

THE DHAMMA AS REALITY AND CONCEPT

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Abstract

In Buddhism the word “dhamma” (Sanskrit “dharma”), which is derived from a Pali root that has the meaning of holding and bearing,² is originally related to the discovery made by the historical Buddha 2600 years ago. That is why in the oldest texts of the Theravada tradition, the language used by the Buddha to convey this discovery is called “Dhamma-nirutti”,³ the language of the Dhamma. The ancient Commentary rightly explains this compound as “Sabhāva-nirutti”,⁴ the language of those things which have an inherent existence. It was only thereafter that the word “dhamma” came to have a whole variety of meanings. But at the beginning the word “dhamma” seems to have had only one meaning: the ultimate realities discovered by the Buddha. It is then that concepts are used to refer to those ultimate realities. That is why it is said that all *dhammas* are the pathways of concepts.⁵

In this paper I intend to explore this peculiar relation that exists between the “dhammas” as the primordial realities, which exist independently of the constructive powers of the mind of the Buddha (and other beings), and the concepts that are used to name, describe and make sense of them, and also to create further concepts. It is said that because there is the condition of mutuality between the conditioned ultimate realities of mind and matter that there exists the

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² See *Saddanīti Dhātumālā* 336. The corresponding Sanskrit root is *dhṛ* which also has the same meaning. All references provided are to the Sixth Buddhist Council Edition of the Buddhist Texts in Pali Myanmar script.

³ *Vibhaṅga-pāḷi* 307.

⁴ *Vibhaṅga-aṭṭhakathā* 370-1.

⁵ “*Sabbe va dhammā paññattipathā.*” See *Dhammasaṅgaṇī-pāḷi* 256.

pathway of designation, the pathway of language, the pathway of concepts.⁶ Therefore, according to Buddhism, the diverse and manifold world of concepts and languages comes to be established from these “dhammas”. Particularly, this means that each culture, each religion, each civilization, etc., establishes a particular “pathway” to these ultimate realities resulting in distinct art forms, distinct belief systems, distinct languages, and so on. Assuming that the insight of Buddha into the ultimate components of existence was correct, I plan, in this paper, to briefly investigate some of the intricate pathways that human civilizations have established in order to determine which ones really correspond to the true dhammas and which ones are mere concepts without a corresponding underlying reality. I consider this important because by doing so pointers may emerge for clarifying and furthering our knowledge of what is real.

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⁶ “*Ettāvatā adhivacanapatho, ettāvatā niruttipatho, ettāvatā paññattipatho... yad idaṃ nāmarūpaṃ saha viññāṇena aññamaññapaccayatā pavattati.*” See Mahānidāna Sutta, *Dīgha Nikāya* ii 47.

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Introduction

In Buddhism the word “dhamma” (Sanskrit “dharma”), which is derived from a Pali root that has the meaning of holding and bearing,² is originally related to the discovery made by the historical Buddha 2600 years ago. That is why in the oldest texts of the Theravada tradition, the language used by the Buddha to convey this discovery is called “Dhamma-nirutti”,³ the language of the Dhamma. The ancient Commentary rightly explains this compound as “Sabhāva-nirutti”,⁴ the language of those things which have an inherent existence. It was only thereafter that the word “dhamma” came to have a whole variety of meanings. But at the beginning the word “dhamma” seems to have had only one meaning: the ultimate realities discovered by the Buddha.

The Discovery of the Buddha

In the Buddhist Texts, especially in the Discourses, the discovery of the Buddha, His Enlightenment, is mainly presented to show its final result: the liberation of suffering—an actual liberation for the Buddha Himself while a potential liberation for the rest of us. Let us take, for the sake of showing this point, a passage from the first Discourse of the Buddha. “Then, bhikkhus, I acknowledged... that I had realized, rightly and by myself, the incomparable Enlightenment. And arose in me the knowledge and vision: ‘Immovable is my emancipation.

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² See *Saddanīti Dhātumālā* 336. The corresponding Sanskrit root is *dhr* which also has the same meaning. All references provided are to the Sixth Buddhist Council Edition of the Buddhist Texts in Pali Myanmar script.

³ *Vibhaṅga-pāli* 307. El Sub-comentario contiene el siguiente pasaje donde se explica el significado de la voz “dhamma” en el compuesto “Dhamma-nirutti”: “*Dhammaniruttābhilāpe ti ettha dhamma-saddo sabhāvavācako ti katvā āha “yā sabhāvaniruttī” ti, aviparātaniruttī ti attho.*” Ref. *Vibhaṅgamūlaṭṭikā* 191.

