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Clearing the Path Continues: Notes on Ñāṇavīra Thera's 'Notes on Dhamma'

Bhikkhu ANĀLAYO

Abstract

This article presents a critical examination of a few selected positions taken by Ñāṇavīra Thera in his *Notes on Dhamma*.

Introduction

In the preface to *Clearing the Path*, Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 5) explains that the “principle aim of these *Notes on Dhamma* is to point out certain current misinterpretations, mostly traditional, of the Pali Suttas.” Based on this premise, his presentation proceeds based on taking key doctrinal Pali terms and phrases as headings and analyzing relevant passages with remarkable depth and acumen, combined with the inner clarity and conviction that come from having personally had a deep and transformative experience. The explanations provided by the venerable author have become a lasting source of inspiration for practitioners and scholars alike.

At the same time, however, closer inspection reveals problems with some of his conclusions. In what follows, I survey selected examples of such problems. Throughout, my presentation is meant to continue Ñāṇavīra Thera's praiseworthy attempt of “clearing the path,” in the sense of hopefully enabling a reader of the *Notes on Dhamma* to benefit from the deep insights they offer and at the same time avoid their occasional pitfalls.

Dependent Arising and Three Lives

The first and most substantial of Ñāṇavīra Thera's notes takes up the topic of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*) and its interpretation by traditional exegesis.¹ In approaching this topic, the venerable author points out that he takes “for granted first, that the reader is acquainted with this traditional interpretation, and secondly, that he is dissatisfied with it” (1965/2001: 17).

For the purpose of the present discussion, it could be helpful to sketch briefly the interpretation proposed by traditional exegesis. This concerns in particular a standard presentation of dependent arising by way of twelve links. The first two links, ignorance and formations, are considered to

pertain to a past life, whereas the final two, birth and old age together with death, are allocated to a future life. The actual presentation of this matter is not without some complexity that is not fully reflected in the summary just given. Nevertheless, this much should suffice for the purpose of providing a background to what follows. In brief, traditional exegesis adopts the “three-lives explanation,” in the sense that the twelve-link presentation concerns the previous, the present, and the next life.

Before turning to the criticism raised by Ñāṇavīra Thera of the traditional interpretation of the twelve links, it needs be noted that his intention is quite clearly not to dismiss rebirth as such. This is evident from the following explicit comment: “A curious view, that the Buddha was agnostic on the question of re-birth and refused to pronounce it, seems to be gaining currency. Even a very slight acquaintance with the Suttas will correct this idea” (1965/2001: 23 n. c).

In other words, the concerns of the venerable author are, as mentioned at the outset, a dissatisfaction with the tendency to default to the three-lives explanation. It appears to be indeed the case that this tendency becomes quite prominent in later times. In relation to Theravāda sources, Ronkin (2005: 232) identifies a “doctrinal shift ... in a transition from a process-oriented to an event-oriented conception of sentient experience.” Cox (1993: 136) explains, in relation to the evolution of Sarvāstivāda exegesis: “With the emergence of an independent and abstract causal theory, dependent origination and its twelve-member formulation ... received its own particularized role, as an explanation of the process of rebirth, completely divorced from general causal theory.”

A Vision of Dependent Arising

According to a famous statement in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta*, found similarly in its Chinese parallel, one who sees dependent arising sees the Dharma, and one who sees the Dharma sees dependent arising.² After referencing this statement, Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 21) points out that “the twelve items, *avijjā* to *jarāmaraṇa*, cannot, if the traditional interpretation is correct, all be seen at once; for they are spread over three successive existences.”

However, it needs to be noted that the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel do not mention the twelve links. Instead, the statement in question leads on to the topic of the conditionality of the five aggregates of clinging, insight into which does not require bringing in all twelve links.

In other words, a direct and personal approach to this dictum need not be seen as necessarily standing in opposition to the three-lives interpretation, simply because the dictum in question is not about the twelve links. In the words of Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 31): “*Paṭiccasamuppāda* is, in fact, a structural principle ... It is thus an over-simplification to regard any one given formulation in particular terms as *paṭiccasamuppāda*.” As succinctly summed up by the venerable author: “*Paṭiccasamuppāda* is just ‘As it is’—i.e. the *present* structure of dependence” (p. 85 n. a). In view of this reasonable assessment, it is not clear why the twelve-link formulation has to be brought in at all for a reading of the dictum found in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel.

Support for distinguishing between the structural principle of dependent arising and its particular formulation by way of twelve links can be found in an explicit reference to seeing dependent arising, found in a verse in the *Vāseṭṭha-sutta* as part of a discussion regarding what makes one a true brahmin.³ In this context, gaining a vision of dependent arising calls for the understanding that the specific condition for being reckoned a brahmin is one’s deeds and not just one’s birth. The central message, as noted by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 59), is that “what one *is depends* on what one does.” This would conform well to the notion of seeing the present structure of dependence, with the twelve links not being directly relevant here.

