

# The Rise of the Concept of ‘Own-Nature’ (*Sabhāva*) in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*

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July 2003

## *I. The development of the Abhidhamma*

The Buddha’s teaching, as it is recorded in the first basket of the Pali Canon, the *Sutta-piṭaka*, is presented as the path leading to the solution of the fundamental problem of human existence, namely, *dukkha*, customarily translated as ‘suffering’. The Buddha’s message contains doctrinal concepts and theoretical statements on the nature of suffering, its cause and the way to its cessation, but these are merely guidelines for making sense of Buddhist thought and do not amount to a systematic theory. The attempt to supply the Buddhist mindset with such a theory was introduced later on, with the advance of the Abhidhamma (*abhidhamma* meaning a discipline whose subject matter is the *Dhamma*, the teaching, or higher/further teaching). The Abhidhamma is a doctrinal, exegetical movement that gradually developed in tandem with distinctive theoretical and practical interests. These eventually resulted in an independent branch of inquiry and literary genre documented in the third basket of the Pali Canon, the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. The Abhidhamma attempts to spell out the Buddha’s *Dhamma* fully, to describe its underlying structure in ultimate terms that apply under all circumstances; that is, to establish Buddhist thought as a comprehensive philosophy.

Seeking to explain the dynamics of sentient life in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, the Buddha taught that to understand this repetitive experience is to see reality as it truly is: not a container of entities and ‘things’, but an assemblage of interlocking physical and mental processes that arise and cease subject to multifarious conditions. Having rejected the notions of a metaphysical substance and an enduring self, he analysed human experience in terms of conceptual and physical identity (*nāma-rūpa*), in terms of the five aggregates (*khandha*), in terms of the twelve sense spheres (*āyatana*) and in terms of the eighteen elements of perception (*dhātu*) – modes of analysis that are based on a conception of phenomenal experience as a series of dynamic processes. Consider the following partial list of phenomena the Buddha discusses: greed, hatred, delusion, ignorance, grasping, craving, sense perception, becoming, ageing, concentration, non-attachment, dispassion, equanimity, tranquillity, trust, gladness, liberation-by-insight. Although these may all be referred to as ‘things’ in the broadest, non-technical sense, they are not substances. Rather, they are *dhammas*, conditioned physical and mental processes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Gombrich (1996), pp. 34–37 & 43–47; Hamilton (1996), e.g., pp. 149–151, 169–170 & 194–196.

Within the Abhidhamma framework the notion of the plurality of *dhammas* becomes the basis of a complex theory of human experience. In the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* the plural form *dhammas* predominantly refers to the objects of mind-consciousness, *manoviññāna*, the primary cognitive operation within the process of perceptual discrimination.<sup>2</sup> *Dhammas* are here psychophysical occurrences, or rather acts of conceptualisation by which the mind unites and assimilates sense data and ideas to a cognitive whole that makes sense. Their character is determined by the contact between the relevant unimpaired sense organ, its respective sense object and appropriate attention on the part of the mind. These psychophysical occurrences – the product of our cognitive apparatus – constitute our experience as presented in consciousness. Hence *dhammas* here designate the constituents of experience as taught by the Buddha, and in this sense the elements that make up one's world. Whereas the *Nikāyas* depict the *dhamma*-occurrences as ongoing sequential processes, the Abhidhamma portrays them as psychophysical events: short-lived, interlocking complexes of phenomena that undergo recurring phases of rise and cessation and that are made up of appropriate consciousness-types (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*) and certain groups of material phenomena (*rūpa*). Later on, and clearly in the post-canonical literature, these events are construed more radically as momentary (*khaṇika*).<sup>3</sup> For the Abhidhammikas *dhammas* are flashes of experience that make up world-creating processes; the irreducible elements of encountered phenomena and the final items revealed when the analysis of conscious experience is pursued to its ultimate limit. In contradistinction to the *suttas*' listings of doctrinal concepts, the Abhidhamma analysis of human experience into *dhammas* results in a systematic structure by which every topic of the Buddha's teachings is dissected and explained in relation to all other topics. The comprehensive theory resultant from this enterprise of analysis and synthesis was fixed in the post-canonical texts and is referred to by modern scholars as 'the *dhamma* theory'.

