remains numerically the same, such as the colour, shape or texture of my desk. If neither the essential constituents of a particular substance nor the set of its essential characteristics properly account for its individuality, then its accidents must function as individuators. Yet if individual substances can share their essential characteristics, why should they not share their contingent ones?

The principle of individuation, then, has not properly been accounted for. All the above theories are flawed, while others that are not mentioned here conflate individuation with numerical difference. All these theories have failed because the principle of individuation is not only supposed to account for the individuality of a substance, but itself must be unique and non-instantiable: it ought to be an individual. This means that in individuating a form, essence, an accident or whatever else is regarded as the principle in question, we need to go beyond the object if the latter is to be an individual substance. We cannot individuate essences etc., on the basis of the objects of which essences they are, for the objects themselves are to be individuated by the essences.

Karl Popper notes that essence can be described by a definition, but a definition must not use accidental universals or individual terms. From this he draws a conclusion that equally follows when taking into account other possible principles of individuation: individuals themselves cannot be defined, only the kinds to which they belong. This means, Popper explains, that in order to provide a unique characterization of an individual something else must be used, such as its spatio-temporal relations to at least one other individual. Michael Frede indicates that temporal relations teach us about an individual’s history, and that even if all the essences of a given kind were completely identical we could still distinguish between them on the basis of their histories. For example, it should be sufficient to suppose that an essence can have a history to the extent that it can be instantiated in different matter at different times. It is possible to distinguish between various essences of the same kind on the basis of their histories, and between various essences of the same kind at a given moment on the basis of the present stages of their histories.

The question of the principle of individuation becomes relevant only within a realist context, for if it is held that there are no substantial realities that undergo change in order to become individuals, then there is no need to identify the principle or cause of such a change. The question, however, may well emerge within the context of conceptual realism and from the processual perspective of an event metaphysics. Thus one may ask not only what in objects individuates them as enduring substances, but rather what in experience individuates the occurrences that constitute one’s mind. The following section portrays the post-canonical Abhidhamma event metaphysics as centred around the principle of the dhammas’ individuality. What I have set out to show in this section is that the Abhidhammikas
grappled with the difficulty of going beyond the \textit{dhammas} in order to individuate them by exploiting their temporal relations and by appropriating the theory of momentariness.

\subsection*{4.4.2 The post-canonical Abhidhamma and the principle of individuality}

The commentarial period saw the advent of new doctrinal developments based on the extant canonical Abhidhamma material, foremost of which was the entwining of the already prevalent sense of a \textit{dhamma} as an individual – a distinct psycho-physical, short-lived event of which dimension is not fixed – with the doctrines of \textit{sabhāva} and of momentariness. This engendered the notion of a \textit{dhamma} as a single consciousness-moment encompassing three distinct sub-phases of origination, endurance and dissolution. Each such momentary event was then equated with and defined in virtue of its particular nature, \textit{sabhāva}. Previously we saw that in the commentarial literature the term \textit{sabhāva} is narrowed down and no longer signifies either a generic or specific nature, the sum-total of characteristics that distinguish a certain type of \textit{dhamma}. Rather it denotes a structural constituent that is essential to a \textit{dhamma} and that enables us to fathom why that \textit{dhamma} possesses the characteristics it has. \textit{Sabhāva} is what determines the \textit{dhamma}'s internal organization or disposition, which make it behave in a certain way or fulfil a specific function. We are now in a position to say that \textit{sabhāva} is the principle and cause of the \textit{dhamma}'s individuality; what makes the \textit{dhamma} the very particular it is rather than any other individual of the same kind.

This is demonstrated by the exegetical statement that ‘there is no such thing called “activity” (\textit{kiriyā}) apart from the \textit{dhamma}'s individual nature’, and by the recurrent definitions of a \textit{dhamma} as that which bears its \textit{sabhāva}, or alternatively as that which is borne by conditions in accordance with its \textit{sabhāva}.\textsuperscript{180} The meaning is that no \textit{dhamma} occurs as indeterminate, having no individuality. Any given consciousness-moment originates with its unique imprint, bearing its particular ‘genetic capacity’ that determines its disposition to act in a certain way, its specific function within its series in the consciousness process. This idea is also expressed by the prevalent commentarial fourfold schema of defining a \textit{dhamma} based on its distinguishing characteristic (\textit{lakkhaṇa}), manifestation (\textit{paccupatṭhāna}), immediate cause (\textit{padatthāna}) and function (\textit{rasa}).\textsuperscript{181} This schema exhibits the individuality factors unique to a \textit{dhamma}; its disposition to present itself and act in a certain way. The commentaries no longer ask ‘What is such-and-such a \textit{dhamma}?’, nor do they make innovative alterations of the extant \textit{dhamma} categorizations. Whereas the canonical Abhidhamma emphasizes the intension of individuation and asks what an individual \textit{dhamma} is, the commentaries ask what in the inner structure of any given \textit{dhamma} makes it the very particular it is. They seek the cause of a \textit{dhamma}'s individuality and broach \textit{sabhāva} as this cause. The emphasis is shifted to the metaphysical foundations of individuation, to its basis in experience.
Now there is a close connection between being an individual – being distinguishable, determined and definable – and existing. Individuality may be logically prior to existence, but the very fact that we can pose the question of being means that the condition for every question is that being *per se* exists. We could not think if not starting from the principle that we are thinking something. It has thus been argued that nothing could be an individual if ‘exists’ were not predicative of it, though this existence does not necessarily refer to the individual’s objective actuality, but to its being the subject of a propositional affirmation. Related as they are, however, being and individuation consist in two different questions, as evidenced by the distinction between existence and essence respectively. Moreover, although essence may be an ontological determinant, it is not an ontological category in itself. We have already seen that in the para-canonical Pali texts *sabhāva* signifies a *dhamma*’s own-nature and plays the role of an individuator, while in the later, quintessential commentaries *sabhāva* emerges as the cause of a *dhamma*’s certain mode of being and may be rendered as own-essence. We now ought properly to distinguish between the epistemological and ontological denotations of *sabhāva*-as-essence.

Aristotle points out that we can ask two questions of every simple thing: ‘Is it?’ and ‘What is it?’ If the questions refer, for instance, to a certain man, the reply to the first question would be: ‘Yes, it has existence’, to the second: ‘A person, he has an essence called “humanity”’.

In both the *Topics* and the *Metaphysics*, a definition is said to be the statement indicating the essence of its definiendum: the essence is that which makes something precisely what it is, and there is an essence only of those things the formula of which is a definition. ‘Essence’ here signifies an individuator and its thrust is epistemological: it explains, without an appeal to anything else, why its object is this very individual; it is what determines the true nature of its object. The distinction between existence and essence is the subject of a continuous, fervent dispute among the medieval scholastic metaphysicians. Boethius had provided considerable impetus for those later discussions by maintaining that in any composite entity its being and what it is are not one and the same. Among the scholastics of the high Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas is a leading advocate of the distinction between existence and essence. In his *De Ente et Essentia* (c.1254) Aquinas enunciates the necessity of a distinction between existence in the sense of ‘isness’ (*esse*) and essence in the sense of ‘whatness’ (*quidditas*). He renders essence *qua* quiddity as ‘What is signified by the definition expressing what the thing is’, namely, that in virtue of which a thing is what it is and nothing else. This implies that existence is a principle of being: that by reason of which an entity actually exists. Essence, by contrast, is a principle of individuation: that on account of which an entity is the particular thing it is and enjoys quidditative content.

The notion of essence, though, might have a stronger, ontological bearing. When Aristotle, as mentioned above, equates form with essence to denote the cause of a substance’s individuality, the essence explains not only why this individual substance is that which is, but also why it exists as an actual, determinate
individual. Essence is here an ontological determinant, though not of existence per se but of a certain mode of existence: primary existence as an individual substance, that is, certain and non-dependent existence. The difference between essence as an epistemological individuator vs. ontological determinant of primary existence is later expounded by Locke, who distinguishes ‘nominal essence’ from ‘real essence’. Possessing a nominal essence justifies the attribution of a particular name to an entity. A real essence is a prerequisite for the recognition of any nominal essence: it renders an extra-sensory substratum that makes sensory experience possible.

The very idea of essence is undoubtedly removed in spirit from the earliest Buddhist teaching and is remote even from the early Abhidhamma. The impetus behind the Madhyamaka criticism of the Abhidharma metaphysics lies in the Madhyamaka dissolution of the ontology of essence. Yet the Madhyamaka criticism is more apposite with respect to the Sarvastivāda-Vaibhāṣika than to the Theravāda Abhidhamma. We have already seen that for the Sarvastivāda all existents are sat, but only dharmas are svabhāva possessing and can be primary existents. To have a svabhāva is to exist as a dravya and be included under one of the categories of the Sarvastivāda ontological table. Paul Williams clarifies that in a second-order world of momentary phenomena like that postulated by the Sarvastivāda, where there is no question of shared characteristics, what determines an instance of a dharma x rather than of y would be a unique definition. Svabhāva is the principle applicable solely to a particular dharma, which renders its unique verbal description. But to have a unique definition is the result of having a unique characteristic (svalakṣaṇa), and this necessitates being a primary existent: primary existence is necessary for linguistic reference. Svabhāva – albeit not itself a real essence – is therefore an ontological determinant and a cause of primary existential status.

It is true that on various occasions Pali exegetical literature, too, contains passages that may separately be interpreted to suggest the idea of sabhāva as a dhamma’s ontological determinant. Yet this ontologically laden meaning of sabhāva is not directly attributable to the Abhidhamma. Having repudiated the Sarvastivāda conception of dharmas as dravya, from the Theravādins’ perspective dharmas are not spatio-temporal point-instants, but rather consciousness moments, or, more correctly, the capacities and capabilities of mental events. Accordingly, the Theravādins do not normally use sabhāva to indicate primary existence, but an individual definition unique to a dhamma. The point is that for the Theravāda Abhidhamma sabhāva predominantly plays as an individuator in its quidditative sense. Quiddity, as a definition expressing what something is, is categorically opposed to the ontological denotation of essence as ‘the substance of a substratum’. Quiddity need not entail a substratum, although a substratum ordinarily entails in addition to itself some sort of quiddity. Formulated as a definition, the sabhāva requires that there always be something to which it could refer, but it does not necessitate the existence – either secondary or primary – of any particular spatio-temporal instantiation of the dhamma defined. Equating sabhāva with salakkhaṇa, the Theravādins usually

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regard both categories as an epistemological, linguistic determinant: to have a *sabhāva* is to be knowable and nameable, that is, possess a unique definition. In harmony with this view certain post-canonical texts introduce the idea of a ‘*sabhāva*-language’ (*sabhāva*-nirutti): a language of uniquely refering names, so that for each *dhamma* there is a corresponding name properly signifying it.¹⁹⁴

Nonetheless, here linguistic considerations pave the way for realism and ontology. *Sabhāva* is an atemporal determinant of the *dhamma*’s individuality, not its temporal status. This category thus facilitates the construction of a *dhamma* categorization based on a tenseless use of language, for which Paul Griffiths has coined the term ‘denaturalized discourse’.¹⁹⁵ A denaturalized discourse is, first, normative, in that it seeks to establish the foundations (e.g. ideas, sensibilia) of any instance of knowledge. Second, it is typically regarded as universal, as applicable to all subjects irrespective of time and place. Third, it is abstracted from a natural language, intending to clear up the ambiguity and polysemy inherent in ordinary language used in everyday contexts. Functionally a denaturalized discourse intends to elucidate what truly exists.¹⁹⁶ The Abhidhamma *sabhāva*-language is an instance of a denaturalized discourse, albeit one that draws on a metaphysics quite different from that which has fostered such a discourse in Western tradition. It reduces the complexity of experience and the ambiguity of everyday language to a list of terms mirroring what ultimately exists in experience — a list that, given the syntax of the Pali, is entirely verbless.¹⁹⁷

Another indication of the ‘ontologization’ of *sabhāva* is that the latter is not only supposed to account for a *dhamma*’s individuality, but itself emerges as a singular, non-instantiable individual. We have an individual *dhamma* only in virtue of its own particular *sabhāva*, which cannot be shared by other *dhamma* instances of the same kind. For example, it is the *sabhāva* of this particular instance of one-pointedness of mind that makes it what it is rather than any other instance of one-pointedness of mind within that consciousness-series. The commentaries display this idea by identifying both *dhamma* and *sabhāva* as denoting the mere fact of originating as a *dhamma*.¹⁹⁸ Embracing this stance, the developed Abhidhamma steps further away towards a realist attitude, reifying the *dhammas* as the irreducible, actual entities on which the phenomenal world rests. What is stressed is not so much the nature that is unique to a given *dhamma*, but the recognition that the encountered world is a world of individuals; that in the final analysis *dhammas* alone are what exist. Here the developed Abhidhamma notion of *sabhāva* is plainly ontological: *sabhāva* is not merely the individuator of its *dhamma*, but also its ontological determinant as a primary existent and an individual in itself.

If *sabhāva* is an individual, then it must be distinguishable and identifiable. This is what the equation of *sabhāva* with *salakkhaṇa* allegedly satisfies, for it implies that any *sabhāva* is uniquely signified by a respective definition. But here crops up the same vexing difficulty that haunts the Western theories of individuation: linguistic recurrence precludes *sabhāva* from qualifying only one single spatio-temporal instantiation of its *dhamma*. However detailed a verbal specification of *sabhāva* we offer, it is always possible that more than a single
dhamma could have this sabhāva. As Popper tells us, individuals themselves cannot be defined. Thus, in individuating a sabhāva we must go beyond its dhamma, for the latter itself is to be individuated by the sabhāva, and hence it cannot account for its own cause of individuation.

We saw that one solution to this difficulty is to distinguish the principle of individuation on the basis of its history. In the context of the developed Abhidhamma this means first to distinguish between different instances of the same kind of dhamma on the basis of their temporal position within their consciousness series, and second between different instances of the same kind of dhamma at a given moment on the basis of the phases comprising each such consciousness-moment. This, I argue, is attempted by entwining the notion of sabhāva with the developed theory of momentariness. The mature Abhidhamma does not merely analyse the processes described in the suttas into their comprising events, but takes each and every phenomenon as momentary and dissects it into three distinct phases of origination, endurance and dissolution. The threefold subdivision of a moment facilitates the rapprochement with realism and ontology, for the sabhāva is equated with the endurance-moment of its dhamma – a phase that attests to the latter’s existence throughout the three sub-moments. But what kind of ontology is this? Within the Abhidhamma framework ontology is not so much an inquiry into what exists per se, but into what constitutes the consciousness process and the awakened mind. The scope of this ontology falls between psychology and soteriology.

The description of the consciousness process (citta-vīthi) is set out in Buddhaghosa’s works, the Visuddhimagga and Atthasālinī specifically, and is summarized in the manuals of Buddhadatta and Anuruddha. The theory of the citta-vīthi, however, is not a product of the commentarial period: it is rooted in the canonical Abhidhamma and is well established in the old Sinhalese commentaries. Thus the Dhammasaṅgani shows that fully fledged cognition takes place at subsequent stages of the consciousness stream as a function of various mental faculties. This work gives a fairly static account of mental and material phenomena as they occur at particular moments. The elaborate theory of the citta-vīthi accounts for their occurrence over a series of such moments. Two types of process are described: five sense-door process (pañcadvāra) and mind-door process (manodvāra). This theory and its relation to the theory of momentariness have been discussed by a number of scholars. The point I wish to stress here is that the theory of citta-vīthi – albeit displaying what in the absence of a better terminology we may render ‘Abhidhamma ontology’ – embodies the Abhidhamma pragmatic concern with psychology. It also hints at the position of soteriology within the Abhidhamma framework. The reason is that the systematic account of the consciousness process is not meant to specify what exists per se, but what goes on in one’s consciousness. The higher one progresses along the hierarchy of the four planes, the more complex the states of consciousness become, involving more mental factors. Still more significant are the qualitative differences that individuate one’s mind: for instance, transcendent lokuttara consciousness may never involve those unskilful tendencies and defilements that still exist potentially and might occur at any moment of skilful
lokīya consciousness. Accordingly, Gethin expresses the concern of the Abhidhamma as follows: ‘If consciousness is understood to consist of a temporal series of consciousness moments each having an individual object, then when an ordinary being (puthujjana) is experiencing wholesome consciousness, what at that moment distinguishes him or her from an arahant?’

The attempts of the later Abhidhamma theoreticians to individuate the awakened mind are bound up with their construal of nibbāna and with their espousal of the fourfold dhamma categorization into citta, cetasika, rūpa and nibbāna. The following and concluding section revisits these two issues.

### 4.4.3 On nibbāna, individuation and the fourfold dhamma categorization

No certain account of the nature of nibbāna can be obtained from the Nikāyas, as their main force is to shy away from any commitment on this issue and they use the term nibbāna in several different senses. First, nibbāna is the particular event that happens at the moment of awakening, specifically the extinction of the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion – an event that is the same for all who attain awakening and that the early texts call nibbāna or parinibbāna interchangeably, although the Pali idiom is a verb: parinibbāyati, ‘he or she parinibbāna-s’.

This sense seems to be part of an extended metaphorical structure that embraces enlightenment and its opposite, alluding to the three fires in the Brahmanical tradition. Second, nibbāna signifies the experience of being without greed, hatred and delusion, namely, what is realized at the moment of enlightenment and is then applied throughout an enlightened person’s present life. Thus at the moment the Buddha gained insight into the nature of dukkha, its arising, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation, he experienced a complete ‘blowing out’ of the three fires and the cessation of all the defilements (kilesa). He continued living motivated entirely by generosity, friendliness and wisdom, although the fuel of life, the five aggregates in a metaphorical structure, still remained – a state known in the commentarial tradition as ‘nibbāna with a remainder of clinging’ (sopādisesanibbānadhātu). When the remainder of clinging had been exhausted, the Buddha was not reborn into some new form of life, but rather parinibbāna-d. In this third sense nibbāna is the extinction of the five khandhas on the passing away of Buddhas and arahants as well as the state they experience after death, both termed ‘nibbāna without a remainder of clinging’ (anupādisesanibbānadhātu).

Yet some texts may equally support the view that nibbāna amounts to some metaphysical absolute; a reality that makes sentient experience possible, but which cannot in itself be part of experience. Renowned in this respect is one of the Buddha’s ‘inspired utterances’ (udāna) concerning nibbāna, which may be read as implying transcendent idealism:

> There is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unconstructed, an unconditioned (asaṅkhata), without which the resultant born, become,
constructed, conditioned could not be known. But because there is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unconstructed, an unconditioned, the resultant born, become, constructed, conditioned can be known.\textsuperscript{208}

Nichbāna is indeed the ultimate religious goal and the final release from all unsatisfactoriness and impermanence, but like all other phenomena it is anattā, not-self, and cannot be the liberated state of any self. Nor can it be properly described, for it is atakkāvacara, inaccessible to discursive thought, and since it defies neat categorization it can only be referred to by way of negation: it is neither temporal nor spatial, neither mind nor matter.\textsuperscript{209} In the first ‘inspired utterance’ regarding nibbāna, which is also one of the most complete statements on nibbāna to be found in the Pali Canon, the Buddha refers to it as a domain (āyatana) of experience in which neither the elements that make up physical phenomena nor the most subtle consciousness types of the formless-sphere take part:

There is, monks, a domain where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind, no sphere of infinite space, no sphere of infinite consciousness, no sphere of nothingness, no sphere of neither-conceptualization-nor-non-conceptualization; there is not this world, there is not another world, there is no sun or moon. I do not call this coming or going, nor standing, nor dying nor being reborn; it is without support, without occurrence, without object. Just this is the end of unsatisfactoriness.\textsuperscript{210}

Such an appeal to ineffability is, of course, very common in religion: Steven Collins shows in his exploration of nirvana and narrative in the Theravāda tradition that this appeal must eventually be made in relation to any concept of final salvation, for any form of eternal life is unimaginable.\textsuperscript{211} The attitude is rarely, however, quite so consistent and uncompromising as in the case of the Buddhist nibbāna.

The traditional ‘problem’ of nibbāna concerns the exact nature and ontological status of nibbāna as the final condition of Buddhas and arahants after death, and as the ineffable realm revealed at the moment of awakening. But no such account of nibbāna can be obtained from the Nikāyas, as the question of what happens to the Tathāgata after death is one of the problems the Buddha is said to have set aside, rejecting the very terms in which it is couched.\textsuperscript{212} Indeed the early texts contain materials that can be interpreted to suggest that nibbāna is both some form of blissful, eternal super-existence, or extinction of the five aggregates. But even those passages that allegedly support a metaphysical or annihilationist interpretation of nibbāna never do so unequivocally: these are merely hints and suggestions, not unequivocal declarations. The point is, however, that the tradition is aware of the apparent ambiguity resulting from these contradictory passages. This ambiguity is not due to carelessness or because the tradition could not make up its mind on that subject. Rather, it stems from the middle way dialectic of early Buddhism and is intended to avoid what the tradition considers the two basic wrong views: the annihilationist view and the eternalist view (ucccheda-vāda/sassata-vāda).\textsuperscript{213}
The path set forth by the Buddha is meant to prescribe how to live the spiritual life, not satisfy intellectual curiosity where this would not be profitable. Accordingly, much can be said, especially metaphorically, in praise of nibbāna to encourage the seeker: we find frequent references to it as ‘the country of No-Birth’, that which is ‘a wonderful ancient city where men of old had gone’, that which is pure, unafflicted, sublime, and so on. But beyond this the Buddha did not wish to go, and the Nikāyas never depart from this position: there must be nothing so concrete said of nibbāna as to encourage attachment or dogmatic convictions; nibbāna is the cessation of craving, so obviously to crave nibbāna obliterates its very meaning. The result is that if one were to accept that the above Nikāya extracts indicate a common Buddhist heritage concerning nibbāna, then one would have to acknowledge that inasmuch as they are common they are vague. The texts put much more effort into explaining the dynamics of experience in saṃsāra than the nature of nibbāna.

This state of affairs undergoes a striking change in the Abhidhamma literature. The Abhidhamma position is already clearly formulated in the Dhammasaṅgani: here the term nibbāna does not feature in the main body of the text but is substituted by the compound asaṅkhata-dhātu, ‘unconditioned element’, namely, that which is independent of relations of causal conditioning. This is not a matter of mere wording, but an indication of the Abhidhamma’s attempts to dispel the obscurity clouding the nature of nibbāna, concretize it and specify its status in actual experience. In pursuing this endeavour the Abhidhammikas must have realized that they could not accommodate the unconditioned element within the extant taxonomies of sentient experience, the analysis into the five khandhas specifically. Seeking an alternative formula to account for the unconditioned, they found the dhātu totality formula suitable for this end.

The phrase ‘unconditioned element’ derives from the Bahudhātuka-sutta, where it is one of a series of explanations as to how a monk is dhātu-kusala, ‘skilled in the elements’. Bear in mind that dhātu always refers to the distinct elements of cognition: a visible object is experientially distinct from an auditory object, from the organ of sight, from consciousness of sight, etc. Just as the analysis into the eighteen dhātus is intended to facilitate insight into personal identity as not-self, the purpose here is presumably to distinguish conceptually the unconditioned element of enlightened experience. As Cousins explains, in the Abhidhamma framework the mind is defined as momentary and intentional in nature; a given mental event involves the knowing by a single mind of a single object. The enlightenment experience was defined as the moment in which a transformed and hence transcendent mind, in association with the mental structuring of the path, takes as its object the element (dhātu) which is unconstructed (asaṅkhata), i.e. its basis is an experience of an aspect of reality which is uncaused and which does not construct new mental and physical events. Yet this aspect somehow acts as the support for the transformed and newly harmonious balance of mental events.
The term asaṅkhata, which we have already come across in the Udāna, occurs on its own in the Nikāyas: in the Asaṅkhata-saṃyutta it is defined as the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion, while the Aṅguttara-nikāya adds that it is free of the characteristics of the conditioned: arising, ceasing and change of what is present.220 Saṅkhata is a participle stemming from the root saṁ-kr, which means ‘to shape’, ‘arrange together’ and ‘consolidate’, but far more frequent is the verbal form saṅkhāra, ordinarily rendered as ‘mental formation’, ‘construction’ or ‘conditioning factor’.221 Saṅkhāra is an activity, especially volition, which enables something to come into existence or to maintain its existence – it fashions or forms a thing. As one of the five khandhas, saṅkhāra qua mental formation is what underlies all encountered phenomena and which gives impetus to the process of conditioning that fuels the sequence of rebirths. Nibbāna alone is asaṅkhata, independent of mental formation, and is therefore totally different from phenomenal experience in its entirety.222 Just as the dhātu’s are distinct elements of cognition, the unconditioned and the conditioned are distinct and exclusive objects of experience.

The Nikkhepakāṇḍa of the Dhammasaṅgaṇi analyses the unconditioned element in accordance with the abhidhamma-mātikā. Following the Nikāya dialectic, it provides a wealth of information about what the unconditioned element is not: it is neither skilful nor unskilful, associated neither with feeling nor with cognition, neither resultant nor giving result, does not require any object, is not classified as past, present or future, and so on, in accordance with the mātikā’s couplets and triplets.223 This in itself does not add much to our sense of nibbāna. The point is that the text articulates what the unconditioned element is totally different from, namely, the five khandhas. In the cūḷantara-duka’s couplets saṅkhata/asaṅkhata and sappaccaya/appaccaya the first term is explained with reference to the five khandhas, whereas the second term relates to the unconditioned element alone.224 This recurs in the Mahantara-duka, in the first three couplets of which the first term again refers to the five khandhas, while the unconditioned element is posed in opposition to these. Since nibbāna without remainder of clinging is the complete cessation of the five khandhas, the unconditioned element is totally different from the khandhas, and hence also excludes the mind-body complex: nothing that is predicable of this complex is attributable to the unconditioned element.225 Even more striking is the fact that the above three Mahantara-duka couplets – with/without an object; citta/not-citta; cetasika/not-cetasika – are but a different arrangement of the four fundamental categories of the later Abhidhamma: rūpa, citta, cetasika and nibbāna.226 The Dhammasaṅgaṇi here anticipates the idea of nibbāna as a distinct category of Buddhist thought, thus taking a consequential step beyond the Nikāyas’ elusive approach to the nature and status of nibbāna within Buddhist conceptual scheme.

Here for the first time nibbāna is conveyed by a positive qualification: since both the conditioned and the unconditioned are subsumed under the wider category of dhamma, nibbāna is a dhamma, an object of mental cognitive awareness about the intension and status of which questions can be raised. Nibbāna is an object of
thought among other dhammas: it is not a special object of thought, but a special dhamma. Accordingly, it is said to be the only thing that does not belong to the five khandhas, yet belongs both to the sphere of mental data (dhammāyatana) and to the element of mental data (dhammadhātu). Although inaccessible to discursive thought, it is an object of thought; though not a thought (na citta), it is a dhamma, and though not a sankhata dhamma, is asankhata dhamma. Nibbāna in this context is established as sui generis: it is the one and only unconditioned dhamma, and hence it excludes whatever makes up experience as we know it, all temporal and spatial relations, and all other dhammas that may appear in consciousness.

Yet this is not because nibbāna is a-kammatic (for there are other dhammas that do not generate future kamma, namely, kiriyā-cittas), or because it is unconscious, but because it defies categorization and undermines the very possibility of conceptualization: to gain insight into nibbāna is to grasp the inadequacy of conceptual thought and language. Having realized the fiction and imaginative creation inherent to our cognitive apparatus, the awakened mind breaks up the apparently solid world that we normally construct for ourselves. Like the Upaniṣads, as Collins notes, Buddhism describes the ultimate religious goal as transcending time, but within the Abhidhamma framework the sequence of the three times is secondary, generated in and by the process of conditioned and conditioning dhammas. If the process is arrested, time will not exist. Since all dhammas excepting nibbāna are ‘past’, ‘present’ or ‘future’, nibbāna is also liberation from time. Piatigorsky comments in this context that the continuity of the dhammas is but a method of naturalization used to apprehend them as ‘units of a conscious being’, and that the recurring expression ‘past, present and future dhammas’ by no means asserts that there is time where there are the dhammas: on the contrary, it is the dhammas that we represent as time in our own ‘representational’ consciousness, or rather, ‘time’ figures as a secondary consciousness with respect to the dhammas.

