



Emptiness Requires Contextualization: On Rob Burbea’s *Seeing That Frees* By Bhikkhu Anālayo

Abstract

This article examines interpretations of emptiness and dependent arising articulated in Burbea (2014), *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising*. Central topics are the historical context informing problematizations of the notion of *svabhāva* in teachings on emptiness in some Mahāyāna traditions; the conditional relationship between links in the standard exposition of dependent arising and its role as the Buddha’s middle way; and the significance of time, impermanence, and the tetralemma. The main concern of the examination is to highlight problems that arise from decontextualized readings of teachings on emptiness taken from different Buddhist traditions without adequately taking into account their respective historical, doctrinal, and soteriological situatedness.

Introduction

Emptiness as a doctrine, a meditation practice, and a realization does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, any form or articulation of emptiness necessarily operates within a particular network of causes and conditions. For this reason, the historical setting makes a difference, at times a fairly substantial one.

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The same holds for the cultural context, in the sense that articulations of emptiness in India, China, or Tibet address, and therefore have been adjusted to, quite different audiences. Doctrinal premises can vary greatly, in the sense of the pre-suppositions taken for granted, the positions considered to require rectification, and the connotations associated with insight into emptiness. Soteriological orientations also differ, in the sense of the overarching framework being the path to arahant-ship or else to Buddhahood, and what particular implications are held to characterize each of these realizations.

All these different factors need to be taken into account in order to arrive at an informed and accurate understanding of a particular articulation or practice of emptiness. In short, emptiness requires contextualization. The purpose of the present exploration is to document the need for such contextualization, as well as the consequences incurred by its neglect, based on a case study of relevant parts of *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising* by Rob Burbea.

Burbea (2014: xiii) starts his book with the compelling observation that there is an “intimate connection between emptiness and dependent arising” whose full understanding requires meditation practice. This aptly thematizes what appears to be a main thrust of *Seeing That Frees*, namely the providing of doctrinal perspectives and meditative implementations of various dimensions of teachings on emptiness and dependent arising. The book proceeds through thirty-one chapters in a gradually deepening presentation of these two key teachings and related practices. Due to his evident expertise as a meditation teacher, Rob Burbea is able to provide a wealth of helpful observations and useful suggestions on meditation practice.

Due to constraints of length in what has anyway become a rather lengthy article, in what follows I will not be able to do justice to the many gems of meditative wisdom found in Burbea (2014), as my main concern is to examine the doctrinal underpinnings of Rob Burbea’s teachings. In fact, the

overall aim of my examination is to offer a contribution to the developing forms of Buddhism in the West by way of emphasizing the importance of a historical perspective in order to do justice to the precious heritages of different Asian forms of Buddhism. For this reason, the present article goes far beyond the standard form and orientation of a review.

I will begin my exploration of these topics by taking up the historical background that informs emptiness rhetoric directed against the idea of an inherent existence. Then I contextualize Rob Burbea's writings within dynamics at work among teachers of insight meditation in the West and evaluate to what degree liberating insight into emptiness needs to rely on deconstructing assumptions of an inherent existence. Next, I examine the conditional relationship between the twelve links of dependent arising and its role as a middle path between two extremes, and discuss the significance of time, impermanence, and the tetralemma.

Inherent Existence and the Perfection of Wisdom

Burbea (2014: 5) reasons that “[w]e feel that a thing has an *inherent existence*—that its existence, its being, inheres in itself alone,” and then defines emptiness as “the absence of this inherent existence.” On the next page he clarifies that the targeted notion corresponds to the Sanskrit term *svabhāva*.¹

Burbea (2014: 7) then asserts that the “complete dissolution of this error in our sense and understanding of things is the primary thrust of the Buddha’s message of liberation,” this being “the deepest level of what the Buddha calls the ignorance or fundamental delusion ... that we share as sentient beings.”

The proposed understanding appears to be influenced by articulations of emptiness found in Perfection of Wisdom literature. In his detailed overview of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Williams (1989/2009: 52) offers the following assessment:

The principal ontological message (message concerning what ultimately exists) of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is an extension of the Buddhist teaching of not-Self to equal ... no fundamentally real existence ... the suggestion is that there simply is no such thing as ‘intrinsic nature’ (*svabhāva* ...) for *dharma*s, any more than for anything else, to possess.

In the context of discussing the relationship between Abhidharma and early Mahāyāna, Bronkhorst (2018: 124) adds the observation that

the ‘Perfection of Wisdom,’ which is the subject matter of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* ... only makes sense against the background of the overhaul of Buddhist scholasticism that had taken place in Greater Gandhāra during the last centuries preceding the Common Era. It was in Greater Gandhāra, during this period, that Buddhist scholasticism developed an ontology centred on the lists of *dharma*s ... They looked upon the *dharma*s as the only really existing things.

In other words, the problematization of an inherent existence emerges as a specific articulation of emptiness in Perfection of Wisdom literature that critically responds to a development in Abhidharma thought. It needs to be appreciated based on taking into account its historical setting and the particular doctrinal premises with which it stands in dialogue.

The Abhidharma analysis of *dharma*s and the *Prajñāpāramitā* advocacy of emptiness are competing articulations of the Buddha’s teaching of not-self, which thus take as their common point of departure a premise that is specifically Buddhist. This prevents extrapolating the position taken by either side as a self-sufficient account of a general human propensity toward essentializing things, promoted or rejected in various strands of Western philosophy or recognized in developmental psychology, simply because these do not share the Buddhist

premise. This is of course not to deny the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between Buddhist traditions and Western philosophy or psychology. My point is only that a simple equation, without taking into account different premises, will not do justice to either side.

Even on entirely Buddhist grounds, refutations of an inherent existence are not automatically representative of Buddhist notions of emptiness in general. Instead, they need to be recognized as specific articulations of emptiness that depend on, and interact with, a particular doctrinal background and historical setting. Rob Burbea does not refer to this doctrinal background and historical setting.² The net result appears to be that he has taken this particular and historically contingent articulation of emptiness as an exhaustive account of Buddhist emptiness as such.

The lack of contextualization and its repercussions that manifest in this way relate to his way of presentation, which freely alternates between quoting a Pāli discourse and excerpts from Buddhist texts pertaining to other historical periods and related to developments in different Mahāyāna traditions, with the latter serving as a confirmation of his proposed interpretation of Pāli discourse passages. Yet, the relevant quotes have been articulated in at times substantially different historical periods, being situated in distinct cultural settings, based on disparate doctrinal frameworks, and informed by divergent soteriological orientations. Such differences would need to be taken into account in some way in any attempt at engaging these teachings in a meaningful and productive dialogue with early Buddhist thought and practice.

Teaching Insight in the West

The eclectic approach evident in this way is not uncommon among Western Dharma teachers and can best be understood by being in turn contextualized. Within the general setting of the contemporary West, quoting from a range of divergent

sources serves to establish oneself as liberal and open-minded, in line with what Taylor (2007: 484), in his study of the current ‘secular age,’ has succinctly described with the following maxim: “let each person do their own thing, and we shouldn’t criticize each other’s ‘values’ ... The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance.”