Another topic particularly pertinent to the quest for a solution to the predicament of human existence would be the attainment of stream-entry. A case in point would be the report of what led to the stream-entry of Sāriputta (and subsequently of his companion Mahāmoggallāna). The relevant instruction takes the form of a brief statement on causality and its cessation.⁴ None of the twelve links is explicitly mentioned; in fact, even the term “dependent arising” is not used. In a comment on this instruction, Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 35) proposes an implicit relation to the first two of the twelve links of dependent arising. Yet, since Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna were at this point completely new to Buddhist doctrine, it could hardly be expected that they would have been able to form such an association on merely hearing this instruction. That is, it can safely be assumed that the penetrative impact of this instruction did not require bringing in any of the twelve links.

Time

The perceived need to counter the three-life explanation has at times led Ñāṇavīra Thera to adopting positions that are not particularly

convincing. An example is the following assertion (1965/2001: 87): “Any interpretation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* that involves time is an attempt to resolve the present problem by referring to past or future, and is therefore *necessarily* mistaken.”

Now the penultimate link in the twelve-link formulation of dependent arising is “birth,” which leads on to the final link of “old age and death.” The implications of these terms can conveniently be explored by turning to other contexts that are directly related to dependent arising. An example is the *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta*, whose presentation works through each of the links of dependent arising under the overarching topic of arrival at right view. In agreement with a parallel extant in the *Madhyama-āgama*, the Pāli discourse defines birth, old age, and death in ways that unmistakably intend sentient beings being born, growing old, and eventually passing away.⁵ Another relevant example can be found in the *Mahānidāna-sutta* and its parallels. In the context of a discussion of the links of consciousness and name-and-form, as part of a detailed examination of dependent arising, the parallels agree in explicitly speaking of consciousness descending into the mother’s womb.⁶

In this way, based on examining passages that are of direct relevance to the topic of dependent arising, evidence can be identified that supports an interpretation of birth, old age, and death as referring to actually being born, eventually growing old, and at some time, sooner or later, having to pass away. Although this does not imply that these expressions may not at times be employed in different ways, the above prevents rejecting the rebirth interpretation in toto.

The wholesale rejection by the venerable author of any relevance of past and future appears to be based, at least in part, on a too literal interpretation of the terms *sandiṭṭhika*, “visible,” and *akālika*, “immediate.” Nāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 21f) reasons: “If *paṭiccasamuppāda* is *sandiṭṭhika* and *akālika* then it is clear that it can have nothing to do with *kamma* and *kammavipāka* ... for the ripening of *kamma* as *vipāka* takes time.” Yet, as pointed out by Bhikkhu Bodhi (1998: 179):

These terms highlight, not the intrinsic character of the Dhamma, but its relation to our capacity for knowledge and understanding. They are epistemological in import, concerned with how the Dhamma is to be known, not with the temporal status of the known.

The significance of *akālika* is also of relevance to the following comment by Nāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 5f):

The scholar's essentially horizontal view of things, seeking connexions in space and time, and his historical approach to the texts, disqualify him from any possibility of understanding a Dhamma that the Buddha himself has called *akālika*, 'timeless'.

The qualification *akālika* does not stand in contrast to a historical approach to the texts, which the venerable author in fact adopts himself, given that he distinguishes between the texts of the Pāli canon and later exegesis. This distinction is of course based on a historical perspective. Considering the historical approach as disqualifying one from understanding the Buddha's teaching would risk undermining the venerable author's own approach.

Another contributing factor probably responsible for the position taken by Ñāṇavīra Thera appears to be a tendency of reading early Buddhist thought through the lenses of European philosophy (particularly existentialism and phenomenology) rather than in dialogue with Buddhist exegesis to begin with. For example, when Ñāṇavīra Thera discusses the significance of *bhava*, "becoming," in relation to birth and death, he mentions in a footnote that "Heidegger, in his *Sein und Zeit* (Halle 1927, p. 374), subordinates the ideas of *birth* and *death* to that of *being*" (p. 24 n. d). This type of subordination may have influenced the position taken by the venerable author himself on that same page, arguing that the worldling "does not see that birth and death depend upon his 'being a self' (*bhavapaccayā jāti*, and so on) ... Quite clearly, the idea of rebirth is totally irrelevant here."

As already pointed out by Bhikkhu Bodhi (1998: 52), to express a subordination of birth and death to (the notion of) being or becoming, the traditional exposition of dependent arising should take the form *bhavapaccayā jarāmarañam*, "with being/becoming as condition, there is old age and death." Instead, the actual formulation rather proposes *jātipaccayā jarāmarañam*, "with birth as condition, there is old age and death." That is, only birth is grounded in being or becoming, *bhavapaccayā jāti*, "with being/becoming as condition, there is birth," a presentation not applied to old age and death. This goes to show that the exposition of dependent arising in the early discourses does not subordinate death to being or becoming.