The canonical Abhidhamma, then, agrees that nibbāna is a dhamma and attempts to specify its nature or individuality as such. This, once again, indicates the tradition’s interest in the intension of this dhamma’s individuality: the focus is on what the unconditioned element signifies and on its uniqueness; on what it means to occur as the single unconditioned dhamma. The Dhammasaṅgani’s epistemologically oriented account is representative of the early, formative period of the Abhidhamma and is followed very closely in other canonical Abhidhamma texts, such as the Vibhaṅga, the Dhātukathā and the Patṭhāna. The subsequent, post-canonical tradition, however, invested this account with a metaphysics from which it drew far-reaching conclusions regarding the ontological status of the unconditioned element.

So far all the dhammas we have referred to have been sabhāva-possessing. But the post-canonical dhamma analysis also accommodates dhammas that lack sabhāva (asabhāva-dhamma): these encompass mentally constructed concepts (paññatti), such as space (ākāsa) and time (kāla), as well as the attainment of cessation (nirodha-samāpatti). Interestingly, nibbāna as the unconditioned
dhamma is sabhāva-possessing. For the developed Abhidhamma this means not only that nībbāna emerges with an own-nature that makes it totally different from any other dhamma, but that this quidditative own-nature is also the cause and principle of its occurrence as a distinguishable event in actuality. In its standard discussion of nībbāna the Visuddhimagga refutes the view that nībbāna is non-existent along with the claims that it is equivalent to mere absence of the aggregates or of the defilements. Instead it proclaims that nībbāna alone is permanent (nicca):

It is because it is uncreated (appabhava) that it is free from ageing and death. It is because of the absence of its creation and of its ageing and death that it is permanent.

The text then quotes the famous verses of the Itivuttaka 37 and the Udāna 80 (‘There is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unconditioned…’), observing that ‘Nībbāna is not non-existent as regards sabhāva in the ultimate sense.’ Explicitly this statement admits merely that nībbāna should not be considered as non-existent, but implicitly it endows nībbāna with a mode of occurrence of a distinct event that has a referent. Nībbāna has such a mode of occurrence in virtue of its sabhāva, which is devoid of everything that belongs to all the conditioned and constructed dharmas and which here may be rendered as ‘own-essence’, for in this context sabhāva is the principle and determinant of the way nībbāna eventuates rather than its epistemological individuator. The Mahātikā to the Visuddhimagga comments on this passage:

The Teacher has demonstrated the existence of nībbāna in the ultimate sense […] Just as owing to a complete understanding that from sensual desires and from materiality [i.e., lokiya dhamma], which have states superior to them, an escape is made known that is their opposite and whose own-essence is devoid of them, so there must exist an escape that is the opposite of, and whose own-essence is devoid of all conditioned dharmas, all of which have the aforesaid own-essence, and it is this escape that is the unconditioned element.

The post-canonical Abhidhamma manifests a remarkable transition towards the articulation of the cause of nībbāna’s reality and its occurrence as an individual dhamma. This doctrinal development culminates in the commentarial finalization of the meta-categorization of the dharmas into four broad categories, a fourfold schema that encompasses both the conditioned and the unconditioned: the former under the three categories of citta, cetasika and rūpa, the latter under the eighty-second dhamma that is the unconditioned element as a one-membered category. We have already explained that a categorial system highlights the singularity of its members; the fact that each category embraces distinct individuals. A categorization prescribes the different ways of calling up subsistent items for discussion by assigning them categorial designations, but ontologically it makes available to
its users the fundamental kinds of being. Collins notes that ‘Although nirvana is “wholly other” than all Conditioned Existents, as an item of the Buddhist scholastic classification scheme it can be categorized like any other dhamma.’\textsuperscript{238} Nibb\texttilde{}na as a category is a cognizable object of thought that can be referred to, but also a certified actuality, for its inclusion as a sabh\texttilde{}ava-possessing dhamma in the dhamma meta-categorization establishes not only its mode of being expressed as the subject of a propositional affirmation, but also its mode of occurrence as an actually existing individual.

Focusing on the principle of the dhammas’ individuality rather than on the mere question of the intension of their individuation, the post-canonical Abhidhammikas sought not only to distinguish nibb\texttilde{}na as the single unconditioned dhamma within the entirety of what occurs in experience, but also to account for its actuality as an individual event in the array of arisen occurrences. The classifications embodied in the extant totality formulas fell short of this objective, for they could not guarantee nibb\texttilde{}na’s complete exclusivity in thought and in actuality vis-à-vis all other dhammas. Hence the Abhidhammikas broached a new categorization in terms of dhammas, in which nibb\texttilde{}na is a single category. In fact, nibb\texttilde{}na can be placed under the dhamm\texttilde{}yatana and the dhammadh\texttilde{}atu only when the āyatana and dh\texttilde{}ātu formulas are taken separately, not when the khandh\texttilde{}yatanaadh\texttilde{}atu threefold scheme is taken as a unified m\texttilde{}ātik\texttilde{}. The three totality formulas are seen as overlapping with each other, and hence the dhamma base in both the twelve āyatanas and the eighteen dh\texttilde{}ātus corresponds to vedan\texttilde{}, saññ\texttilde{}a and sañkh\texttilde{}ra in the five khandhas. This, however, would have made nibb\texttilde{}na automatically correspond to either vedan\texttilde{}, saññ\texttilde{}a or sañkh\texttilde{}ra – a result that could not be permitted because nibb\texttilde{}na was said to be wholly different from the khandhas.\textsuperscript{239} The Abhidhammikas’ solution, then, was found in the form of a dhamma meta-categorization that subsumes all three totality formulas.

The history of the Therav\texttilde{}da Abhidhamma, then, reflects a shift in metaphysical foundation and epistemological approach. The canonical Abhidhamma framework is concerned with the individuation of one’s mind – an endeavour that emphasizes the intension of the dhammas’ individuality and is, at bottom, epistemological. Conjoined with the Abhidhamma’s newly advocated event metaphysics, the analysis of the concept of individuality paved the way for conceptual realism. This led the post-canonical Abhidhamma into pursuing a different question regarding the principle of the dhammas’ individuality, which had ontological implications. Seeking the foundations of individuality in the dhammas qua individuals themselves while incorporating the doctrines of sabh\texttilde{}ava and momentariness, the post-canonical Abhidhamma not only attempted to account for the nature of one’s mind, but also to establish the indubitable correlates of thought and speech in reality. It was thus gradually drawn into espousing a naturalistic explanation of dhammas as actual events that are the fundamental constituents of the phenomenal world. Yet this explanation supports a metaphysics of mind rather than a comprehensive ontology; if this metaphysics of mind eventually yielded an ontology, then the latter is a sort of psychological ontology.\textsuperscript{240}
The Abhidhamma doctrinal evolution is also accompanied by a comprehensive theory of causation, or rather of relationships of causal conditioning (paccaya), as explicated in the seventh book of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, the Paṭṭhāna. We have seen in Chapter 2 that basic to process philosophy is the category of relatedness (rather than mere relation), and indeed the Paṭṭhāna theory of paccaya must have been a natural outgrowth of the Abhidhamma event metaphysics that may be subsumed under the category of process philosophy. Now both causes and events, unlike objects and facts, stand in temporal relations to one another, while events are perhaps the most natural items to serve as the terms of causal interrelations.241 The Paṭṭhāna theory of paccaya is also subject to the Abhidhamma’s concern with the problem of individuation, attesting to its interest in both the intension and the principle of the dhammas’ individuality. The next chapter explores this theory as part of a broader investigation into the Theravādin notion of causation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Strawson 1971: 9.
5 Strawson 1971: 23 and 16.
6 I have borrowed the titles of these two questions from Witt 1989: 7.
8 Quinton 1973: 8. In fact, identity has been included as part of the medieval scholastic standard definition of individuality. Cf. §4.1.2 below.
9 Quine 1969: 23 and 2.
10 Davidson 1969: 84.
11 Unlike Strawson, I do not employ ‘particulars’ exclusively to denote empirical, sensible objects.
14 Castañeda 1975: 133–5. Castañeda further claims here that what accounts for the individuality of an individual need not be also what differentiates it from any other entity. It is properties that differentiate, though they do not individuate.
15 For example, Euthyphro 5d, 6d–e; Meno 72c–d; Phaedo 74–5; Republic VII 514ff.; Theaetetus 186a–e (the criticism of sense perception), all in Plato 1961. For a discussion of Plato’s theory of Forms see Field 1969: 17ff.; Allen 1970: 67ff.
16 Philebus 12e, 15a–b in Plato 1961.
18 Aristotle 1963 (Categories): 1b6–7, 3b12; 1966: 1000a1–2. I shall further deal with the Categories below.
19 Frede 1987: 51–3. An exception to this rule are homogeneous stuff and collections, such as water, a lump of gold, or a pile of stones.
20 Aristotle 1963 (Categories): 1a20–b6 and 2b6: ‘So if primary substances did not exist, it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist.’ Cf. §2.2.2 above.
21 In Boethius’s texts we find the first explicit references in the early medieval period to the problem of individuation. Gracia 1994: 21–4; 1988b: 261–3.
22 Gracia 1988a: 27–42.
25 See §2.1.3, n. 58 above.
26 A given occurrence of *citta* can, however, be an object of consciousness: for instance, the *citta* of the second formless attainment, that is, the base of infinite consciousness (*viññānāśīla*), takes as its object the *citta* of the first formless attainment – that is, the base of infinite space (*ākāsānāśīla*) that has as its own object the concept of infinite space and partakes in its infinity – and contemplates it just as ‘infinite consciousness’. Likewise, the *citta* of the base of the fourth formless attainment, neither-conceptualization-nor-non-conceptualization (*nevasaññāsaññāyatana*), in which all the concomitant mental factors are so subtle that they cannot be described as either existent or non-existent, takes as its object the consciousness of the base of nothingness (*ākāśaṃññāyatana*), the third formless attainment.
28 NPED s.v. *avacara*.
30 Vism 139ff. (IV 79ff.). On the ten *kāsinās* see 170ff. (Ch. V). The *suttas*, by distinction, enumerate four *jāna*, with the second *jāna* eliminating both *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the third and fourth *jānas* equivalent to the fourth and fifth *jānas* of the Abhidhamma: e.g. S II 210–11, III 236–7, IV 263–6; D I 73–6, II 186.
31 Vism 326ff. (Ch. X). That Buddhaghosa presents the four formless attainments as refinements of the fourth *jāna* is indicated by his introducing the forty *kammaṭṭhānas* or ‘meditation subjects’. Ibid.: 110ff. (III 103 ff.).
32 Abhidh-av 2; Abhidh-s 15 and Vism 452–3 (XIV 83–5): when accompanied by happiness and associated with knowledge it is either uninstigated or instigated; or it is accompanied by happiness, dissociated from knowledge and is likewise uninstigated or instigated; the same four alternatives arise when accompanied by equanimity. The commentary to the Abhidh-s explains ‘instigation’ as ‘What prepares and equips the consciousness in the form of furnishing it with energy […] It is that exertion of oneself or others which precedes by way of giving assistance to a consciousness that is slowing down in a particular action.’ Trans. by Wijeratne and Gethin 2002: 13. For example, when a man gives a gift on account of being urged on by others, then his consciousness is instigated: Abhidh-av 3–4 and Vism XIV 84.
33 Abhidh-av 6–7; Abhidh-s 1 and Vism 454 (XIV 89–91).
34 Dhs 242; Dhs-a 46 and 154. The idea of *hetu* as cause will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter, as part of the discussion of the *Paṭṭhāna* theory of *paccaya*.
35 Abhidh-av 7–10; Abhidh-s 2 and Vism 454–6 (XIV 94–102).
36 For example, Dhs 120–4; Vibh 106, 108–10 and 182–4.
38 When the latter is accompanied by happiness rather than by equanimity it occurs only in *arahants*. Abhidh-av 12–13; Abhidh-s 2–3; Vism 456–7 (XIV 106–9).
39 Abhidh-av 4–5, 10, 13 (the explanation of the form sphere), 5, 10, 14 (formless) and 5, 11 (transcendent); Abhidh-s 3 (form), 3–4 (formless and transcendent); Vism XIV 86, 103, 109 (form) 87, 104, 109 (formless) and 88, 105 (transcendent).
40 Dhs 9–124.
42 Ibid.: 183–4: katame dhammā bhāvanāya pahātabbā? katame dhammā dassanena pahātabbā? katame dhammā bhāvanāya pahātabhahetukā? pp. 185–6: katame dhammā hīnā? katame dhammā majjhīmā? katame dhammā paññītā? katame dhammā micchattaniyātā? There are eight micchattas, namely, the eight wrong qualities enumerated under the anāriya-magga, by contrast to the sammatha or righteousness of the noble path (e.g. D II 353, III 254; A II 221). There is also a list of ten micchattas, adding wrong knowledge (micchānāna) and wrong liberation (micchāvimuttii): D III 290; Vism 683 (XXII 50).

43 C.A.F. Rhys Davids 1997 (Dhs trans.): xxxvii.

44 Cf. §3.1.1, n. 19 and §3.2.2, n. 111 above.

45 Abhidh-av 29; Abhidh-s 5; Abhidh-s-mht 77–9.

46 Abhidh-av 4: sattarasa-sahassāni āve satāni asiti ca/ kāmāvacara-puññāni bhavaṅṭi ti viniddise// ‘One should distinguish the 17,280 kinds of sensuous-sphere merit.’ The sub-commentaries (Abhidh-av-† B'CSCD 205ff. and Abhidh-av-‡ B'CSCD 7) explain that this tremendous number is the result of multiplying eight kinds of citta by the following variables: ten kinds of meritorious action (puññakriyā), six kinds of object (ārammanā), four kinds of dominant effect on the mind (adhipati), three kinds of kamma and three kinds of quality (i.e. inferior, mediocre and excellent: hīna, majjhīma, paññīta).


52 Dhs 9: katame dhammā kusalā? yasmiṁ samaye kāmāvacaraṁ kusalaṁ cittaṁ uppannam hoti somanassasahagatam ūṇāsanampayuttaṁ rūpārammaṇam vā saddāraṁmaṇam vā gandhāraṁmaṇam vā rasāraṁmaṇam vā phoṭhābāraṁmaṇam vā dharmāraṁmaṇaṁ vā yaṁ yaṁ vā pañārabba, tasmiṁ samaye (1) phasso hoti, (2) vedanā hoti, (3) saññā hoti, (4) cetanā hoti, (5) cittaṁ hoti, (6) vitakko hoti, (7) vicāro hoti, (8) ṗiti hoti, (9) sukhaṁ hoti, (10) cittass’ ekaggatā hoti, [...] (51) sati hoti, (52) sampājanāññāṁ hoti, (53) samatho hoti, (54) vipassanā hoti, (55) pāgāho hoti, (56) avikkhepo hoti; ye vā pana tasmiṁ samaye aṇīne pi atthi paṭiccasaṁuppānaṁ ārāpino dharmā – ime dhammā kusalā.


54 Ibid.: 17ff.

55 Ibid.: 17–18.

56 Ibid.: 25–6. Also Dhs-a 155: dharmā va ete dhammadattā asārā aparānyayakā ti imissā suññatāya dipanathaṁ vutta. ‘Only dharmas are spoken of in order to show this emptiness because they are mere dharmas with no substance, with no guiding principle.’


59 Dhs 10: katamā tasmiṁ samaye cittass’ ekaggatā hoti? yā tasmiṁ samaye cittaṁ āthi saññhi avaṭṭhi avissāhaṁ avikkhepo avissāhatamānasatā samatho samādhindriyāṁ samādhibalaṁ sammāsamādhi – ayaṁ tasmiṁ samaye cittass’ ekaggatā hoti.

60 Dhs-a 118–19.

61 Ibid.: 248: cittass’ ekaggatā hotī ti pānātipātādīsu pi avikkhittabhāvena cittassa ekaggatā hoti. manussā hi cittaṁ samādhāhitvā avikkhitā hūvā avirajjhamāṇāni satthāni pānasarīresu nīpātenti, susamāhitā paresaṁ santakam haranti, ekarasena cittaṁ micchācāraṁ āpajjanti. evaṁ akusalapavatīyam pi cittass’ ekaggatā hoti.
'One-pointedness of mind is concentration in virtue of its being free from distraction when taking life, etc. Concentrating the mind and being free from distraction, people throw unerring weapons on the bodies of creatures. Being well concentrated they steal others’ property. With mind [fixed on] a single function they fall into misconduct. Hence one-pointedness of mind is also present in the operation of immorality.'


64 Dhs-a 259: cittass’ ekaggatāniddese yasmā idaṃ dubbalaṃ cittam pavattīṭhitimat-takam ev’ ettha hoti, tasmiṃ saṃsthiti ti ādīni avatvā cittassa thīti ti ekam eva padam vuttam. ten’ eva ca kāraṇa uddesavāre pi saṃādhīdriyam ti ādī na vuttaṃ.

65 Dhs 53; Dhs-a 362.

66 Dhs-a 177–8. The commentary distinguishes ten different kinds of equanimity (p. 172).


68 Dhs 121; Dhs-a 295; Nett 100. Gethin 1992a: 140–5.

69 Predominating over or being unshakeable by such states as distrust, idleness, negligence, distraction and confusion. Paṭis 1 16–17; Vism 679 (XXII 37).


71 Dhs 56ff.: katame dhammā kusalā? yasmiṃ samaye kāmāvacarāṃ kusalam cittam uppannaṃ hoti somanassasahagataṃ naṇasampayuttam hiṇāṃ...majjhīmaṃ...pañitam...pe...chandādhipeyyaṃ hiṇāṃ...majjhīmaṃ...pañitam...pe...vīriyādhipeyyaṃ hiṇāṃ...majjhīmaṃ...pañitam...cittādhipeyyaṃ hiṇāṃ...majjhīmaṃ...pañitam...pe...vīmamsāadhipeyyaṃ hiṇāṃ...majjhīmaṃ...pañitam, tasmiṃ samaye dhammā phasso hoti...pe...avipakkhepo hoti...pe...ime dhammā kusala. For a detailed discussion of the four bases of success see Gethin 1992a: 81–103.

72 Dhs-a 211–12: tān’ti pi ayūhanavasen’ eva veditabbāni. yassa hi ayūhanakkhaṇe chando va hiṇo hoti, vīriyaṃ vā, cittam vā, vīmāṃsā vā, taṃ hiṇām nāma. yassa te dhammā majjhīma c’e eva pañītā, ca taṃ majjhīmaṃ c’ eva pañīṭaṅ ca. ‘They [i.e., “low”, “medium” and “excellent”] should be understood in the sense of endeavouring. When, at the moment of endeavouring, the desire to act, vigour, thought or investigation are low, that [cittā] is called “low”. When those dhāmmas are medium and excellent, that [cittā] is medium and excellent respectively.’

73 In the case of kusala vipāka cittā the Dhammasāṅgani again renders this dhamma only as ‘endurance of mind’, and the Atthasālīni explains this curtailed definition in exactly the same manner as it does on the occasion of the eleventh unskilful cittā. Dhs-a 262 on Dhs 88: cittass’ ekaggatāniddese cittassā thīti ti ekam eva padam vuttam. idam pi hi dubbalaṃ cittam pavattīṭhitimat- ev’ ettha labbhati, saṃsthiti avatthīti bhāvam pūpuniṃtaṃ na sakkoṭi. ‘In the exposition of one-pointedness of mind one term alone, “endurance of mind”, is stated, for this [dhamma], too, is weak, and only the degree of endurance [necessary] for the operation of the cittā is obtained. [Hence] it is unable to obtain the state of stability and steadfastness.’

74 Had it not been so, it would have been impossible to draw basic distinctions, such as that between the first type of skilful sensuous-sphere cittā and the first type of skilful form-sphere cittā, for there is no difference between the two in terms of which dhāmmas contribute to them. Gethin 1994: 26 and 28.

75 Ibid.: 27. Emphasis in the original.

76 Piatigorsky 1984: 3.

77 For a typical presentation of the dharma theory as a theory of types delineating ontologically primitive categories see, for instance, Arnold 2003: 143.

78 Piatigorsky 1984: 183. Emphases in the original.

For example, Vibh 87: *tattha katamā cakkhuviññānadāhātu? cakkhuḥ ca paticca rūpe ca uppaṭijati cittaṃ mano mānasam hadayaṃ pāṇḍarāṃ mano manāyatanaṃ manin-driyam viññānaṃ viññānakkhandho tajjā cakkhuviññānadāhātu – ayam vuccati cakkhuviññānadāhātu. ‘What is the element of visual cognitive awareness? Depending on the eye and visible objects, there arise consciousness, mind, intention, heart, clarity, ideation, the mind base, the controlling faculty of mind, cognitive awareness, the aggregate of consciousness and, on the ground of these, the element of visual cognitive awareness. This is called “element of visual cognitive awareness”.

Ibid.: 138–43 and 144–64.

Ibid.: 164ff. The text does not contain a full exposition and it is not exactly clear how many of the *Dhammasaṅgani*’s variables it takes into account. See Gethin 1992b: 159.

84 Ibid.
85 Vibh 53–4.
86 Ibid.: 55ff.
87 Ibid.: 61.
89 Wright 1993: 1 and 3.
90 In contemporary philosophy of mind this is called ‘sortal concept’. See Lowe 1989: 1–5.
91 Cf. §4.1 above, esp. n. 7.
92 Although there are scholars who mistrust this treatise as a reliable source for establishing the proper nature of the categories. Frede 1987: 29–33.
93 Aristotle 1963 (*Categories*): 1b25–27.
94 Frede 1987: 29–35. The table of categories is also presented at the opening of Chapter 9, Book I of the *Topics* (Aristotle 1997), where they are said to be the general kinds of predication applied to the four predicates: genus, definition, property and accident. This sense recurs later on at 109b5, 141a4 and 181b27. Wedin 2000: 71 and 115–19.
100 Cf. §4.1 above, esp. n. 12.
102 Gajendragadkar 1988: 12.
103 Cover and O’Leary-Hawthorne 1999: 11.
104 Ibid.: 15.
105 MW s.v. *padārtha*; see *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.1, as well as Vātsyāyana’s introductory bhāṣya and Uddyotakara’s *vārttika* II in Jhā 1999: 3 and 38 respectively.
106 *Nirukta* 1.12 lines 15–16: *iti imāni catvāri padajātāny anukrāntāni nāmākhyaśte c’ opasarganipātās ca/ ‘These are the four kinds of linguistic components to have been dealt with in their proper order: noun, verb, preverb and particle.’ This fourfold division, Matilal notes (1990: 18), was a legacy of the *samhitā* or ‘connected text’, as uttered in the recitation of the Rg Vedic hymns, into its constituent words called the *pada* text. See also Narain 1976: 115; Coward and Kunjunni Raja 1990: 107–10. 
107 *Nirukta* 1.3.2–3: *[upasargāḥ] uccāvacāḥ padārthā bhavanti iti Gārgyah/ tad ya esu padārthah prāhur ime tam nāmākhyaśayārthavikaraṇam/According to Sarup’s index to the *Nirukta* (1929), this is the single occurrence of the term *padārtha* in the text. 
108 Bronkhorst 1998b s.v. ‘Patañjali’, §2: ‘The linguistic units that have meaning’. Bronkhorst cites Pāṇini’s *sūtra* 1.2.45 as follows: *arthavad adhātur apratyayaḥ prātipadikam/’ What is meaningful, but is neither a verbal root nor an affix, is a nominal stem.’ See also ibid. §3: ‘The search for minimal meaningful units.’
This rule covers not only nouns like ‘tree’, which refers to each individual tree, but

Matilal 1990: 19.

MB I.16.17.

Ibid.: I.7.8–9 and 22–3: atha kam punah padārtha matvai ‘sa vigrahah kriyate siddhe
śabde ‘rthe sambandhe ce ‘ti/ākṛtip ity āha/ kuta etat/ākṛtip hi nityā dravyamaniyam//' [...] tad api nityām yasmiṁs tattvam na vihanyate/ kim punas tattvam/tadbhāvas-
tattvam/ ākṛtāvā ‘pi tattvam na vihanyate// ‘In the compound śabdārtvasambandhe,
which is applied to words’, their referents and their relation being eternal, what is the
referent of a word? The reply is that the referent is a generic form. For what reason?
Because the generic form is eternal, whereas an individual substance is impermanent.
[...] Eternal is also that in which the essence is not destroyed. What is essence? Essence
is its being. In the case of a generic form too the essence is not destroyed.’

Ibid.: I.7.17–18: ākṛtiranyā c ‘ānyā ca bhavati dravyam punas tadbh eva/ ākṛtyapamardena
dravyam ev ‘avāśyayate// ‘The generic form may be this or other, but the substrate is
the same. With the destruction of the generic form the substrate remains the same.’ See Taber
1998 s.v. ‘Universals, Indian Theories of’, §1: ‘Universals as the meaning of words’.

MB I.6.8–11: kim punar ākṛtipa padārthā āhospvid dravyam/ ubhayam ity āha/ kathām
jñāyate/ ubhayathā hy ācāryena sūtraṁ paśhitāni ‘ākṛtipi padārtham matvā
jātyākhyāyām ekasmin bahuvacanam anyatrasyam [Pā. I.2.58] ity ucyate/ dravyam
padārtham matvā sarāpānām [Pā. 1.2.64] ity ekasesa ārābhhyate// ‘Is a word’s refer-
ent an individual substance or a generic configuration? “Both”, he says. How is it
known? The teacher reads the sūtras in two ways: taking the generic configuration as
the referent, he formed sūtra 1.2.58: “Nouns may optionally take plural endings when
referring to a genus (jātī).” Taking an individual substance as the referent, he formed
sūtra 1.2.64: “In the case of words alike in form and declensional suffix, only one may
be left” [so that the plural form is really an abbreviation of the same word iterated sev-


This rule covers not only nouns like ‘tree’, which refers to each individual tree, but
extends to many other cases: for instance, Matilal (1971: 98–9) mentions Pā. 1.2.70,
which states that pitarau, ‘parents’, combines pītṛ and mātr.


MB I.371.3 on Pā. 2.1.1.21: dravyam ti loke ‘dhiṇarāṇam ity upacaryate/ MB
II.413.8 on Pā. 5.3.55 refers to dravya as the abode of attributes (gunagrhaṇam), and
later on (II.415.13) as the locus where attributes ‘sleep’ and as ‘that which possesses

Patañjali, then, introduces two notions of substance, which, as Halbfass notes (1992: 91),
correspond to one of the fundamental ambiguities in the Aristotelian conception of sub-
stance, namely, the dichotomy of hypokeimenon, ‘substrate’, and tōde ti, ‘individual’.