In the more specific setting of Dharma in the West, the late Rob Burbea was a teacher at Gaia House in the UK, an Insight Meditation center affiliated with the *vipassanā* movement but open to embracing other Buddhist traditions and styles of practice.³ In this setting, the approach of emphasizing openness to different practice lineages can help to create a distance from the dogmatism perceived as characteristic of *vipassanā* meditation taught in the tradition of S. N. Goenka, with his insistence on representing a form of practice that originated with the Buddha and has been handed down since then in its “pristine purity.”⁴ This belief then informs attempts at protecting such purity against the danger of meditators straying into other forms of practice.

In an ostensible attempt to distance themselves from this type of attitude, Dharma teachers at institutions like Gaia House—or, for example, the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts and Spirit Rock in California—tend to diversify the sources from which they draw in the preparation of a Dharma talk or when writing an article or a book.

In this way, a discussion based on Pāli discourses may be combined with a quote from Nāgārjuna here and another one (believed to be) from Huineng there. The verse attributed to the latter in the Platform *sūtra* appears to be a particular favorite among Western Dharma teachers, and Burbea (2014: 333) is no exception. This tradition continues even though it has long been pointed out that the narrative of Huineng and the entire verse exchange are pure invention, motivated by polemic purposes. As explained by McRae (1986: 6), “in strictly historical terms the *Platform Sūtra* narrative is completely inaccurate,” wherefore “[c]itation of the *Platform Sūtra* verses is acceptable only if one distinguishes clearly between the

history and legend of early Ch'an and if one is very precise about the verses' legitimate frame of reference."

The needed perspective is not confined to scholarly circles but by now is also accessible on Wikipedia.⁵ Nevertheless, quoting of this verse continues unperturbed, which furnishes a good example for a lack of contextualization by some Western Dharma teachers. The procedure adopted in this way could be illustrated with the example of walking through a supermarket and picking up one item from this shelf and another item from another shelf in order to make a meal. It does not matter under what conditions and in what country the individual item was produced as long as the combination of the different items results in a tasty meal.

Underlying this syncretistic way of teaching Dharma appears to be the belief that anything said on a particular topic like emptiness, independent of where, when, and by whom, must in the final count be reflecting the same basic perspective, just expressed in different ways. That is, in principle differences can only be in letter and never in spirit. Communicating such a perspective may well feel reassuring for Western Buddhists in their struggle to make sense of the vast array of different teachings and practices they encounter. Yet, such reassurance can easily come at the cost of failing to do justice to the deeper meanings and contextual settings of those teachings and practices.

A tendency toward decontextualization can become further strengthened by the need to accommodate the interests and inclinations of those who come to a retreat or will read a book on meditation. This type of audience will hardly appreciate being informed about reliable Pure Land practice for ensuring rebirth in the presence of Amitābha or Thai Buddhist amulets capable of providing efficient blessings in different life situations. The need to cater to prevalent predilections almost inevitably leads to attempts to set aside what is perceived as Asian cultural baggage.

This much is in line with the approach articulated by Stephen Batchelor, a patron of Gaia House,⁶ for his reading of

Pāli discourses. Batchelor (2010/2011: 101) reports that anything “that could just as well have been said in the classical Indian texts of the Upanishads or Vedas, I would bracket off and put to one side,” with the result of this procedure then being considered to yield “what I had sifted out as the Buddha’s word.” Although seriously flawed as a method for arriving at “the Buddha’s word,”⁷ the popularity of Stephen Batchelor’s writings shows the appeal of this type of approach. The resultant thrust toward setting aside what appears to be related to Asian cultures in order to arrive at the perceived essence of the teachings further encourages and supports the main problem of extracting various teachings from their historical, cultural, and doctrinal home.

In this way, the requirements to be in resonance with the general orientation in Western culture, to distance oneself from dogmatism of the type associated with the S. N. Goenka tradition, and to cater to the predilections of one’s audiences combine in making it almost *de rigueur* to draw on a broad variety of Buddhist thinkers, taken out of their respective contexts, to prepare a ‘tasty meal.’

In the present case, it appears to be due to this type of approach that Rob Burbea presents the specific application of emptiness in Perfection of Wisdom literature—designed to counter the Abhidharma promotion of *svabhāva*—as a sort of meta-theory of what Buddhist emptiness is meant to achieve. This seems to inform the belief by Burbea (2014: 138) that “*any* sense of a subject (or an object) will be felt and assumed, usually without realizing that we are doing so, to possess inherent existence.”

Of course, from the more specific viewpoint of Buddhist traditions that are heirs of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought, countering the notion of an inherent existence may indeed appear to be invested with an overarching importance. Without in any way intending to problematize such an inheritance in some Asian Buddhist traditions, it needs to be clearly recognized that the importance of countering *svabhāva* is not automati-

cally relevant to any Buddhist cultivation of insight into emptiness.

Emptiness Beyond Inherent Existence

The Pāli term *sabhāva* does not occur at all in Pāli discourses, which do not evince any explicit concern with problematizing the notion of an inherent existence. In other words, as far as the textual sources allow us to judge, during the period of time preceding the development of the *svabhāva* notion in Abhidharma thought, the idea of an inherent existence was not perceived as a problem that required addressing. At the same time, the Pāli discourses (and their parallels) clearly advocate the emptiness of all dharmas, contrary to a popular belief that this much is a Mahāyāna innovation.⁸

Once all the detailed discussions of clinging and attachment in Pāli discourses—combined with their clear advocacy of the emptiness of all phenomena—show no concern with problematizing the notion of an inherent existence, there is hardly much room left to consider such problematizing to be indispensable for any contemporary Buddhist approach to cultivating emptiness in order to overcome attachment and clinging. This is not to underestimate the importance of the corrective provided by Perfection of Wisdom literature. But this importance emerges in a specific historical setting. It does not necessarily hold for a different setting.

In fact, it is not at all clear if the same notion should be considered the key to solving clinging and attachment in present times, simply because the necessary understanding is already in place, thanks to developments in quantum physics. The theoretical physicist Rovelli (2021: 141f) offers the following description:

[T]he properties of an object become manifest when this object interacts with others. We cannot separate the properties from these other objects. We cannot attribute them just to a single object. All of the (variable)

properties of an object, in the final analysis, are such and exist only with respect to other objects. ‘Contextuality’ is the technical term that denotes this central aspect of quantum physics: things exist in a context. An isolated object, taken in itself, independent of every interaction, has no particular state. At most we can attribute to it a kind of probabilistic disposition to manifest itself in one way or another. But even this is only an anticipation of future phenomena, a reflection of phenomena past, and only and always relative to another object.

The perspective that emerges in this way successfully demolishes the postulation of an inherent existence. It should be sufficient to prevent this theory gaining a significant following in the contemporary setting, obviating any need to posit the identification of the absence of an inherent existence as the key element that must be counteracted in order to further insight into emptiness, at the expense of giving more room to alternative ways of relating emptiness to actual practice, such as by simply countering the tendency to cling to things as ‘me’ or ‘mine.’