The contrast that emerges in this way between Ñāṇavīra Thera's reliance on Heidegger and the actual position taken in the early discourses in a way reflects a recurrent methodological problem in his writings, in that traditional exegesis is being simply replaced by his understanding

of European philosophy. Problematizing this tendency is not to deny that a comparison of Buddhist and European philosophies can be of considerable interest. The point is only that such comparison should be based on understanding each tradition of thought on its own terms, first of all. In order to do that for early Buddhism, the preferable methodological approach would be a close reading and contextualization of any passage with other passages found elsewhere, following which relevant exegesis can be consulted. Only after that would it be meaningful to turn to relevant modes of thought from a different culture.

Now, the explanation offered by Bhikkhu Bodhi has been criticized by Bhikkhu Mettiko (2015: 447) on the grounds that it supposedly rests on the assumption that dependent arising involves a temporal succession of links.⁷ The criticism appears to involve a misunderstanding. Independent of whether one adopts a structural or a temporal reading of the links under discussion, their relationship remains one of specific conditionality. An illustrative example is the report of the Buddha's pre-awakening investigation of causality, which takes as its starting point the recognition of the affliction caused by old age and death, leading on to an inquiry regarding what causes these.⁸ The reply is birth. In other words, it is not being/becoming (*bhava*) but rather birth (*jāti*) that is singled out as the specific condition responsible for the manifestation of old age and death.

Besides offering this clarification, the present discourse is also of significance insofar as it can be taken to complement the presentation in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel, where a direct vision of dependent arising appears to be concerned with the principle of specific conditionality as such, rather than with the various links that exemplify this principle. In the present case, the links are explicitly mentioned one after the other and they do fulfil a meaningful role as part of a more reflective type of contemplation that is based on drawing inferences. This type of reflection is clearly seen as a way of preparing the ground for an eventual direct and full realization of the principle of dependent arising.

Traditional Exegesis

Another problem with the approach adopted by Ñāṇavīra Thera is that it tends to involve a wholesale rejection of traditional exegesis. This can be exemplified with his proposal that, except for material found in the *Vinaya* and the four *Nikāyas* (and some from the fifth), “[n]o other Pali books whatsoever should be taken as authoritative; and ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted

a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned” (1965/2001: 5). Elsewhere the venerable author qualifies the commentarial model of the cognitive series (*cittavūthi*) as “a vicious doctrine, totally at variance with *paṭiccasamuppāda*,” having “nothing at all to do with the Buddha’s teaching” (p. 62f). The evaluation expressed in this way is unfortunate. Even if one finds this commentarial model not relevant to one’s personal concerns, why voice such a strongly worded dismissal, which can safely be expected to be experienced as hurtful by traditional Buddhists who find this model meaningful?

Now, the benefit of giving a fair hearing to traditional exegesis can conveniently be illustrated with the present case of the twelve links of dependent arising, as a rather significant perspective emerges from an early work in the *Abhidhamma* collection: the *Vibhaṅga*. The relevant passage proceeds as follows:⁹

At the time when an unwholesome state of mind has arisen that is conjoined with pleasure and associated with resorting to views, having as object form, or having as object sound, or having as object odor, or having as object flavor, or having as object touch, or having as object a mental phenomena, or in relation to whatever, at that time with ignorance as condition there is formation, with formation as condition there is consciousness, with consciousness as condition there is name, with name as condition there is the sixth sense sphere, with the sixth sense sphere as condition there is contact, with contact as condition there is feeling tone, with feeling tone as condition there is craving, with craving as condition there is clinging, with clinging as condition there is becoming, with becoming as condition there is birth, with birth as condition there is old age and death. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of *dukkha*.

In this way, the Theravāda *Abhidhamma* quite explicitly recognizes an application of the full formula of twelve links to a single mind moment (appropriately adjusted to fit the case by having formation in the singular, giving only name out of name-and-form, and mentioning only the sixth out of the six sense spheres).

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, a work that apparently was too late to make it into the canonical *Abhidhamma* collection and was therefore placed rather in the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, presents the traditional interpretation of the twelve links by way of three lives.¹⁰ This divergence, if it can be called such, is particularly noteworthy, as in general the *Vibhaṅga* is clearly authoritative for the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*.¹¹

The situation that emerges in this way from these two works of Theravāda exegesis shows that both interpretations were considered viable. The same basic position recurs in Sarvāstivāda exegesis. In this case, it is the canonical Abhidharma work, the *Jñānaprasthāna*, which offers the three-lives interpretation,¹² whereas a later work that builds on it,¹³ the **Mahāvibhāṣā*, presents the perspective concerned with a single mind moment.¹⁴

The Tetralemma

In this way, consultation of the traditional exegesis can be very fruitful, as it shows that the apparent conflict between the affirmation and the denial of the rebirth interpretation of the twelve links of dependent arising can be resolved if one is willing to step out of the dualistic contrast between either right or wrong, a contrast that, with the reception of Aristotelian logic, has informed European modes of thinking. An alternative to such binary thinking, grounded in ancient Indian thought, is the tetralemma. Besides “yes” and “no,” the tetralemma recognizes that at times a situation can be more appropriately reflected by “both yes and no” or else by “neither yes nor no.” An illustration would be the dualistic contrast between the colors black and white, which does not capture fully the range of variety of visible objects. In addition, some objects could be both, namely grey, and quite a range of objects are neither, because they are colored, such as being yellow or blue, etc.