MB II.366.14 on Pā. 5.1.119.5: śabdasparśarūpasagandhā gunaṁ tato ‘nyad
dravyam/"
127 MB II.198.7–9: pravṛttiḥ khaly api nityā/ na hiha kaś cit svasminā ātmani mūhūrtam apy avatiśṭhate/ vardhate va yāvad anena vardhitavyam apāyena vā yujyate/. Additional verses Bronkhorst mentions in this context (1987: 59) are found in the commentary to Pā. 3.2.123.5 (II.123.24–124.9).
129 Cf. n. 112–13 above.
130 MB II.104.2 on Pā. 3.2.49.3.
132 Ibid.: 59–64.
133 The precise interpretation of the terms vyañjanakāya, nāmakāya and padakāya varies in the later Sarvāstivādin texts. One peculiarity is that the word pada in padakāya came to denote ‘sentence’, or ‘verse foot’, and accordingly the accepted Sarvāstivādin list contains three elements that correspond to phonemes (vyañjanakāya), words (nāmakāya) and sentences (padakāya) respectively.
134 The Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika linguistic dharmas have been discussed by P.S. Jaini (1959), who claims that they owe their origin to the influence of the theory of sphoṭa and of the Mīmāṃsā theory of eternal words.
135 Bronkhorst 1987: 65. On another occasion Bronkhorst notes (1998a s.v. ‘Language, Indian Theories of’, §3: ‘The ontological status of composite linguistic units’) that Patañjali’s deviation from Pāṇini in his claiming that words and sentences, not stems and affixes, are meaningful is easily explained by the hypothesis that Patañjali was influenced by the Sarvāstivādins, who had reified phonemes and words (and perhaps sentences), but not stems and affixes, into real, existing dharmas.
136 MB I.181.19–20 on Pā. 1.1.70.5: evam tarhi sphaṭaḥ sabdo dhvanih śabdagnnauḥ/ Also line 23 of this verse: dhvanih sphaṭas ca śabdānām dhvanis tu khalu lakṣyate/ This is considerably different from the later sphaṭa theory, according to which sphaṭa is a meaning-bearing unit. See Matilal 1990: 77ff.; Bronkhorst 1998a s.v. ‘Language, Indian Theories of’, §4: ‘Early sphaṭa theory’; Coward and Kunjunni Raja 1990: 66–7 and 117–18. On the Mīmāṃsā’s and the Vaibhāṣika’s reliance upon the Grammarians’ sphaṭa theory see Frauwallner 1974: 37–9.
137 Jaini 1959.
138 For example, D I 202.
140 Dhs-a 391: ekadhammo sabbadhhammesu nipatati, sabbadhhammā ekadhammasmiṁ nipatanti. kathāṁ? ayaṁ hi nāmapaññatti ekadhammo, so sabbesu catubhāmakadhammesu nipatati. satto pi saṅkhāro pi nāmato muttako nāma natthi.
141 See §2.2.1, n. 76 above.
143 VS 1.1.5: prthivy āpas tejo vāyur ākāśam kālo dig abtā mana iti dravyāni/
145 VS 1.1.15: kriyāgūnavat samavāyikāraṇām iti dravyalakṣaṇam// 1.1.18: dravyagūnakarmanāṁ dravyam kāraṇam sāmānyam/
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146 PDS: 95. The VS’s corresponding list, which contains only seventeen items, is given at sūtra 1.1.6: rūpasagandhasparsāh sankhyāḥ parimānāni prthāktyam samyogavibhāgau paratvāpatravat budhhyayām sukhaduḥkkhe icchādevaya prayatnāś ca gunāḥ/

147 VS 1.1.16: dravyāṣrayy agunavān samyogavibhāgeṣv akāraṇam anapekṣa iti///

148 Ibid.: 1.1.7: utkṣeṇaṁ avakṣeṇaṁ ākūrcaṁ praśaṇaṁ gamanaṁ iti karmāni/

149 Ibid.: 1.1.17: ekadrayaṁ agunam samyogavibhāgesv anapeksakaṇāṇam iti karmalakṣaṇam// Also 1.1.20–2.

150 Ibid.: 1.2.5: dravyatvaṁ guṇatvaṁ karmatvā ca sāmānyāni viśeṣāṅ ca/

151 Ibid.: 1.2.4: bhāvo ‘nuvṛtter eva hetutvāt sāmānyam eva// On the distinction between sāmānya and jāti see Potter 1977: 133–6.


156 VS 1.2.4 (cited in n. 151 above) and 1.2.7–8: sad iti yato dravyaṅgukarmasu sā sattā// dravyaṅgukarmabhyo ‘rthāntaram sattā//


159 PDS 11: sāmānyam dvividham paramaparam c ’ānuvṛtti-pratayakāranaṁ/ tatra param satā mahāviśayavāt sā c ’ānuvṛttier eva hetutvāt sāmānyam eva/ dravyatvadīyaparamapālsaṃyavātā/ tace ca vyāvṛtter api hetutvāt sāmānyam sadviśeṣākhyām api labhate/ Also 311–12: sāmānyam dvividham paramaparam ca/ […] tatra sattāsāmānyam paramanuvṛtti-pratayakāranaṁ eva/[…] sattānusambandhat satsad iti pratyaṅgaṇuvṛtti tasmāt sā sāmānyam eva/ aparām dravyatvagunatvakarmatvādi anuvṛtti-pravṛtti hetutvāt sāmānyam viśeṣaṁ ca bhavati/ See also Frauwallner 1974: 176; Halbfass 1992: 143–4; Matilal 1977b: 94.

160 PDS 16: saṃnām api pādārthānāmastiṣṭvabhādhiyayavijñeyatvāni/See Halbfass 1992: 144. The term astitva had been used as an expression of existential claims in Brahmanical and Buddhist literature prior to Pārasastapāda (for instance, by Nāgārjuna). In particular, the thesis of the knowability and nameability of existents is also propounded by the Nyāya school. On the Nyāya view of this issue see Shaw 1978: 255 and 259; Perrett 1999: 403–4.


162 Halbfass 1992: 78 and 150.


164 Quine’s words in his essay ‘Ontological relativity’ (1969: 55) are: ‘We cannot know what something is without knowing how it is marked off from other things. Identity is thus of a piece with ontology.’ As we have seen above, though, the questions of identity vs. individuality constitute two different philosophical problems, and viśeṣa concerns the latter.

For example, Aristotle 1975 (Posterior Analytics II): Ch. 2.


Frede 1987: 69. To avoid circularity, the essence need not be the essence of the matter at the time of its identification.


§3.2.2, nn. 131 and 123–4 respectively.

§3.1.1, n. 22.

Eco 1999: 17–19; Miller 1979: 476. This view is challenged by Owens 1979: 480. On the various possible usages of the verb ‘to be’ see Lowe 1989: 3.

§3.1.1, nn. 45–6 and §3.2.2.


§3.2.2, nn. 158ff.

For example, Dhs-a 391–2; Vibh-a 387; Vism 441–2 (XIV 25). See also P. Williams 1981: 244.


Ibid.


§3.2.2, nn. 126.

§3.2.2, nn. 157ff.

Vism 457–60 (XIV 111–24), 546–51 (XVII 126–45); Dhs-a 82–106 and 267–87; Vibh-a 155–60; Abhidh-s 17–21.

Cousins 1981: 38ff.


For instance, when the Venerable Sāriputta is asked by the wanderer Jambukhādaka: ‘Friend Sāriputta, it is said “nibbāna, nibbāna”. What now is nibbāna?” he replies: ‘The destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this, friend, is called nibbāna.’ S IV 251–2: nibbānam, nibbānan ti, āvuso sāriputta, vuccati. katamaṁ nu kho, āvuso, nibbānan ti? yo kho, āvuso, rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo – idam vuccati nibbānan ti. Tradition has it that the Buddha introduced the concept of the three fires in his third sermon (Vin I 34–5).


Dhp-a II 163; Vibh-a 433; Vism 509 (XVI 73–4).
207 Modern Buddhist usage tends to restrict nibbāna to the awakening experience and reserve parinibbāna to the passing away of an enlightened person. The Visuddhimagga explains: ‘The Buddha’s goal is one and has no plurality. But it is firstly called “with remainder”, for it is made known in terms of the stilling of the defilements and the remaining karma of past clinging along with its resultant aggregates that are present in one who has reached the goal by means of development. Secondly, it is called “without remainder”, for after the last consciousness of the arahant, who has abandoned arousing future aggregates and hence prevented future karma, there is no further arising of aggregates and those already arisen have disappeared. It is in the sense that there is no remainder of past karma of clinging that the single goal, nibbāna, is called “without remainder”.’

Vism 509 (XVI 73, Naṇamoli’s trans. slightly modified): buddhādīnāṁ nīṭṭhāya visesābhāvato ekāva nīṭhāya yena bhāvanāya pattaṁ, tassa kilesavāpasamam, upādīsesāṁ ca upādāya paññāpāntyattā sāha upādīsesena paññāpiyati ti saupādīsesam. yo c’ assa samudayappahānena upahatayatikammaphalassa carimacicatato ca uddham pavattikkhandhānam anuppādanato, uppannānaṁ ca antaradhānato upādīsesābhāvo, tāṁ upādāya paññāpāntyato naththi ethha upādīseso ti anupādīsesam.

See also Dhp-a II 163. On the two nirvāṇa theory see Hwang 2002: 19ff.


209 D II 36; M I 163. For the term atakkāvacara see It 37; Ud-a 391.

210 Ud 80: athi bhikkhave, tadāyatanam, yattha n’ eva pathavi, na āpo, na tejo, na vāyo, na ākāśānaṁcayatanam, na viññānaṁcayatanam, na aśīṣaṁcayatanam, na nevasaṁcayatanam, na eva yāṁ loko, na paraloko, na ubho candimāsīrīyaṁ, tatr’ āpāham, bhikkhave, n’ eva āgatīm vadāmi, na gatim, na ṭhitim, na cutim, na upapatim; appatītham, appavattam, anārammanam ev’ etam. es’ ev’ anto dukkhasā ti.


212 See Introduction, n. 7.


214 S II 105–6; IV 371.


217 W.D. Kim 1999: 42.

218 M III 63.


220 S IV 359–68 and A I 152. See also A II 34; M I 300.

221 PED s.v. saṁkhāra/saṁkhata; BHSD s.v. saṁskāra/saṁskṛta.


223 Dhs 180–234.


225 Ibid.: 209. Consider the first couplet: katame dhammā sārammaṁ? vedanakkhandho, saññakkhandho, sankhārakkhandho, viññānakkhandho – ime dhammā sārammaṁ. katame dhammā anārammaṁ? saṁvānaṁ ca rūpaṁ, asañkhata ca dhātu – ime dhammā anārammaṁ. See Collins 1998: 175–6; Cousins 1983–4: 98–102. Nibbāna is classified under the dharmāyatana, but is excluded from the five khandhas. Similarly, it is included within the dhamma-dhātu, but is set apart from the khandhas, for example, Vibh 72–3 and 89; Moh 75; Vism 484 (XV 14): dharmāyatanaṁ vedanāsaṅgānāsaṅkhārakkhandhasukumarāpuṇibbānaṁ sabbāvanānattabhedaṁ anekappabhedaṁ.
ti. ‘The mental data sphere is of many kinds when divided according to the particular natures of feeling,apperception,mental formations,subtle matter and nībbāna.’ Also pp. 487–8(XV 31 and 34).


227 Dhātuk 5 and 7: dhāmmapattatāgam jhānādhiṭṭhā [ . . . ] dhāmmapattatā gam jhānādhiṭṭhā. Also Vibh 72: tatthā katamā dhāmmapattatāgam? vedanākkhandho, saññākkhandho, saññhārakkhandho, yaṁ ca rūpāṃ anidassanāppapatīgam dhāmmapattatāgamapāppannam, saññhātā ca dhātū. ‘Therein what is the base of mental data? The aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of conceptualization, the aggregate of mental formations; that invisible, non-impinging form included in the base of mental data; and the unconditioned element.’ Also Vibh 89: tatthā katamā dhāmmapattatā gam? vedanākkhandho, saññākkhandho, saññhārakkhandho, yaṁ ca rūpāṃ anidassanāppapatīgam dhāmmapattatāgamapāppannam, saññhātā ca dhātū. ‘Therein what is the element of mental data? The aggregate of feeling . . . that invisible, non-impinging form included in the base of mental data; and the unconditioned element. [. . .] Therein what is the element of mental data? The destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called “the unconditioned element” and “the element of mental data base”’.

228 Piatigorsky 1984: 185.

229 Kv 317: dve asanikkhatāti ti. āmantā. [. . .] dve nibbānāti ti na h’ evam vattabbe [. . .] atthi dvinnaṃ nibbānānaṃ uccanācītāh hīnapaṇītattā ukkāmsāvākamso simā vā bheda vā rājī vā antarikā vā ti? na h’ evam vattabbe. ‘If you assert that there are two unconditioned [ . . . ] then there are two nibbānas. This should not be said [. . .] If you assent, is it possible that of the two nibbānas one is high the other low, one is sublime the other inferior? Is there a boundary, or a division, or a line, or an interval between them? This should not be said.’ See also Kv 225.


232 For example, Kv 317ff.

233 The Vibh gives an identical account in its treatment of the truths, taking the third truth as equivalent to the unconditioned element (e.g. Vibh 112–15; 404ff.). Dhātuk 9ff. does the same. The Paṭṭhāna deals with nibbāna as an object condition (ārammanapaccaya). Some of the material is also found in the Pātis.

234 Vism 507–9 (XVI 67–73), esp. 67–8: api ca nibbānam natthi ti na vattabbam. kasmā? patippattiyā vaṁhahābhāvāpajjanato. ‘Again, it should not be said that nibbāna does not exist. For what reason? Because it then follows that the way would be futile.’


236 Ibid.: 509 (XVI 74): parammatthena sabhāvato nibbānam nāvijjamānaṁ.

237 Vism-mht B′CSCD 534 (on Vism XVI 74): evam ettha satthā parammatthato nibbānassa atthibhāvam pavedesī [. . .] yathā parinibbāyatāya sauttarāṇaṁ kāmānaṁ rūpānaṁ ca patippakkabhūtaṁ tabbhidhurasabbhāvaṁ nissaraṇaṁ paśūyati, evam sabhāvānaṁ sabbesam pi saṅkhataadhammaṁ paṭippakkabhūtena tabbhidhurasabhāvena nissaraṇena bhavitabbam. yaṁ ca taṁ nissaraṇaṁ, sā asanikkhātā dhātū. Based on Nāṇamoli’s trans. (1991: 825–6, n. 18) with slight modifications. See also Mil 270, which says that nibbāna really exists and should not be referred to as mere absence: tumhe nathidhammaṁ nibbānam apaddaṁattho natthi nibbānam ti. atthi, mahārāja, nibbānam.

238 Collins 1998: 175.


240 On this point see Piatigorsky 1984: 188.

241 Quinton 1979: 208.
Causation is a salient motif in Indian philosophy: reflections on the topic of causation date back to the Vedic period and, along with a host of derivative questions regarding moral responsibility and human destiny, subsequently come to play a major role in almost every Indian school of thought, orthodox and heterodox alike. The present chapter deals with the development of the Buddhist notion of causation, or rather the early Buddhist principle of conditioning, namely, *idappaccayatā*. The later tradition draws explicit connections between causation and the early teaching of dependent co-arising, that is, *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and indeed scholarly investigations of dependent co-arising often emphasize its role as a generalized, logical principle of abstract conditioning applicable to all phenomena. Nevertheless, as Collett Cox notes, the fact that the later Buddhist tradition examines dependent co-arising in a context determined by the broader topic of causation cannot be taken as an indication of the relative importance or priority of that topic within Buddhist tradition as a whole. Contextual sensitivity thus demands that we examine the role of dependent co-arising from its earliest appearance in Buddhist teaching, as well as its relation to other aspects of later Buddhist doctrine. The first division of this chapter undertakes to examine in what sense dependent co-arising functions as a causal principle and whether the rendering ‘causation’ is appropriate in this context. The second division investigates the doctrinal transition from the Nikāya view of the principle of conditioning to the canonical Abhidhamma’s systematized account of this principle. The Abhidhammikas elaborated on the doctrine of dependent co-arising and supplemented it with a broader theory of relationships of causal conditioning (*paccaya*). Yet is this theory a theory of causation at all? Underlying this chapter is the argument that the Abhidhamma theory of relations of causal conditioning forms one aspect of the overall intellectual shift from the Nikāya worldview to the Abhidhamma framework, and that since this theory is subject to the Abhidhamma metaphysics as embodied in the *dhamma* theory, it centres on the individuation of the mental rather than on causation as such.
5.1 DEPENDENT CO-ARISING AND THE EARLY BUDDHIST NOTION OF CAUSATION: A REASSESSMENT

5.1.1 The intellectual backdrop: the pre-Buddhist doctrines of causation

In relation to the general early history of Indian religion, the Buddha and his teaching must be seen against an intellectual and social backdrop composed of two major elements: first, the Brahmanical, orthodox tradition, mainly represented by the central teachings of the several pre-Buddhist Upaniṣads that had been extant at that time; second, the contemporary religious milieu constituted by a vast number of wandering ascetics, loosely grouped around various teachers into heterodox sects. Those Brahmins and ascetics endorsed a variety of conflicting ideas about the nature of worldly phenomena. The present section reviews this doctrinal background against which the Buddha presented his concept of causation.

The Indian theoreticians’ concern with causation originated from two main sources: first, the Vedic interest in ritual and in the mechanisms by which certain actions bear fruits; second, the cosmogonic speculations of Vedic thinkers who tried to explain the evolution of the universe. The Vedic outlook was later challenged by a dominant conceptual framework that arose, at least in its part, within the Brahmanical tradition itself and constructed a new symbolic world. Almost all the major intellectual and spiritual movements elaborated their worldviews within this conceptual framework, which is evidenced in the early Upaniṣads. It consists in three fundamental concepts: samsāra, the idea that existence is subject to a round of rebirth, which is a state of bondage and suffering; karma, the idea that ritual and moral actions fuel and determine this process of rebirth; and mokṣa, the idea that liberation from samsāra is possible and is the ultimate goal to which all spiritual effort should be directed. It is this conceptual framework that provides the context for understanding ancient India’s concern with causation. Once this framework gained dominance and mokṣa was acknowledged as the highest ideal, the Indian thinkers sought to account for a universe that allows for the possibility of liberation. Such an account must guarantee that events and actions stand in causal relations to each other. The Indian thinkers thus sought to identify the causal relations that are relevant to liberation.

The inseparability of religious concerns and theoretical-doctrinal interests characterizes Indian Buddhism as well as the primary Brahmanical schools. Setting human experience in samsāra as the starting point of the philosophical discussion would shape an introspective mindset that closely relates the contents discussed to the interior of human experience, causation being no exception. This is markedly different from the line of development of the concept of causation in Western thought that begins with the pre-Socratics, continues with Aristotle and culminates in the works of Hume and Kant. According to this line of thought speculations about the problem of causation are instigated by fascination with the sciences, the paradigm of which is mathematics, rather than with the existential problem of human suffering. Yet the preoccupation of the main Indian religious-philosophical traditions with
experience and soteriology does not necessarily result in psychologism or mysticism. Exactitude, clarity and formal criteria of theoretical investigation can be applied to a formal contents, and Indian philosophy, indeed, abounds with analytical discussions of the veridical status and the nature of the scope of the mental. In the *Nikāyas* the Buddha’s formulaic descriptions of dependent co-arising and the explanation of the origin of suffering are contrasted with four doctrines of causation: the first is the doctrine of ‘done by oneself’ (*sayāmkatam*), or self-agency, according to which suffering depends upon one’s own deeds; the second is the doctrine of ‘done by another’ (*paramkataṃ*), claiming that suffering is determined by factors external to the person; the third is a combination of these two views (*sayāmkatana ca paramkataṇ ca*), arguing that suffering results both from one’s own deeds and from external factors; finally there is the doctrine that refuses to admit the notion of causation as an invariable relation altogether (*asayāmkāram aparamekāram*), claiming that suffering arises fortuitously and is created neither by oneself nor by another. Having classified these four positions, the Buddha rejects them all.

The first doctrine, *sayāmkatam*, implies the view that the effect is not different from the cause but is somehow inherent in it. Its origins can be traced back to the Rg Vedic period and to the Upaniṣadic notions of ātman and evolution. The Rg Vedic hymns do not yet have a clear concept of causality, although they do attest to the fact that the Vedic poets held a belief in the uniformity of nature and that they tried to explain how the ordered universe they witnessed had originated and developed to its present form. Thus various Rg Vedic hymns express the idea that becoming or change is a self-becoming or a self-manifestation of the very same origin in different forms, and so that which changes and that into which it is changed are identical.

The explicit term *hetu* or ‘cause’, however, is first found in one of the more personal and psychological Rg Vedic hymns, wherein the poet refers to himself as a gambler who laments his compulsive attraction to the dice. He confesses that ‘because of a losing throw of the dice I have driven away a devoted wife’.
In the *Upaniṣads* the idea of a self-manifestation of the same origin is further elaborated in terms of an abstract notion of being or existence. A central Upaniṣadic teaching concerns the cosmic homology or correspondence between the essence or true nature of the microcosm, namely, ātman, and the essence or true nature of the macrocosm, that is, brahman. The latter was conceived of as the reality underlying the phenomenal world and was characterized as having a permanent, immutable and unchanging nature.12 In the sixth chapter of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, one of the most famous Upaniṣadic passages, Uddālaka Āruṇi instructs his son on the nature of reality and unfolds the representative Upaniṣadic teaching of substantialism and eternalism. According to this teaching, the world has its origin and unity in existence or being (*sat*), namely, that which exists solely and completely by virtue of its own power of existence; it is the ultimate, irreducible substance in which all entities are a priori contained and with which they are identical.13 Uddālaka maintains that this primal existence, the root and cause of everything, cannot originate, as some think, in non-existence. Rather, it is something that is alive and has the conscious desire ‘to be many’ and to emanate powers from itself.14

The Buddha, however, refusing to admit any metaphysical principle as a common thread holding the moments of encountered phenomena together, rejects the Upaniṣadic notion of an immutable substance or principle underlying the world and the person and producing phenomena out of its inherent power, be it ‘being’, ātman, brahman or ‘god’. Rather, he declares: ‘Kassapa, with reference to what exists from the beginning, [the thought] that “the one who acts is the one who experiences [the result]” amounts to the assertion of eternalism, namely: “suffering is created by oneself”’.15

The second doctrine of causation, *paraṃkatam*, suggests that the effect is a completely different entity from the cause. This view groups various teachings promulgated by non-Buddhists and wandering ascetics, which emerged as a revolt against Vedic ritualism and certain elements of the influential Brahmanical metaphysics. That this position was popular mainly among non-Buddhist religious followers is indicated by the initial verses of the *Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad*, which mention a set of heretical doctrines of causation:

People who make inquiries about brahman say: ‘What is the cause of brahman? Why were we born? By what do we live? On what are we established? Governed by whom, O you who know brahman, do we live in pleasure and in pain, each in our respective situation? Should we regard it as time (*kāla*), as inherent nature (*svabhāva*), as necessity (*niyati*), as chance (*yadṛccāḥ*), as the elements (*bhūtāni*), as the source of birth (*yoni*), or as the Person (*puruṣa*)? Or is it a combination of these?’ But that can’t be, because there is the self.16

The representatives of such teachings are the materialists and the sceptics, generally called Lokāyatas.17 Among them the Cārvākas, whose main proponent is identified as Ajita Kesakambalī, argued that all phenomena are reducible to
transformations of material particles and occur by virtue of matter’s inherent nature, svabhāva.\(^\text{18}\) This view, svabhāva-vāda, or naturalism, is classified in the Nikāyas as a paramkataṃ doctrine because that inherent nature was conceived of as a force at work in material phenomena, a purely physical law and in this sense external to the person and so denying the validity of human exertion as a causal factor.\(^\text{19}\) Others, mainly the Ājīvikas, adhered to determinism (niyati-vāda), leaving no room for human volition or chance occurrence. We are told that Makkhali Gosāla, for instance, taught that

There is no cause, no condition for the defilement of beings, they become defiled without cause or condition. There is no cause, no condition for the purification of beings, they are purified without cause or condition. […] All beings, all that lives, all creatures, all living things are without control, powerless and without vigour; they are changed according to fate, species and nature as they experience happiness or suffering in the six classes of being.\(^\text{20}\)

Pūrṇa Kassapa and Pakudha Kaccāyana are said to have arrived at a similar rejection of a moral account of action.\(^\text{21}\) The Buddha rebuffs the paramkataṃ doctrine for two main reasons: first, it leads to annihilatization while positing an existence which is annihilated. Second, a necessary corollary of this doctrine is the denial of human exertion and moral retribution – an outcome which the Buddha strongly disapproved of. He is recorded as saying: ‘Kassapa, with reference to one stricken by feeling, [the thought] that “the one who acts is one, the one who experiences [the result] is another” amounts to the assertion of annihilatization, namely: “suffering is created by another”.’\(^\text{22}\)

In repudiating the third type of causational doctrine, sayamkatañ ca paramkatañ ca, the likelihood is that the Buddha pointed his criticism at the Jain teaching. The Sūtrakṛtangā, one of the oldest parts of the Śvetāmbara texts (dated to the fifth or fourth centuries BCE), contains references to the various non-Buddhist positions mentioned in the opening sentence of the Śvetāśvatara Upanisad cited above. The Jains did not simply dismiss these positions, but rather argued that each of them had overemphasized the role of a certain factor, such as time, inherent nature etc., and that none of them was tenable when taken individually; only when considered as a group or from different standpoints was their causal status admissible. This assimilative view follows from the Jain non-absolutism, or non-categorical theory of truth (literally ‘many-pointedness theory’, anekānta-vāda), namely, the view that everything has various aspects and hence conflicting theories may each be true from one point of view but false from another. With reference to causation this implies that cause and effect may be both identical and non-identical. A cause has a potential to produce an effect, and so the effect pre-exists in its cause, but at the same time the effect is a real, new entity different from its cause.\(^\text{23}\) In the Nikāyas this assimilative doctrine is not attributed to any specific school, but the Buddha criticizes it all the same.
Logically this doctrine combines two opposite views both refuted by the Buddha, and a valid view cannot be obtained by conjoining two untenable views.24

Finally the Buddha rejects the doctrine of asayamkāram aparāmāram, or rather indeterminism (yadṛcchā), namely, the view that all events are subject to chance occurrence, which undermines the very notion of causation and amounts to a belief in fortuitous origination (adhiccasamuppāda). He relates to the adherents of this view thus: ‘There are, monks, some ascetics and Brahmins who are “Chance-Originationists”, who proclaim that the self and the world are chance-originated.’25 He then classifies this position under the group of ‘wrong views’, for it subverts human volition and moral responsibility, and hence is opposed to the Buddhist principles.26

By using the appellations sayamkata and para, thus referring to the cause in terms of a personal agent, the Buddha argues with the Upaniṣadic notion of ātman. The term kata, a passive participle, introduces the idea of agency, which implies moral responsibility – an ethical issue separate from causation. As we shall see below, the Buddha rejects the idea of an agent, though he is committed to human agency and moral responsibility. His earliest teaching is thus concerned more with ethics than with causation per se. At some point, however – whether during the lifetime of the Buddha himself or of his immediate followers – what is morally good was regarded as intellectually good, so that moral conduct became interchangeable with knowledge of how things truly are, namely, the way phenomena originate and pass away according to causes and conditions.27 Both the ethical and the intellectual dimensions of the Buddha’s teaching are integrated in the paṭiccasamuppāda formula, where they are mainly expressed by the links of craving and ignorance respectively.