The influence of the unquestioned premise regarding the overarching importance of the notion of an inherent existence can be illustrated with the example of walking, a standard meditation posture alongside sitting. Burbea (2014: 305) presents the following reasoning: “Walking, indeed any motion, cannot begin when stationary, since to be stationary is to be unmoving. Nor can motion begin when moving, since any moving thing is already in motion.” He then arrives at the conclusion that, “[n]o beginning nor ending of walking can be found ... Without a real beginning and a real ending, motion lacks inherent existence.”

The supposed problem of explaining how walking can begin or end rests on a substantialist notion of what the term walking refers to. It is not relevant to those who do not hold such a notion. If at present we want to start walking, then at first there will be an intention to move. Then energy will flow

down to the legs, next the muscles and tendons will be activated, and then the first externally visible motion will manifest. Which of these successive stages of an ongoing process we then consider to be the moment when walking ‘begins’ is up to our personal preference, that is, it depends on what particular definition we wish to give to the act of walking.

As long as walking or any other motion is understood as a process rather than an entity, there is no problem in explaining such a simple thing as starting to walk. Instead of reflecting an obvious conundrum, the problematization of walking having a beginning point reflects a specific historical setting. Bronkhorst (2018: 126) explains that

the beginning and end of dharmas ... is clearly the elaboration of a question with which the scholiasts of Greater Gandhāra were confronted: did they have to postulate the existence of a dharma called ‘beginning’ (*jāti, utpatti*) in order to account for the fact that dharmas, being momentary, have a beginning in time? The scholiasts explored this possibility, and ended up with improbable dharmas such as ‘the beginning of beginning’ (*jātijāti*). The position taken in numerous Mahāyāna texts is that dharmas have no beginning (and no end). This makes perfect sense among thinkers who are steeped in Gandhāran scholasticism, but nowhere else.

Once again, for Mahāyāna *sūtras* and treatises confronted with reifications of ‘the beginning,’ it makes eminent sense to deconstruct these by rejecting such a beginning. But the same seems a bit out of place for those who do not share the above Abhidharma preoccupations or are perhaps not even aware of them. These preoccupations are a matter of the past and their relevance to the contemporary situation is far from being self-evident.

Just to be clear, my intention is not to criticize engagement with these philosophical positions as an Asian Buddhist cultural practice, such as, for example, in the form of debate in

Tibetan Buddhist traditions.⁹ My point is rather to question the relevance of attempts to internalize—through repeated reflection and meditation—the realization that 2,000 years ago Abhidharma philosophers made a ‘mistake’ in postulating an inherent existence, especially in a contemporary setting, where practitioners are probably more aware of the results of research in quantum physics than of ancient Indian Abhidharma theories.

In relation to the same topic of walking, Burbea (2014: 307) further reasons that “[w]alking that is past no longer exists. Walking that has not yet taken place does not exist either.” Present walking then is problematized on the grounds that “motion is defined as a change in position over time. This means that it cannot exist at any exact present moment.” The reasoning behind this is that “if the position of an object changed in that moment, that moment would actually be at least two moments—one moment in time when the object was at one position, and another when the object was at a different position.” The proposed conclusion then is that “[t]here is actually no time findable at which a thing is in motion.”

This reasoning again concerns absolute notions, such as here the notion of a “moment” of time in the way conceived by proponents of momentariness, a theory that appears to have emerged after the closure of canonical Abhidharma works.¹⁰ The basic idea of this theory is that everything passes away completely as soon as it has arisen, with the notion of a moment becoming so infinitesimally short as to have basically no duration, hence no motion can happen during such a moment.

Apart from such ideas, however, the reasoning fails to be relevant, and the perceived problem can simply be solved by recognizing that a “moment” is not an entity but refers to a process that is not confined to an infinitesimal fraction of time. Hence, there is no reason why a moment should not be able to accommodate a shift from motionlessness to motion.

The Pāli term for a “moment,” *khana*, can have considerable temporal duration. An example is a verse in the *Sutta-nipāta*, according to which one who knows the moment will listen carefully when a Dharma talk is occurring.¹¹ Here, *khana*

is clearly not confined to a brief moment and can accommodate changing phenomena, such as different words being spoken during a talk, leaving no reason why the notion of a moment may not be used in the same way elsewhere, such as when a change of motion occurs.

The same holds for the usage of the term “moment” in English, such as when, for example, we tell someone “I will be with you in a moment.” This clearly intends more than an infinitesimally short fraction of time during which no change can occur. Thus, the above problematization concerns a specific problem that arose at a particular point in the course of the history of Buddhist thought and it would hardly be compelling to extrapolate it from that context and turn it into a universally valid issue.

The limitations of defaulting to the notion of an inherent existence as the key problem to be solved through emptiness meditation become particularly evident when Burbea (2014: 7) avows that “we do not cling to what we know is not real.” People can cling to Harry Potter or even to cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. In the age of the internet and artificial intelligence, we simply cannot afford to confine the problem of clinging to what, according to an ancient Indian Abhidharma definition, is (mis-)taken to be real.

This is not meant to dismiss the transformative potential of questioning our ordinary sense of reality or to deny that at times seeing through the idea of an inherent existence, at least by those who have been introduced to it, may subjectively feel liberating. However, in themselves meaningful attempts at exorcising a belief in an inherent existence need to take into account its historical setting in the development of Buddhist thought in order to be able to evaluate to what extent such exorcism is still relevant today.

An alternative could be the simple strategy, proposed already in early Buddhist formulations of emptiness, of questioning the ingrained sense of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ in order to undermine ego and clinging. Why complicate that unnecessarily by bringing in outdated Abhidharma discussions?

Conditionality Between the Twelve Links

The focus on deconstructing inherent existence has not only resulted in a limited perspective on emptiness—missing out on its profundity and its potential for countering a range of delusions and forms of clinging that are not directly related to attributing *svabhāva* to phenomena—it also appears to have affected a proper understanding of early Buddhist teachings that according to the Pāli discourses and their parallels are indispensable requirements for a genuine realization of emptiness.

For example, Burbea (2014: 256) presents as an outcome of insight meditation, preceded by giving a Pāli discourse quotation on contemplation of the five aggregates, that “objects of perception are fabricated by clinging, and are thus empty of inherent existence.” The untenable attribution of clinging to objects of perception in general, rather than confining it to the subjective act of clinging, gives the impression that the professed need to undermine the notion of an inherent existence has fueled a serious misunderstanding of dependent arising. In apparent support of the above position, Burbea (2014: 362) takes up the second part of a verse from the *Udāna*, which can be rendered as follows:¹²

Contacts make contact in dependence on a basis;
How could contacts contact one without a basis?