⁴ *Vibhaṅga-aṭṭhakathā* 370-1.

This is the last birth. Now there is no existence again’.”⁵ Here clearly the message is “Wisdom results in liberation”. And even when the Commentaries gloss the word “Buddha”⁶ as one who discovered by himself the Four Truths and one who made other beings discover the Four Truths, wisdom is not let alone, but it is put in the service of compassion, that is, helping others to understand the Four Noble Truths and become liberated of all suffering.

All this is perfectly right and in accordance with the spiritual purpose of the Buddha-Dhamma, the Teaching of the Buddha, which, while upholding, eventually leads beings to the cessation of suffering.

However, there is another dimension, a more primordial dimension, we may say, of the Buddha’s discovery: the discovery of the “dhammas,”⁷ the final components of everything that exists. In fact, the first words attributed to the Buddha, as they are recorded in the *Udāna-pāḷi*, are as follows: “When the *dhammas* become manifest to the exerting and meditating Brahmin...”⁸ Here the Buddha himself is referring in his first words after his Enlightenment to these dhammas, and further adding that all his doubts have been dispelled because he has understood the *dhammas* together with their causes.

It is not that these dhammas are something new or different from the Four Truths. Actually it is said that all these dhammas are included within the Four Truths.⁹ But since the Four Truths are generally presented in the Discourses from a soteriological perspective, often the ontological perspective of the Buddha’s discovery seems to be thrown and relegated into the background. It is only in the Abhidhamma books, specially in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī-pāḷi*, that this ontological

⁵ “*Ath’ āhaṃ bhikkhave... ‘anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddho’ ti paccaññāsiṃ. Ñāṇañ ca pana me dassanaṃ udapādi, ‘akuppā me vimutti, ayam antimā jāti, natthi dāni punabbhavo’ ti.*” Ref. *Samyutta Nikāya* iii 370-1.

⁶ “*Saccāni attanā pi bujjhi, aññe pi satte bodhesi... Buddho.*” *Visuddhimagga* i 203.

⁷ The term “dhamma” in this context is defined as that which is devoid of a being (*nissatta*) or a soul (*nijjīva*). Furthermore, it is said that the “dhammas” are those which hold their own intrinsic nature or those which are held by conditions or those which are held by their own intrinsic natures. Ref. *Dhammasaṅgaṇi Aṭṭhakathā* 81.

⁸ “*Yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā...*” Ref. *Udāna-pāḷi* 78.

⁹ The Commentary explains that these dhammas correspond to the Four Noble Truths. “*Dhammā ti catu-ariyasaccadhammā*”. Ref. *Udānaṭṭhakathā* 40.

perspective is brought back to the foreground when the dhammas are classified in different groups which include all that exists.¹⁰

It is to these dhammas, which are the building blocks of everything, animate and inanimate, that the oldest texts of the Theravada tradition refer, when describing the language the Buddha used to convey his discovery.

In other words, it can be said that the Buddha discovered the final components of reality—the components of a reality which preceded him and to which all beings are inextricably related since the moment they are born until the moment they die. It is only then that concepts are used to refer to these final components of reality.

From Reality to Concept

It is said that all *dhammas* are the pathways of concepts, language and designation.¹¹ This statement, if true, is important to us for at least two reasons: possibility and reachability.

First it shows that it is because of the dhammas that it is possible language, concept and designation. As it is said somewhere else in the Pali Canon it is because there is the condition of mutuality between the conditioned ultimate realities of mind and matter that there exists the pathway of designation, the pathway of language, the pathway of concepts.¹²

Second, it establishes that the dhammas are reachable through concepts. Since the dhammas are real not only because of their objective existence but also because they are knowable through wisdom,¹³ it could be stated that they could also be described by concepts.

¹⁰ For example, the first triplet of *Dhammasaṅgaṇi-pāḷi* postulates the existence of wholesome dhammas, unwholesome dhammas and indeterminate dhammas. This triplet is said to be all-inclusive (*nippadesa*) since nothing is left out. Ref. Dhs. 1.

¹¹ “*Sabbe va dhammā adhivacanapathā. Sabbe va dhammā niruttipathā. Sabbe va dhammā paññattipathā.*” Ref. *Dhammasaṅgaṇi-pāḷi* 256, §1313-1315.