In sum, the Buddha’s stance regarding causation is empirical, morally oriented and focused on human responsibility. The Buddha dismisses the particular claims of all his contemporary causational doctrines, but in doing so he rejects something deeper than that. Despite their diversity these doctrines rely, to different degrees, on substance metaphysics. As explained in Chapter 2, substance metaphysics engenders an ontological model on which the phenomenal world is made up of externally real entities endowed with qualities; ‘things’ that at their basis are immutable substances and that possess certain characteristics. Resultant from such an ontology are the assumptions that the causal relation is a binary function of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, and that it has a sense of production. A cause is that which produces something and in terms of which the product, its effect, can be explained. Causes and effects are thus changes in the states of substances, and causation is an invariable relation between the characteristics of those substances: whenever a substance occurs with the characteristic x, it produces a substance with the characteristic y.28 Now the metaphysical horizons of a given philosophical system shape and determine its ensuing concepts, causation inclusive. A causal relation between two substances would have a different sense from a causal relation between two processes or events.29 Drawing on process metaphysics rather than substance metaphysics, the Buddha was led into recasting the concept of causation as a whole. We now turn to the embodiment of this concept in the doctrine of dependent co-arising.
5.1.2 Kamma, causation and the pāṭiccasamuppāda doctrine

The Buddha’s experience on the night of his awakening illustrates the fundamentals of early Buddhist teaching as presented by the tradition. Having recollected his own and others’ former lives, the Buddha (re)discovers the way to uproot the deepest tendencies (āsava) that bind one to continued rebirth, and directly sees the four noble truths.\(^30\) He then realizes how and why the arising, maintenance and dissolution of any given individual history, as well as of samsāric experience as a whole, follows a certain orderly pattern. This brings about his insight into the dynamics of the law of kamma: how every action has its consequences and that everything occurs in dependence on other conditions. Samsāric existence can thus be seen as a ‘mass of karma’, any segment of which appears depending on the rise of certain sequences of coordinated factors.\(^31\) The relationship between the patterns of these sequences is called pāṭiccasamuppāda (Sanskrit pratītyasamutpāda), dependent co-arising, which we may render as ‘causal relatedness’ or ‘conditionality’. In the sense that all samsāric phenomena are conditioned (saṅkhata), pāṭiccasamuppāda is the Buddhist principle of causation. Since samsāric experience is characterized as dukkha, pāṭiccasamuppāda is particularly an explanation of the nature and origin of dukkha – the crux of the four noble truths.\(^32\) By clarifying how one process leads to another, pāṭiccasamuppāda illustrates what makes up sentient experience: the causal relations between ordered successions of physical and mental processes, not their inherence in some substrate. And this is the way things truly are: to grasp the pāṭiccasamuppāda principle is therefore to realize Dhamma. Indeed, the canonical texts often equate the Dhamma with pāṭiccasamuppāda. Perhaps the most acclaimed occasion is when Sāriputta reports the Buddha to have said that ‘Whoever sees pāṭiccasamuppāda sees the Dhamma, and whoever sees the Dhamma sees pāṭiccasamuppāda.’\(^33\)

The causational principle is also labelled idappaccayatā (Sanskrit idampratīyayatā), ‘the state of having this or that as its cause’, and is represented by a succinct formula: ‘This existing, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises; this not existing, that does not come to be; from the cessation of this, that ceases.’\(^34\) One may thus be tempted to conclude that pāṭiccasamuppāda is but the Buddhist formulation of a law of universal causation. The latter is defined by Bertrand Russell as follows: ‘There are such invariable relations between different events at the same or different times that, given the state of the whole universe throughout any finite time, however short, every previous and subsequent event can theoretically be determined as a function of the given events during that time.’\(^35\) Pāṭiccasamuppāda, however, is bound up with the concept of kamma. Now the Buddha did not simply take over an extant doctrine of karma. The word karman means ‘action’ or ‘activity’, but within the Brahmanical context it refers to the Vedic ritual, which is regarded as the paradigmatic action. From this perspective every action produces a fitting result, the quality of which is determined by the quality of the action. By contrast, the Buddha redefined karma and turned it into an intrinsic, psychological process: kamma emerged as a particular kind of
mentality, one’s act of will or intention (cetanā), which is manifested in physical, speech or mental acts. ‘It is intention’, the Buddha says, ‘that I call kamma. Having intended, one performs acts by body, speech and mind.’ Recasting karma from ‘action’ to ‘intention’, the Buddha ethicized the contemporary conceptual framework and shifted the focus of interest from the Brahmanical outlook of external, ritual action to the arena of one’s mind and its intrinsic psychological processes.

It is this ethicized sense of kamma that is fundamental to the paṭīcchasamuppāda doctrine. The Pali texts thus portray kamma as the key conditioning factor in the causal chain:

What one intends, plans and inclines to is the basis of the establishing of consciousness. When there is a basis there is support for consciousness. When consciousness has been supported and has grown, there follows the production of future renewed existence. Once there is future renewed existence, future birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, unsatisfactoriness, grief and unrest come into being. Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.

This Nidāna-samyutta statement is followed by another similar passage, which explicitly sets cetanā as the first link in the traditional, twelvefold paṭīcchasamuppāda formula, instead of the first two usual links of ignorance and mental formations. The Buddhist construal of causal conditioning, then, is concerned with the workings of the mind rather than with the mechanics of the world: the emphasis is on how certain kinds of mentality that condition the ways in which one thinks, talks and behaves, shape and determine one’s course of life and one’s relation to the environment.

Now paṭīcchasamuppāda as centred around kamma is not equivalent to a law of universal causation. First, such a law deals with causes and effects regardless of whether they are related to the person, whereas the paṭīcchasamuppāda principle delineates the relationships between physical and mental processes insofar as they impinge on one’s experience in saṁsāra. Second, a law of universal causation does not necessarily entail that like causes produce like effects, while the paṭīcchasamuppāda principle implies that like intention conditions like action. The moral character of one’s intention – whether it is skilful, unskilful or neutral – determines the quality of the respective acts it motivates. What type of causational principle is it, then?

First a distinction should be made between paṭīcchasamuppāda as an abstract principle of causation – a metaphysical account of the true nature of things – and the articulation of this principle for the sake of specifying the actual patterned operation of causal conditioning. This is given by succinct formulas listing chains of several factors or links (nidāna). The most representative formula is that of the twelvefold chain:

Conditioned by (1) ignorance are (2) mental formations, conditioned by mental formations is (3) consciousness, conditioned by consciousness is
(4) name-and-form, conditioned by name-and-form are (5) the six senses, conditioned by the six senses is (6) sense contact, conditioned by sense contact is (7) feeling, conditioned by feeling is (8) craving, conditioned by craving is (9) clinging, conditioned by clinging is (10) becoming, conditioned by becoming is (11) birth, conditioned by birth is (12) ageing and death – sorrow, lamentation, unsatisfactoriness, grief and unrest come into being. Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.41

There are numerous canonical variations on this traditional twelfold formula, even in its forward order (anuloma): some present consciousness and name-and-form as mutually conditioning, or list the twelve links in a different order. Others present the formula in backward order (patiloma); some trace the cessation of each link; some omit links to various numbers ranging from eleven down to just two, while others add links.42 This diversity in the presentation of the patīcasamuppāda formula has invoked speculation as to the possible stages of its evolution.43 Whatever its history, however, the largely shared body of Pali and Chinese material shows that a variety of formulaic descriptions of the patīcasamuppāda doctrine already existed at an early stage of Buddhist thought, and that the stock twelfold formula served as a standard schematization of pivotal elements of the Buddha’s teaching. The various canonical and commentarial interpretations of the patīcasamuppāda formula have long been studied by modern scholarship and there is no need to repeat them here.44 Most pertinent to our present concern, however, is that at the level of metaphysics the formula demonstrates the Buddhist conception of change and continuity as consisting solely in the causal connectedness between impermanent processes, rather than in an immutable substance underlying change in its secondary qualities. It exemplifies that the notions of continuity and identity are meaningful, although they do not imply the existence of any metaphysical principle that makes encountered phenomena continuous and identifiable.

This leads us from the formulaic presentation of the patīcasamuppāda to the principle it articulates. The Buddha is recorded as saying that he teaches both patīcasamuppāda and the dhammas that arise in dependence on conditions.45 An adequate examination of the patīcasamuppāda doctrine, then, must take into account not only the nature of dependent co-arising itself, but also the nature of the arisen dhammas. A first hint in that direction is given immediately following the above statement, where, in reply to the question ‘What are the dependently co-arisen dhammas?’ the Buddha depicts each of the twelve factors of the patīcasamuppāda formula as ‘impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to decay, subject to waning away, liable to fading away and of a nature to cease.’46 The point is that all the enumerated phenomena – ageing and death, birth, becoming and the rest of the factors of the twelfold formula – are processes: dynamic, physical and mental processes that are subject to constant change. The patīcasamuppāda formula explains why and how the processes that tie one to saṃsāra occur in a non-random order, and since these processes are paradigmatic of all the dependently arisen dhammas – all conditioned phenomena – it establishes
a comprehensive portrayal of the way things operate.\textsuperscript{47} The formula thus embodies the early Buddhist process epistemology, which maintains that processes rather than ‘things’ best represent encountered phenomena, and that to know how experience in \textit{samsāra} originates and ceases is to comprehend how those phenomena are causally connected. From this one may disentangle a metaphysics that sees temporality and change as fundamental to human experience, and that repudiates the notion of a substance or agent, that is, \textit{ātman}, as an underlying self-substantiated reality from which phenomena derive their actuality. William Waldron remarks in this context that ‘Instead of asking how independent entities act within or upon an objective world, the view of dependent arising asks “under what conditions does such and such a phenomenon arise?”’\textsuperscript{48} or, more elaborately, “what complex of conditions operates in what recurrently patterned ways in order to typically give rise to what kind of phenomena?”\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Paticcasamuppāda} as a principle of causal connectedness does not posit that a certain independent substance at some point operates on another independent substance to activate change. Indeed even within the framework of a substance-attribute ontology the causal relation does not necessarily hold between substances: in modern philosophy causation is frequently regarded as a relation between changes or states of substances, or alternatively between events – where ‘event’ signifies a change or an absence of a change in an object.\textsuperscript{49} But the Buddhist position is more radical than that: it not only states that causation is a relation between experiential processes rather than substances, but it also recasts the whole concept of causation in line with its process-oriented epistemology, thus investing it with a novel significance. As part of this conceptual reconstruction the very terms ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ are recognized as mere constructs that emerge conditioned by the cognitive process through which we make sense of all the factors of our experience. Sue Hamilton has elucidated the connection between the operation of the \textit{khandhas} as our cognitive process and dependent co-arising: if one links the description of all things in our cyclical experience as conditioned by other things with the way the operation of our cognitive apparatus \textit{is} this very experience, Hamilton says, ‘one can see that what all things are \textit{actually} dependently originated in is our cognitive apparatus’.\textsuperscript{50} This is demonstrated in a \textit{Majjhima} passage, where repeated examples of \textit{khandha} activity yielding various cognitive processes – such as the six modalities of cognitive awareness (\textit{cakkhuviññāna} etc.) – are interspersed with the statement: ‘Such are the dependently originated phenomena, namely, the five aggregates of grasping.’\textsuperscript{51} Causation, then, is a relation holding between psycho-physical processes as constructed by the mind, and the \textit{paticcasamuppāda} principle reveals how past or present mental formations ripen into present or future courses of action.

Yet this reconstruction does not amount to an elimination of the concept of causation, for otherwise early Buddhism could not have retained its commitment to moral responsibility. The canonical texts not only emphasize the conditioned co-arising of all phenomena as constructed by our cognitive process, but also stress the regularity, objectivity and universal validity of the causal relation. Thus,
having explained what \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} and what the dependently arisen \textit{dhammas} are, the Buddha states that whether Tathāgatas were to arise in this world or not, ‘that element still persists: the way things are, the way they work and the fact of conditionality’.\footnote{\textsuperscript{52}} He then adds that \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} is characterized by exactitude (\textit{tathatā}, literally ‘it is exactly so’), necessity (\textit{avītathatā}), invariability or uniformity (\textit{anaññathatā}, ‘not otherwise’) and the fact of conditionality (\textit{idappaccayatā}).\footnote{\textsuperscript{53}} This is supported by the commentary that explains the characteristics in the above passage as follows:

\begin{quote}
‘Exactitude’ etc., are epithets of the mode of conditions. Because on account of such-and-such conditions alone, neither more nor less, there arises such-and-such a \textit{dhamma}, there is said to be ‘exactitude’. Once the conditions have combined together there is no obstruction, even for a moment, of the development of the originating \textit{dhammas}, and hence there is said to be ‘necessity’. Because no \textit{dhamma} arises on account of the conditions of another \textit{dhamma}, there is said to be ‘invariability’. Because there is a condition or a group of conditions of ageing and death etc., as stated, there is said to be ‘conditionality’.\footnote{\textsuperscript{54}}
\end{quote}

Another revealing indication of the Buddha’s emphasis on the objectivity of the causal relation and its independent status is found in the \textit{Nagara-sutta}, wherein he compares his insight into the \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} principle to the exposure of an ancient, buried city that has existed independently of anyone knowing of it.\footnote{\textsuperscript{55}}

The \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} doctrine centres on the idea of \textit{kamma}, and \textit{kamma} is mainly intention, that is, a certain kind of mentality. This implies that any attempt to evaluate the early Buddhist conception of \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} as a causational principle must take into account this mental aspect, which Buddhism sees as an integral part of its notion of causation. Moreover, since the formation of concepts about causality is itself part of the way our cognitive apparatus operates, this also means that for early Buddhism the construction of causation by our cognitive process – just as the construction of all encountered phenomena – is not regarded as a representational activity mirroring what is outside the mind, and its analysis is not thought to uncover how the mind constructs mental copies that correspond to an external reality. The causal relation enjoys objectivity and universal validity, but these need not necessarily or exclusively characterize what is externally real.

Once a substance-attribute ontology is replaced by process metaphysics, the analysis of the causal relation in terms of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ becomes inappropriate, for these are not regarded as two distinct entities whose qualities or properties undergo change. The binary idea of causal determination is replaced by the notion of \textit{kammic} conditioning. By placing \textit{kamma-as-cetana} at the hub of the \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} doctrine the Buddha clarifies that the causal relation is mentally conditioned in various ways.\footnote{\textsuperscript{56}} ‘\textit{Kammic} conditioning’ is a notion more flexible than ‘causal determination’ and suitable for representing the variety of \textit{cetana}’s conditioning powers. Such a deflationary concept of causation avoids determinism (\textit{niyati-vāda}) and thus
befits the intrinsic mental aspect of causation as seen from the Buddhist perspective. At the same time it also escapes the belief in fortuity (adhicca-vāda) and is not too loose a concept. Let us examine this relation more closely.

### 5.1.3 Necessity and sufficiency in the Nikāya notion of causal conditioning

The causal relation exemplified by the *paticcasamuppāda* formula is not that of production of a substantial entity out of some other substantial entity or entities, but of the supporting conditions for the arising and ceasing of *dhammas*. In accordance with the Buddhist postulate of impermanence, what is being discussed here is the arising and ceasing of *dhammas qua* physical and mental processes that are subject to change. Such an analysis requires one to distinguish between the diverse supporting conditions that are individually necessary and collectively sufficient for the arising of a given process. This is reminiscent of a model of causation which has gained currency in contemporary Western philosophy, contrary to the fundamental position advocated by Hume.

The most influential contribution to the analysis of causation was made by David Hume (1711–76). In harmony with his empiricist worldview, Hume sought to establish non-demonstrative inferences about empirical matters, that is, justify our reasoning concerning matters of fact beyond the testimony of the senses. He assumed that causation is the fundamental and immediate subject of all such inferences and that our idea of causation combines three elements: succession, contiguity and necessary connection between causes and effects. His specific task was to account for the necessary connection between phenomenal objects. His conclusion, though, was negative: in objects there is no such necessity that could justify our non-demonstrative inferences. Our idea of invariable causation results from those very inferences, which are grounded in the psychology of human custom rather than in reason.\(^57\) Hume’s conclusion is summed up in his two definitions of causation: (i) ‘A cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are placed in like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter.’ Here causation is identified with regular succession. (ii) ‘A cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.’ According to this definition the above succession becomes a psychological association.\(^58\)

Hume’s idea of causation is at odds with situations where there is a set of factors, each necessary and jointly sufficient for a certain result, which all precede or occur contiguously with that result. Then, had any given factor not occurred the result would not have occurred either, although one would be reluctant to say of each of these factors that it caused the result.\(^59\) Contrary to Hume’s conclusion, then, there arose the view that a given event occurs under a set of conditions, both indispensable and contingent. The former are conditions without which the event in...
question would not have occurred; the latter are conditions of which presence is accidental to the event’s occurrence. This model requires one to distinguish the indispensable conditions from the ‘proper’ cause of a given event.

In his discussion of causation John Stuart Mill (1806–73) claims that the invariable sequence we find in nature between antecedents and consequents of certain sorts consists in the consequent and the sum-total of several antecedents, the occurrence of all of which is requisite to produce the consequent. ‘In such cases’, Mill claims,

it is very common to single out only one of the antecedents under the domination of Cause, calling the others merely Conditions. […] The real Cause is the whole of these antecedents; and we have, philosophically speaking, no right to give the name of cause to one of them exclusively of the others’.60

The contemporary reading of this view draws the following distinctions: a given event that is sufficient for the occurrence of another event is the latter’s cause; one that is necessary for that matter is the latter’s condition; necessitated by the occurrence of a certain event is the effect; contingent upon the occurrence of a certain event is a resultant of that event.61

This construal of causation as a relation between events is still grounded in a substance metaphysics, for an event here signifies either a change or an absence of change in the relation of an object to a standard reference during a specified time interval. Events are the having or lacking of properties by particular objects at particular time intervals.62 Substance metaphysics, however, is not the single type of metaphysics at one’s disposal. The early Buddhist patīcchasamuppāda doctrine shows that causation may well be construed within the framework of process metaphysics, as a relation between phenomenal occurrences that do not draw on the notion of a substance. Within this framework the causal relation denotes causal connectedness based on kammic conditioning. The Nikāyas explicate this type of conditionality in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for the arising and ceasing of physical and mental processes. Consider, for example, the account of visual cognitive awareness (cakkhuviññāna):

If the eye is internally intact, but no external visual forms come within its perceptual range and there is no corresponding appropriate act of attention, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding type of cognitive awareness. If the eye is internally intact and external visual forms do come within its perceptual range, but there is no corresponding appropriate act of attention, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding type of cognitive awareness. But once the eye is internally intact, visual forms come within its perceptual range and there is a corresponding appropriate act of attention, then there is, indeed, manifestation of the corresponding type of cognitive awareness.63
The commentary explains the term ‘appropriate act of attention’ (tajjo samannāhāro) as proper attention (manasikāra) arising conditioned by the eye and visual forms. This, following the Abhidhamma analysis of the consciousness process, is identified as the kiriya mind consciousness element that directs the flow of the passive mind (bhavaṅga) towards the initiation of an active process of visual cognitive awareness at the eye door process. When the visual forms fail to come within the eye’s perceptual range, or if one is occupied with something else, such an act of attention does not occur. The point is that visual cognitive awareness results from the presence of three conditions: an unimpaired sense organ of sight, external visible forms entering into the field of vision and an appropriate act of attention on the part of the mind. Each of these three conditions is necessary to the occurrence of visual cognitive awareness, and when the three of them are obtained they are collectively sufficient for the manifestation of the particular kind of consciousness in question.

Another canonical indication of the understanding of the causal relation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is found in a Samyutta passage delineating the supporting conditions for the growth, increase and expansion of five kinds of seeds into sprouts. Therein the process of growth is depicted as resultant from a group of sine qua non conditions, each of which is a necessary condition such that had it not been present, the sprout would not have grown: the seeds have to be unbroken, not rotten and undamaged by the wind and sun; they should be fresh; they must be well planted; and they must be supported by earth and water. When all four conditions are collectively satisfied, the growth of the seeds comes about.

To sum up, the Nikāya notion of causation is remarkably different from its contemporary doctrines of causation. First, rather than analysing the production of entities it accounts for the arising and ceasing of psycho-physical processes. Second, instead of physical causality it centres on the idea of kammic connectedness by mental conditioning. Third, instead of a binary portrayal of the causal relation as holding between a single cause and a corresponding single effect, it regards this relation as a manifoldness of supporting conditions: a group of interacting factors, individually necessary and jointly sufficient for setting off processes, none of which is the cause for the arising of those processes. Finally, it substitutes for the relation of causal determination that of kammic implication. This is evidenced in the abovementioned succinct verse formulating the principle of causation: ‘This existing, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises; this not existing, that does not come to be; from the cessation of this, that ceases.’ The formula by no means states that ‘a causes b’. Rather, the arising of x implies the presence of y, and by the same token, the cessation of y is implied by the absence of x. The meaning, then, is framed in hypothetical terms: if y arose, then x had necessarily been present, whereas if x had ceased, then y was necessarily eliminated. In this context, Sue Hamilton remarks that in order to understand this formula accurately, ‘one has to see it not in terms of causation but of origination’, which means that ‘dependent origination is not stating that a will
cause b, but that b occurs because there was a. Further, to grasp the mechanics better one needs to see it in the even looser sense that if there is a b, then there must have been an a.67

My argument is that the paṭiccasamuppāda formula is not so much loose as pragmatic. It must be pragmatic if it is to deal with the workings of the mind. From the Buddhist perspective all encountered phenomena that constitute our experience in saṃsāra are dependently originated precisely because they are conditioned by our cognitive process. Paṭiccasamuppāda as a principle of causation does not depict what things are as given in an external, mind-independent reality, but reveals the mechanics of our cognitive apparatus, and hence it cannot be a deterministic law, although it may be universally valid. For, again, it shows that the structure of the experiential world is correlated with the cognitive process, and hence all the factors of experience are made factors of experience because they invariably and inevitably emerge as constructs of our cognitive apparatus.68

At this stage we should appraise the terminology employed in discussing the paṭiccasamuppāda doctrine. In the Pali Canon several words denote ‘causal relatedness’. Buddhaghosa lists the most conspicuous ones: ‘The words paccaya, hetu, kāraṇa, nidāna, sambhava, pabhava etc., all have the same meaning, although they are different in the letter.’69 To this list one may add the words upaṇisā, saṅkhāra, mūla, ārammana, āhāra, samuṭṭhāna and samudaya.70 Of these, the words hetu and paccaya are the most commonly used, though paccaya features in the traditional twelvefold paṭiccasamuppāda formula and recurs in the vast majority of its versions. Paccaya has a wide range of meaning: it signifies ‘support’, ‘requisite’, ‘means’, ‘reason’, ‘grounds’, ‘cause’ and ‘condition’. Hetu is less laden a term, primarily denoting ‘cause’, ‘reason’ and ‘condition’.71

Modern translations of the canonical texts and the extant scholarly literature show that contemporary Buddhologists normally translate paccaya as ‘condition’ and hetu as ‘cause’. Nevertheless, in the suttas there is no ground for such a distinction: both terms are used interchangeably for rhetorical purposes. Numerous occasions testify to this semantic indiscrimination. For instance, in the Mahānidāna-sutta the Buddha teaches Ānanda the paṭiccasamuppāda doctrine and of each nidāna of the twelvefold formula he says: ‘Therefore, Ānanda, just this is the cause (hetu), the source (nidāna), the origin (samudaya), the condition (paccaya) for ageing and death, namely, birth… the condition for birth, namely, becoming, etc.’72 In this context hetu and paccaya are synonyms that, for literary and pragmatic reasons, are juxtaposed with a series of other terms having slightly different meanings. Another example is the oft-repeated question, ‘What is the paccaya, what is the hetu?’ Of these, the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta the Buddha relates to Ānanda ‘Eight hetu, eight paccaya for the appearance of a great earthquake’; yet again, the Dasuttara-sutta says that ‘There are eight hetu, eight paccaya for wisdom regarding the holy life.’74

In the suttas, then, the causal relation is better construed in terms of conditionality, and both hetu and paccaya mean ‘condition’. The semantic distinction between them probably mirrors the modern philosophical differentiation between

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cause and condition respectively. Nevertheless, while there is no ground for assigning the canonical texts the modern distinction between ‘causal condition’ and a ‘proper cause’, the texts do entertain a distinction between supporting conditions that are individually necessary for the occurrence of a certain process, and the set of those conditions collectively sufficient for the occurrence of the process in question. The *paṭiccasamuppāda* twelvefold formula supposedly represents a linear succession of processes necessarily conditioned by one another: the arising of any given process implies the operation of another process, either preceding or coexistent with the former; the obliteration of any given process implies the cessation of another process, either subsequent to or coexistent with the former.75

Within such a linear chain of couplets related by necessary and sufficient conditions it should have been possible to do away with *dukkha* simply by the cessation of any one of the twelve links, for the cessation of any *nidāna* brings to a halt whichever *nidāna* is said to follow it, thus obliterating the operation of the entire *dukkha*-process. This, however, works within each *nidāna*, but not across the totality of them: the cessation of any one *nidāna* is insufficient for the cessation of *dukkha* as a whole, and hence the process of conditioning still continues, for there are interrelations among the twelve *nidānas*. Yet this is not to say that the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula represents a network of causally interrelated conditions. We shall see in the next section that such a network model, in which everything is interconnected to everything else, was developed by the Abhidhamma.

Still, the *Nikāyas* already describe at least some of the twelve *nidānas* as mutually conditioned and as interrelated by a web of conditions with other processes. First, consciousness (*viññāna*) and name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*) are, on various occasions, said to be mutually dependent and then form a ‘loop’ once they have been combined into the twelvefold schema. The *locus classicus* of this view is the *Mahānidāna-sutta*, which states that conditioned by consciousness there occurs name-and-form, and conditioned by name-and-form there emerges consciousness.76 This reciprocity is compared to that between two standing sheaves of reeds mutually supporting and leaning against each other so that if one were to remove either of them, the other would fall.77 The mutual conditioning between consciousness and name-and-form may be highlighted from another angle. As mentioned above, the process of sensory, discriminative cognitive awareness is explained as conditioned by the joint operation of three necessary factors: an intact sense organ, sense data entering the sense sphere, or the perceptual field of the appropriate sense organ, and an appropriate act of attention on the part of the mind.78 Now what is implied by these three conditions is the operation of a psycho-physical complex equipped with sense faculties, namely, *nāmarūpa*. But this psycho-physical complex is incapable of arousing sensory discriminative, cognitive awareness on its own unless it is supported by consciousness. Hence both *viññāna* and *nāmarūpa* are mutually dependent and reciprocally condition each other. Hamilton explicates this mutual dependence from another perspective: first, she shows that in the Pali texts *nāmarūpa* is associated with the structure of our cognitive apparatus, and hence that *nāma* should be taken to refer to
what is conceived of, rūpa to what is apperceived. Insofar as these two thus cover the range of whatever is cognizable, nāmarūpa is equivalent to the four khandhas other than viññāna. Since viññāna and nāmarūpa represent the most fundamental aspects of one’s present life – for they are what actualizes the processes that are the person and are equally necessary for one’s subsequent development – they operate together and are mutually dependent.79

Other processes within the patīccasamuppāda formula, too, are mutually conditioned, although this is not explicitly stated. For instance, becoming conditions birth, but birth conditions becoming in a future renewed existence. The same applies to birth and ageing-and-death. Along with the relation of reciprocal conditioning the patīccasamuppāda also accommodates the relation of concomitance: this is exemplified in the relation between sense contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā), which is compared to that between fire and its resulting heat. Just as from the friction of two fire sticks both fire and heat are emitted concomitantly, so from a sense contact experienced as pleasant, painful or neither-pleasant-nor-painful a corresponding feeling concomitantly springs up.80

It turns out that there are interrelations among the nidānas, as well as among other processes. Ignorance, for instance, mutually interacts with the defiling tendencies (āsava), and consciousness is also one of the four nutriments (āhāra) and as such follows from craving, while the four nutriments condition consciousness and future renewed existence.81 The patīccasamuppāda thus hints at the possibility that interrelations of mutual conditioning and reciprocity hold not only among those processes directly tracing the origin of suffering, but also among whatever phenomena may eventuate. The five physical sense faculties (indriya), for example, originate in dependence on the life force (āyū), but the latter is conditioned by the kamma-born heat (usmā) intrinsic to the living body, which itself is conditioned by the life force.82

Accommodating relations such as mutual conditioning or concomitance, the patīccasamuppāda formula expresses something more intricate than mere one-directional, causal relations between the operation of a single process and the occurrence of a certain other process.83 This was later on made clear by the commentaries, which advocate the view that ‘There is no single or multiple result of any kind from a single condition, nor a single result from multiple conditions, but only multiple results from multiple conditions.’84 It also invokes the idea that each process conditions and may be conditioned by a set of other processes, to each of which it may stand in a different type of causal relation.

These different relations are treated in the Nikāyas in a rather perfunctory manner. To judge by the Nikāyas, the Buddha and his immediate disciples were not too interested in analysing the possible relations among the sine qua non conditions that make up a sufficient condition for an arisen process, nor in the variety of possible relations between these conditions and the arisen process. Rather, they were preoccupied with singling out the general mechanism by which processes are related. The motivation of the immediate community was not to reveal the exact nature of the relations by which birth, for example, is connected with numerous other processes, one of which is ageing-and-death, but to uncover
which processes are most prominently related to ageing-and-death, so that with their elimination ageing-and-death would cease. The focus is on the cognitive apparatus, which, in turn, determines how and why one’s life comes about. To know how and why one’s life occurs the way it does is, according to the Buddhist postulate of impermanence, to understand the mechanics of the incessant, dynamic process of arising and ceasing of phenomena. The Buddha offers a cure for an ailment, a prescription of how to bring to a halt this continuous cyclical experience in *samsāra*. For this purpose the most efficient analysis is of how processes operate: how experience as suffering comes about and how it can be ended. In an oft-quoted *Majjhima* passage, the Buddha states that he has always made known only two things, namely, *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*. With such a goal in mind speculations regarding the true nature and status of the constituents of experience become secondary. The Buddha was thus less anxious to account for such questions and dispensed with a theoretical account of reality. The *paticcasamuppāda* doctrine is a pragmatic manual of the dynamics of change, rather than a descriptive metaphysics. An analysis of all the possible relations that may hold among the sum-total of conditions, and between those conditions and their conditioned processes, constitutes one such theoretical account or metaphysical explanation of sentient experience. It was the task of the Abhidhamma to offer such a systematic account.