The Pāli word rendered above as “basis” is *upadhi*, a term that can convey neutral connotations—such as pointing to a foundation, ground, acquisition, or possession—or else it can carry a negative sense by designating an attachment or a type of clinging. The appropriate meaning needs to be determined based on the context. In the present case, according to the preceding narrative the Buddha and his monastic disciples had been receiving much respect and support, unlike non-Buddhist wanderers, which motivated the latter to abuse and insult the former. When his monastic disciples report this to the Buddha, he responds with an inspired utterance, *udāna*, of which the above translation renders the latter part.

The context makes it fair to opt for the neutral meaning of *upadhi*, as the experience of being revered by some and abused by others can happen even to arahants. In other words, this type of contact does not require the presence of attachment within the one who experiences it but is simply an inevitable part of the life of a mendicant in the ancient Indian setting. As long as there is the type of ‘basis’ provided by a living human body, contacts will make contact with it, resulting in experiences that can involve either reverence or else abuse.

The above verse could be explored further with the help of a definition of the Nirvana element with a remainder of *upadhi* given in the *Itivuttaka* and its Chinese parallel, where such a remainder of *upadhi* characterizes an arahant while still alive, contrasted to the absence of *upadhi* once an arahant attains final Nirvana. The definition of the former in the Pāli version explicitly mentions a living arahant’s experience of what is agreeable and disagreeable (*manāpāmanāpa*) as well as what is pleasant and painful (*sukhadukkha*).¹³ The last matches the first line of the *udāna* under discussion, which speaks of being contacted by what is pleasant and painful (*sukhadukkha*).¹⁴

In this way, by relating the presence of *upadhi* to the experience of what is pleasant and painful and the absence of *upadhi* to a condition in which contacts no longer occur, the *Itivuttaka* passage provides a directly relevant perspective on the verse under discussion from within the same textual corpus of Pāli discourse literature.

Shifting to a different type of Pāli literature, the commentary on the *Udāna* verse concords with what has emerged thus far, explaining that the reference to *upadhi* here intends the five aggregates. The other reference to being without *upadhi* in turn should be understood to reflect the Buddha encouraging his disciples to dedicate themselves to reaching final Nirvana.¹⁵

Now, the Pāli commentarial tradition reflects a different historical setting and changed doctrinal presuppositions.¹⁶ For this reason, its glosses cannot serve as a certain guide to

the meaning of a particular Pāli discourse. At the same time, however, the Pāli commentaries are historically closer to a Pāli discourse than is the case for a reader living in the 21st century. For this reason, I contend that the commentaries deserve to be given a fair hearing.

In the present case, what emerges in this way concords with the indications that can be derived from considering the above Pāli poem in its immediate environment of the same discourse and its wider environment of other Pāli discourses. Such consideration makes it fair to understand *upadhi* here to carry a neutral nuance, hence a rendering like “basis,” or else perhaps a “foundation,” or a “ground” would be appropriate.

Burbea (2014: 362) prefers to render *upadhi* here as “attachment” and then takes the implication of this verse to be that contact “is actually fabricated by clinging.” It is difficult to see how this could be. Even on adopting a somewhat decontextualized reading of the verse—setting aside the narrative context, the *Itivuttaka* usage, and the Pāli commentary—translating *upadhi* here as “attachment” would just convey that someone with attachment is affected by what is pleasant or painful (*sukhadukkha*), ostensibly in the sense of the heart being touched by such contact in a way that causes elation or sadness. One without attachment in turn would then not be affected in this way.

Thus, even on adopting the other possible sense of *upadhi*, the result does not support reading this verse as implying that contact itself depends on the presence of attachment or clinging. As the above-mentioned *Itivuttaka* passage clearly shows, those who are by definition free from attachment or clinging still experience contact.

The same holds for several other links in the standard exposition of dependent arising, such as, for example, the next link of feeling tone. Based on a selection of Mahāyāna sources, Burbea (2014: 253) presents the conclusion that “it is clear that not only does craving depend on *vedanā*, as in the more commonly received formulation, but also that *vedanā* depends on craving.”¹⁷ Again in reliance on Mahāyāna sources, Burbea

(2014: 285) then adopts the same perspective on the ensuing link of clinging, reasoning that in the case of “clinging and *vedanā* ... it is not possible to say where one ends and the other begins.” Yet, to make contact and *vedanā* dependent on craving or clinging results in rendering impossible the existence of fully liberated beings in the form recognized in mainstream Indian Buddhism, be they arahants or Buddhas.

A reference to Nāgārjuna leads Burbea (2014: 250) still further: “*The experience, the perception of a phenomenon, depends on clinging.* For a thing to appear as that thing for consciousness, to be consolidated into an experience, it needs a certain amount of clinging” (here and elsewhere, italics are reproduced as they are in the original). Again, according to Burbea (2014: 279), “to ‘see,’ or experience, something—any thing, ‘inner’ or ‘outer’—a degree of clinging is needed ... any experience involves the doing of clinging.” That is, “[w]hen-ever anything is perceived, that perceiving involves fabricating through clinging and *avijjā*,” ignorance.

The last reference suggests that the proposed interpretation may be based on taking the twelve-link formulation of dependent arising to be an account of any type of experience, including that of arahants and Buddhas. Confirmation for this impression comes with the following statement in Burbea (2014: 255): “The perception of any phenomenon is dependent on *avijjā* as a basis, as the teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda* makes clear.” The use of Pāli terminology in this statement, which follows right after a quote from the Mahāyāna author Śāntideva, accords with the impression of a conflation of historically and doctrinally distinct positions. The result unfortunately amounts to a serious misunderstanding of the standard teaching on dependent arising in mainstream Indian Buddhism.

Arahants are by definition free from ignorance, yet they still have all five aggregates. As several verses in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* convey, in the case of arahants the five aggregates, which have been penetratively understood, remain with their root cut off.¹⁸ The five aggregates must remain, as otherwise an arahant or the Buddha would be unable to

function. This much holds even for the fourth aggregate of *sankhāras*, which is needed for taking any volitional decision, such as deciding to go and beg for food or give a teaching. It is any clinging to the five aggregates that has been cut off for good. Expressed in terms of the standard formulation of dependent arising, the key difference is the complete absence of ignorance influencing the volitional decisions taken by fully awakened ones, making it impossible for the experience of feeling tone, *vedanā*, to result in craving or clinging.

A loss from sight of this fairly fundamental dimension of dependent arising appears to be the result of a lack of contextualization of doctrinal statements and positions taken at different times and in differing context in the history of Buddhist thought. The net result is a failure to do justice to each of the various Buddhist traditions involved, as their conflation prevents an accurate coverage that takes into account their distinct settings, premises, and orientations.

The Middle Way of Dependent Arising

Dependent arising features in Pāli discourses and their parallels as a “middle way” that avoids two extremes. The importance for later tradition of one such exposition, found in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and addressed to Kaccāyana (or Kaccāna), is reflected in a reference to this teaching given in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (15.7),¹⁹ a treatise by Nāgārjuna that is foundational for Madhyamaka thought.²⁰ The Pāli version of the relevant exposition introduces the standard depiction of dependent arising by way of twelve links in the following manner:²¹

Kaccāyana, all exists: this is one extreme. All does not exist: this is the second extreme. Kaccāyana, without going into these two extremes the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma by the middle [way]: In dependence on ignorance ...