In what has become the classic study of early Buddhist epistemology, Jayatilleke (1963/1980: 342) reasoned that “this four-fold schema gave a better and finer classification of the empirical data (thus preventing much ambiguity in utterances) than that offered by the strictly dichotomous division.”

In particular when attempting to understand ancient Indian thought, the adoption of the tetralemma mode of thinking can be remarkably helpful for stepping out of ingrained patterns of binary thinking that can prevent,¹⁵ as the present case shows, appreciating the richness and complexity of the Buddhist traditions. Applied to the traditional Buddhist exposition of conditionality by way of dependent arising, the apparent problem can be solved by allowing for the third of the four options of the tetralemma: both interpretations are correct and have their value. In fact, since rebirth is of course conditioned, and each mind moment is obviously also conditioned, it seems natural to allow dependent arising to explain both.

The *Milindapañha*

The position on rebirth taken in the *Milindapañha* has also met with criticism by Nāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 72), who offers the following assessment:

Na ca so na ca añño, 'Neither he nor another.' This often-quoted dictum occurs in the *Milindapañha* somewhere, as the answer to the question 'When a man dies, who is reborn—he or another?' This question is quite illegitimate, and any attempt to answer it cannot be less so. The question, in asking who is reborn, falls into *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*. It takes for granted the validity of the person as 'self'; for it is only about 'self' that this question—'Eternal (*so*) or perishable (*añño*)?'—can be asked ... The answer also takes this 'self' for granted, since it allows that the question can be asked. It merely denies that this 'self' (which must be either eternal or perishable) is either eternal or perishable, thus making confusion worse confounded. *The proper way is to reject the question in the first place.*

As a starting point for exploring this assessment further, here are the Pāli and Chinese versions of the relevant exchange.¹⁶

(Pāli):

The king said: "Venerable Nāgasena, is the one who is reborn the same or another?"

The elder said: "Not the same and not another."

(Chinese:)

The king asked Nāgasena again: "[When] a person at death proceeds on the paths of good and evil, do they continue keeping the consciousness of their former body on going to be reborn? Or do they rather change to another consciousness on going to be reborn?"

Nāgasena said: "It is neither the consciousness of the former body nor different from the consciousness of the former body."

First of all, in evaluating the above exchange it needs to be noted that a consideration of the context would prevent suggesting that the question should just be rejected. This is a debate and failing to give an answer in a debate is an admission of defeat.¹⁷ To proceed in the way depicted above is therefore quite an adequate approach in such a situation. Giving an answer in keeping with the tetralemma possibilities (4th option: neither/nor) is the best way to reply to such a question in the debate setting.

Given that King Milinda would have grown up in a setting dominated by the Aristotelian twofold logic but during his time in India would have come to know that Indian debaters accept the four alternatives of the tetralemma, the approach reportedly taken by Nāgasena can even be considered rather skillful. By framing things with the fourth alternative, he presents something the king cannot just reject but also something he probably is not too familiar with. This opens the door to further examination, which can yield a more detailed clarification of the matter.

In fact, the two versions report Nāgasena next turning to the king's personal sphere of experience, inquiring whether Milinda's body now was the same as when he was a child. When the king replies by affirming the difference between his former and present bodies, Nāgasena seizes the occasion to clarify that taking such a position negates the continuity between the child Milinda and the adult king. In this way, with a directly intelligible example, he is able to wean the king from the binary "either same or different" approach and make it clear that at times an answer requires going beyond these two categories, which is of course precisely what the tetralemma enshrines. In sum, the criticism voiced by Nāṇavīra Thera of this exchange in the *Milindapañha* does not seem to be justified; it appears to rest on a lack of contextualization.

The Cessation of Consciousness

Problems in interpretation also appear to manifest in relation to the cessation mode of dependent arising. For the case of the third link of consciousness, Nāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 28) reasons: "Belief in 'self' ... is the condition for consciousness, and when it altogether ceases the word *consciousness* no longer applies ... The *arahat*, however, still lives, and he has both intentions ... and consciousness; but this consciousness is *niruddha*." This reasoning seems to take the cessation of the links of dependent arising to be applicable to the living experience of the arahant throughout. Yet, the idea of a cessation of consciousness appears to be relevant to the moment when Nirvana is realized, rather than being a qualification of the consciousness of arahants in general, which the discourses describe rather as *appaṭiṭṭhita*, "not established."¹⁸

However, Nāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 35) argues: "While the *arahat* yet lives, his consciousness is *niruddha*, or 'ceased,' for the reason that it is *ananuruddha-appaṭiviruddha* (Majjhima ii,1 <M.i,65>)." The quoted passage refers to the final goal (*niṭṭha*) rather than to the consciousness of an arahant, and the two terms quoted by the venerable author are not about cessation but about the absence of favoring and opposing.

Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 34) also offers the assessment that, although even for an arahant “there is certainly consciousness and so on, there is no apparent ‘self’ *for whom* there is consciousness.” In fact, “[a]ctually and in truth ... there is, even in this very life, no *arahat* to be found.” The assertion that an arahant is not found in truth and fact comes with a reference to a Pāli discourse presenting the clarification that no Tathāgata can be found to exist in truth and fact.¹⁹ However, this concerns the tetralemma on the existence or non-existence of a Tathāgata after death, which is based on the mistaken notion of a self, held by some contemporaries of the Buddha. In other words, the context of this statement is a clarification that the Buddha’s refusal to take up any of the four positions envisaged by the tetralemma regarding the postmortem state of a Tathāgata was motivated by the fact that each position involves a mistaken notion of the Tathāgata.²⁰ It is this mistaken notion of a self, in the present context also held by a Buddhist monastic, that the discourse targets and shows to be referring to something that in truth and fact does not exist.

Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 34) additionally presents a translation of another passage in support of his position, the most relevant part of which reads: “That consciousness by which the Tathāgata might be manifested has been eliminated by the Tathāgata,” *yena viññāṇena tathāgataṃ paññāpayamāno paññāpeyya, taṃ viññāṇaṃ tathāgatassa pahīnaṃ*.²¹ The translation is not convincing. From a grammatical perspective, the phrase *paññāpayamāno paññāpeyya* combines the present participle with the third person singular optative of the same verb *paññāpeti*, of which only the second form has been taken into account in the translation “might be manifested.” Moreover, Rhys Davids and Stede (1921/1993: 390) offer the following translations for *paññāpeti*: “to make known, declare, point out, appoint, assign, recognise, define” (with an alternative meaning not relevant to the present context being “to lay down, fold out, spread”). The phrase in question does not convey “might be manifested” but can more appropriately be understood to mean that “on designating, one might designate.” In fact, the passage applies the same qualification also to the first aggregate, which in the case of a Tathāgata is certainly still manifest.

The point made in this way in relation to each of the five aggregates is that, due to having eliminated all clinging to the five aggregates, a Tathāgata can no longer be designated, described, or defined by way of any of these five. The passage under discussion continues by indicating that the Tathāgata is deep like the great ocean,²² which confirms that the main point is about the difficulty of fathoming the Tathāgata.

The Cessation of Contact

Pursuing a line of reasoning similar to the one adopted for consciousness, Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 35) proposes that, “when there is no longer any apparent ‘self’ to be contacted, contact (*phassa*) is said to have ceased,” followed by quoting a line from the *Udāna*, according to which contacts contact one in dependence on *upadhi* (translated by the venerable author as “ground”); how could they contact one who is free from *upadhi*?²³ According to the Pāli commentary, the reference to the absence of *upadhi* intends the Nirvana element without remainder and thus not the living arahant.²⁴

The introductory narrative to the discourse reports that some monastics were receiving much support but also experiencing abuse, and it was on being informed of this that the Buddha spoke the verse. Although narratives in the *Udāna* can at times be substantially later than the respective verse and miss its significance (Anālayo 2009a), in the present case the appropriateness of the introductory story finds confirmation in the preceding line of the verse, which in all versions speaks of being contacted by pleasure and pain. Given the narrative setting, it seems indeed meaningful to understand the remainder of the verse in line with the commentarial suggestion.

On such a reading, it would play a function similar to a reflection given in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* and its parallel. The relevant passage recommends that, in case of abuse or even being physically attacked, one should reflect that it is in the nature of having a body that one is subject to such treatment.²⁵ The present verse can be understood to serve similarly as inviting the reflection that one is bound to experience contacts as long as one has not entered final Nirvana. That arahants still experience contact, even physical attacks, is in fact evident from the report of the arahant Aṅgulimāla having to face retaliation by the populace for his former murderous deeds.²⁶ Yet, as an arahant he was able to bear up even with contact that caused physical injury without giving rise to mental reactions under the influence of defilements. That is, defilements have ceased, not contact itself.

The assumption that the notion of a cessation of contact is applicable to the general condition of the living arahant could be what led Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 90f) to taking the following position:

All normal experience is dual ... contact is *primarily* between subject and object, and not between eye, forms, and eye-

consciousness. This approach makes it possible to see in what sense, with the entire cessation of all illusion of an ‘I’ and ‘mine’, there is *phassanirodha* in the *arahat*.