### 5.2 THE ABHIDHAMMA THEORY OF CAUSAL CONDITIONING

Taking into account the Buddha’s statement that there are two aspects to his teaching, namely, dependent co-arising and the dependently arisen *dhammas*, I have argued that the *paticcasamuppāda* doctrine must be related to the Buddhist notion of what the *dhammas* are. By *dhammas* the Buddha and his immediate followers understood the physical and mental processes that make up sentient experience. Previously we have seen that this construal of *dhammas* yielded a notion of causal conditionality that is better understood in terms of *kammic* conditioning and implication rather than of causal production. Within the Abhidhamma framework, however, the conception of the plurality of *dhammas* changes significantly, and hence to understand the Abhidhamma theory of relations of causal conditioning, its relation to the *paticcasamuppāda* doctrine and whether this theory is about causation at all, it must be investigated in the context of the consolidating *dhamma* theory and adjoined with the Abhidhamma metaphysics of mind, which may elucidate how this allegedly scholastic development is concerned with Buddhist soteriology.

For the Abhidhammikas *dhammas* are diverse capacities or capabilities of psycho-physical events: short-lived minds and the instantiations of consciousness types that interact with material phenomena, each of which arising and ceasing in sequential series while having its own function and capability. In tandem with the tradition’s gradual assimilation of the doctrine of momentariness, those events emerged as momentary: psycho-physical instants that emerge and subside extremely rapidly a
large number of times each second, and that are all interrelated in a web of conditions. The Abhidhamma’s concern with the systematization and individuation of the dhammas had direct implications for its notion of causal conditioning: to individuate one’s mind the Abhidhammikas not only had to categorize all possible types of dhamma and provide the criteria for individuating any of their possible instances, but also to analyse all the possible conditions by which these discrete events interact and stand in relation to each other in the incessant process of their occurrence and cessation. Thus, the Abhidhamma substitutes for the image of a causal chain the image of a branching network of causal conditions. The locus classicus of the Abhidhamma theory of relations of causal conditioning is the Paṭṭhāna.

### 5.2.1 The Paṭṭhāna

The Paṭṭhāna (also called Mahāpakaraṇa, The Great Book), the last and longest of the seven books of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka is dated roughly to the second century BCE. In the suttas the term paṭṭhāna is always found compounded with the word sati, forming the term satipaññāna, which frequently recurs in the context of the meditative practice of observation and awareness of body, feelings, consciousness and dhammas. Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that the commentaries offer two derivations of paṭṭhāna in this compound: one from the root upa-sthā and the other from pra-sthā, and that although they prefer the latter derivation, the former is supported by the Sanskrit smṛtyupasthāna. C.A.F. Rhys Davids indeed points out that it is almost always derivatives from the root upa-sthā rather than pra-sthā that are associated with sati in the Nikāyas. In the Abhidhamma literature, however, the term paṭṭhāna does seem to derive from pra-sthā. In classical Sanskrit, pra-sthā means ‘to stand forth, ‘to set out’ and hence prasthāna means ‘setting out’, ‘departure’, ‘course’ and ‘method’. In the title of the seventh book of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, paṭṭhāna roughly means point of departure, origin or cause, or alternatively a course of conditions. The term ṭhāna (literally ‘place’ or ‘station’) may be defined as the event by which a result is established, whereas the prefix pa signifies ‘predominance’ or ‘pre-eminence’. Hence the Paṭṭhāna teaches the principal causal conditions among all conditions.

The Paṭṭhāna is concerned with the dependent nature of all encountered phenomena, and therefore represents the Abhidhamma elaboration on the paṭicca-samuppāda doctrine, although here the analysis is not arranged according to the twelve nidānas, but rather according to twenty-four relations of causal conditioning, namely, paccayas. Where did these twenty-four relations originate? The paṭicca-samuppāda doctrine, entwined with the Nikāya notion of causal conditioning as an assemblage of sine qua non conditions, reflects a sequential temporal model of causal conditioning, in which a certain process serves as the condition for the emergence of a subsequent process over a period of time, while the explanations of the enumerated processes emphasize their role in the operation of kamma and rebirth. Yet the questions of the temporal relation and causal interrelations among the processes is not addressed in the Nikāyas. The
Abhidhamma shifts form a sequential approach to a momentary approach: it describes particular events using the categories which the Nikāyas rather employ to refer to successive processes. The Abhidhamma thus offers a simultaneous temporal model of causal conditioning, in which all the distinct events partaking in a process function within a single moment. Drawing on this idea, the Paṭṭhāna deals with all possible conditions that hold simultaneously among dhammas arising together in a given psycho-physical assemblage at a given moment in time. The text analyses each of those conditions in order to determine not only the relationships between successive dhammas, but also the interrelationships between simultaneous dhammas. It seeks to distinguish all possible ways in which a given psycho-physical event conditions the emergence of other psycho-physical events of its kind as well as of different kinds, that is, events arising both within and outside its own consciousness series. The twenty-four types of relationship of causal conditioning that are found to be holding between dhammas over a period of time and among dhammas at a given instant form the scope of the Paṭṭhāna. We shall see below that the post-canonical Theravāda tradition further elaborates on this analysis by applying the scheme of the twenty-four paccayās to each of the twelve nidānas, explicating how the twelve nidānas operate successively over a period of time and how they function simultaneously within a single consciousness moment.

The structure of the Paṭṭhāna is complex and difficult to follow. It consists of several different modes of analysis which interact and converge, forming many levels of divisions and subdivisions. The Paṭṭhāna combines the analysis of the twenty-four causal conditions with the triplet-couplet abhidhamma-mātikā. The introductory part consists of a mātikā listing these twenty-four conditions and is followed by their analytical exposition. The main body of the text analyses the dhammas by four methods which form the four great divisions of the text. In each division the subject matter consists of six kinds of combination (according to triplets, couplets, couplet-triplet, triplet-couplet, triplet-triplet and couplet-couplet combinations). This gives the twenty-four divisions of the Paṭṭhāna. Each of these combinations is treated under seven headings, each of which is divided into four sections according to whether the causal conditions are taken positively or negatively. The contents of each heading are then divided into a Questions Chapter and an Answers Chapter. In the very first Questions Chapter, for instance, the questions regarding the conditioned arising of the dhammas are asked (i) taking the conditions singly, by twos, by threes etc., up to the maximum of twenty-four conditions, (ii) by referring to each of the seven ways of taking the triplet skilful/unskilful/undeclared (kusala, akusala, avyākata), (iii) and under the seven headings of ‘dependent’, ‘co-nascent’, ‘conditioned’, ‘supported’, ‘conjoined’, ‘associated’ and ‘investigation’. All these combinations are enumerated by means of four divisions, according to the following four methods:

1. **anuloma** or positive method, asking whether a certain dhamma may originate while being positively conditioned by another dhamma (e.g. ‘Dependent on a skilful dhamma, may there arise a skilful dhamma by root condition?’);
2 *paccāniya* or negative method, asking whether a certain *dhamma* may emerge while being negatively conditioned by another *dhamma* (e.g. ‘Dependent on a skilful *dhamma*, may there arise a skilful *dhamma* by not-root condition?’);

3 *anuloma-paccāniya* or positive-negative method, asking if a certain *dhamma* may occur while being both positively and negatively conditioned by another *dhamma*. Each of the twenty-four relations of causal conditioning is then taken in its positive form and united with each of the remaining twenty-three relations in their negative form (e.g. ‘Dependent on a skilful *dhamma*, may there arise a skilful *dhamma* by root condition, not-object condition?…by root condition, not-predominance condition?’ etc.);

4 *paccāniya-anuloma* or negative-positive method, asking whether a certain *dhamma* may eventuate while being both negatively and positively conditioned by another *dhamma*. The difference is that here each of the twenty-four causal conditions is first taken in its negative form and united with each of the remaining twenty-three relations in their positive form (e.g. ‘Dependent on a skilful *dhamma*, may there arise a skilful *dhamma* by not-root condition, object condition?…by not-object condition, predominance condition?’ etc.).

Each of the Questions Chapters is then followed by a corresponding Answers Chapter. If all the possible combinations had been taken into account, there would have been roughly a billion questions, but not all can be answered: for example, for the forty-nine questions obtained by combining the first condition with dependent heading in the positive, only nine answers are obtained. The text does not specify all the questions and answers, but merely those that are necessary for illustrating the types of questions involved. Only the forty-nine questions for the first condition are fully given, while the others are abbreviated.93

Having reviewed the *Paṭṭhāna*’s structure and method, we now turn to the twenty-four types of relationships of causal conditioning and their analysis.94 While the *Nikāyas* use the terms *paccaya* and *hetu* interchangeably, in the Abhidhamma *paccaya* specifically denotes the types of the relationships of causal conditioning, and *hetu* signifies one of these relationships only. Buddhaghosa explains the term *paccaya* as ‘that from which [the result] comes about dependent on it’.95 The commentator emphasizes that *paccaya* is not merely any contingent circumstance invariably connected with the arising result, but that it must be actively helpful in this process of arising; it has to render service to the arisen result or group of results. The definition of *paccaya* is thus extended by saying that ‘it has the characteristic of assisting’.96

The *Paṭṭhāṇa* commences with a *mātikā* listing the twenty-four *paccayas*, the first of which is *cause condition* (*hetupaccaya*). The analytical explanation merely says that this relation holds between a *dhamma* that conditions a certain other *dhamma* by being its *hetu*. Buddhaghosa glosses this as follows:

The word *hetu* is a designation for the roots that are the reason for the items being referred to […] Briefly, here *hetu* has the sense of root and
paccaya has the sense of assistance, so that cause condition is a dhamma assisting as a root. The teachers’ intention is that it establishes the skilfulness of the skilful etc., as paddy seeds do for paddy etc., and as the colour of crystal does for the lustre of crystal etc. […] For dhāmmas that have obtained a cause condition are firm and stable, like trees whose roots have grown, but those without cause are unstable, like moss, sesame seeds etc. Hence the term ‘cause condition’ is to be understood as an ‘assistant in the sense of a root’; an assistant dhamma by means of its establishing the state of being stable.97

In this context, then, hetu is interchangeable with the term mūla. In the Nikāyas mūla denotes six kinds of mentality or psychological motives: three of these are defiled and unskilful, namely, greed, hatred and delusion (lobha, dosa and moha), and the remaining three are their skilful opposites, namely, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. These six are referred to as roots in the sense of primary types of mentality or predispositions that precipitate the occurrence of either unskilful or skilful bodily, verbal and mental acts respectively.98 The roots are psychological tendencies that shape human action by deed, speech and thought. Just as the roots are related to a tree as the basis for its growth and development, so the six mental roots induce their associated mental dispositions and keep them firmly fixed together, until the latter ripen into manifest acts. Although this explanation is also applicable to the Paṭṭhāna, the latter’s conception of mūla is significantly different from the above psychological outlook. In the Paṭṭhāna the term mūla gains a more technical meaning, testifying to the doctrinal transition typical of the Abhidhamma from the empirical-phenomenal to the metaphysical. Within the Abhidhamma framework ‘root’ is equated with the term hetu, thus turning into an instantiation of an abstract category of metaphysically basic particulars: that of essential causal conditions. For the cause condition is not merely a requisite supporting condition; rather, it is what individuates its related dhāmma, establishing its nature and rendering it as this particular event rather than any other event of its kind. Of the twenty-four paccayas, cause condition is the one that directly capacitates the dhāmmas’ individuation. I shall return to this point in greater detail below.

The second relation of causal condition is object condition (ārammanapaccaya). This relation is emblematized in the six object fields – visual forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tangibles and mental data – that are related each to its corresponding modality or element of cognitive awareness (viññānadhātu) as a supporting object. All six object fields can impinge upon the mind-element (manodhātu) and are likewise related to it as its supporting object. Moreover, since according to the Buddhist intentional model of consciousness any assemblage of citta and cetasika is always directed to some object, then the consciousness stream flows contingent upon dhāmmas as its support and basis, or rather, dhāmmas condition consciousness being related to it as its object condition. This relation is likened to a weak man who stands by leaning on a stick for support.99 Object condition, then, establishes a subject-object relationship. Buddhaghosa maintains that consciousness may originate
without paying one’s attention (āvajjana) to an object, but not without objective support, and that there is not a single dhamma that cannot function as an object of consciousness. That is, while the five physical sense objects serve as objective support of the five corresponding types of sensory cognitive awareness (visual, auditory etc.), all forms of cognizant data, including the mental data base – that is, whatever concepts may arise plus nibbāna – function as objective support of consciousness.100 This is another indication of the conceptual realism introduced by the Abhidhammikas in their attempt to establish a correspondence between conceptual thought, that is, language, and the ‘arising of the world’, though this ought to be understood epistemologically only, in the phenomenological sense of one’s experiential world as it arises. For the Paṭṭhāna, and even for Buddhaghosa, the intentional model of consciousness is not entwined with an a priori assumption that the intentional object must exist, since this would necessitate the existence of, for instance, the son of a barren woman, which is a cogent object of thought – a result that is impermissible within the Theravādin framework.101

The third causal relation is predominance condition (adhīpatipaccaya). A dhamma that assists the occurrence of another dhamma in the sense of being foremost is a predominance condition. This is defined as follows: ‘When whatever dhammas qua assemblages of citta and cetasika emerge by giving importance to any dhammas, these latter dhammas are a predominant condition for those former dhammas.’102 Just as an object like gold enslaves someone desiring it, so adhipati is to be understood in the sense of a dhamma’s potency to dominate whatever other dhammas render it as of high regard, meaning that adhipati is a mental quality that gives one the strength to do something. This conditioning relation specifically applies to the four ‘bases of success’ or iddhipādas, namely, will to act (chanda), strength (viriya), consciousness (citta) and investigation (vīmaṃsā). The success for which these four factors constitute a basis or foundation is meditational success, and this is seen in the commentarial tradition in terms of either access concentration (upacārasamādhi) or jhāna.103 According to the Dhammasaṅgaṇi either one of the four iddhipādas may act as the predominant element in certain citta types.104 It is this notion of predominance that is instantiated in the Paṭṭhāna’s third paccaya. The Paṭṭhāna thus asserts that ‘Predominance of will to act, of strength, of consciousness and of investigation is a predominance condition for dhammas associated with will to act, with strength, with consciousness and with investigation respectively, and for the types of materiality originated thereby.’105 The exegetical tradition distinguishes two sub-types of this condition: object predominance (ārammaṇādhipati) and simultaneity dominance (sahajātādhipati), explaining that

The four dhammas designated chanda, viriya, citta and vīmaṃsā should be reckoned as predominance condition, albeit not all at once, for when citta occurs having made chanda the chief, the foremost, then chanda alone is the predominant, not the others. The same method applies to the others. But the dhamma by which, having made it the chief, immaterial dhammas proceed, is their object predominance.106
The fourth and fifth relations of causal conditioning may be assessed together: these are the conditions of **proximity** (*anantara*) and **contiguity** or **immediate antecedent** (*samanantara*) that, again, obtain only among immaterial dhammas, namely, *vipāka* and *kiriyā* types. A dhamma that is capable of arousing a succeeding *citta* is related to it as a proximity condition. The same temporal relation is also spoken of as one of immediate contiguity in time, without any pause: ‘There is no interval between them, so they are called proximate. They are proximate still further, because there is no interval between the cessation [of the preceding and the arising of the subsequent], thus they are contiguous.’ All *citta* categories and their associated mental states that have just ceased in the immediately preceding instant are proximity conditions. Conditioned by them are all types of consciousness and their associated mental states partaking in the immediately succeeding consciousness moment. In every process of thought a preceding consciousness that has just ceased conditions its succeeding consciousness that has immediately sprung by a relation of proximity. This relation continuously prevails throughout one’s lifespan excepting an *arahant*’s death-consciousness (*cuticitta*), which does not fuel the occurrence of rebirth-linking consciousness (*patisandhi*), for an *arahant* is entirely free from all defilements. The only difference between the proximity and contiguity conditions is that in the latter there does not exist any intermediary between each two consecutive groups of consciousness and mental associates. These two relations were probably necessary in order to account for the continuity of phenomena without relying on any metaphysical substance. With the assimilation of the developed theory of momentariness, though, the temporal relation of contiguity became especially important for explaining the continuity of the consciousness process, given the supposition that it consists of momentary mental events. Every preceding thought moment is thus regarded as capable of arousing succeeding states of consciousness similar to it in the immediately following instant.

Next in the list is the sixth condition, that of **simultaneity** (*sahajātapaccaya*): the relation that holds when ‘A dhamma, while arising, assists [another dhamma] by making it arise with itself, as a lamp is for light.’ This relation is exemplified by the process of sensory cognitive awareness: when a visible object is detected, visual cognitive awareness ensues simultaneously with the minimum necessary seven *cetasika*s. The commentary identifies this relation as that which applies to cases where the *suttas* speak of reciprocal dependency, such as that which holds among the four immaterial *khandha*s, between *nāma* and *rūpa* at the moment of conception in the womb, or among the four great elements (*mahābhūta*). This condition is the focal axis of the list of the twenty-four *paccaya*s and is second in its importance only to the cause condition. There are no fewer than seven other causal conditions further down the list of the twenty-four which are sub-categories of the simultaneity condition. In fact, all the seven are types of dependence-in-coexistence, which strongly implies interdependence; they all instantiate the abstract category of interrelations. As noted above, although in the *Nikāyas* there is, to some extent, evidence that the *paticcasaṃuppāda* accommodates reciprocal conditioning and mutual dependency, and that at least some
processes are interrelated, these relations are still latent and treated cursorily. In the Abhidhamma, by contrast, the image of a network of interrelations plays a major role and reshapes the entire conception of causal conditioning.

The seven causal conditions that may be classified as species of the genus of simultaneity are:

(i) The seventh condition, mutuality/reciprocity (*aññamaññapaccaya*). It occurs when ‘a dhamma assists [another dhamma] by means of mutual arousing and consolidating’, and is likened to the relation among three sticks mutually supporting each other (invoking the *sutta* simile that explains the interrelation and mutual conditioning of viññāna and nāmarūpa).\(^{109}\) For the Abhidhamma all states of consciousness and their associated mentalities are, reciprocally, conditioned and conditioning dharmas. The difference between the relations of simultaneity and reciprocity is that in the latter the conditioning dhamma is not simply simultaneous with its associated, arising dharmas, but is also conditioned or assisted by them. Whatever dharmas are reciprocally conditioned are also simultaneous, but not vice versa. Consciousness and associated mentalities, for instance, are related to mind-produced matter by simultaneity condition, though not by reciprocity.

(ii) The eighth relation, support condition (*nissayapaccaya*), applies when a conditioning dhamma supports its conditioned dhamma by arousing other dharmas. This relation is likened to that between soil and a tree. Under this causal condition the *Paṭṭhāna* lists again the examples of mutual dependence among the immaterial aggregates, among the four great elements and between nāma and rūpa at the time of conception; it then adds a series of other exemplary cases, such as the relations among the sense faculties, their corresponding modalities of sensory cognitive awareness and the cetasikas accompanying them on their occurrence.\(^{110}\)

(iii) The fourteenth condition is fruition (*vipāka*): the relation between a dhamma that assists the arising of another dhamma without exerting any effort. This relation obtains when a conditioning event is associated with its conditioned events by making them commence simultaneously with it as passive and effortless as itself. For example, in the five-door consciousness process, once the sense object and the sense faculty have coincided, the five modes of cognitive awareness emanate without having to make any effort. Another example is one’s consciousness at death (*cuticitta*): when one dies with one’s attention fixed on one of the objects of the mind-door consciousness,\(^{111}\) kamma then comes to fruition in the immediately following rebirth. Therefore states of consciousness and their associated mentalities which are the results of volitions (*cetanā*) and volitions themselves are called vipāka, ‘resultants’. Thirty-six types of resultant consciousness are related to their associated mentalities by this condition. They are also mutually related to one another.\(^{112}\)

(iv–v) The nineteenth and twentieth conditions are association (*sampayutta*) and dissociation (*vippayutta*). Association holds when a conditioning event relates to its conditioned events by causing them to issue associated in a group, so that they are inseparable and cannot be singled out, for they possess the four characteristics of association, namely, simultaneous origination, simultaneous cessation, taking the
same object and depending on the same sense faculty. This state is likened to water in the ocean, which cannot be distinguished as originating from different rivers. For example, visual consciousness and the seven necessary cetasikas are associated together as an inseparable group. All citta types and their mental concomitants are mutually related by association condition. Dissociation, by contrast, obtains when a conditioning dhamma relates to its conditioned dhammas by making them set in simultaneously with it, though not according to the characteristics of association. This is likened to a mixture of water and mercury which, albeit combined, remain separate. When a visual object and the eye faculty coincide to instigate visual cognitive awareness, the latter can be observed distinctly from these visual object and eye faculty, albeit derived from them; it occurs simultaneously with its conditioning factors but not due to association with them. Association is one of the possible relations among the four immaterial khandha's, while dissociation holds when material and immaterial dhammas condition each other, thus explaining the interaction and synthesis of physical and mental phenomena.\footnote{113}

(vi–vii) The twenty-first and twenty-fourth conditions are presence (atthi) and non-disappearance (avigata). Both these conditions are defined in exactly the same way: they obtain when a dhamma, by means of its presence, assists the arising of another dhamma of its kind. These conditions hold among the four mental khandhas, the four great elements, nāmarūpa, citta and cetasika, the sense spheres (sense objects and faculties) and their corresponding modalities of cognitive awareness etc. For example, in a sense-door consciousness process, such as eye-door process, there arise in succession several consciousness instances with specific functions: advertizing to the eye door (āvajjana), which is undertaken by the kiriyā mind element; the act of seeing itself; receiving (sampāticchana) of the sense object, which is executed by one of the two resultant mind elements; examining (santiraṇa) of the object, which is carried out by one of the three resultant mind-consciousness elements; determining (votthapana) of the object’s nature, undertaken by the kiriyā mind-consciousness element; impulsions (javana), or the act of actually apperceiving the object, operated by the actively skilful and unskilful cittas; and tadārammaṇa, or retaining the object of the javana mind in the bhavaṅga mind, which is performed by eleven types of resultant consciousness.\footnote{114} Each of these mental events with its own function conditions its subsequent mental event in the series by its presence at the appropriate moment. The presence and non-disappearance conditions make sense in view of the Buddhist notion of a complex, sufficient condition which is the sum-total of several necessary conditions. Even after the sufficient condition issued its resultant process, the latter may still require the presence of some of the necessary conditions for its maintenance, as the sprout needs earth and water even after it has arisen.\footnote{115} A possible difference between the relation of presence and the otherwise identical non-disappearance is that while the former focuses on co-presence, the latter emphasizes that it is not merely a contingent co-presence but also inseparability-in-simultaneity.

Having evaluated the central role of interrelatedness and interdependence within the Abhidhamma network model of causal conditioning, we now turn to
the remaining paccayas on the list. The ninth relation, **decisive support** condition (upanissayapaccaya), obtains when a dhamma is capable of arousing a resultant dhamma self-sufficiently. This is how actively skilful and unskilful dhammas are related to subsequent actively skilful and unskilful dhammas respectively. The difference between this condition and the aforementioned support condition (nissaya-paccaya) is that the latter is a primary condition and is necessary specifically at the time of the arising of the conditioned dhamma, whereas a decisive support condition is not necessarily the foremost: it lasts longer, has a long-term effect and implies action at a distance. Past kamma thus assists the occurrence of sensory cognitive awareness arising at one of the sense-door processes as a decisive support, but the actual emergence of, say, visual cognitive awareness, is primarily dependent at that time on the visual sense sphere, and hence the latter is its support condition. The importance of the decisive support condition seems to lie in its accounting for moral and spiritual progress: virtues like trust or confidence (saddhā), generosity (dāna), undertaking the precepts and others, all assist the occurrence of their long term results (the jhānas, insight, taking the path etc.) as their decisive support, and these results, in their turn, condition the repeated arising of trust, generosity etc. The commentarial tradition distinguishes three sub-types of this causal conditioning relation: object decisive support, proximate decisive support and natural decisive support (ārammanūpanissaya, anantarūpanissaya, pakatūpanissaya respectively).

The tenth and eleventh causal conditions are **pre-existence** (purejāta) and **post-existence** (pacchājāta). A dhamma that assists by its presence, having previously arisen, is a pre-existent condition. This relation is held between the sense faculties and their appropriate sense objects: the consciousness series of any cognitive process cannot commence without the pre-existence of the sense objects and sense faculties. These are not completely antecedent events that have expired before the emergence of their resultant consciousness, for according to the Theravāda the operation of a conditioning dhamma continues even after its result has occurred. By the same token, an immaterial dhamma assisting previously arisen material dhammas by supporting their continued function is their post-existing condition. Just as the annual rains support trees that already exist, so every posterior consciousness is related to the matter-resultant qualities that are still active and that are born of the four origins (kamma, consciousness, temperature and nutriment) by a post-existence condition, thus assisting them to develop. This is another condition, then, that accounts for the synthesis of physical and mental phenomena.

The twelfth condition, **habitual cultivation** (āsevana), holds when a dhamma builds up its following dhamma, enhancing its proficiency and power by making it predisposed to recurrence. For example, developing a certain skilful thought once facilitates the cultivation of the same thought with a greater degree of efficiency and intensity. This causal conditioning relation, effecting the flow of citta series during the process of cognizing, marks the way in which one’s habitual tendencies and dispositions are shaped, and the latter, in their turn, condition one’s bodily, verbal and mental acts. It therefore underlies the cultivation of right view, right speech and right action.
The thirteenth, *kamma*, condition obtains when a conditioning *dhamma*, through accomplishing its function, enables its conditioned *dhammas* to accomplish their own functions. It is likened to a chief disciple who, by encouraging himself to complete his task, makes the younger disciples complete theirs. *Kamma* here ordinarily denotes *cetanā*, volition or intention, and the *Patthāna*’s formulation reflects upon the renowned Nikāya statement equating *kamma* with *cetanā*: ‘Intention is related to its associated *dhammas* and to the materiality arising from them by *kamma* condition.’\(^{119}\) The commentary, however, attests to a further elaboration on this idea: therein two sorts of *kamma* condition are distinguished, namely, simultaneous (*sahajāta*) and asynchronous (*nānakhanika*). A simultaneous condition occurs when an intention determines and fashions its corresponding action that emanates simultaneously with it. An asynchronous condition obtains when a past *kamma* comes into fruition in a manifest corresponding action. Although the volition itself ceases, it leaves in the mind latent traces that take effect and assist the arising of an appropriate action when the necessary conditions are satisfied.\(^ {120}\)

The fifteenth relation, *nutriment* (*āhāra*), obtains when a conditioning *dhamma* enables its conditioned *dhammas* to operate by supporting them in the sense of nourishment. It is likened to a prop supporting a house. This condition is prefigured in the *Nikāyas*, where the four nutriments – edible food, sense contact, mental volition and consciousness – are presented as the conditions for maintaining one’s life. Sense contact, for example, strongly supports its simultaneous mental states, the chief of which is the feeling experienced with regard to desirable and undesirable objects.