The elision mark stands in place of a full exposition of the twelve links. Burbea (2014: 10) translates the part on the two extremes as follows: “That things exist, O Kaccāyana, is one extreme [of view]. That they do not exist is another” (supplementation found in the original). The Pāli original uses *sabba* here, which means “all,” for which “things” is not an appropriate rendering. I will come back to the significance of accurately translating this term below. Based on his preferred rendering, Burbea (2014: 14) then takes the present passage to imply “[t]he Buddha’s assertion that things are beyond existing and not existing.”

As already pointed out by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 734n29) in a publication included in the bibliography in Burbea (2014: 423), it would be a misunderstanding to take the above passage as countering an identification of things as existing or else as not existing. In support of this assessment, Bhikkhu Bodhi draws attention to another passage in the same *Samyutta-nikāya*, according to which the Buddha asserted both the non-existence of any permanent instance of the five aggregates and the existence of impermanent aggregates.²² The position taken in this discourse implies that existence and non-existence are not dismissed in principle. Instead, they can be put into service to highlight the impermanent nature of the five aggregates.

This in turn places into perspective a conclusion drawn by Burbea (2014: 356), based on his above assessment regarding “the existence and non-existence of things—the two extreme views avoided by the Buddha’s ‘Middle Way’ of emptiness. And if things do not either really exist or really not exist, then an assertion of their impermanence is ultimately untenable.” Yet, perspectives on the importance of impermanence vary considerably in different Buddhist traditions.

For example, the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* promotes a permanent self. A version of this text extant in Chinese considers this position to amount to a second turning of the wheel of Dharma by the Buddha. Whereas the traditionally recognized first turning, which begins with the Buddha an-

nouncing his discovery of the middle way, teaches impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, emptiness, and not self, the second turning promoted in this text rather presents him teaching permanence, (intrinsic) happiness, self, and purity.²³

According to Radich (2015), the Mahāyāna *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra* appears to have provided the setting within which the very notion of *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddhanature emerged. As noted by Jones (2022: 41), “we must take seriously that the development of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* was at least in part the history, and then legacy, of a Buddhist account of the self.” From the viewpoint of a conception of Buddhanature as a permanent self, impermanence would indeed be ultimately untenable.

The situation differs substantially, however, from the viewpoint of Buddhist traditions that take the first turning of the wheel of Dharma as their reference point. In fact, the above Pāli discourse and its parallel precede the assertion of the impermanent aggregates as something that exists with the indication that in this respect the Buddha is in agreement with those in the world who are wise.²⁴ It follows that, at least from the viewpoint of the Pāli discourses and their parallels, a dismissal of impermanence as ultimately untenable would stand little chance of gaining membership in the category of what the Buddha of mainstream Indian Buddhism and the wise agree on.

The early Buddhist notion of dependent arising as a middle way between two extremes can be explored further based on recurrences in other Pāli discourses of the same exposition. One relevant instance takes the form of a brahmin wanting to know if the Buddha affirms that all exists or else that all does not exist,²⁵ which receives the same reply as in the passage translated above. Another instance features a different brahmin who wants to know not only if the Buddha affirms these two positions but also if he affirms that all is unitary or else that all is variegated.²⁶ The two alternatives concerned with unity and its opposite are also two extremes that the Buddha’s middle way of dependent arising avoids.

The implication is clearly not to dismiss that some phenomena may be unitary and others the opposite. In fact, Pāli discourses and their parallels recognize that certain meditation experiences and corresponding cosmological realms are characterized by being unitary. An example occurs in listings of seven stations of consciousness, the fourth of which involves sentient beings whose bodies and perceptions are characterized by unity, namely sentient beings reborn in the celestial realm corresponding to the third absorption.²⁷ Other stations of consciousness in the same list, however, involve having unitary bodies but diverse perceptions, or diverse perceptions and unitary bodies, or even both being diverse.

In other words, what leads to a rejection of the brahmin's proposal is not that characterizing something as unitary or its opposite is problematic as such. Instead, the problem appears to be mistaking any such characterization as reflecting a universally applicable feature. What emerges in this way is that, here as well as with the question of existence and non-existence, the extremes seem to result from turning the respective characterizations into absolutes, where "all" is asserted to be a certain way and not otherwise. This is precisely where Rob Burbea's failure to translate the term *sabba* adequately has led his interpretation of the Pāli discourse astray.

Time

An identification of what exists also features in relation to the topic of time. A Pāli discourse offers the clarification that what is past, what is present, and what is future should be clearly distinguished from each other. This applies to all five aggregates, in the sense that any past instance of an aggregate should be designated as "it was," a present instance as "it is," and a future instance as "it will be." The Pāli term used in relation to the present instance of an aggregate is the same *atthi* as in the formulation of the extreme that "all exists" (*sabbaṃ atthi*), so

that the statement made here on any aggregate in the present could alternatively be translated as “it exists.”

The same Pāli discourse emphasizes that the three pathways of designation it has surveyed will not be rejected by wise renunciants and brahmins. Even those who discard causality and advocate nihilism will not go so far as to reject these three pathways of designation, out of fear of incurring blame and censure.²⁸ In this way, once again the notion of wisdom comes up, here in relation to the idea that a present aggregate “is” or “exists.”

This provides a background for evaluating a discussion of the present moment by Burbea (2014: 347), informed by Nāgārjuna, in the course of which he argues that it “cannot possibly arise *from itself*,” and “it cannot arise from a past moment either, since any past moment must have completely disappeared before the present moment can arise, and if it is totally gone, how can it be said to give rise to anything?” Burbea (2014: 347n1) concludes that, “[w]hen analysed, past and present can have no contact in any way that makes sense.”

The proposed reasoning appears to be based on taking as a premise a rigid definition of the past and the present as totally separate temporal entities. Once the two are approached from the viewpoint of pathways of language employed to characterize dimensions of the continuous experience of changing phenomena, by way of distinguishing between what was and what is, the problem dissolves.

The promoted problematization of time appears to be related to the misunderstanding of dependent arising discussed above, evident when Burbea (2014: 350) states that “all sense of time—of past, of future, and of present—is fabricated by clinging.” Although it is indeed the case that “the sense of time becomes more prominent when there is a greater degree of craving or aversion to something,” it does not follow that *all* sense of time is fabricated by clinging. The Pāli discourse on the three pathways of designation features the Buddha, who is of course by definition free from clinging, quite clearly articulating a sense of time involving past, present, and future.

The notion of time is also relevant to the standard exposition of dependent arising by way of twelve links as the Buddha's middle way approach. From the viewpoint of time, the twelve links condition each other in ways that can either operate simultaneously or else consecutively. For example, contact as a condition for feeling tone involves the former, as the two arise together, but feeling tone as a condition for craving involves the latter, as craving is a reaction to an already arisen feeling tone. Both types of conditioning do not take place apart from time. They only differ in involving either a simultaneous or else a consecutive operation of causality. This contrasts with the assessment by Burbea (2014: 130) that a "very normal tendency of fundamental delusion is to conceive of causality as a process in time." Such a conception seems hardly a matter of delusion.