The idea that “contact is primarily between subject and object” would not work for the immaterial sphere of infinite consciousness, for example. This meditative attainment transcends the subject-object duality but still involves contact. Moreover, it has no necessary bearing on the gaining of awakening, its attainment being within the purview of non-Buddhist practitioners. Conversely, the standard description of full awakening in the discourses does not bring in the issue of the subject-object duality, thereby providing no support for the assessment by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 106) that with the “attainment of *arahattā* all traces of the subject-&-objects duality vanishes.” The relationship between the senses and their objects, which represent the basic duality of ordinary experience in the early discourses,²⁷ remains the same after the attainment of full awakening. The decisive difference in the case of an arahant is the absence of any attachment to either the senses or their objects, the lack of any identification with the former, and the impossibility of misperceiving the latter.²⁸

In fact, the subject-object duality is not problematized in early Buddhist thought in general, so that the position taken by the venerable author appears to be another instance of reading the early discourses through the lens of extraneous modes of thought. At least from an early Buddhist perspective, the problem is not the subject-object duality but much rather defilements. Thus, when Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 91 n. d) reasons that “[t]here is, and there is not, contact in the case of the *arahat*, just as there is, and there is not, consciousness,” then adding the qualifications “defiled” and “undefiled” would help to clarify the situation. The basic principle is simply that the type of contact or consciousness that is rooted in ignorance no longer occurs in an arahant. Without any need to bring in the subject-object duality, the venerable author’s statement could be reformulated in the following form: There is undefiled contact, and there is no defiled contact in the case of the arahant, just as there is undefiled consciousness, and there is no defiled consciousness.

The Five Faculties

A central requirement for progress to the condition of becoming completely free from defilements is the cultivation of the five spiritual faculties, *indriya*. According to Gethin (1992: 124),

the special import of the list of the five spiritual faculties is that it characterizes *saddhā*, *virīya*, *sati*, *samādhi* and *paññā* in their

most universal aspect: wherever and whenever these *dhammas* occur, their characteristic is that they function in some respects as faculties.

A different position emerges with the following comment by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 93):

It is sometimes supposed that a *puthujjana* possesses these faculties and powers, at least in embryo, and that his task is to develop them. This is a misunderstanding. It is the *puthujjana*'s task to *acquire* them. It is for the *sekha*, who has acquired them, to develop them.

The implication would be that the five spiritual faculties (or the corresponding five powers) can only be cultivated from the moment of stream-entry onwards, whereby one becomes a trainee (*sekha*) and leaves behind the condition of being a worldling (*puthujjana*).

In the course of making this proposal, the venerable author draws attention to a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* as showing that the five faculties are “either effective or latent all at once” in a noble disciple. According to the Pāli discourse in question, it is only with the arising of noble knowledge—a reference that must be intending the wisdom gained with stream-entry, although such a reference is not found in the Chinese parallel—that the other four faculties become fully stabilized.²⁹ In other words, the full potential of the five faculties as a set becomes fully manifest only once at least the first level of awakening has been reached, as the wisdom resulting from stream-entry has a role comparable to the ridgepole being set into place, as a result of which the rafters of a roof become fully stabilized.

The proposal by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001: 93) that these five “are totally absent from the *puthujjana*” comes with a reference to another discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya*. The relevant Pāli discourse and its parallels correlate degrees in the development of the five faculties with stages of awakening, showing the complete fulfilment of the five faculties to correspond to full awakening and lesser degrees of development to lower stages of progress to awakening. A difference between the parallels is that the Pāli version differentiates between those on the path and those who have realized the corresponding fruit, whereas the parallels only mention becoming an arahant, a non-returner, a once-returner, and a stream-enterer. The concluding statement in the discourse versions is the one directly relevant to the topic under discussion:³⁰

(Pāli):

Monastics, I say that one in whom these five faculties are altogether and in every way completely absent is an outsider who stands in the faction of worldlings.

(Chinese):

I say that if one does not have these five faculties at all, one is to be reckoned an outsider and worldling.

(Tibetan):

I say that whoever lacks these five faculties altogether in every way is an outsider who stands in the faction of worldlings.

The same statement is also found in the form of quotations in later works. Two examples are the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* extant in Sanskrit and the **Mahāvibhāṣā* extant in Chinese:³¹

(Sanskrit):

I say that one in whom these five faculties are altogether absent is an outsider who stands in the faction of worldlings.

(Chinese):

I say that one who is completely without these five faculties of confidence, etc., stands in the faction of outsider worldlings.

The main point made similarly in the parallels is that one who is bereft of the five faculties is a non-Buddhist worldling. Note that none of the versions makes a statement about Buddhist worldlings. In all versions the one bereft of the five faculties is an outsider.

Another aspect to be kept in mind is that the presentation as a whole correlates accomplishment in the possession of faculties to certain persons, not the other way round. This difference is significant. For example, everyone who is Sri Lankan is also an Asian, but not everyone who is Asian is also a Sri Lankan. Similarly, stating that someone who is bereft of a certain quality can only be a worldling does not imply that everyone who is a worldling must be lacking this quality. Just as there is a need to leave room for Asians that are not Sri Lankans, so there is a need to leave room for worldlings (especially Buddhist worldlings) who could have the five faculties in an embryonic stage.

In other words, the passages quoted above are not presenting an exclusive statement that bars all worldlings from a cultivation of the five faculties. Instead, the import of the passage in question appears to be rather that the five faculties are of such importance for the path that someone who does not have them at all can only be a non-Buddhist worldling.