Throughout the Abhidhamma's formative period Buddhist thought was subject to a gradual process of institutionalisation, schematisation and conceptual assimilation. Fundamental to this doctrinal development is the concept of *sabhāva* (Skt. *svabhāva*), which we may provisionally translate as 'own-nature'. This concept plays a major role in the systematisation of Abhidhamma thought, is bound up with the rise of the *dhamma* theory and its ancillary doctrines of momentariness and atomism, and is regarded as that which gave an impetus to the Abhidhamma's growing concern with ontology. To judge from the *suttas*, the term *sabhāva* was never employed by the Buddha and it is rare in the Pali Canon in general. Only in the post-canonical period does it become a standard concept, when it is extensively used in the commentarial descriptions of the *dhammas* and in the sub-commentarial exegesis.<sup>4</sup> The term *sabhāva*, though, does occur on various occasions in five canonical or para-canonical texts: the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Peṭakopadesa*, the *Nettipakaraṇa*, the *Milindapañha* and the *Buddhavaṃsa*. Although these texts are generally considered as late additions to the Canon, they may at least contain parts that predate the latest works of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* and that are certainly older than the main Pali commentaries.<sup>5</sup> By

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Dhs 132, 229 & 178; Vibh 10, 14–15, 54, 60–62; Dhātuk 7–8, 34, 41, 63; Kv 12ff, 19–20, 67.

<sup>3</sup> See Cousins (1995), s.v. *Abhidhamma*; Kim (1999); von Rospatt (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Warder (1997), Introduction to the Paṭis trans., p. xvii; Ñāṇamoli (1991), Vism trans., n. 68 on Vism II 178, p. 789.

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Buddhavaṃsa* are included in the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, but the latter remained open for additions and the actual number of texts contained in it is not uniform across the

examining the meaning of the concept of *sabhāva* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the present article shows how this transitional text sheds light on the doctrinal development of the Theravādin Abhidhamma during its formative period.

## II. Some remarks on the chronology and framework of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*

Albeit included in the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is clearly a work of the Abhidhamma.<sup>6</sup> Erich Frauwallner explains the absence of this treatise from the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* as due to its being the latest of the Abhidhamma works, and dates it to a time when the compilation of the Canon had essentially been completed.<sup>7</sup> A conceptual mapping of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, though, suggests that at least parts of the text are earlier than the main body of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. If so then this early textual layer belongs to and may shed light on the formative period of the Abhidhamma and its doctrinal move away from the Nikāya thought-world. To settle this hypothesis we should briefly deal with the *Paṭisambhidāmagga's* method.

Translated as *The Path of Discrimination*,<sup>8</sup> the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is a treatise whose purpose is to expound the actual way by which one comes to discriminate and comprehend the Buddha's teachings. This type of discrimination (*paṭisambhidā*) has four aspects. The first aspect is the discrimination of *dhammas*: *dhammas* in this context refer to the principles or elements constituting human experience, such as eye, knowledge or recognition, but also to such items as the four noble truths, the five faculties and five powers, the seven factors of awakening or the eight factors of the path. These are taken in the sense of objects of thought, and testify to what Gombrich has identified as a movement from thinking *about* the Buddha's teachings to thinking *with* them, thus seeing the world through Buddhist spectacles, as it were.<sup>9</sup> The second aspect is the discrimination of the *dhammas' attha*. *Attha* here signifies the *dhammas'* operation or function, for the enumerated *atthas* are those of establishment (*upaṭṭhānattho*), of investigating (*pavicayattho*), of calm (*upasamattho*), of non-distraction (*avikkhepattho*), and others, all with reference to their corresponding *dhammas*.<sup>10</sup> The discrimination of *attha*, then, concerns what the *dhammas* do and how they act – an aspect fit for the process-oriented construal of the *dhammas* as dynamic occurrences. The third aspect is the discrimination of the language (*nirutti*) expressing the *dhammas* and their *atthas*, and the fourth is the discrimination of perspicuity or penetration (*paṭibhāna*). The latter is 'meta-knowledge', namely, the apprehension of instances of the first three kinds of discrimination, which are regarded as its supporting object (*ārammaṇa*) and its domain (*gocara*). Discrimination of penetration, then, is the knowledge of the differences between the various types of *dhamma*, their functions and the language in which they are articulated.<sup>11</sup>

Theravādin countries. See von Hinüber (1997), pp. 42, 59–60 & 76; Lamotte (1976), pp. 158–159.

<sup>6</sup> Frauwallner (1995), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Id., pp. 42 & 87.

<sup>8</sup> Nāṇamoli (1997).

<sup>9</sup> (1996), p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> When employing the word *attha* I follow the convention that the cerebral form *aṭṭha* is used mainly in compounds, very frequently at the end of a compound, though there are also instances where it occurs at the beginning of a compound, such as *aṭṭhakathā*. CPED, s.v. *aṭṭha*.