Once again, the example of the Buddha comes in handy as one who is of course by definition free from delusion. This condition clearly holds when he features as the speaker of the standard exposition of dependent arising. In the final part of this exposition, for example, birth forms the necessary condition for aging and death. Aging and death can only happen to what is born, and that birth must have happened at a prior time. This clearly exemplifies a conception of causality as a process in time.²⁹

This is not to present time as a sort of independent container within which things happen in an invariably linear manner. In fact, the ancient Indian perspective on time combines linear with circular perspectives—the relevance of the latter could be exemplified with the change from day to night to day, etc., or from winter to summer to winter, etc.—and such a circular perspective seems to do better justice to the subjective dimension inherent in our experience of time.

At any rate, causality implies change, as whatever is conditioned is bound to change sooner or later due to its dependence on conditions that are not permanent. Time, in turn, can perhaps be understood as a designation of our experience of change: what has changed (= past), what is changing (=

present), and what will change (= future). In this way, causality can be seen as indeed a process in time, and time in turn as a causal process. This is precisely why time turns out to be empty.

Impermanence

In early Buddhist thought, emptiness stands in a close interrelationship with impermanence. This relationship can conveniently be exemplified with what according to tradition was the Buddha's second sermon delivered to his first five disciples. According to the narrative setting of events surrounding the Buddha's awakening, these five had been his companions during the time when he cultivated ascetic practices. Once he gave up asceticism as not conducive to awakening, they in turn gave up on him, in the belief that he was no longer able to reach awakening.

When the recently-awakened Buddha went to meet these five, they were at first rather reluctant to believe in his claim to have reached awakening.³⁰ However, he was able to dispel their reservations and, during what tradition reckons to have been his first sermon, one of the five attained stream-entry,³¹ whereby the Buddha had successfully set in motion the wheel of Dharma.

The second sermon begins with the Buddha clarifying that none of the five aggregates is truly amenable to control. It is not possible to have bodily form, feeling tones, perceptions, volitional formations, or states of consciousness always be exactly as one would like them to be. After the argument based on a lack of control, the second sermon presents a standard catechism found on many occasions in the Pāli discourses and their parallels. This takes off from the impermanent nature of each aggregate, which implies that each of these is *dukkha*. Both characteristics taken together then make it clear that each aggregate should not be regarded as "this is mine," "this I am," and "this is my self."

The second sermon concludes with the report that all five disciples became arahants,³² which implies that the teaching given on this occasion covers what is needed for progress to a full realization of emptiness, whereby the mind is forever emptied of clinging and attachment.

Since this teaching clearly rests on insight into impermanence, it provides a perspective on the assertion by Burbea (2014: 190) that “the *anicca* practice ... has limits built into it, since through its very view it tends to reinforce a subtle degree of reification.” Burbea (2014: 159) further reasons that “where there is still some unchallenged belief in impermanence (or in permanence) as being ultimately true ... A dimension of freedom that it is possible to know will be inaccessible.”

The proposed perspective appears to be related to the belief that time is necessarily fabricated by clinging, hence the perception of impermanence is assumed to involve some degree of reification, thereby preventing fully realizing freedom. At least as far as Pāli discourses and their parallels are concerned, the fullest possible dimension of freedom through eradication of all defilements rests on the bedrock of insight into impermanence.

The relationship of problematizing impermanence to doing the same in relation to time is also evident when Burbea (2014: 191) refers to “the tendency the *anicca* practice has of reifying and solidifying time and momentary phenomena.” This can then presumably be avoided with the following conclusion by Burbea (2014: 356), drawn by again bringing in various Mahāyāna texts: “The true nature of things is neither permanence nor impermanence.” I will turn to the underlying rationale for this type of reasoning below. Suffice it for now to point out that this conclusion is not generalizable to Buddhist thought in general.

Contemplating the five aggregates from a series of insight perspectives, including impermanence, features in early Buddhist thought not only as the way to reach progressive levels of awakening up to becoming an arahant but also as a practice still undertaken by those who have reached the final

goal.³³ Of course, as the relevant discourse clarifies, nothing further needs to be done by those who have already reached full awakening. Nevertheless, contemplating impermanence and other insight perspectives provides a happy abiding for arahants in the present.

Besides confirming the point made above that arahants still have all five aggregates—otherwise they would hardly be able to contemplate them—this passage shows that in early Buddhist thought there is no point at which insight into impermanence needs to be left behind, instead of which it is relevant from the onset of insight to its full consummation and beyond.

The Tetralemma and Equivocation

The idea, mentioned above, that contemplation of impermanence has limitations and somehow does not fully conform to the standards of emptiness can be explored further based on the following remark in Burbea (2014: 216): “a thing, *if it is really existent*, must be either A or not-A (permanent or impermanent, say) and cannot be both. If some thing is seen to be neither A nor not-A, then this principle implies, decisively, that that thing cannot be inherently existent.”

In other words, the idea appears to be that considering phenomena to be neither permanent nor impermanent serves to counter the assumption of an inherent existence. In fact, Burbea (2014: 217) reasons that “[w]rapped up in our basic perception of phenomena is an intuitive sense that they inherently exist; and this intuitive notion includes the tacit belief that a phenomenon is either A or not-A *in itself*.”

Adopting the notion “neither A nor not-A” can indeed lead to a significant opening of perspective, especially for those who are steeped in a culture influenced by Aristotelian logic and the principle of the excluded middle—*tertium non datur*, “no third [possibility] is given”—according to which a phenomenon must be either A or not-A. Allowing for “neither

A nor not-A” can thus offer substantial help for stepping out of patterns of binary thinking.³⁴

However, this does not imply a necessary relationship to emptiness. The option “neither A nor not-A” is part of the ancient Indian tetralemma mode of thinking, which in addition to recognizing the options of “A” and “not-A” also allows for “both A and not-A” as well as for the notion under discussion, “neither A nor not-A.”

A way of illustrating the tetralemma perspective to those unfamiliar with this mode of thinking can rely on colors. In addition to something being either black (= A) or white (= not-A), it could be grey (= both A and not-A) or else red or blue (= neither A nor not-A).

The Pāli discourses present the tetralemma mode of thinking as being already in vogue before the Buddha and thus not as something specifically related to his teachings. The tetralemma comes up repeatedly as part of a standard questionnaire apparently used regularly in philosophical and religious discussions in ancient India, where the tetralemma concerns the after-death condition of a *tathāgata*, a term used in such contexts to refer to a fully awakened one in general. The positions one may take on this after-death condition are that such a *tathāgata*

- 1) exists,
- 2) does not exist,
- 3) both exists and does not exist,
- 4) neither exists nor does not exist.