The distinction to be drawn in this way is of considerable practical relevance, since the question at stake is if the five faculties have a contribution to offer already to progress to stream-entry. The four establishments of mindfulness, for example, representing the faculty of mindfulness, should according to a Pāli discourse and its Chinese *Āgama* parallel be taught right away to newly-ordained monastics.³² In other words, the transformative potential of cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness is indeed of relevance as soon as one embarks on the path toward awakening, which in the ancient setting had going forth as its most natural expression. It would be putting the cart before the horse if one were to assume that such meditative cultivation is only relevant after one has reached stream-entry.

Another passage extant only in Pāli emphatically encourages the teaching of the four establishments of mindfulness to one's friends and relatives, out of compassion for those who are willing to lend an ear.³³ This injunction would hardly make sense if such practice were to be only relevant for those who have already attained stream-entry.

The present and final example in my survey conveniently relates back to the overall theme of "clearing the path." The clarification that a cultivation of the five faculties, at least in an embryonic state, is already relevant for those who have just embarked on the path to stream-entry would indeed offer a fitting exemplification of the need to clear the path.

Conclusion

The points surveyed above suggest that the power of the profound expositions given by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1965/2001) can at times be impaired by two unfortunate tendencies. One of these takes the form of a literalist and decontextualized reading, in the sense of taking a particular passage at its face value without sufficient attention being given to its setting and to other relevant passages elsewhere among the discourses. Another tendency is the adoption of notions and ideas that are not well attested in early Buddhist thought, or are even foreign to it, as a basis for interpreting the Pāli discourses. This has its complement in a thorough dismissal of traditional exegesis.

As long as the aim is to arrive at a better understanding of the early Buddhist teachings, especially if done with the aim of clearing the path to awakening, both of these tendencies are better avoided. In other words, contextualization within the same textual corpus is an indispensable

requirement. This can find a complement in a consultation of traditional exegesis, which should only be rejected after such consultation has brought to light shortcomings or inconsistencies. After a thorough study of all relevant material, be it other discourses or relevant commentaries, has provided the necessary foundation for understanding Buddhist thought on its own terms, the time would have come to turn to philosophical notions and ideas from a different age and culture.

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| D | Derge |
| EĀ | <i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125) |
| MĀ | <i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26) |
| Mil | <i>Milindapañha</i> |
| MN | <i>Majjhima-nikāya</i> |
| P | Peking |
| Paṭis | <i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i> |
| SĀ | <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99) |
| SN | <i>Samyutta-nikāya</i> |
| Sn | <i>Sutta-nipāta</i> |
| Vibh | <i>Vibhaṅga</i> |
| T | Taishō (digital) |
| Th | <i>Theragāthā</i> |
| Ud | <i>Udāna</i> |
| Ud-a | <i>Paramatthadīpanī</i> |
| Up | <i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i> |
| Uv | <i>Udānavarga</i> |
| Vin | <i>Vinaya</i> |