The sixteenth condition, *controlling faculty* (*indriyapaccaya*), obtains when a conditioning event relates to its conditioned events by controlling them. It is likened to several ministers of state who have freedom of control in each region and who do not interfere with one another. This relation specifically refers to the faculties that determine one’s behaviour by exercising control over their associated mental states, capacitating them to appear in consciousness. These include the six sense *indriyas* (the five physical plus the mental one, *manindriya*), but also additional faculties such as the female (*itthindriya*) and male faculties (*purisindriya*), the life faculty (*jīvindriya*), and various other controlling motives, like bodily pleasure faculty (*sukhindriya*), confidence (*saddhindriya*), concentration (*samādhindriya*), awareness (*satindriya*) and others. For example, the faculty of confidence controls one’s trust in the triple gem, the awareness faculty oversees one’s cultivating the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, and the bodily pleasure faculty governs one’s experiencing bodily pleasure. The Abhidhamma enumerates twenty-two *indriyas*, and the significance attributed to them in moulding one’s behaviour may have led the Abhidhammikas to formulate this causal conditioning relation that is held among the faculties as they facilitate the rise of *dhammas* in consciousness.\(^ {121}\)

The seventeenth condition, *jhāna*, obtains when the *jhāna* factors cause their conditioned states to fix themselves on an object. Here *jhāna* is to be understood in the broad sense of focusing the mind attentively on an object, not with specific reference to the higher consciousness types that arise while in meditation and pertain to the *rūpa* sphere. Indeed by means of this causal conditioning relation the
five meditative jhāna factors – that is, initial thought, sustained or exploring thought, joy, happiness and one-pointedness of mind (vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukhā, cittass’ ekāgatatā)122 – enable the mind to sustain and cultivate the jhāna practice. Nevertheless, without the jhāna causal conditioning relation no action that involves concentration and cognitive discrimination would have been possible, and hence in this system the jhāna factors are seven, adding somanassa and domanassa, pleasant and painful feelings, which facilitate the focusing of the mind in actively skilful and unskilful sense-sphere citta respectively. Jhāna is therefore likened to an archer who makes the arrow steady, holds it firmly, directs it towards the target and attentively aims it. The seven jhāna factors are the rope and the post, as it were, which control the mind and prevent it from wandering away. The jhāna causal conditioning relations thus hold among all assemblages of citta and cetasika along with the material phenomena co-arising with them.123

The eighteenth relation, path condition (maggapaccaya), takes place when a conditioning dhamma relates to its conditioned dhamas by making them function as a path to happy or sorrowful states. It accounts for the relation between the stages on the path and their associated dhamas, as each stage is deemed to act on both mind and body and to determine the attainment of its subsequent stage. The conditioning dhamas are the twelve path constituents: the renowned eight factors (right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness and right concentration) fix volition firmly on the path to the cessation of dukkha, while the four wrong factors (wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong effort and wrong concentration) fix volition on the path to further rebirths in saṃsāra.

Finally, the twenty-second and twenty-third relations, absence (natthi) and disappearance (vigata) conditions, are the exact opposites of the conditions of presence and non-disappearance respectively. These two relations account for instances where certain mental events must cease in order to induce a resultant event. When they do so by ceasing in contiguity to their resultant event, they are related to it by absence condition. Here the conditioning events already belong to the past when the conditioned event follows, just like a flame that by dying out enables darkness to set in. When the same conditioning mental events induce a conditioned event while having disappeared in complete contiguity to it, they are spoken of as being related to the result by disappearance condition, just as the sunlight, while disappearing, enables darkness to settle in.

Having discussed the twenty-four paccayas, we shall now reconsider the theory they constitute, this time focusing on its underlying conceptual scheme and its philosophical implications.

5.2.2 To see the wood for the trees: making sense of the twenty-four paccayas

The Patṭhāna list of the twenty-four paccayas involves a prominent doctrinal issue crucial to the construal of the Abhidhamma notion of causation and necessary for
completing our account of the doctrinal transition from the Nikāya worldview to the Abhidhamma. This issue is the semantic distinction between hetu and paccaya. As previously noted, the Nikāya grasp of a sufficient condition consisting in the sum-total of several sine qua non conditions has misled modern scholarship into thinking that early Buddhism distinguishes between hetu and paccaya, and thus into differentiating between ‘cause’ and ‘condition’ respectively. As we shall see in greater detail below, such a distinction was systematically developed by the Sarvāstivāda. The Sarvāstivādin position, too – both because of its dominance within Buddhist circles and also owing to modern scholarship’s over-reliance on the Abhidharmakośa when dealing with doctrinal matters – is likely to have produced the impression that the distinction between hetu and paccaya/pratyaya is found in the earliest strata of the Pali Canon. But there is no ground for this distinction in the Nikāyas, where the two terms are regarded as synonymous and are used interchangeably.

In the Patṭhāna the meaning of hetu is restricted to ‘root’ (mūla), but in a narrower, more technical sense than its original intension of basic psychological dispositions that shape one’s actions. Rather, hetu-as-root consists in a specific category of causal conditions: that of basic or primary causal conditions. While paccaya refers to supporting causal conditions in the broadest sense of the relations between dependently co-arising dhammas, hetu signifies the pre-eminent condition of this set of conditions. This condition is the most fundamental of all the conditions that are necessary to the rise of a given dhamma, for it determines what that dhamma is, rendering it as a unique, distinguishable and definable particular. Only after the dhamma eventuates as a unique particular whose individuality is established do all the other causal conditions required for its occurrence become relevant. Thus, the distinction between hetu and paccaya and the identification of hetu as a dhamma’s cause in the sense of its sabhāva are subject to the canonical Abhidhamma preoccupation with the intension of the dhammas’ individuality.

Now outside of the Patṭhāna there are merely two para-canonical texts that uphold the semantic distinction between hetu and paccaya. These are the two methodological manuals, namely, the Nettippakarana and the Petakopadesa. Relevant to our present concern are two parallel extracts from both these texts, wherein the distinction in question is presented. In what follows, however, I show that if one applies the way these passages construe hetu and paccaya to the overall framework of the Patṭhāna, it emerges that the latter accommodates a different interpretation of hetu: one that attests to the Abhidhamma concern with the metaphysical question of the principle of the dhammas’ individuality.

We have already come across the two relevant extracts from the Nettippakarana and the Petakopadesa as part of our discussion of sabhāva in Chapter 3. Both these passages deal with causal conditioning and invoke the concept of sabhāva as directly related to it. The Petakopadesa’s fifteenth category of investigation, ‘conveying requisites’ (parikkhāro-hāra), states that a dhamma that conditions the arising of a certain other dhamma is the latter’s requisite, and
there are two kinds of such requisite dhammas: a cause, namely, hetu, and a condition, that is, paccaya. The text then explains the difference between the two:

The cause is the own-nature, whereas the condition is the other-nature. Although the other-nature’s condition is a cause, too, the condition of any other-nature whatsoever, other than the own-nature’s cause, is not called ‘cause’; it is called ‘condition’. The cause is internal, while the condition is external; the cause is not held in common, whereas the condition is held in common […] the cause is single only, while the condition is diverse; the condition is a support for the cause once the latter has obtained.125

The cause of a dhamma, then, is its very own-nature, its sabhāva that individuates it and makes it this particular dhamma. Any other of the dhamma’s attributes or of the contingencies involved in its arising – albeit requisite for its occurrence – does not constitute the dhamma’s individuality, and is therefore regarded merely as a condition necessary for its arising. The cause is intrinsic and unique to a dhamma; it is what makes up the dhamma’s individuality, thus distinguishing it from any other instant, either of other kinds or of the same kind. The condition, by contrast, can be shared by other dharmas and contribute to their occurrence. The cause is the very sabhāva of a particular dhamma instant arising in a certain situation, while the condition is some other dhamma or a group of dharmas that establish this situation once the sabhāva has been obtained. The cause is what makes the dhamma in its essence, or in Buddhaghosa’s words, ‘what establishes the skilful in what is skilful, etc.’ This state of affairs is likened to the growth of a sprout: the sprout’s own-nature, which determines its individuality as this particular sprout rather than any other, is the sprout’s cause. Water and earth, however, are each a condition for the growth of the sprout, just as they are the conditions for the growth of any other sprout and plant. Among a group of sine qua non conditions for the occurrence of a dhamma, then, there is only one that is the principle and cause of that dhamma’s individuality. The remaining conditions are all necessary, though they are regarded as secondary in their importance, as it were; they become relevant only once the primary cause has fulfilled its operation.

Chapter 4 has shown that the concern with the question of the principle of the dharmas’ individuality takes centre stage in the post-canonical Abhidhamma. Indeed the term sabhāva does not feature in the Paṭṭhāna and the interpretation of hetu-as-sabhāva in the sense of the cause of a dhamma’s individuality probably belongs to a textual layer somewhat later than the earliest parts of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka. Given the problems associated with the dating of early Buddhist literature, we are unable to establish a straightforward, relative chronology of the Petakopadesa, Nettippakaraṇa and Paṭṭhāna, and the best estimation presently available is that they all date roughly around the second or first centuries BCE.126 At any rate, these texts predate the quintessential commentaries: they are transitional texts that merge various doctrinal layers, reflecting the formative period of the shift from the beginnings of the Abhidhamma to its later systematization,
when growing emphasis was put on the metaphysical question of the principle of the dhammas’ individuality and on their reification.

We have already seen that in developing the dhamma theory along with its related doctrines of sabhāva and momentariness the Theravādins were influenced by Sarvāstivāda metaphysics. There are strong grounds for believing that the distinction between hetu and paccaya, too, was appropriated by the Theravādins and borrowed from contemporary Sarvāstivādin sources. The developed Sarvāstivādin theory of causation consists of two related doctrines: the doctrine of hetus and the doctrine of pratyayas. The Sarvāstivādins strive to show that these two doctrines originate from the Sūtra literature, though no indication of them is found in the Pali Nikāyas, Chinese Āgamas or the Vinaya. Let us first look into the doctrine of pratyayas.

One short discourse held to be authoritative by the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādins – that is, both by the Sarvāstivādin and Mūlasarvāstivādin schools – but without corresponding Pali versions, is the *Pratyayasūtra, or rather, the Sūtra on the Four Conditions. This discourse is cited in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, and Vasubandhu asserts that he is citing a sūtra: ‘What are the conditions? Four conditions have been stated. Where? In a sūtra: “There are four conditions, namely, cause as condition (hetupratyaya), immediate antecedent as condition (samanantarapratyaya), perceptual object as condition (ālambanapratyaya) and predominance as condition (adhipatipratyaya)’.”\(^{127}\) In his discussion of the *Pratyayasūtra, Peter Skilling observes that the same sūtra is referred to in the Vibhāṣā, that it is cited as a sūtra in the Sārasamuccaya, and that Vasubandhu’s above citation means that he must have extracted the text from one of the Mūlasarvāstivādin Āgamas.\(^{128}\)

On the basis of the sūtra’s style, and drawing on Śamathadeva’s references to it in his commentary to the Abhidharmakośa, the Upāyikā Tikā – an anthology of canonical and citations originally composed in Sanskrit but extant only in Tibetan translation – Skilling concludes that the *Pratyayasūtra was included in the section of fours in the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin Ekottarikāgama (noting that the school-affiliation of the Chinese Ekottarikāgama is not (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin). Skilling says: ‘The references of the Vibhāṣā, of Vasubandhu, of Śamathadeva, and of the anonymous author of the Sārasamuccaya establish the existence and transmission of the sūtra from before the time of the compilation of the Vibhāṣā (1st century CE[?]) up to the time of the latter two authors (6th or 7th century [?]).’\(^{129}\)

The doctrine of four conditions is a fundamental category of the (Mūla)Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and seems to have been the kernel from which more elaborate theories of causation originated within that tradition. It is presented in the canonical or middle (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma texts, occurring first in the Vījñānakāya (where it is applied to the six modalities of cognitive awareness), followed by the Prakaraṇapāda and the *Āryavasumitraḥodhisattvasaṅgītīsāstra, and finally by the Jñānaprasthāna – a text generally held to be the latest of the seven Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma treatises and dated to the first century BCE. If this dating is correct, the doctrine of four conditions must have evolved by the end of the second century BCE, and hence is contemporary with the Patthāna.\(^{130}\) Supporting a fairly early dating of the doctrine is the
Śāriputrābhidharmaśāstra, a treatise of unknown school considered to be one of the oldest Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma works extant. This text advances an explicit causal model based on a distinctive enumeration of ten pratyayas. Of these ten pratyayas, four are the exact match of the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin pratyayas: the first three correspond to hetu-, samanantara- and ālambanapratyayas, the last to adhīpatipratyaya. Foremost for our present concern, though, is the fact that the remaining pratyayas are similar to others of the Patṭhāna list of paccayas. Edward Conze thus notes that the Sarvāstivādin and the Theravādin enumerations of conditions show sufficient resemblance to make it likely that the two schemes originally evolved before the two schools separated, and sufficient dissimilarity to suggest that the developed schemes were thought out after their separation.

As for an exposition of the four pratyayas, cause as condition is reckoned the foremost in inciting the process of fruition and origination; the immediate antecedent conditioning relation holds between a consciousness moment and its immediately preceding moment in that consciousness series; perceptual object condition applies to all dharmas insofar as they are referents or intentional objects of consciousness, and the predominance condition settles the sensory discriminative quality of fruition, as, for example, the faculty of sight’s sovereignty on visual, discriminative cognitive awareness. It now emerges that the Sarvāstivādin four pratyayas exactly correspond to the Patṭhāna’s first five paccayas (counting anantarā and samanantara as one). There are other parallel interests and points of resemblance between the remaining paccayas and the Sarvāstivādin causational theory: Kalupahana shows that nearly eighteen of the twenty-four paccayas have counterparts in the Sarvāstivāda and Yogācāra theories.

In the most recent of the canonical Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma texts, the Jñānapraśṭhāna of Kātyāyanīputra, conditioning relations are examined in the context of a newly elaborated theory of six causes. Thus, by the time of the Jñānapraśṭhāna the Sarvāstivādin development of a theory of causal relations was extended through the theory of six causes, which, from the Mahāvibhāṣā onward, was interwoven with the theory of four conditions to form the two major components of the Sarvāstivādin causal model. The six hetus, as they are documented in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, are: (i) kāraṇahetu, the primary (pradhāna) cause, or the leading factor in the production of a result; (ii) sahabhūhetu, a simultaneous or coexistent cause that connects phenomena arising simultaneously (e.g. the primary and secondary elements of matter); (iii) sabhāgahetu, a homogenous cause, explains the homogenous flow of dharmas; (iv) samprayuktaḥetu, or associated cause, operates only between immaterial dharmas and explains why the elements of consciousness never appear alone but always accompanied by other mental factors; (v) sarvatragahetu, a dominant or pervasive cause, is the origin of defiled dharmas (lust, hatred, etc.) which form one’s habitual cognitive and behavioural dispositions; (vi) lastly vipākahetu, a cause of retribution or maturation, refers to whatever is the result of actively skilful or unskilful dharma.
The two doctrines of six causes and four conditions interact with each other in explaining phenomenal experience: for example, each moment of thought acts both as the homogenous cause as well as the immediate antecedent condition of the rise of thought and its concomitants in a subsequent moment. Moreover, the two doctrines overlap with one another: the category of cause as condition, \textit{hetupratyaya}, is constituted by the five \textit{hetu} excepting the basic \textit{kāraṇahetu}. Note that the \textit{Bhāṣya} explains \textit{kāraṇahetu} as the primary cause or the cause \emph{par excellence}, the generating cause of the origination and fruition of a phenomenon. It is compared to what the eye and visual forms are for visual cognitive awareness, to food for the body and to seeds for the sprout. The \textit{Paṭṭhāna} commentary’s exegesis of \textit{hetupaccaya}, as well as the \textit{Nettipakarana}’s and the \textit{Peṭakopadesa}’s explanation of \textit{hetu}, clearly bear resemblance to the Sarvāstivādin formulation of \textit{karaṇahetu}. The likelihood, then, is that the Theravādin \textit{Paṭṭhāna} theory of \textit{paccaya}, and the very distinction between \textit{hetu} and \textit{paccaya}, were the result of the contemporary intellectual milieu determined by the Abhidhamma and Northern Abhidharma philosophical and doctrinal discussions before and after the two traditions were finalized.

The Sarvāstivādin distinction between \textit{hetu} and \textit{pratyaya}, though, is tied in with its metaphysics and ontological conception of a \textit{dharma}. Within the Sarvāstivādin framework \textit{dharmas} are primary existents (\textit{dravyasat}); albeit not permanent, they do have continued, certain and independent existence – a primary ontological status that is indicated by their \textit{svabhāva}. Accordingly, the encountered world is seen as constructed from the interaction of \textit{dharmas}, each of which is causally efficacious. On this line of thought a \textit{dharma} is a substantial element endowed with a defining characteristic (\textit{svalakṣaṇa}), with its \textit{svabhāva} (which here may be rendered ‘self-essence’), and with secondary attributes. Hence each \textit{dharma} has a certain cause that accounts for what it is in essence, while its accidental attributes are the conditions of the various phases and transformations it undergoes.

The Theravādins, however, as we have seen throughout the present study, do not subscribe to the Sarvāstivāda metaphysics: first and foremost they do not hold that a \textit{dhamma} is a \textit{dravyasat} and do not use the category of \textit{sabhāva} as an ontological determinant of primary existence – at least not until late into the post-canonical period. Therefore, the \textit{Paṭṭhāna}’s \textit{hetupaccaya} primarily answers the question what a \textit{dhamma} is, namely, the question of the intension of a \textit{dhamma}’s individuality. Even when this causal condition is equated with a \textit{dhamma}’s \textit{sabhāva}, it answers the question of what makes a \textit{dhamma} the very particular it is, namely, the question of the principle of a \textit{dhamma}’s individuality. By contrast to the Sarvāstivāda ontology and its subordinate construal of causation, \textit{hetupaccaya} as a reply to the question \emph{what} a \textit{dhamma} is does not necessarily imply \emph{that} it is.

The distinction between cause and condition is merely part of an intricate solution to a broader problem that resulted from the Abhidharma/Abhidhamma tendency towards doctrinal systematization. The Buddhist postulate of impermanence sets up the ground for the assumption that our experience is reducible to clusters of basic, ever-changing constituents and is not unified by any underlying substance or enduring self. This assumption requires one to account for the experience of the
connection between and the continuity of those constituents. In the early period of Buddhist thought the answer to this challenge was found in the principle of conditioning as embodied in the *paticcasamuppāda* doctrine: the processes that make up one’s experience were deemed as connected by necessary and sufficient conditions, such that certain processes necessarily arouse subsequent processes that share their qualities. Later on, however, along with the doctrinal systematization of the early tradition, both the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and the Theravāda Abhidhamma came to adopt, with certain modifications, the theory of momentariness, which portrayed the *dharmas/dhammas* as discrete, individual and radically momentary constituents of experience, whether primary existents or psycho-physical events.\(^{142}\) Such a radical construal of experience as basically momentary is not only a move away from the early Buddhist experientially oriented teaching, but it also raises a vexing difficulty: to account for the experience of the connection between and the continuity of discrete, momentary items seems to be logically impossible. Moreover, the theory of momentariness allegedly has destructive repercussions for the notion of causation: supposing that causes, conditions and their results are momentary existents or events, how can an existent or event which has ended and disappeared bring about a result? How can an event that undergoes distinct stages of origination, endurance and cessation in a brief moment have causal efficacy? Notwithstanding their disputes and doctrinal differences, both the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika and the Theravāda Abhidhamma had to confront this problem, and they both did so by formulating a theory of immediate contiguity that grants causal efficacy.

The Sarvāstivāda thus developed a complex analysis of causal conditionality in terms of intricate interrelations among six types of cause, four kinds of condition and five sorts of effect. At the hub of this analysis lie the principles of action and conditioning. In the early Sarvāstivāda, as represented by the doctrines of the *Vibhāṣa*, a *dharma* enjoys primary existential status by virtue of its *svabhāva*, but the *svabhāva* is an atemporal determinant of such an ontological status and does not concern the temporal status of its possessing *dharma*. Rather, a *dharma*’s temporal status is determined by the presence or absence of function. Given an appropriate assemblage of causes and conditions, the existent *dharmas* manifest a particular momentary function or activity (*kārita*). It is the arising and passing away of this activity that defines the present moment and determines the *dharma*’s momentariness.\(^{143}\) Collett Cox expounds this idea as follows:

If factors exist as real entities characterized by intrinsic nature in the three time periods, momentariness refers only to the transitory character of a factor’s activity, specifically, to the arising and passing away of a factor’s activity that defines the limits of each present moment. Even though a factor’s activity passes away and the factor is thereby said to become past, the factor continues to exist and can still be said to have the capability of acting as a cause in the production of presently arising factors. Among the infinite number of factors whose impermanent activities constitute the total array of sentient and insentient phenomena,
those that occur within the streams of sentient beings arise together with a separate factor, possession (prāpti). When the present factor and its possession pass away, that possession serves as the homogenous cause for the recurrent arising of subsequent factors.\textsuperscript{144}

This doctrine was criticized Vasubandhu who, in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, denies the distinction between a dharma’s activity and its own-nature, asserting that the dharma’s primary existence itself subsists in its activity that occurs only in the present. Causal interaction can thus become meaningful as a relation between the present moment and its immediately preceding moment: it resides in a stream of contiguous conditioning lacking any mediation such as possession. To explain the direct conditioning between contiguous causes and effects Vasubandhu relies on the theory of seeds (bīja), but this lies beyond the scope of this study.\textsuperscript{145}

The early Vibhāṣa’s doctrine of prāpti, though, was also criticized by the established Sarvāstivāda, which provided alternative models in order to account for causal efficacy. Pertinent to our present concern is Saṅghabhadra’s modification of the early Sarvāstivāda position in his Nyāyānusāra.

Saṅghabhadra, who represents the orthodox Kāśmīra Sarvāstivādins, argues that causal interaction, even between two contiguous moments, is untenable. For any given moment, the preceding moment is past and no longer exists, whereas the succeeding moment is future and does not yet exist. Hence causal interaction is defensible only if the dharmas are admitted to exist in the three time periods. Saṅghabhadra’s solution is to distinguish between two modes of a dharma’s operation: a dharma’s specific operation in the present is referred to as function or activity (kārita), whereas its more general efficacy, which can occur in all the three time periods, is called capability (sāmarthya). These two differ in their locus of operation relative to the consciousness series (santāna) constituted by the functional dharma in question: activity is an internal causal efficacy that assists in the production of an effect within a dharma’s own series. Capability, by contrast, is an external conditioning efficacy directed towards the consciousness series of another dharma; it constitutes a condition that assists another dharma in the production of its own effect. A present dharma must fulfil its function in the production of its own series; past and future dharmas can operate only as capabilities conditioning a dharma of another series.\textsuperscript{146} According to this view, a momentary dharma may have two causal operations, only one of which, its kārita, is necessary to its spatio-temporal primary existence. Paul Williams clarifies:

Within a series of momentary entities each moment has to engender the next, but it can also act as a contributory condition towards producing a different sort of effect. We might speak of this as ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ causality, within the series and transcending it respectively. A momentary instant of visual power horizontally produces the next moment of visual power and may or may not, depending on other factors such as light and so on, vertically produce vision of the object […] It is ability which gives rise
to an entity of a completely different sort, and so it is ability which has the
efficacy in the case of a past dharma exerting causal activity. The past
dharma is thus without function and therefore not present, although still
causally efficacious. It follows that to be present is to have horizontal
causality, which may or may not include vertical causality – a fact which
serves to remind us that we are dealing here with primary existents which
are frequently positioned within the system in terms of what they do.147

Returning to our present interest in the Theravādin Abhidhamma theory of causal
conditioning, it should be noted that the Sarvāstivādin doctrines mentioned above
are much later than the Abhidhamma texts we are dealing with (the Vasubandhu-
Saṅghabhadrā dispute dates to the fifth century CE). Yet Saṅghabhadrā’s distinction
between activity and capability has much in common with the Theravādin distinc-
tion between hetu and paccaya as advocated in the Nettippakarana and the
Petakovadāsa. In these treatises hetu is identified as a dhamma’s horizontal causal-
ity in the sense of its own-nature – its mode of operation within its consciousness
series, which determines its individuality as that particular dhamma. On a stronger
metaphysical interpretation hetu is the proper cause of a dhamma’s individuality,
but as such is equivalent with sabhāva in the sense of an individuator and not of an
ontological determinant of primary existential status. Paccaya is a condition in the
sense of other-nature – a dhamma that operates as a contributory condition towards
producing another dhamma outside its own consciousness series, thus resembling
the Sarvāstivādin idea of vertical causality. This Sarvāstivādin distinction between
horizontal and vertical causality is helpful in understanding the Paṭṭhāna theory of
the twenty-four paccayas, the distinction between hetu and paccaya specifically,
and the affinity of the two conceptual frameworks may indicate that they belong to
the same complex of ideas within the early history of Buddhist thought.
Nevertheless, the application of the Sarvāstivādin scheme to the Theravādin context
must be qualified: first, within the Theravādin context a dhamma is a psycho-
physical event; ‘a rise of thought’ in one’s consciousness, not a primary existent.
Second, insofar as the Paṭṭhāna theory of paccaya accommodates horizontal and
vertical causality, these two modes of causal operation are not intended to account
for the dharmas’ temporal existence but for their individuality.

Saṅghabhadrā’s notion of a dhamma’s function as horizontal causality clarifies the
meaning of the first paccaya on the Paṭṭhāna list, namely, hetupaccaya. This causal
condition is exactly what defines a dhamma as that particular event, thus answering
the question of the intension of the dhamma’s individuality. A dhamma’s activity
within its consciousness series in precipitating the next moment of this series is its
very individuality. Alternatively, hetupaccaya could be interpreted metaphysically,
as a mode of operation within the dhamma’s series which constitutes the dhamma’s
own-nature or quidditative essence; as what makes the dhamma the particular event
it is, thus answering the question of the principle of the dhamma’s individuality. This
is evinced in the commentarial statement ‘There is no such thing called “activity”
(kiriyā) apart from the dhamma’s sabhāva.’148 We have already explained that the
Dhammas are diverse capacities of mental events, and that each particular dhamma instant is distinguishable from any other instant by virtue of its unique kammic operation within and outside of its series. The first paccaya on the list of the twenty-four specifically defines what each and every dhamma is and what makes it so, while the remaining twenty-three paccayas further explicate this account by revealing the kammic quality and intensity of operation unique to each dhamma, that is, its capability of ‘vertical’ conditioning by which it facilitates the occurrence of other dhammas outside its consciousness series.

On the Sarvāstivādin theory of causation the horizontal and vertical modes of operation account for the dharmas’ temporal existence: a present dharma has both horizontal and vertical causal efficacy, while past and future dharmas have only vertical causal efficacy. Within the Paṭṭhāna framework, however, these two modes of operation are intended to account not for the dharmas’ temporal existence but for their individuality. In fact, the Sarvāstivādin surmise that present existence may be explained in terms of causal efficacy is circular, for it is untenable to define the present in terms of causal efficacy and then to use this as the basis of an account of existence-in-time. For the Theravadins hetupaccaya directly accounts for what any given individual dhamma is and for why it is so, whereas the remaining paccayas further establish this explanation by locating the dhamma within the web of interrelations by which it is connected with the incessant rise and fall of all other dharmas. It is here that the image of the network model of causal conditioning takes over from the earlier image of the causal chain. The relative positioning of each dhamma within this network of vertical causal conditioning is, first and foremost, a means for its individuation. Only in an indirect, subsidiary sense may this vertical causal conditioning be regarded as an analysis of causal production.

It thus turns out that the Paṭṭhāna theory of paccaya is not about causation at all, at least not if causation is taken in its customarily accepted meaning. Causation here has the sense of kammic conditioning and it is subordinate to the Abhidhamma metaphysical endeavour of the dharmas’ individuation. In fact, the whole idea of an analysis of causation in terms of causal conditioning is circular: such an analysis would first define causation as a functional dependence between events, only to find out that this dependence is but a causal one. The Abhidhamma theory of paccaya, however, is intended to account neither for causal production, nor for the dharmas’ primary existential status, nor for their temporal existential status, but for the individuality of each and every dhamma as a capacity of a certain mental event that occurs within a network of interrelations of causal conditioning.

Within the context of the Paṭṭhāna the distinction between horizontal and vertical causality is not clear-cut: the application of these two modes of operation to the paccayas does not amount to saying that hetupaccaya alone demonstrates horizontal causality while the remaining twenty-three paccayas embody only vertical causal conditioning. We have seen that no fewer than eight of these twenty-three paccayas instantiate interrelations of simultaneity and mutuality among the operating dharmas. To clarify the issue in question one of these eight relations is particularly significant, namely, aṇṇamaṇṇapaccaya. A corresponding concept
of a mutually simultaneous cause is found in the Sarvāstivādin category of sahabhūhetu. The latter has been analysed by Kenneth Tanaka in a paper called ‘Simultaneous relation: (Sahabhū-hetu): a study in Buddhist theory of causation’. I suggest that this analysis may shed light on the Theravādin notion of aṇṇamaṇḍapaccaya and on its implications for the attribution of the distinction between horizontal and vertical causality to the Paṭṭhāna.