This exhaustively covers all the possible positions one may take on this issue.³⁵ The Buddha is on record for refusing to adopt any out of these four. The main problem with these so-called unanswered questions appears to be that they are premised on reified notions, such as in the present case on the idea of a *tathāgata* as involving some type of a self.³⁶ Adopting any of these four positions would grant the mistaken premise, hence the Buddha’s consistent refusal.

The example of the tetralemma on the after-death state of a *tathāgata* shows that the option “neither A nor not-A” can combine with a belief in a self, which is clearly the opposite of an insight into emptiness.

In fact, just advocating “neither A nor not-A” can at times become mere equivocation. The Pāli discourses and their parallel reflect awareness of the adoption of equivocation as a philosophical position in ancient India. According to the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, equivocation was the position taken by Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, one of six well-known teachers at the time of the Buddha. His reported articulation of this position could perhaps somewhat freely be rendered in the following form:³⁷

I neither affirm that it is like this, nor do I affirm that it is like that, nor do I affirm that it is in another way, nor do I affirm that it is not so, nor do I deny that it is not so.

The last two statements resemble “neither A nor not-A.” The above quote recurs in the *Sandaka-sutta*, where it characterizes a confused teacher whom one should better not follow.³⁸ Pointing out this evaluation is not meant to deny that at specific times in the history of Buddhist thought the advocacy of “neither A nor not-A” may have been a meaningful strategy to counter a particular misunderstanding or type of reification. It can also be useful in a practical way, such as when designating neutral feeling as being “neither painful nor pleasant” (*adukkhamasukha*). But it does not follow that in any kind of doctrinal context or historical setting, including the contemporary one, the promotion of “neither A nor not-A” is necessarily related to insight into emptiness.

Take the situation of me writing these words and you, the reader, reading them. The emptiness of this situation does not require us to reformulate it as me neither writing nor not writing these words and you neither reading nor not reading them. Instead, all that is required to serve the cause of emptiness is for us to keep the three characteristics in view—impermanence, *dukkha*, and the absence of a self—and in reliance on that let go of any selfing.

Conclusion

The above survey has brought to light a recurrent tendency toward decontextualized readings.³⁹ The resultant conflation of positions on emptiness taken in different Buddhist traditions at different times and based on different premises and different orientations unfortunately fails to do justice to each of them. This is certainly not to dismiss the possibility of a fruitful dialogue, and in a recently published monograph study I have attempted to relate early *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* to early Buddhist thought (Anālayo 2025). But such a dialogue needs to be based on approaching each tradition on its own terms. Mere conflation risks misrepresenting each of the relevant traditions.

In the present case, the proposed understanding of emptiness, with its all-out focus on countering the notion of an inherent existence, may be a case of mistaking part of the elephant for being the whole animal.⁴⁰ This in turn appears to have resulted in a misinterpretation of the Buddhist mainstream teachings on dependent arising in a way that ultimately denies the existence of liberated beings, as it considers even bare experience to be dependent on clinging. This combines with a failure to recognize the significance of time and impermanence in mainstream Indian Buddhist traditions.

In combination, what emerges in this way undermines the potential of *Seeing That Frees* to serve as a reliable guide to the cultivation of liberating insight aimed at the dissolution of, or a decrease in, *dukkha* in the way this is understood in mainstream Indian Buddhist soteriology.⁴¹ This is highly unfortunate, as due to his extensive experience as a meditation teacher Rob Burbea is able to offer a wealth of useful and significant advice on meditation practices.

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Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
GDhp	<i>Gāndhārī Dharmapada</i>
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
PDhp	<i>Patna Dharmapada</i>
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SHT	Sanskrithandschrift aus den Turfanfunden
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
T	Taishō (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association)
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Thī	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Ud-a	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>
Uv	<i>Udānavarga</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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Notes

¹ My own preferred rendering of *svabhāva* would be as “intrinsic nature,” following the terminological choice of Cox 1995: 12. However, for the sake of easy readability, in this article I will adopt “inherent existence” instead.

² In fact, although the situation in general has been known for quite some time, the specific indications offered in Bronkhorst 2018 were published too late to be possibly taken into account in Burbea 2014.

³ See <https://gaiahouse.co.uk/about/gaia-house-vision/>.

⁴ In the *Sayagyi U Ba Khin Journal* 1991/1998: 118 and 151f, Goenka reports that “[t]his wonderful technique was kept in its pristine purity from generation to generation through a chain of Teachers” and then refers to this “entire chain of teachers from [the] Buddha, the Enlightened One, to Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who maintained this wonderful technique in its original form, thereby permitting me to learn it in its purity.” For a study of the gradual emergence and probable origins of this meditation technique, the so-called body scan, see Anālayo 2024: 150–181.

⁵ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huineng>, the most relevant information being that “20th century scholarship revealed that the story of Huineng’s Buddhist career was likely invented by the monk Heze Shenhui, who claimed to be one of Huineng’s disciples”; for a summary of the present scholarly consensus on the same topic see, e.g., Jorgensen 2019.

⁶ See <https://gaiahouse.co.uk/retreats/about-the-teachers/>.

⁷ See in more detail Anālayo 2021: 108–138 and for a reply to criticism 2023: 61–65.

⁸ See in more detail Anālayo 2025: 42–47.

⁹ See, e.g., Dreyfus 2003.

¹⁰ See von Rospatt 1995: 28.

¹¹ Sn 325. An even broader sense of the term *khana* can be seen in Sn 333, with similar formulations found in Dh 315 and Th 403 and Th 1005. The same type of usage recurs in Indic language parallels to Dh 315; see GDhp 131, Brough 1962/2001: 137, PDhp 201 and 234, Cone 1989: 155 and 164, and Uv 3.14 and 5.17, Bernhard 1965: 123 and 143.

¹² Ud 2.4 at Ud 12,31: *phusanti phassā upadhiṃ paṭicca, nirupadhiṃ kena phuseyyuṃ phassā ti?* The Sanskrit version, Uv 30.51, Bernhard 1965: 406,

similarly reads: *sparśāḥ sprśanti hy upadhiṃ pratītya, niraupadhiṃ kiṃ sparśāḥ sprśeyuḥ?*

¹³ It 44 at It 38,12: *manāpāmanāpaṃ paccanubhoti, sukhadukkhaṃ paṭi-samvediyati*. The relevant part in the similar definition given in T 765 at T XVII 677b6 refers to 好醜, which according to Hirakawa 1997: 342 can serve as a rendering of an Indic equivalent to *manāpāmanāpa*.

¹⁴ Ud 2.4 at Ud 12,29: *sukhadukkhaṃphuṭṭho*.

¹⁵ Ud-a 114,21: *khandhapañcakasaṅkhātāṃ upadhiṃ paṭicca ... yadi hi tumhe akkosādivasena uppaṇṇasukhadukkhaṃ na icchatha, sabbaso nirūpadhi-bhāve yeva yogaṃ kareyyāthā ti anupādisesanibbānadhātuyā gāthaṃ nīṭṭhapesi*.

¹⁶ This holds particularly in the present case, as the commentary is by Dhammapāla and thus even later than Buddhaghosa.