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Notes

- 1 On this topic see also Jones 2009.
- 2 MN 28 at MN I 190,³⁷ and its parallel MĀ 30 at T I 467a9.
- 3 Sn 653: *paṭiccasamuppādada(s)sā*; see also Th 422.
- 4 Vin I 40,²⁸ with a parallel in the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, Waldschmidt 1962, 378,13; see also the *Mahāvastu* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda *Vinaya*, Marciniak 2019, 72,⁸ (see Senart 1897, 62,⁸) and for other sources see, e.g., Lamotte 1949/1981, 631, Waldschmidt 1951/1967, 198–201, Migot 1952, 426–443, and Bareau 1963, 343–347.
- 5 MN 9 at MN I 48,²⁰ and MĀ 29 at T I 462b¹²; other extant parallels abbreviate this section, see Anālayo 2011: 70.
- 6 See Anālayo 2018: 12–15.
- 7 Mettiko 2015: 447: “die *Kritik* beginnt beim Thema „Geburt“ und unterstellt Ñāṇavīra, er sage im Endeffekt *bhavapaccayā jarāmarañam*, „bedingt durch Dasein ist Alter und Tod“, statt „durch Geburt bedingt ist Altern und Tod“. Das ist natürlich nur gerechtfertigt, wenn man *paṭiccasamuppāda* stillschweigend als zeitlichen Ablauf voraussetzt.”
- 8 SN 12.10 at SN II 10,3, with parallels in Chung and Fukita 2020: 88 and in SĀ 285 at T II 80a1.
- 9 Vibh 144,2: *yasmiṃ samaye akusalaṃ cittaṃ uppannaṃ hoti somanassasahagataṃ dīṭṭhigatasampayuttaṃ rūpārammaṇaṃ vā saddārammaṇaṃ vā gandhārammaṇaṃ vā rasārammaṇaṃ vā phoṭṭhabhārammaṇaṃ vā dhammārammaṇaṃ vā yaṃ yaṃ vā pan’ ārabha, tasmīṃ samaye avijjāpaccayā saṅkhāro, saṅkhārapaccayā viññānaṃ, viññānapaccayā nāmaṃ, nāmapaccayā chaṭṭhāyatanaṃ, chaṭṭhāyatanaṃ phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmarañam. evaṃ etassa kevalassa dukkhak-khandhassa samudayo hoti.*
- 10 Paṭis I 52,19.
- 11 See Warder 1982: xxxv.
- 12 T 1544 at T XXVI 921b17.
- 13 See Cox 1995: 34.
- 14 T 1545 at T XXVII 118c7.
- 15 On the potential of the tetralemma approach to counter binary modes of thought see also Anālayo 2022.
- 16 Mil 40,1: *rājā āha: bhante nāgasena, yo uppajjati, so eva so, udāhu añño ti? therō āha: na ca so, na ca añño ti.* T 1670B at T XXXII 708c9: 王復問那先言: 人死所趣善惡之道續持故身神行生耶, 更贊他神行生耶. 那先言: 亦非故身神亦不離故身神.
- 17 See in more detail Anālayo 2021b.
- 18 For a survey of such occurrences in Pāli discourses see Anālayo 2019: 57f.
- 19 SN 44.2 at SN IV 384,6, whose parallel SĀ 106 at T II 32c²⁸ proceeds differently; see Anālayo 2014: 26.
- 20 See also Anālayo 2018: 37–44 and 2022.
- 21 The phrase is found in SN 44.1 at SN IV 379,9.
- 22 SN 44.1 at SN IV 379,12.
- 23 Ud 2.4 at Ud 12,³¹ with parallels in Uv 30.51, Bernhard 1965: 406, T 212 at T IV 758b16, and T 213 at T IV 795a²⁹.
- 24 Ud-a 115,1.
- 25 MN 28 at MN I 186,8 and MĀ 30 at T I 464c²⁷.
- 26 MN 86 at MN II 104,4, EĀ 38.6 at T II 721a²⁴, T 118 at T II 510a⁶, and T 119 at T II 511c²²; see also Anālayo 2008: 146.
- 27 SN 35.92 at SN IV 67,¹¹ and its parallel SĀ 213 at T II 54a³.
- 28 See, e.g., MN 112 at MN III 32,¹⁷ and its parallel MĀ 187 at T I 732c¹⁹ on the absence of any attachment to the senses and their objects, and for the case of potential misperceiving of objects see also MN 1 at MN I 4,²³ and its main parallel EĀ 44.6 at T II 766b⁵, whose description of the way an arahant perceives objects contrasts with their previous depiction of the misperceptions of the same objects by worldlings.

- 29 SN 48.52 at SN V 228,9; the parallel SĀ 654 at T II 183b₂₁ employs basically the same simile to convey that the role of wisdom is to comprise all the five faculties, without providing any reference to noble knowledge and thus without establishing an implicit relationship to stream-entry.
- 30 SN 48.18 at SN V 202,23: *yassa kho, bhikkhave, imāni pañcendriyāni sabbena sabbam sabbathā sabbam n' atthi, tam ahaṃ bhāhīro puthujjanapakkhe t̥hito ti vadāmi ti*. SĀ 652 at T II 183b₁: 若於此五根一切無者, 我說彼為外道凡夫之數. Up 2010 at P 5595 tu 57a5 or D 4094 ju 52b2: *gang la dbang po lnga po* (*lnga po* is missing in P) *'di dag rnam pa thams cad du thams cad med pa de ni phyi rol so so'i skye bo'i phyogs la gnas par nga smra'o*.
- 31 Wogihara 1932: 103,8: *yasyemāni pañcendriyāni sarvena sarvāni na santi, tam ahaṃ bāhyaṃ pṛthagjanapakṣāvasthitam vadāmīti*, T 1545 at T XXVII 7c8: 若全無此信等五根, 我說彼住外異生品; see also the *Abhidharmakośabhaṣya*, Pradhan 1967: 42,23: *yasyemāni pañcendriyāni sarvena sarvaṃ na santi tam ahaṃ bāhyaṃ pṛthagjanapakṣāvasthitam vadāmīti*, and the *Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti*, Jaini 1977: 54,1: (*yasyemāni*) *pañcendriyāni sarvena sarvaṃ na santi tam ahaṃ bāhyaṃ pṛthagjanapakṣāvasthitam vadāmi iti*.
- 32 SN 47.4 at SN V 144,16 and SĀ 621 at T II 173c₁₆.
- 33 SN 47.48 at SN V 189,2. Hearing the teachings features as one of the five spheres of liberation, together with teaching them to others, reciting them, reflecting on them, and meditating (Anālayo 2009b and Pāsādika 2017). In evaluating this presentation, it needs to be kept in mind that it concerns the actual occasion of the breakthrough to levels of awakening rather than providing a comprehensive coverage of the trajectory of progress on the path that leads up to such a breakthrough. This path, as evident from the passage quoted in the previous note, calls for a meditative cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness.