Tanaka’s argument begins by noting that in the Kośa Vasubandhu documents a definition of sahabhūhetu as ‘those dharmas that become together’, equating ‘together’ with ‘mutuality’: ‘Dharmas which are mutual effects are mutually sahabhū-hetu.’152 This definition is criticized by the opponent, who sees in it an abrogation of the temporal sequence of cause and effect, for it is incoherent to hold that dharmas that are produced simultaneously can be both cause and effect. The response is that ‘Among the coexistent dharmas, when one exists then all exist, and when one does not exist then all do not exist; therefore, they do constitute cause and effect.’153 This statement shows that sahabhūhetu has two distinct aspects: one is simultaneity and the other is mutuality. It further indicates that what is at stake here is not the simultaneity of the arising dharmas, but rather their alleged mutuality. This is because mutuality, as claimed by the Sautrāntika, implies the lack of criteria for determining which of the simultaneously produced dharmas constitute the cause and which the effect.154 It is Saṅghabhadrā who clarifies what stands behind the relation of sahabhūhetu. He argues that this relation does not at all signify a dharma’s capability of causally producing other dharmas. The opponent’s mistake, Saṅghabhadrā claims, lies in the attempt to find in the simultaneously produced hetu ‘sequential’ causation – that is, what has been referred to above as ‘vertical’ causation – while it has no such function. Instead, this hetu is concerned with the spatial (as opposed to the temporal) interrelation among the coexistent dharmas, emphasizing their inseparability. To clarify this idea Saṅghabhadrā proposes the metaphor of the lamp and its inevitably conjoined light: these are not two discrete entities existing independently of each other at any time, but rather two phenomena that constitute a unified whole in which they both support each other.155 ‘What is clearly shown here’, Tanaka concludes,

is that ‘to be mutually cause and effect’ does not refer to causation. It, instead, points to the relationship in which one is inextricably related to the rest and vice versa. […] Sahabhū-hetu is the force that coordinates the dharmas for a common effect. Its main concern lies with the ‘horizontal’ relationship among the dharmas, not with the direct production of a common effect.156

I suggest that this is also the right way to interpret the relation of aṇṇamaṇḍapaccaya posited by the Theravādin Abhidhamma. Obviously the Sarvāstivādin ontology should not be attributed to the Theravādin mindset, and for this reason the employment of the terms ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ is not as directly applicable to the Pali Abhidhamma as it is to the Sarvāstivādin framework.

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Notwithstanding the doctrinal differences between the two schools, what lies at the core of both *aññamaññapaccaya* and *sahabhūhetu* is not vertical causal production – in fact, not the general idea of causation at all – but rather an attempt to account for the nature of the *dhammas/dharmas* in terms of causal efficacy. Despite the fact that simultaneity and mutuality are indicators of time, in the analysis of the relation of simultaneous causal conditioning temporal considerations are relegated to the background. This relation does not refer to causation at all, and hence it does not involve time. Rather, it is an atemporal category that contributes to the systematization of the *dhammas* by means of a tenseless use of language. The Sarvāstivādins similarly use the category of *svabhāva* as an atemporal determinant of primary ontological status. Just as a *dharma* possesses its primary existential status irrespective of time, the relation of mutually simultaneous causation indicates the *dharma’s* existence as spatially interrelated, and hence it transcends time. The Theravādins, though, use *sabhāva* as an atemporal determinant of individuality. Bear in mind that this notion of *sabhāva* as an individuator, and hence as an individual itself, implies that any attempt to individuate a *sabhāva* must transcend its possessing *dhamma* and use something else, such as the *dhamma*’s spatio-temporal relations to at least one other individual *dhamma*.

I have shown that the post-canonical Abhidhamma confronts this problem by entwining the notion of *sabhāva* with the developed theory of momentariness. The *Pāṭṭhāna* theory of *paccaya* embodies another, earlier attempt to offer a solution to this problem. Here the Theravādins use *aññamaññapaccaya* as an indicator of the spatial interrelations among the *dhammas* for the sake of their individuation.

The Abhidhamma systematized analysis of all possible relations of causal conditioning, then, is subordinate to the *dhamma* theory and its associated metaphysical vision of the individuation of one’s mind. It forms part of the Theravādins’ broader metaphysical account of the nature of sentient experience, meditative experience in particular, and of how it is constructed; it is one facet of a comprehensive method of explaining what every possible event that appears in one’s consciousness is, rather than a theory of causation *per se*.

The following and concluding section expounds this claim, situating the *Pāṭṭhāna* theory within the broader context of the doctrinal transition from the Nikāya mindset to the Abhidhamma.

### 5.2.3 Causation and individuation: how twelve nidānas become twenty-four paccayas

The *Pāṭṭhāna* analysis of causal conditioning is subsidiary to the Abhidhamma metaphysics of mind as this is represented by the *dhamma* theory. In contradistinction to the earliest stratum of Buddhist thought, the Abhidhamma analysis of causal conditioning is primarily intended to account for the true nature of the dependently co-arisen *dharmas*, and only secondarily for the principle of dependent co-arising itself. The Abhidhamma theory of *paccaya* explains what it is to be an individual *dhamma* in terms of causal efficacy. We have seen that the doctrinal shift from the
Nikāya mindset to the Abhidhamma consists in a transition from a process-oriented to an event-oriented conception of sentient experience. Having portrayed the dhammas as events, and subsequently as momentary events of which dimensions are fixed, the Abhidhamma shifts its doctrinal focus from describing the dependent co-origination of all encountered phenomena to establishing a metaphysical theory of mental events. Providing a theory of events involves settling the question of what events are, and this necessitates methods of their identification as well as criteria for their individuation.158 I have already noted that modern philosophical scholarship, especially that interested in philosophy of mind, has put forward various theories of events.159 To get a clearer idea of the Abhidhamma theory of events as embodied in the Paṭṭhāna it would be helpful to address one of the most influential theories of events in twentieth-century philosophy, namely, Donald Davidson’s theory that accounts for events in terms of causation.

Davidson argues for the existence of events either directly, or by proving first that there are actions and then showing that actions are but events.160 Davidson’s preliminary step in offering a theory of events is to point to the fact that many of the terms that purport to describe events do so in terms of the causes and effects of those events. He claims that all causes and effects are events, and that only events can be causes and effects. This leads to his theory about what it is to be an event: the properties of being a cause and being an effect, which are unique to events, make it possible to express the very idea of an event. According to this view, to be an event is to have a place in a series of causes and effects. This implies that identical events must fit into the framework of causal relations in the same way; that is, events are identical if, and only if, they have exactly the same causes and effects. Sameness of causes and effects is a condition of identity for events.161 Davidson’s nexus of causal relations provides a framework for the identification and description of events, analogous in many respects to the way the space-time coordinate system enables one to identify and describe material objects.

In the light of Davidson’s theory of events, the Paṭṭhāna network of paccaya may be seen as a space-time coordinate system that enables one to locate within it any given dhamma in relation to all other events. This not only makes it possible to identify the dhamma, but also to render it in its exclusiveness as a unique particular, namely, to individuate it. Two dhammic instances of the same type would fit into the web of causal conditions in exactly the same way, but would then be distinguished as discrete, individual instances on the grounds of their unique degrees of causal efficacy. The paccaya web of interrelations, then, provides a method of the dhammas’ individuation, by which any given dhamma may be identified and distinguished from any other dhammic instance.

The Abhidhammikas sought to offer a metaphysical account of the structure of one’s experience. This required them to explain the exact nature of the dhammas constituting that experience. Since they portrayed the dhammas as events, they had to provide a theory of what it means to be an event and what makes an individual event the particular it is. In accordance with the fundamentals of Buddhist thought, the natural place in which to search for such a theory must have been the
principle of causal conditioning and the *paṭiccasamuppāda* doctrine. But the treatment of these was then subject to the requirements imposed by a broader interest in the *dhamma’s* nature. A metaphysical theory of events in terms of causal conditioning was then provided and formulated in line with the systematic methods of the Abhidhamma and its specific doctrinal concerns.

To reconstruct the shift from the Buddha’s teaching to the Abhidhamma as a doctrinal transition from explaining human experience in terms of processes to its explanation in terms of events may particularly elucidate the nature of the connection between the early *paṭiccasamuppāda* doctrine and the Abhidhamma theory of the twenty-four *paccayas*. Within the Nikāya conceptual framework *dhammas* are physical and mental processes, and processes *ipso facto* take place over a period of time. Accordingly, the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula has traditionally been interpreted as depicting a process – the process that makes up a person – as it stretches over three cycles of lives in the three time periods. The twelvefold formula was thus divided into three sections: the first, comprised by the first two *nidānas* of ignorance and mental formations, represents one’s past life; the second, from consciousness up to the tenth *nidāna* of becoming, depicts one’s present life; and the third, which includes the last two *nidānas* of birth plus ageing-and-death, portrays one’s future life. The twelvefold chain was further divided by placing within it three transition points: first, between mental formations and consciousness; second, between feeling and craving; third, between becoming and birth. This division results in four sections: (i) past ignorance and formations are the sufficient condition of (ii) the present fruit (consciousness up to feeling); the present fruit conditions (iii) the set of necessary conditions (craving up to becoming) that will bear fruit in (iv) a future cycle of birth, ageing and death.162

In the Abhidhamma the twelvefold formula is viewed differently. Led by their interest in accounting for meditative experience, as well as by their espoused event-oriented metaphysics and the theory of momentariness, the Abhidhamma points out that the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula applies not only to one’s past, present and future lives, but also to each and every single moment of consciousness. Although the *Paṭṭhāna* does not yet contain the full-fledged theory of the momentary consciousness process, the basics of this theory are well established in it and it specifies almost all the stages of the consciousness process. The theory of the consciousness process can thus be attributed to the canonical Abhidhamma, if not to the earlier Abhidhamma.163 According to this theory every *dhamma*, every momentary event, emerges in one’s consciousness in accordance with the twelvefold chain. This means that in every consciousness moment the twelve *nidānas* arise simultaneously as a unified whole of which constitutive causal conditions are all interrelated.164 The principle of *paṭiccasamuppāda* reveals the mechanism underlying experience in *samsāra*. It shows that the latter is a cyclic process encapsulated in the repetitive movement from becoming to birth, which in turn leads to ageing and death, then to a renewed birth that will end, again and again. This means that the chain cannot be broken at any of its links; it can only be demolished as a whole. Hence it is not only necessary to analyse how each two links stand in
relation to one another, but also what possible interrelations may obtain among the
twelve links in their entirety at any given consciousness moment.

This task is facilitated by analysing the twelve nidānas in terms of the twenty-four paccayās, and accomplished by Buddhaghosa in the Visuddhimagga’s chapter on the paṭiccasamuppāda doctrine as well as by the author of the Sammohavinodanī in commenting on the Vibhaṅga’s paṭiccasamuppādavibhaṅga. For instance, the investigation of the relation between the first two nidānas, ignorance and mental formations, reveals that ignorance is conditionally related to mental formations in many ways: as object condition on the occurrence of the three roots of greed etc.; as a decisive support condition in one whose moral conduct is flawed; or as cause condition, simultaneity, mutuality, support, association, presence and non-disappearance conditions in one while performing anything unskilful. Another example is the inquiry into the sequence from the six sense faculties to sense contact which discloses the following web of conditioning relations: the five physical sense faculties are conditionally related to their corresponding types of sense contact (eye contact etc.) in six ways, namely, as support, pre-existence, controlling faculty, dissociation, presence and non-disappearance conditions. Subsequently, the mental sense faculty is conditionally related to its corresponding mind contact in nine ways: as simultaneity, mutuality, support, fruition, nutriment, controlling faculty, association, presence and non-disappearance conditions. Likewise, the five physical sense objects are conditionally related to their corresponding types of sense contact in four ways: as object, pre-existence, presence and non-disappearance conditions. But all these also operate as object condition in relation to mind contact, and hence mind contact has all the five physical sense objects plus mental objects as object conditions.

The paṭiccasamuppāda formula and the twenty-four paccayās are thus two different methods of analysing the processes that make up the person. Yet once it is acknowledged that all sentient and insentient phenomena are impermanent, and that our construction of these phenomena is a dynamic process that may be examined on a number of different scales, it turns out that the two methods in fact converge. When they are applied to the smallest scale of each and every single moment of consciousness, they turn out to be two aspects of an attempted theoretical reconstruction of one’s conscious world. Gethin comments on this:

The list of twenty-four paccayās can be considered by way of two basic aspects. The first concerns those paccayās that illustrate the various relationships that exist simultaneously between dharmas that arise together in a given assemblage or complex at a given moment in time. The second concerns those paccayās that focus on the relationships that exist between dharmas over a period of time, that is to say, the way in which a dhamma that arises at one moment can be related to a dhamma that arises at another time.

From the Abhidhamma viewpoint what determines the process that makes up the person is his or her consciousness process, and this is understood as a
dynamic stream of consciousness moments. The Abhidhamma seeks to cultivate one’s mind and wisdom by drawing one’s attention to the ways in which one’s process of life occurs at each and every single moment of thought. To grasp the mechanism that conditions one’s consciousness in its entirety is seen as a requisite part of the spiritual path to awakening. Just as the process of samsāric experience is an interrelated network of conditions encapsulated in every single consciousness moment, so the path factors leading to the cessation of this samsāric process are contained in every single consciousness moment that contributes to awakening. Any one of the path factors embraces all the factors, and hence, by the principle of simultaneity and reciprocity, to cultivate any one of the dhammas that contribute to awakening is to develop them all.\(^\text{169}\) The awakening moment is that at which all the path factors follow simultaneously as a unified whole. At this moment the chain of dependent co-arising is demolished in its entirety and liberation emerges from wisdom. This is where the Abhidhamma systematic and allegedly divergent method is at home with early Buddhist soteriology.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Cox 1993: 120–1.
2 Collins (1982: 29–40) provides a lucid outline of the place of Buddhist thought in the general history of early Indian religion. Note that the bifurcation into ‘Brahmanical tradition’ and ‘non-Brahmanical religious milieu’ is made only for the sake of simplicity. In fact, the two streams of thought mutually influenced each other. Moreover, the qualification of the former group as ‘orthodox’ and of the latter as ‘heterodox’ is made from the Brahmanical point of view. On this topic see Olivelle 1992: Introduction, esp. pp. 13 and 36.
3 The primary sources for studying pre-Buddhist thought are the Brahmanical and Buddhist texts themselves. Since these are committed to their own worldviews, they may have distorted their opponents’ positions, and hence by no means portray an objective picture of the historical reality at the time of the Buddha. Collins 1982: 32–3; Gombrich 1996: 13–14.
6 For example, S I 134; S II 20. This fourfold classification recurs throughout the Nidāna-saṁyutta.
7 Weerasinghe 1993: 104.
8 For example, RV 2.10.3ab: uttānāyām ajanayan susūtaṁ bhuvad agnih purupeśāsu garbhah. ‘They made the well-begotten infant be born on wood supine. Agni was a germ in various forms.’ Agni is also identified with the Child of the Waters (apām napāt), the form of fire that appears as the lightning born from the clouds: see 2.35.8, where Agni is also depicted as begotten by the herbs and trees which are born from the waters; 7.4.5, wherein Agni is the unborn infant of the plants and trees as well as of earth, the all-sustainer (tam ośadhī ca vaninās ca garbhām bhūmiś ca viśvadh-vṛttaṁ bibhartī). At RV 10.5 Agni, who ‘was born many times’ (verse 1), is the child of the holy pair, namely, heaven and earth, that have copulated, having been moved by the cosmic order, ṛṣa; he is thus also called ‘ṛṣa’s first-born’ (verse 7). A similar idea of a self-manifestation of the same original stuff in different forms can also be discerned in hymns addressed to Indra, such as at 4.26.1, where the poet
ascribes to Indra the words: ‘I was Manu and Sûrya; I am the sage Kakśvat, the singer...I am the poet Uśanā, behold me!’: ahaṃ manur abhavaṃ sūryaś cāhaṃ kakśvāṃ rṣir asmi viprah/...ahaṃ kavir uśanā paśyatāṁ mā// 9

Ibid.: 10.190.1–2: riṭam ca satyam cābhiddhāt tapaso ‘dhajajāyata/ tato rātry ajāyata tataḥ samudro arṇavah/ samudrāt arṇavād adhi saṃvatsaro ajāyata/ ahorātrānī vidadhad viśvasya misato vaśi//= Trans. O’Flaherty 1981: 34. It should be noted that this idea of mechanical evolution is then immediately followed by a different account, which tells that it was a Disposer or an Arranger (dhātr) who set in place the phenomena in the universe.

10 RV 10.90.8–14. Note that at the same time, though, this hymn also points at the impossibility of identifying any coherent causal succession, for it puts forward the circularity or mutual dependence between phenomena, which does not allow to determine what is the cause and what is the effect. Thus, it is said that Virāj was born from Puruṣa and that He came from Virāj (verse 5). Moreover, we are told that ‘With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice’ (verse 16), namely, Puruṣa was both the subject and the object of the sacrifice. See O’Flaherty 1981: 30–1 and 32, n. 18.


12 For example, BU 3.8.8.; CU 8.1.5–6; MuU 1.6–7.

13 CU 6.8.4: sammūlaḥ somyemāḥ sarvāḥ praṇāḥ sadāyatanāḥ satpratisthāḥ/// ‘The existent, my son, is the root of all these creatures – the existent, the existing is their foundation.’ Sanskrit text and trans. in Olivelle 1998: 250–1.

14 CU 6.2.1–4: sad eva somyedam agra āśīd ekam evādvityam/ tad aiṣkata bahu syāṃ praṇāyeyeti/ tat tejo ‘srjata/ tat tejo aiṣkata/ bahu syāṃ praṇāyeyeti/ tad apo ‘srjata/ tā āpa aiṣkanta ...tā annam asṛjanta// ‘In the beginning, son, this world was simply what is existent – one only, without a second [...] And it thought to itself: “Let me become many. Let me propagate myself.” It emitted heat. The heat thought to itself: “Let me become many” [...] It emitted water [...] It emitted food.’ Sanskrit text and trans. in Olivelle 1998: 246–7.

15 S II 20: so karoti so paṭiṃsamediyāti ti kho kassapa ādito sato sayāṃkataṃ dukkhaḥ ti iti vadaṃ sassaṃtām etam pareti.


17 The Brahmagīla-sutta (D I 34) refers to materialism as annihilationism (uccheda): the view that the self is material and perishes at death. The term lokāyata is used in the Nikāyas to designate a branch of Brahmanical learning (e.g. D I 88 and 114), cosmology in particular. It also features at S II 77 and A IV 428, where the Buddha discusses metaphysical matters with ‘lokāyatika Brahmins’. On lokāyata as denoting ‘the science of debate’ (vītaṃdasaṭṭha) and ‘materialism’ see Jayatilleke 1963: 49–51 and 71–80; Bhikku Bodhi 2000 (S trans. vol. I): 763–4, n. 128 on S II 77; Warder 1956: 52.

18 D I 55.


According to It 8 the twelvefold formula is a combination of two earlier lists analysing suffering: the first traces it to craving and the second to ignorance. See also Frauwallner 1974: 156–7. On the formula as a polemic against Vedic thought see Jurewicz 2000. Studies of the evolution of the formula’s different versions based on
comparisons of the Pali sources and their Chinese counterparts are found in Bucknell 1999 and Choong 2000: 151ff.


45 S II 25: paticcassamuppada ca vo bhikkhave desissami paticcassamuppanne ca dhamme.

46 Ibid.: 26, III 43; M I 500: jati bhikkhave anicca sankhatat paticcassamuppanna khayadhammad vayadhammad viragadhammad nirodhadhamma; bhavo bhikkhave anicco...avijja bhikkhave anicca...nirodhadhamma.

47 Gombrich 1996: 47. Cox (1993: 126–7), though, promulgates a different view: ‘The twelve member formulation thus offers a specific program through which the religious objective of the cessation of suffering can be effected. [...] Therefore it would appear that in these early accounts, conditioning or causation, as such, is important neither as an abstract descriptive principle nor as an explanation for the process of rebirth, but rather insofar as it explains the presence of suffering and thereby makes possible its termination.’


50 Hamilton 2000: 89–92 (emphasis in the original).

51 M I 191ff.: paticcassamuppanna kho pan' ime yad idam pancupadananakkhandha.

52 S II 25: uppada vathagatanam anuppada vathagatanam thita va sa dhatu dhammatihata dhammaniyamatata idapaccayata.


54 Spk II 41: tathata ti adini paccayakarass' eva vevacanani: so tehi tehi paccayehi anunadhikev eva tassa tassa dhammassa sambhavato, tathata ti. sammaggim upagatesu paccayesu muhutta pi tato nibbattanan dhammanam asambhav' abhavato, avitathati ti. a'nhadhammapaccayehi a'nhadhamm'anuppattito, anan'naithatha ti. yathavuttanam etesa jaranamaranadina paccayato v paccayasamuhato v idapaccayata ti vutto. See also Vism 518 (XVII 6). Some manuscripts of the Vibhanga employ the term paccayakara as a synonym for paticcassamuppada (using paccayakara vivibhango instead of paticcassamuppavadibhango at Vibh 192), and this is how it is clearly understood in the commentarial tradition: e.g. Dhs-a 2, 7, 30.

55 S II 105–6.


58 Hume 1978: 170 (1.3.14).

59 Mackie 1974: 34.


63 M I 190: ajjhattikan' c' eva, avuso, cakkhum aparibhinnan hoti, bahirca ca rupna na apatham agacchanti, no ca tajjo samannaharo hoti, n'eva tavava tajjassa viinnanabh-agassa patubhavo hoti. ajjhattikan' c' eva, avuso, cakkhum aparibhinnan hoti bahirca ca ruppa apatham agacchanti, no ca tajjo samannaharo hoti, n'eva tavava tajjassa viinnanabhagassa patubhavo hoti. yato ca kho, avuso, ajjhattikan' c' eva cakkhum aparibhinnan hoti, bahirca ca ruppa apatham agacchanti, tajjo ca samannaharo hoti, evam tajjassa viinnanabhagassa patubhavo hoti. This stereotyped description of the multi-conditioning of sense perception recurs throughout the Nikayas, e.g. M I 111–12; S II 72–5; IV 32–4, 66–9 and 166–7; D II 62–3.
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kiriyananodhātucittan ti attho. taṃ rūpāṇaṃ anāpāthagatattāpi aṇāvihitassa’pi na hoti.
65 S III 54.
66 Referred to at Vism 518 (XVII 6) and 521–2 (XVII 16–22) as paccaya-sāmaggi and hetu-samāhā.
69 Vism 532–3 (XVII 67): paccayo hetu kā raṇaṃ niḍānaṃ sambhavo pabhavo ti ādi attithato ekāṃ byañjanato nānaṃ.
70 S II 30–1 employs the first one, Mp II 154 the second one and Nidd I vol. II 158, 256 and 258 the rest of the list.
71 PED s.v. paccaya and hetu.
72 D II 57–8 and 62–3: tasmā ti hānanda, es’ eva hetu etam niḍānaṃ esa samudayo esa paccayo jārāmaranāsassa, yadidam jāti... tasmā ti hānanda, es’ eva hetu etam niḍānaṃ esa samudayo esa paccayo jātiyā, yadidam bhavo...
73 For example, M I 442 and 445; II 45 and 74; A I 55, 66 and 200: ko hetu ko paccayo.
76 D II 56 and 63: iti khe ānanda nāmarupapaccaya viṇñāṇaṃ, viṇñāṇapaccaya nāmarūpam. On p. 64 it is also said that the round of sansāra is experienced by means of nāmarūpā together with viṇñāṇa (nāmarūpaṃ sāha viṇñāṇena). Their mutual dependency also occurs at S II 104 and 113–14. See n. 42 above.
77 D II 114: seyyathāpi, āvuso, dve nalakalāpīyo aṇāmaṇaṇīṃ nissāya tiṇṭheyyum. evam eva kho, āvuso, nāmarūpa papaccaya viṇñāṇaṃ, viṇñāṇapaccaya nāmarūpan [ ... ] tāsaṃ ce, āvuso, nalakalāpīṇam ekā aṅkaḍhadheyya ekā papateyya, aparam ce aṅkaḍhadheyya aparā papateyya. evam eva kho, āvuso, nāmarūpanirodhā viṇñānanirodho, viṇñānanirodhā nāmarūpanirodho.
78 See n. 63 above.
79 Hamilton 1996: 125 and 129.
80 S II 97: seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, dvinnam kaṭṭhānaṃ saṅghatānasamodhāna usmā jāyati tejo abhinibbattati. tesam eva dvinnam kaṭṭhaṇam namaṅbhāvāvinikkhapa yā tajjā usmā sā nirujijhati sā vippasammati, evam eva kho, bhikkhave, sukhavedaniyam phassam paticca uppaṭijati sukhvedanā. tass’ eva sukhavedaniyassa phassassa nirodhā yaṃ tajjam vedayitam sukhavedaniyam phassam paticca uppannā sukhvedanā sā nirujijhati sā vippasammati... pe... adukkhamasukhavedaniyam phassam paticca uppaṭijati adukkhamasukhvedanā. tass’ eva adukkhamasukhavedaniyassa phassassa nirodhā yaṃ tajjam vedayitam adukkhamasukhavedaniyam phassam... sā nirujijhati sā vippasammati. This simile recurs at S IV 215 and S V 212–13.
81 M I 55; S II 101 respectively. Also n. 42 above.
82 M I 295.
84 Vism 542 (XVII 106): ekato hi kāraṇato na idha kiñcī ekāṃ phalam atthi, na anekam, nāpi anekhehi kāraṇahī ekam; anekhehi pana kāraṇehi anekam eva hoti.
85 Kalupahana 1961: 183 and 188.
86 M I 140. At S II 17 it is said that suffering alone is what arises and ceases.
88 PTC s.v. paṭṭhāna gives only two occasions: Nidd I vol. I 19 (which is a misreading of satipaṭṭhāna) and Patiss I 15.
89 Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000 (S trans. vol II): 1915 (n. 122 on the Satipaṭṭhāna-saṃyutta of S V 141ff.).
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91 MW s.v. pra-sthā.
95 Paṭṭha 11: paccayo ti ettha pana ayam vacanattho paṭiccet atasmā eti tī paccayo. See also Vism 532 (XVII 68).
97 Paṭṭha 11–12: tattha hetu ti vacanāvayavakāraṇamūlānaṃ etam adhivacanam [...] iti mūlaṭṭhena hetu, upakāraṭṭhena paccayo ti sāṅkheta: mūlaṭṭhena upakāro dhammo hetupaccayo. so hi sāli-ādīnaṃ sālījīdīni viya, manippabhdīdinaṃ viya ca, manivannādayo kusalādīnāṃ kusalādībhavasādhako ti ācaryānaṃ adhipāyo. [...] laddhahetupaccayaḥ hi dhammā virūḥmatulā viya pādāpā thīrā honti suppaṭṭīthītī, ahetukā tilabhīdikā sevāḷa viya, na suppaṭṭīthītī. iti mūlaṭṭhena upakāro tī suppaṭṭīthītabhavasāḍhanena upakāro dhammo hetupaccayo ti veditabbo. Also Vism 532–3 (XVII 67–70).
98 D III 214; M I 47.
99 Tikap I 1–2; Paṭṭha 12 and Vism 533 (XVII 71).
100 Dhs-a 278: vinā hi āvajjanena cittam uppajjati, ārammaṇena pana vinā n’ uppajjati tī. Vism XVII 71: ossāpitātā na koci dhammo na hoti.
101 The Sarvāstivādins, by contrast, do draw ontological conclusions from the intentionality of consciousness, assuming that the intentional object or referent must exist. The Vijñānavāda, however, rejects both the Theravādin conceptual realism and the Sarvāstivādin ontological realism, claiming that the subject-object relationship is but one of the forms assumed by consciousness itself, or rather a stage in its evolution. See Kalupahana 1975: 165; Williams 1981: 230.
102 Tikap I 2: yaṃ yaṃ dhammam garum katvā ye ye dhammā uppajjantī cittacetasikā dhammā, te te dhammā tesam tesam dhammānaṃ adhipatipaccayena paccayo.
103 Sv II 641 = Vibh-a 303 = Vism 385 (XII 52).
104 Dhs 61–8, 75 and 117. The Dhs confines its treatment of this matter to actively skilful and unskilful cittas, and to the four types of lokuttara-vippāka citta. See Gethin 1992a: 85 and 320.
105 Tikap I 2: adhipatipaccayo ti chandādhipati chandasampayuttakānaṃ dhammānaṃ tāṃsammaṭṭhānānaṃ ca rūpānaṃ adhipatipaccayena paccayo. viriyādhipati viriyasampayuttakānaṃ dhammānaṃ tāṃsammaṭṭhānānaṃ ca rūpānaṃ adhipatipaccayena paccayo. cittādhipati cittasampayuttakānaṃ dhammānaṃ tāṃsammaṭṭhānānaṃ ca rūpānaṃ adhipatipaccayena paccayo. vimānasādhipati vimānasampayuttakānaṃ dhammānaṃ tāṃsammaṭṭhānānaṃ ca rūpānaṃ adhipatipaccayena paccayo.
106 Vism 534 (XVII 72): chanḍaviriyacittavigamīṃsāvākāhāta cattāro dhammā adhipatipaccayo ti veditabba, no ca kho ekato, yadhā hi chandam dhuroma chandam jeṭṭhakam katvā cittam pavattati, tadā chando ‘va adhipati, na itare. esa nayo sesesu pi. yaṃ pana dhammaṃ garum katvā arūpadhammā pavattanti, so nesaṃ ārammaṇādhipati.
107 Paṭṭha 14: n’ atthi etesam anantarana ti hi anantarā. saṃṭhānabhāvato suṭṭhu anantarā ti samantarā. Vism 534 (XVII 76).
108 Paṭṭha 14 and Vism 535 (XVII 77): uppajjāṆino saha uppajjāṆābhāvena upakāraṇa dhamma sahajatapaccayo, pakāsassa padīpo viya.
109 Paṭṭha 14. See n. 77 above.