¹⁷ The underlying reasoning seems to be related to the observation by Burbea 2014: 254 that “the very experience of any sensation is revealed to be not at all independent of the way the mind is looking at it.” This is certainly the case, but it does not follow that any sensation or *vedanā* is invariably dependent on craving or clinging, simply because the way the mind is looking at *vedanā* need not be invariably under their influence.

¹⁸ Th 90, Th 120, Th 440, and Thī 106: *pañcakkhandhā pariññātā, tiṭṭhanti chinnamūlakā*.

¹⁹ See de La Vallée Poussin 1913: 269,5.

²⁰ Based on a detailed discussion of evidence relevant to dating Nāgārjuna, Ye 2019: 336 concludes that “300 CE can be considered a reasonable *terminus ante quem* for Nāgārjuna.”

²¹ SN 12.15 at SN II 17,21: *sabbam atthī ti kho, kaccāyana, ayam eko anto. sabbam natthī ti ayam dutiyo anto. ete te, kaccāyana, ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti: avijjāpaccayā ...*; the parallels in Chung and Fukita 2020: 168,13 (19.8) and SĀ 301 at T II 85c28 do not have a counterpart to the *sabba* statements, as here the two extremes refer to the prior statements on the untenability of affirming the world’s existence or non-existence. The same difference applies to a quote from the present exposition in SN 22.90 at SN III 135,12 and its parallel SĀ 262 at T II 67a4. Since the term “world” (*loka*/世間) can function as a reference to the totality of experience in early Buddhist literature (see, e.g., SN 35.68 at SN IV 39,28 and its parallel SĀ 230 at T II 56a26), which fits the present context, this interesting difference does not seem to result in a substantially different perspective.

²² SN 22.94 at SN III 139,1; the parallel SĀ 37 at T II 8b19 adopts the opposite sequence by first asserting the existence of impermanent aggregates and then the non-existence of permanent aggregates.

²³ T 374 at T XII 448a2.

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²⁴ SN 22.94 at SN III 138,31: *yaṃ, bhikkhave, atthi sammataṃ loke pañ-
ditānaṃ, aham pi taṃ atthī ti vadāmi*, with a similar formulation in the
parallel SĀ 37 at T II 8b18: 世間智者言有, 我亦言有.

²⁵ SN 12.47 at SN II 76,23.

²⁶ SN 12.48 at SN II 77,13. In the case of the present discourse and the
preceding one, no parallels appear to be known.

²⁷ See, e.g., AN 7.41 at AN IV 40,7 and its parallel EĀ 39.5 at T II 730c26.

²⁸ SN 22.62 at SN III 73,1; no parallel appears to be known of this discourse.

²⁹ Even the reciprocal conditioning between consciousness and name-and-
form is not exempt from the operation of causality in time, evident when
the *Mahānidāna-sutta* and its parallels list several problems that may occur
to consciousness at the time of conception, which will impact the continuity
of name-and-form; see DN 15 at DN II 63,2, DĀ 13 at T I 61b9, T 14 at T
I 243b18, MĀ 97 at T I 579c17, and T 52 at T I 845b6.

³⁰ MN 26 at MN I 172,7, MĀ 204 at T I 777c19, and EĀ 24.5 at T II 619a3.

³¹ SN 56.11 at SN V 423,13; for a comparative study of the parallels see
Anālayo 2012 and 2013.

³² SN 22.59 at SN III 68,27 (= Vin I 14,34), Allon 2020: 221, SĀ 34 at T II
8a2, T 102 at T II 499c26, T 190 at T III 813c2, the *Catuṣpariṣat-sūtra*,
Waldschmidt 1957: 170 (15.19), the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T
XXII 789b1, the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 105a24, and the
Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, Gnoli 1977: 139,14 and T 1450 at T XXIV
128c10. In the *Mahāvastu* version, the teaching proceeds directly from the
lack of control to contemplation of each aggregate as not mine, not I, and
not my self; another difference is the outcome, as only Kauṇḍinya becomes
an arhat, whereas the other four just reach stream-entry; see Marciniak
2019: 429,16 or Senart 1897: 337,3. An immediate follow-up teaching that
corresponds to the standard catechism taking off from impermanence then
leads the other four to becoming arhats; see Marciniak 2019: 431,18 or
Senart 1897: 338,19. Note that in the *Mahāvastu* the four are thus still
worldlings until the onset of the second sermon, whereas according to Spk
II 278,14 they had by this time attained stream-entry.

³³ SN 22.122 at SN III 169,1, SHT IV 30e R6, Sander and Waldschmidt
1980: 85, and SĀ 259 at T II 65c10.

³⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2022.

³⁵ Priest 2010: 27 conveniently articulates this by stating that in early
Buddhist thought the tetralemma “functioned as something like a Principle
of the Excluded Fifth. Aristotle held a principle of the Excluded Third: any
statement must be either true or false; there is no third possibility; more-
over, the two are exclusive. In a similar but more generous way, the *catus-
koti* [= tetralemma] gives us an exhaustive and mutually exclusive set of
four possibilities.”

³⁶ SN 41.3 at SN IV 287,6 indicates that various views, including the
tetralemma on the *tathāgata* after death, depend on *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* and thus

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on a belief in a self; the parallel SĀ 570 at T II 151a20 takes a similar position, although without explicitly listing the tetralemma.

³⁷ DN 2 at DN I 58,26: *evam pi me no, tathā ti pi me no, aññathā ti pi me no, no ti pi me no, no no ti pi me no ti* (my translation follows the sixth *saṅgīti* edition, which has the quotative *iti* also for the first item in the list, i.e., *evan ti pi me no*, in line with the remaining four items). For comparative surveys of what position the parallels to DN 2 attribute to which of the six teachers see Bapat 1948: 109–112, Basham 1951: 21–23, Vogel 1970, Meisig 1987: 124–169, and MacQueen 1988: 148–168.

³⁸ MN 76 at MN I 521,2.

³⁹ This is not meant to convey the impression that contextualization has been disregarded in principle. For example, Burbea 2014: 407 contextualizes teachings on the need to transcend even notions of emptiness. The point is only that the same strategy has unfortunately not been applied consistently.

⁴⁰ On the parable of blind men touching parts of an elephant and mistaking that to be an exhaustive account of the whole elephant see, e.g., Ud 6.4 at Ud 68,3, DĀ 30 at T I 128c11, T 23 at T I 289c17, T 152 at T III 50c22, T 198 at T IV 178b6, T 768 at T XVII 704c7, and T 1592 at T XXXI 98c16. A reference to this parable occurs also in the *Vimuttimaggā*, T 1648 at T XXXII 448a10.

⁴¹ The task Burbea 2014: 29 assigns to insight is to issue in “any realization, understanding, or a way of seeing things that brings, to any degree, a dissolution of, or a decrease in, *dukkha*.” Although he does not specify what particular Buddhist tradition or perspective he has in mind, the use of Pāli terminology gives the impression that his formulation should be considered relevant to an early Buddhist or Theravāda framework.