¹² “*Ettāvatā adhivacanapatho, ettāvatā niruttipatho, ettāvatā paññattipatho... yad idaṃ nāmarūpaṃ saha viññāṇena aññamaññapaccayatā pavattati.*” See Mahānidāna Sutta, *Dīgha Nikāya* ii 47.

¹³ “*Tattha paramo uttamo aviparīto attho, paramassa vā uttamassa ñāṇassa attho gocaro ti paramattho.*” Ref. *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinītikā* 74.

There are, at least, two significant ways to reach the dhammas: (1) naming and (2) describing. Naming consists of assigning a label to an specific dhamma while describing has to do with demarcating its distinguishing qualities. While both processes are possible because of the existence of the dhammas, naming and describing are mental constructs which belong to the conventional or conceptual reality. Regarding this topic, in the literature of the Commentaries of the Theravada tradition, there are four defining devices which allow us to delimit the dhammas.¹⁴

Knowingly or unknowingly humans have always been conceptualizing based upon these dhammas. Since the dawn of civilization humans have been refining the conceptual reality, ever improving it, ever perfecting it. In their efforts to understand and make sense of the world around, humans created philosophy, art, religion, and later science. As time went by, philosophies started adding up in the world, and the same can be said about religions. Philosophies were based upon reasoning and thought while religions were mostly based upon faith, belief, and intuition.

All these attempts toward understanding and explaining reality, either through philosophy, religion or science, are invariably based upon the dhammas and belong to the conceptual reality. Therefore, it could be said that there is always a unidirectionality from the dhammas, the final components of reality, to concepts, the mentally constructed reality. This unidirectionality may not be unique since various pathways could be established to reach the dhammas.

Here some questions should be asked regarding the conventional reality, those concepts which are used to explain what is real. Do they accurately correspond to the dhammas? Do they just correspond to other concepts? Do they partially correspond to the dhammas? How to know if a particular concept does or does not correspond to a dhamma?

Although to dwell on these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, let us briefly analyse a few concepts. For example, does the concept “Buddhist” correspond to the dhammas or not?

¹⁴ It defines according to the characteristic, function, manifestation and proximate cause. “*Lakkhaṇa-rasa-paccupaṭṭhāna-padaṭṭhānato vavatthapeti*”. Ref. *Itivuttaka Aṭṭhakathā* 50.

Since the term “Buddhist” refers to a person who believes and follows the Buddha’s teachings, it does not correspond to the dhammas. Therefore it is an unreal concept.¹⁵ The same could be asserted of concepts like “theist” and “atheist”. The recognition that a concept is unreal is important because of two things: relativity and non-clinging. Relativity here means that the reality of the concept is determined by a set of conventionally established parameters and not by an ultimate reality. Relativity means that opposing concepts such as “theist” and “atheist” can both be true within the realm of conventional reality—the realm of conventional reality allows for the existence and coexistence of all sorts of concepts. Understanding the relativity of a concept should lead to non-clinging. Non-clinging should be a condition for the advancement of knowledge and non-violence.

The fact that in the conventional realm there can be many truths has historically resulted in discord, intolerance and war. Even now in this technologically advanced and globalized world, intolerance and war do not seem to decrease. Why is that? Because humans tend to cling to the conventional reality considering it as absolute. This has been the case in the past. It is the case in the present. And unless humans learn to understand this relativity of the conventional reality, it will be the case in the future. Clinging to anything, especially clinging to mental constructs, is a condition for discord and violence. The recognition of relativity of the conventional reality should lead us towards a more enlightened and peaceful world.

Existing concepts should be sorted out in order to determine if they are real or unreal. While in many cases it may be easy to determine if a concept is unreal such as in the examples given above, in other cases it may not be so simple. So, how to know if a particular concept does or does not correspond to a dhamma? Regarding the sciences, it is to be expected that the closer their concepts correspond to the dhammas, the more accurate their predictive power should be. It could be said that science in general, and the hard sciences in particular, while still belonging to the conventional reality, they represent a human attempt to bridge cultural and civilizational differences towards an unbiased understanding of reality. Still, concepts such as space and time are, according to Buddhism, unreal concepts.