<sup>11</sup> Paṭis I 88–91, esp. 88: *dhammanānante paññā dhammapaṭisambhīde nāṇaṃ [...] atthanānante paññā atthapaṭisambhīde nāṇaṃ [...] niruttinānante paññā niruttiapaṭisambhīde nāṇaṃ [...] aññāni dhammesu nāṇāni,*

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* presents a practice based on the coupling of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*), which is made possible when the practitioner gains such fourfold discrimination of the nature of reality as taught by the Buddha. The move away from the *suttas* is evinced by the attempt to provide a more systematic and all-embracing account of this path than previously supplied by the Buddha's scattered descriptions on various occasions. To this end, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* distinguishes and discusses the prior doctrinal concepts in their manifold aspects. Commenting on this method, Frauwallner opines that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* differs from the older Abhidhamma works in that 'several "excrescences" of the "method" which are so unpleasantly obtrusive in the old Abhidharma are missing here.'<sup>12</sup> May it not be the case, however, that the reason for the loose systematic structure of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is that major parts of it overlap with, or perhaps even predate, the main body of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*?

First, to judge from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s method of explaining the *dhammas*, the work is considerably prior to the Aṭṭhakathā period.<sup>13</sup> In the commentaries the method of explaining the *dhammas* is based on a fourfold scheme of stating the distinguishing characteristic (*lakkhana*), manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*), immediate cause (*padatṭhāna*) and function (*rasa* in a special technical sense) peculiar to each *dhamma*. Concentration (*samādhi*), for example, which is equated with one-pointedness of mind, is assigned the characteristic of non-scattering or non-distractedness, the function of combining co-nascent *dhammas*, the manifestation of calm or knowledge and being the immediate cause of happiness.<sup>14</sup> Thus, each *dhamma* is defined by means of a particular characteristic peculiar to itself, in addition to the *ti-saṅkhata-lakkhana* shared by all conditioned phenomena, namely, *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, though, the method of explaining the *dhammas* consists in stating their *atthas*, following the second of the four discriminations.<sup>15</sup> The *lakkhana*s of the *dhammas* are, indeed, brought forward, yet they do not refer to the actuality of these *dhammas* as entities of any sort, nor to particular, distinguishing features peculiar to each and every *dhamma*. Rather, they signify the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness

*aññāni atthesu ñāṇāni, aññāni niruttisu ñāṇāni. yena ñāṇena ime nānā ñāṇā nātā, ten'eva ñāṇena ime nānā ñāṇā paṭividditā ti. tena vuccati paṭibhānanānante paññā paṭibhānapaṭisambhide ñāṇaṃ.* Also II 149–158, esp. 150: *pañcasu dhammesu ñāṇāni, pañcasu atthesu ñāṇāni, dasasu niruttisu ñāṇāni. imāni vīsati ñāṇāni paṭibhānapaṭisambhidāya ārammaṇā c'eva honti gocarā ca. ye tassā ārammaṇā te tassā gocarā. ye tassā gocarā te tassā ārammaṇā. tena vuccati paṭibhānesu ñāṇaṃ paṭibhānapaṭisambhidā.* It is worth noting that the same four types of discrimination are also discussed in the *Vibhaṅga* 293–305 (chapter XV), but the latter portrays the discriminations of *dhammas* and *attha* differently from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*.

<sup>12</sup> Frauwallner (1995), p. 88. Among the missing 'excrescences' mentioned are 'the excessively extended' *mātikās* and 'the endless stringing together of all the different combinations of elements which hardly say anything about the nature of things'.

<sup>13</sup> Von Hinüber (1978), pp. 49 & 57, distinguishes three periods in the history of Pali literature: 1) the Aluvihāra (or Ālokavihāra) council (29–17 BCE), where the Pali Canon was written down for the first time in Ceylon, which he considers as the starting point of the tradition handed down by the monks of the Mahāvihāra; 2) the Aṭṭhakathā; 3) the *ṛikās*. The original commentaries were put into Old Sinhalese and the period of their composition ended in the first century CE. See Wārder (1970), pp. 321–22; Lamotte (1976), pp. 292–95; Adikaram (1946), pp. 2 & 33ff.