For a discussion of the standard five jhāna factors and other lists of qualities experienced during the jhāna practice that are scattered throughout the Nikāyas see Cousins 1973: 122 and 124–5.

See §3.1.2 above.

AKB 2.61c: pratayāh katame? catvārāḥ pratayāḥ uktāḥ, kva uktāḥ? sūtre/ catasrāḥ pratayātāḥ/ hetupratyayatā samanantarā...


Cox 1993: 127–32; Skilling 1998: 145 n. 28. Interesting is the structural similarity between the Śāriputrābhidharmaśāstra and the Dharmaskandha, on the one hand, and the Vibhaṅga, on the other hand – a similarity that may point to a possible historical affinity among these texts and that provides possible clues as to the development of the Abhidharma/Abhidhamma exposition of dependent co-arising and of causation. See Cox’s discussion: 127–32.


As Skilling remarks (1998: 144), that the six causes were a later development is shown by the fact that they are not mentioned in any sūtra, and the Viśhāṣikas themselves admit that they first appear in the Jñānaprasthāna.

AKB 2.49: yattātkatam: janyasya jañikā jātir na hetupratyayair vinā iti ka ime hetavah? ke ca pratayāh? kāraṇāṃ sahabhūs caiva sahāgah sampratayutakah/ sarvatrago vipākāhyah sadvidho hetur iṣyate// ‘We have seen that arising, in order to engender the dharma that it should engender, needs the cooperation of hetus or
causes, and pratyayas or conditions. What are the hetus and what are the pratyayas? The hetus are sixfold: kāraṇahetu, sahabhū . . . vipāka.’ English rendering of La Vallée Poussin’s trans. 1988 vol. I: 255. See Willemen et. al. 1998: 28–9.

137 Cox 1995: 92.
138 AKB 2.61d: hetvākhyāḥ pañca hetavah// kāraṇahetuvajrīyāḥ pañca hetavo hetupratyayāḥ/
139 AKB bhāṣya on 2.50a : yas tu pradhānah kāraṇahetuh sa utpādane ‘pi samarthah yathā caṅṣūrūpe caṅṣur vijñānasya āhārāḥ ārārasya bijādayo ‘nikurādīnāṁ iti/
141 Ibid.: 245.
142 See §2.2.4 above.
143 Williams 1981: 241 and 246; Cox 1995: 85–7 and 139.
144 Cox 1995: 93.
146 Ibid.: 141–2.
148 See §3.2.2, n. 131 above.
149 See §3.2.2.1, esp. nn. 74–8 above.
150 See Williams 1981: 247. Although here time does not have the sense of Kant’s intuition; it does not exist in ultimate truth. Rather, the sequence of the three times is understood to be generated by and in the process of conditioned and conditioning dharmas/dhammas. For the Sarvāstivādins time is not included as dravya under the categories of the ontological table, while for the Theravādins it is but a concept (paññatti), a label ascribed to a sequence of processes. Since time is not a prerequisite for action, an analysis of existence-in-time in terms of action is not inevitably circular.
151 Reichenbach 1989: 141.
152 Tanaka 1985: 92. The following references to and translations of the Kośa are Tanaka’s.
153 Ibid.: 93.
156 Ibid.: 98 and 102.
157 See §4.4.1, nn. 175–8 and §4.4.2 above.
159 See §2.3.2 above.
161 Ibid.: 179–80 (‘The individuation of events’).
166 Vism 541 (XVII 103).
167 Ibid.: 566 (XVII 227).
169 Ibid.: 244–7.
The foregoing study has shown that the primary discord between the Nikāya mindset and the Abhidhamma framework lies in their divergent metaphysical concerns. Although the Buddha repudiates theoretical generalizations and shuns ontological commitments regarding the status of the person or the external world, he advances a distinctive epistemology. According to this epistemology the range of whatever is conceived and apperceived is mediated by the cognitive apparatus as embodied in the operation of the five khandhas. Hence the boundaries of one’s cognitive process are the boundaries of one’s world: the latter is the world of one’s own experience, dependent on the workings of one’s cognitive apparatus. Under the aegis of this epistemology there follows a metaphysical framework that we have identified as an experientially oriented process metaphysics: the view that processes are fundamental to experience and cognition, and that all encountered phenomena are best portrayed and understood in terms of processes rather than of substances. This may not be explicit in the earliest stratum of the Pali Canon, but it surely follows from the way in which the Nikāyas describe the Buddha’s insight into Dhamma, the Truth of how things really are, namely, how experience operates. It is true that the Buddha dismisses certain metaphysical questions known as the ‘undeclared questions’ – about whether or not the world or the self is eternal, etc. – on the grounds that they are not conducive to nibbāna. Yet he is not an anti-metaphysician: nothing in the texts suggests that these questions are completely meaningless, or that the Buddha denies the soundness of metaphysics as such in the sense intended by twentieth-century Logical Positivism. The undeclared questions are indeed irrelevant to understanding one’s cognitive process, which is what perpetuates experience in samsāra and is the kernel of the four noble truths. But there are metaphysical issues quite relevant to acquiring wisdom along the Buddhist path, such as the postulate of anicca and the paticcasamuppāda principle.

Rather than completely to deny metaphysics, the early texts stress the need to avoid one-sided views (diṭṭhi), particularly eternalism and annihilationism. Any view or doctrine is partial and misleads its adherents into assuming that it is mind-independent and veridical, whereas it is merely born of certain pragmatic concerns and linguistic conventions. Having refuted all sixty-two types of wrong
view in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, the Buddha says:

Monks, all those ascetics and Brahmins [having fixed views in sixty-two different ways] experience feelings by repeated contact through the six sense-spheres; in them feeling conditions craving; craving conditions clinging; clinging conditions future renewed existence; future renewed existence conditions birth; conditioned by birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, unsatisfactoriness, grief and unrest come into being. When, monks, a monk comprehends as they really are the arising and ceasing of the six contact-spheres, their appeal and peril, and the escape from them, he understands that which surpasses all these views.2

The Buddha’s insight reveals that the causal foundation for one’s *saṃsāric* experience is the operation of one’s cognitive apparatus. One’s experience in its entirety arises from the cognitive process of making sense of the incoming sensory data. Basic to this process is the *khandha* of conceptualization and apperception, namely, *saññā*, the activity of which results in the identification and differentiation of the incoming data. This identification process necessarily involves naming. As Hamilton points out, in describing the way identification is part of sorting out incoming experiential data the early Buddhist texts emphasize that naming is equivalent to what is called ‘making manifold’ of those data. ‘One might say’, Hamilton suggests, ‘that the process of making manifold in order to identify is the process of making nameable the aspects of one’s experience’.3 Indeed the Pali term for making manifold, *papañceti*, also means ‘verbal differentiation’, or ‘verbal proliferation’. All this verbal differentiation adds up to language, for, as the apperceptive process develops, one is imposing on the sensory influx categories and references that can be indicated by means of language. Language, then, is intrinsic to our experience: it provides the conceptual criteria and framework by which we make sense of our experience, or rather, by which we construct our world.4

The Buddha, however, unveils not only the dominance of language and conceptual thought, but also their inherent insufficiency and inadequacy. Although language is a constant feature of our experience, we are normally unaware of the paradox in the cognitive process: to become knowable all the incoming sensory data must be verbally differentiated, but as such they are mere constructions, mental formations; nothing justifies their reliability because they could equally have been constructed otherwise, in accordance with other conventional guidelines. What the Buddha rejects is realism, conceptual and ontological alike: the notion that the encountered world is made up of distinguishable substances, and the linguistic theory that words refer to these substances which they represent; the conviction that our language corresponds to or mirrors a mind-independent reality. He points towards conventionalism in language and undermines the misleading character of nouns as substance-words.5 Whatever we can know is part of the activity of language, but language, by its very nature, undermines certified knowledge. The Buddha shows that
language is, in principle, faulty: having the power to make manifold and endlessly to proliferate, it makes things appear and disappear; it can construct anything and hence cannot be representational of reality. There can be no innocence of relations between word and world. George Steiner has vividly captured this point:

*Anything* can be said and, in consequence, written about *anything*. We scarcely pause to observe or to countenance this commonplace. But an enigmatic enormity inhabits it. Every other human instrument and performative capability has its limitations. [...] Only language knows no conceptual, no projective finality. We are at liberty to say anything, to say what we will about anything, about everything and about nothing [...] Translated into saying – where the notion of ‘translation’, of some pre-verbalized status is one of the most demanding uncertainty – the conceptual process, the deed of imagining, can abolish, reverse or confound all categories (themselves embedded in language) of identity and temporality.6

The Buddha’s critique of language and conceptual thought is embodied in the teaching of *anatta* and the analysis of personal identity in terms of the five *khandhas*. Apart from rejecting the notion of a metaphysical self as an enduring substratum underlying experience, this analysis repudiates the very concept of a self as referring to an ‘I’ that can be discovered by reflection. ‘Self’, ‘person’ or ‘being’ are mental constructs; conventional labels for what in reality is a mass of constantly changing, conditionally originated psycho-physical processes. But the critique of the concept of self is merely an instance of a broader rule: the Buddha’s dialectic exhibits that language provides no criteria for determining the nature of the particular episodes making up one’s conscious experience, let alone for mirroring reality, that is, for establishing whether there are features in reality that correspond to our conceptual constructs. Any word, term or definition is an arbitrary phonetic mark, an empty sign. Hence ‘To ascribe to words a correspondence to “things out there”, to see and use them as somehow representational of “reality” in the world, is not only a vulgar illusion. It makes of language a lie.’7 Stated otherwise, *samsāric* experience is rooted in our cognitive apparatus: to rely on our conceptual scheme and language the way we normally do amounts to emotionally and intellectually grasping at and fixing our experience. Having recognized the fiction and imaginative creation inherent in conceptual thought and language, the awakened mind breaks up the apparently solid world that we construct for ourselves. To realize that words and concepts do not name anything, do not represent anything – what could be closer to silence and the eschewal of all views?

Noticeable in this context is the *Āṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta*, which promulgates an ascetic discipline of silence and repudiation of our very cognitive apparatus as based on linguistic and conceptual delineation:

Neither conceptualizing, nor conceptualizing wrongly, nor lacking conceptualization, nor conceptualizing nothing – in one who has achieved
this state sensory recognizable experience (rūpa) ceases, for what is called ‘verbal proliferation’ (papañca) has its origin in conceptualization.8

What comes to a halt according to this description is but nāmarūpa: nāma referring to all that is conceived of, thus providing an abstract, conceptual identity for the person, rūpa designating the physically (though not necessarily visibly) recognizable data, that is, all that lends itself to apperception and that is given shape by means of sensory impression. Covering the range of whatever is either conceived or apperceived, nāmarūpa therefore signifies the entirety of what is cognizable.9 That nāmarūpa is related to papañca is attested by another Suttanipata passage located in the Mahāvagga:

Having understood nāmarūpa as verbal proliferation (papañca) that is the root of inward and outward disease, one is released from bondage to the root of all disease. Such a one is called in truth ‘one who knows well’.10

Subject to the early Buddhist epistemological constraints, then, a radical metaphysics may be teased out (that is, taking ‘metaphysics’ in the broadest sense of a general picture explaining the relation between human thought and the world): one that opens our very apprehension of the nature of reality and of the person to a thorough re-examination, for it draws on a self-defeating conceptual framework in which there is nothing that necessitates such a nature. Fundamental to this framework are the notions of dependency on conditions, impermanence and the indeterminacy of knowledge and language. It is a metaphysics that undermines the very epistemology from which it stems. Demonstrating the endless proliferation, and hence the emptiness of our constructed world, it reveals the impossibility of maintaining a reliable conceptual scheme and advances a deflationary theory of truth: it shows that the concept of truth is not metaphysically deep, and therefore does not require appeal to such notions as correspondence to reality, coherence, or success of one sort or another in coping.11 To gain direct insight into this state of things is not only to undergo a transformation from avijjā to vijjā, but to transform the way one’s cognitive apparatus functions; it is to undergo a transformation of wrong view, wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong striving, wrong awareness and wrong concentration into right view, right intention, etc. Since the insight underpinning this transformation from an unawakened mind into an awakened mind is what actually cuts the fetters that bind one to saṁsāra, the Buddha’s soteriology is presented as deflationary.12 And what epitomizes this deflationary soteriology is the paticcasamuppāda formula.

Roberto Calasso comments in this respect that the Buddha breaks the analogical pact of the Upaniṣadic connections, the bandhus: he ignores correspondences, not in the sense of denying their existence, but by belittling them. ‘Why concern oneself over echoes of like and like when all elements are anyway linked together in the same chain, in the way they manifest themselves, and for the mere fact that they do manifest themselves?’13 What mattered to the Buddha, Calasso adds, is
that the world – that is, the world *as it arises* – was a fabric,

[S]omething that covers, that tightens, that can suffocate. *This* was the true, dominant, omnipresent analogy. An expert eye could sense it in all the variegated diversity of the apparent world. And one day it would sense *only* that, discarding the individual shapes as irrelevant. But if that was the case, then every stitch could be substituted by any other. And at this point, where everything was analogy, mightn’t one more exactly say that everything was substitution? The unending net of the *bandhus*, of the ‘connections’, became a single lace, whose various parts had no distinctive features save that of reinforcing the general constriction. It was called *prattyasamutpāda*, the interlinking of everything that arises.\(^\text{14}\)

It is here that the earliest Buddhist teaching discloses tenor analogues to Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka and to modern deconstructionist arguments.\(^\text{15}\) And it is this line of thought that the Abhidhamma grapples with in an attempt to readmit the distinctive, individual shapes of the phenomenal world.

Throughout this study we have seen that the history of the Abhidhamma is marked by a gradual shift from epistemology to metaphysics, and more specifically from an implicit process-oriented conceptual scheme to an event metaphysics. Although the *dhamma* theory has implications for ontology, especially in its post-canonical formulation, it centres on the problem of the individuation of the mental and sets up the foundation of a metaphysical theory of mental events best understood as a metaphysics of mind rather than a comprehensive ontology. The Abhidhamma seeks not only to account for the transformation of the unawakened mind of the ‘ordinary person’ (*puthujjana*) into the awakened mind of the ‘noble person’ (*ariyapuggala*), but also to explain how to effect that transformation. To specify the nature of the mind at the turning point in the process of awakening that effects a breakthrough to the establishing of the eight factors of the ‘noble path’ beginning with right view, one would have to know exactly what is going on at each and every moment of that process of transformation. For this purpose one must clarify what the nature is of the mental events, forces and qualities that contribute to the mind at the point of cross-over to awakening, what makes them so, what distinguishes them from all other, ordinary types of mind and how they are related to the latter.\(^\text{16}\) Put differently, one would have to think about the criteria for individuating *dhammas*.

To provide such criteria, the Abhidhamma prescribes a method of explaining what any given *dhamma* is *qua* a mental event that makes up one’s consciousness process, and what makes it the very item it is. The Abhidhamma thus deals with the problems of the intension and the principle of the individuation of the mental. The emphasis of this endeavour is meta-psychological, not ontological, for what is at stake here are the conditions of our thinking about mind and mental events rather than the substrata of mental events. The *dhammas* are first and foremost the ultimate units of categorization, analysis and distinction of ones repetitive
consciousness process. A dhamma upholds its own individuality and is uniquely defined by its sabhāva, that is, an individuator that determines its internal structure and mode of operation, and that discriminates it from all other eventualities.

In the post-canonical Abhidhamma, however, when the problem of the principle of individuation takes centre stage, this framework is gradually invested with an ontological signification, for the dharmas that are discerned and distinguished are reckoned not only as constitutive conditions of the experiential world as it arises, but as distinguishable, meaningful factors of experience, by the individuation of which anything experienced acquires reality. They are throbs of experience, as it were, that make up world-creating processes; irreducible units of secondary, apparent identities; particulars best represented by the category of event, and finally the ultimate constituents of encountered phenomena: they alone really exist. This is where sabhāva emerges as an ontological determinant: it is the cause of its dhamma’s existence as a particular of a certain kind, albeit the focus is laid on ‘being something or other’ and not on ‘being’ per se. In its later stage the Abhidhamma system is reminiscent of Leibniz’s monadological metaphysics. Leibniz employs the term ‘monad’ in both a physical and a metaphysical sense. Physically, monads are centres of activity, loci characterized by a dynamic impetus to change. Metaphysically, monads are self-sufficient, existing items of which individualities lie in their uniqueness. A pivotal contention of monadological metaphysics is that concrete particulars are individuated descriptively; that to be is to be uniquely describable, the bearer of a peculiar definition.17

The doctrinal development of the Abhidhamma attests to its urge to turn the Buddha’s radical legacy into a rather more commonsense worldview and supplement it with a metaphysical commitment of the kind which the Buddha deliberately refused to admit. For this end the Abhidhammikas were willing to make ideological concessions and accede to doctrines that may sometimes have imposed more meaning on the earliest Buddhist teaching than it originally had. The Abhidhamma’s preoccupation with the dhamma analysis, and with such notions as individuality, particular characteristic, own-nature, unique definition, reference or predication, is meant first to ensure that the words and concepts employed in its systematic discourse have precise, definite meanings, and second that our conceptual scheme is trustworthy because it is representational of a world of referents. This, in effect, would establish a representational model of knowledge and a metaphysical framework that would vindicate our experience as grounded in reality (leaving aside the question of just how real this reality is). Put differently, the Abhidhamma sets up a schema for verbally differentiating the dharmas qua the limits of our world as it arises associated with the limits of cognition as we know it. Such a schema dissects sentient experience, bringing it within our linguistic and conceptual framework, and hence delineating it from what it is not.18 But this conceptual delineating or giving of boundaries is exactly what the verb papañceti, ‘making manifold’, means, and its result is but papañca, the unlimited verbal proliferation demonstrated by the Buddha to be the source of samsāric experience. What the dhamma analysis, then, calls into question is the
Buddha’s very repudiation of the correspondence of word and world. The attempts to consolidate this correspondence are reinforced in the post-canonical Abhidhamma, leading to a growing tendency towards realism and reification of conscious experience. These finally culminate in the fully-fledged *dhamma* theory, which elicits the enticing unison between an epistemological and existential assumption of substantive meaning.

By asserting that any given event within the array of encountered phenomena may be endowed with a unique own-nature, and that based on this own-nature we can formulate a unique definition (*salakkhana*) referring to the event in question, the developed Abhidhamma admits what Matilal entitles ‘fallibilism’. Some definitions, Matilal explains in his discussion of Navya-Nyāya philosophical logic, are easy to formulate within certain contexts, but it is always possible that some day we would discover new facts about the definienda and would conclude that the definienda have changed their ‘meanings’ and hence require new definitions. Nevertheless, Matilal continues,

[I]f one has to choose between fallibilism and the impossibility of formulating a *lakṣaṇa* or definition, it is not a bad idea to choose the first. For, the other alternative is a message of despair about formulating any definition. If we have to give up definitions, we may be asked to stake the claim that the words we use in philosophy (or, in any other systematic discourse) have precise meanings more often than not. If we give up this claim, we may be invited to the game of the Alice-in-the-Wonderland croquet to roll those concepts with mobile hoops.19

In my view the Buddha and, following him, Nāgārjuna invite us to a game of such a sort, although their message of despair about formulating definitions and concepts is at the same time a message of hope about the possibility and the philosophical accountability of liberation. For what is eventually unveiled by means of the early Buddhist so-called deconstructionist treatment of conceptual thought and of knowledge as epistemological conditions of personal identity is that the awakened mind and the unawakened mind are not necessarily disparate; that the sort of mind in which awakening arises is not so far removed from ‘ordinary’ types of mind. And since *papañca* that is the root of all disease is necessary and philosophically accountable, so is release from bondage to the root of all disease necessary and philosophically accountable.

I wish to conclude this book by reconsidering the developed Abhidhamma metaphysical enterprise as embodied in the *dhamma* theory. Is it tenable? Is it possible adequately to account for the individuality of events? Might not the very notion of individuation be circular? The foregoing study has shown that the post-canonical Abhidhamma projects a philosophy of substantiality without substance, or rather smuggles substantiality into process metaphysics. But such an enterprise is, first, at odds with the earliest Buddhist teaching and, second, suffers from several grave weaknesses.
To begin with, the Abhidhamma’s categorial preference for the dhammas is dubious. The canonical Abhidhamma claims that the dhammas, and only they, are primary individuals in the sense of particular-distinction, namely, that they are the absolutely primary objects of reference, analysis and distinction. The post-canonical Abhidhamma takes this claim to imply that the dhammas are also ontologically prior to all other types of encountered phenomena. But things are not intrinsically primary: primacy is an epistemic characteristic, not ontological. A given item is primary to the extent that one confronts it directly in perception as a possible object of the demonstrative ‘this’, so that any given event may be primary for one person at a certain time and not at another, or for one observer but not for another.\textsuperscript{20}

In fact, the entire espousal of an epistemological and existential unison of substantive meaning is based on the unwarranted transition from epistemology to ontology. The developed dhamma theory rests on the thesis that existence follows from reference to individuals. It hinges upon the idea that the statements of ordinary speech do not merely report the manifestation of psycho-physical occurrences, but also the existence of various types of events. This surmise has its origins in the early Buddhist doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness, that is, the thesis that any instance of consciousness must be conscious of something, that it must have an objective support (ārammaṇa).\textsuperscript{21} Based on this thesis and on the established linguistic practice of reference to empirical particulars, the later Abhidhamma drew the conclusion that the intentional object must exist. To draw ontological conclusions on the grounds of linguistic practice is, however, a non sequitur. Moreover, the Abhidhamma dhamma theory relies on the unacceptable premise that individuality-dependence constitutes the appropriate criterion for ontological primacy. The focus is on the individuating reference to specific dhamma categories. But tying questions of what is or is not ontologically prior exclusively to particular individuation procedures and to conceptual dependence relationships among phenomena is a questionable strategy. Why should individuality-dependence be selected as the touchstone of ontological priority, rather than, for instance, predication or origination-dependence?\textsuperscript{22}

Yet another problem is that the developed Abhidhamma uses the atemporal category of sabhāva as an ontological determinant while atemporal individuation is ontologically impoverishing. A complete account of a dhamma’s nature must involve the dynamics of its operation through time, but sabhāva as an atemporal category falls short of such a description of its dhamma. Also, the very idea of a complete individuating description is dubious, for when the dhammas’ individuation does take into account their causal and temporal relations, then a vast range of descriptive possibilities is effected, none of which is complete. A variety of different possible individual dhamma instances may then be the referents of that incomplete description, and hence the uniqueness essential to individuation would be lacking.\textsuperscript{23}

The Abhidhamma takes into account the dhammas’ temporal relations for the sake of their individuation by entwining the notion of sabhāva with the theory of momentariness. But this, as we have seen in the course of this study, draws the
Abhidhamma away from the earliest Buddhist sources towards ontological realism and reification. An alternative resort is to turn to the conditional relations that exist among the dhammas, both simultaneously and over a period of time – an attempt embodied in the Paṭṭhāna theory of paccaya. This attempt, though, is circular: at least some paccayas are events, namely, dhammas, and hence we cannot use relationships of causal conditioning as the criteria for the individuation of events. The circularity arises from the fact that causal conditions individuate dhammas only if the latter are already individuated.24

In attempting to offer criteria for the individuation of the mental the Abhidhamma falls back on the slippery notion of individuation that goes considerably against the spirit of the Nikāya-based Buddhist heritage. Indeed the concerns of the Abhidhamma and its ultimate objective, let alone in the canonical period, ensue from the concerns of the Nikāyas, but there appears to be an inevitable tension between this objective and the method the Abhidhamma advances in order to pursue it. Drawing on the concept of dhamma qua an analytical primitive in the sense of a distinguishable particular that is the basic unit in a system of reference, the Abhdhamma method arouses vexing philosophical puzzles that have also affected Western intellectual history, as well as doctrinal difficulties that may undermine both the early Buddhist outlook and the Abhidhamma’s own concern with Buddhist soteriology. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Abhidhamma/Abhidharma metaphysical venture was emphatically criticized by the Mahāyāna philosophers, and that it was eventually destined to set the scene for the next turning of the dharma wheel in the history of Buddhist thought.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 See Introduction, n. 7.
2 D I 44–5: tatra, bhikkhave, ye te samaṇabrāhmaṇā [. . .] sabbe te chahi phassāyatahe phussa phussa paṭisāṃvedenti tesaṃ vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhava, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jāramaraṇaṃ sokaparide-vadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti. yato kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu channaṃ phasāyatanānaṃ samudayaṃ ca atthāngamaṃ ca assādānaṃ ca ādhāranaṃ ca nissaraṇaṃ ca yathābhūtānaṃ paññātī, ayaṃ imehi sabbehe ’eva uttaritaram paññātī.
3 Hamilton 2000: 76–8 and 124.
5 Smart 1997: 89–90. Smart proclaims that the notion of language as representational of the world helped reinforce not only the sacred status of Sanskrit but also the Vedas’ everlasting validity. By promulgating conventionalism in linguistic theory the Buddha rejected the prestige of the Vedas and the Brahmans, although this rejection also had a deep-cutting social edge.
7 Ibid.: 95.
8 Sn 170 (IV 874): na saññasaññi na visaññasaññi no pi asaññi na vibhūtasaññī – evaṃ sametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ saññādidaṇā hi papañcasankhā. Also p. 179 (IV 916). Rūpa here has the metaphysical sense of the representative of ordinary experience pertaining to the sense sphere: PED s.v. rūpa.
9 In rendering thus nāmarūpa I follow Hamilton 1996: Ch. 6 (esp. p. 127) and 2000: 150–3.
CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

10 Sn 98 (III 530): anuvicca papañcanāmarūpaṁ ajjhattam bahiddhā ca rogamūlaṁ sabbarogamūlabandhāṇā pamutto, anvividito tādi pavuccate tathattā.

11 Davidson 1995 s.v. ‘deflationary theories of truth’.
12 Matilal 2002: 303 (‘The perception of self in the Indian tradition’).
13 Calasso 1999: 372. Emphases in the original
14 Ibid.
19 Matilal 1985: 201–2. Emphasis in the original.
20 Quinton 1973: 50.
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