¹⁵ An unreal concept (*avijjamāna-paññatti*) is a concept which does not correspond to an ultimate reality. The opposite would be a real concept (*vijjamāna-paññatti*), that is a concept which does correspond to an ultimate reality. And in between there are four other types of concepts. Ref. *Pañcapakarāṇa-aṭṭhakathā* 26.

Building the Knowledge of Reality

At this point, it may be pertinent to ask what would be a good strategy to understand reality. One approach that has been tried for a long time is to get to know reality through unreal concepts, that is by concepts trying to explain other concepts. It is basically through this approach that humans have built upon the knowledge that have been acquired and accumulated through time. The world that we have today is basically the result of this approach. In the fields of knowledge and education, this approach has resulted in information explosion and overspecialization. Although nowadays there are scientific attempts towards the unification of knowledge,¹⁶ proliferation is the norm. This is so because proliferation is embedded in this approach.

Another approach, which in no way should only be a substitute of the first one, would be to assume the existence of the dhammas as the ultimate realities beyond which nothing can be reached, and as the ground upon which the conventional or conceptual reality is created.

This approach, which may be called the Dhamma Paradigm, has the following components:

- (1) Acknowledgment of domain: the acceptance that the representation and communication of knowledge always belongs to the conventional reality.
- (2) Specification of knowledge: the identification of those conceptual entities which point, totally or partially, to ultimate realities, from those which just point to concepts.
- (3) Discernment of the real: the analytical study of the ultimate components of reality.
- (4) Assemblage of the real: the study of how the ultimate realities combine to form real entities.¹⁷

¹⁶ One example of this is the Theory of Everything of theoretical physics which tries to explain the workings of the material world.

¹⁷ The assemblage of the real is related to the next one, conditionality, since individual ultimate realities are assembled into real entities through the forces of conditionality (*paccaya-satti*).

(5) Conditionality: the study of the conditions for the arising and existence of the ultimate realities, their interrelations, and how they interact with the conventional reality.

Conclusion

Although the discovery of the Buddha 2600 years ago is of consequence to his followers because it provides a method and a practice for lessening and removing the suffering in the world, it is also significant for the world at large for various reasons. Among those reasons, in this paper we explored the discovery of the dhammas and the subsequent articulation of what could be called a “Dhamma Paradigm”.

In brief, the Dhamma Paradigm holds that there are two spheres of reality, ultimate and conventional. The ultimate reality is composed of the dhammas, the final components of existence, while the conventional reality exists in dependence of the ultimate reality and is mentally constructed.¹⁸

As it was mentioned, this Dhamma Paradigm, which provides a different approach, though complementary to the current strategy towards understanding reality, offers worthy-of-taking-into-account contributions for clarifying and furthering our knowledge of what is real. One of these contributions has to do with the fact, according to this paradigm, that all representation and communication of knowledge belongs to the conventional reality. If this is correct, the approach to be pursued towards understanding reality should avoid proliferation, that is, the attempt to arrive at knowledge through concepts elucidating other concepts.

Another contribution worth of mentioning is the recognition, within the sphere of the ultimate reality, of the existence of two different but interrelated categories of dhammas. These are the categories of mental and material dhammas. Although the mental dhammas as well as the material dhammas occur as composites, there is a fundamental difference between them:

¹⁸ “*Paramatthato avijjamānā pi atthacchāyākārena cittuppādānamārammaṇabhūtā*”. This passage can be literally translated as “although (concepts) do not exist as ultimate realities, they are objects of consciousness as shadows of (ultimate) things.” Ref. *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* of Anuruddha page 57.

immateriality versus materiality. The mental and material dhammas, which have to be completely comprehended,¹⁹ are said to be equally real.²⁰ If this is correct, it means that any theory which claims to explain the fundamental principles of reality should take into account both the mental and material dhammas. Any theory which only takes into account the material dhammas, should lead to incomplete and probably fallacious results.

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Bibliography

All references are to the Sixth Buddhist Council edition of the Pali Text, Commentaries and Sub-commentaries. A romanized version of the Sixth Buddhist Council edition can be found in the following web site: <http://bit.ly/rLVhSw>

¹⁹ “*Nāmañ ca rūpañ ca. Ime dve dhammā pariññeyyā*”. See Dasuttara Sutta, *Dīgha Nikāya* iii 228.

²⁰ “*Paramatthato vijjamānattā ca bhūtan ti vuccati*”. Ref. *Itivuttaka Aṭṭhakathā* 170.