<sup>14</sup> Dhs-a 118–119: *ayaṃ cittassekaggatāsāṅkhāto samādhi nāma avisāralakkhaṇo vā avikkhepalakkhaṇo vā, sahaṅgādharmānaṃ sampiṇḍanaraso, upasamapaccupaṭṭhāno ñāṇapaccupaṭṭhāno vā [...] vīsato sukkaṇḍapaṭṭhāno.* Also 63, 137–38, 193 & 332; Vism I 20. The threefold scheme of stating the characteristic, manifestation and immediate cause of each *dhamma* is anticipated in the *Peṭ* 128–130.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., *Paṭis* I 15ff.

and insubstantiality of the *dhammas* in their totality, as well as the rise, fall and change which they all have in common. For instance, the term *lakkhaṇa* is repeatedly employed throughout Chapter Six of Treatise I in the first division of the text, which deals with the knowledge of the rise and fall (*udaya-bbaya-ñāṇa*) of *dhammas*. There it is stated of each of the five *khandhas*, which are qualified as presently-arisen (*paccuppanna*) and as born (*jāta*), that the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of its generation is rise whereas the characteristic of its change is fall.<sup>16</sup> Further on, in Treatise XII of the second division, which concerns the four noble truths, we also find an extensive usage of the term *lakkhaṇa*. It is there stated that the four truths have two *lakkhaṇas*: the conditioned (*saṅkhata*) and the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). The conditioned are, in their turn, qualified by the marks of rise (*uppāda*), fall (*vaya*) and change of what is present (*thitassa aññathatta*). In the case of the unconditioned it is said that no such marks are discerned.<sup>17</sup> *Lakkhaṇas* as the *dhammas*' characteristics are but concepts referring to the common features of the conditioned *dhammas* in their totality rather than to the individuality or actual existence of any given *dhamma*. The idea of *lakkhaṇa* thus falls short of being either an epistemological determinant ascertaining the discernibility of a *dhamma*'s particular nature or an ontological determinant attesting to a *dhamma*'s existential status.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is not of one piece and is probably not all of the same date. Like the other canonical Abhidhamma works, it is likely to have grown by expansion of its *mātikās* and presupposes much of the *Sutta-piṭaka* – in fact, its first part is based on the *Dasuttara-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.<sup>18</sup> It seems that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* presupposes the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, for it is acquainted with the latter's analysis by 'planes' (*avacaras*) and with its first triplet (I 83–85), and occasionally quotes descriptions or definitions from it.<sup>19</sup> Yet the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* generally manifests a lesser degree of systematisation in its *dhamma* categorisation compared to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and is not aware of the latter's elaborate triplet-couplet *mātikā*.<sup>20</sup> It may thus be the case that the two texts originated from a common source around the same time. Warder has indeed suggested that 'a substantial part of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* may have been elaborated in the same period of the composition of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, parallel to it and using some of its contents in an earlier form.'<sup>21</sup>

In support of dating the text to as early as the third century BCE, Warder adduces the text's view of the nature of insight (*abhisamaya*). The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* bespeaks the Theravādin idea that the penetration of the four noble truths in the path moments occurs

<sup>16</sup> Id., I 54: *jātaṃ rūpaṃ paccuppannaṃ, tassa nibbatilakkhaṇaṃ udayo, vipariṇāma-lakkhaṇaṃ vayo. jātā vedanā . . . pe . . . jātā saññā . . . jātā saṅkhārā . . . jātaṃ viññānaṃ*. See also I 167 & 191–192.

<sup>17</sup> Id., II 108: *saccānaṃ kati lakkhaṇāni? saccānaṃ dve lakkhaṇāni. saṅkhatalakkhaṇaṃ ca, asaṅkhatalakkhaṇaṃ ca – saccānaṃ imāni dve lakkhaṇāni. saccānaṃ kati lakkhaṇāni? saccānaṃ cha lakkhaṇāni. saṅkhatānaṃ saccānaṃ uppādo paññāyati, vayo paññāyati, thitānaṃ aññathattaṃ paññāyati asaṅkhatassa saccassa na uppādo paññāyati, na vayo paññāyati, na thitassa aññathattaṃ paññāyati – saccānaṃ imāni cha lakkhaṇāni*. See also II 179. A notable example of the Abhidhamma's growing tendency to reify and hypostatise the *dhammas* is the occurrence of the concept of *thitassa aññathatta*. A discussion of this concept, however, transcends the scope of the present article.

<sup>18</sup> Warder (1997), Introduction to the *Paṭis* trans., pp. xxix–xxx.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Treatises I and III, *Paṭis* I 119 on the knowledge of *dukkha*; 186–188 on the knowledge of joy (*pīti*) and happiness (*sukka*); 190–191 on *citta* and *samādhi*. These definitions appear in Dhs 16 & 9–11 respectively. See Warder, id., pp. xxvi.

<sup>20</sup> It employs only the first triplet of *kusala/akusala/avyākata*, which is very ancient: *Paṭis* I 84–85. See also Warder, id., p. xxxv.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

as a sudden flash of intuition, a single breakthrough to knowledge (*ekābhisamaya*), rather than as separate intuitions of each truth.<sup>22</sup> The idea of a spontaneous insight arose in the wake of the Sarvāstivāda schism and is propounded for the first time in the *Kathāvatthu*. This supports the impression that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* was composed during the period of the great doctrinal divisions as a summation setting out the doctrines accepted by the Theravāda, perhaps as a positive counterpart to the *Kathāvatthu*.<sup>23</sup> Cousins also notes that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is certainly a work of the period of the first doctrinal split related to the Second Council of Vesālī.<sup>24</sup> On the basis of all these pieces of evidence the suggestion that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* may have been composed during the period of the doctrinal divisions among the ancient schools – a period that witnessed the formation of the Abhidhamma – is more convincing than the claim that this text is the latest of the Abhidhamma works.

Nevertheless, while this suggestion applies mainly to the first division of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, some parts of the second division are probably later than the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*. These introduce several concepts that are not to be found in the latter, and hence the last major stage of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s composition is likely to have taken place in the early or mid second century BCE, with only minor later additions.<sup>25</sup> The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is therefore a transitional text residing somewhere in between the *suttas* and the *Aṭṭhakathā*. It introduces new concepts and ideas that depart from the Nikāya outlook, while at the same time its method of explaining these concepts and ideas is not yet as crystallised as that of the commentaries, and the ideas themselves are not fully worked out, or indeed are still latent. One such concept that belongs to the textual layer posterior to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is *sabhāva*. The third and final section examines the meaning of *sabhāva* in this text and concludes with some remarks on the implication of this concept for the alleged Abhidhamma ontology.

### III. What is *sabhāva* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*?

The term *sabhāva* features at the end of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s second division in Treatise XX, which deals with emptiness (*suññam*) (pp. 177–183). The treatise opens with a Sutta-quotation style ('Thus have I heard'), describing an occasion on which Ānanda, referring to the supposed claim 'The world is empty' (*suñño loko ti*), asks the Buddha to explain in what way it is so. In reply, the Buddha affirms the validity of that claim on the grounds that the world 'is empty of self or of what belongs to self.'<sup>26</sup> He then expounds what exactly it is that is empty of self or of what belongs to self, enumerating the six sense

<sup>22</sup> Paṭis I 94–96, where the attainment of arahantship is described as the result of 'immediate concentration' (*ānantarikasamādhī*); II 105 depicts the four noble truths as having 'a single penetration' (*cattāri saccāni ekappaṭivedhāni*). See also Cousins (1983-84), p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Kv II 9 & III 3–4. Warder (1997), Paṭis trans pp. xxv & xxxv; (1970), pp. 295–296.

<sup>24</sup> (1991), p. 39, n. 53. Gombrich (1992), pp. 246 & 258–259, deduced on the basis of the *Dīpavaṃsa*'s ordination data that the Buddha's death took place within five or six years of 404 BCE and that the Second Council dates round 60 years after his death, that is, round 345 BCE. Cousins reaches a slightly different dating, placing the Buddha's death in 413 BCE and the Second Council 70–80 years later, namely between 343 and 333 BCE (id., pp. 31 & 59). Norman (1983), p. 88, notes that the Paṭis is included on the list of texts stated by the *Dīpavaṃsa* to have been rejected by the Mahāsāṅghikas (Dīp V 37), and that it was likely to be recognised as canonical before the composition of the *Apadāna*, *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpīṭaka* and *Khuddakapāṭha*.

<sup>25</sup> Warder (1997), Paṭis trans, pp. xxxv & xxxvii–xxxix.

<sup>26</sup> Paṭis II 177: *yaṃ mā kho, ānanda, suññam attena vā attaniyena vā, tasmā 'suñño loko' ti vuccati.*

spheres (*sadāyatana*) along with their appropriate sense objects, that is, the twelve *āyatana*s, adding their six respective types of consciousness that arise from the contact between the sense organs and their objects, thus forming together the eighteen *dhātus* or elements of perception. Included in the above list is also whatever feeling arises from the contact between the sense organs and their objects, whether pleasant, painful or neither.<sup>27</sup> Bear in mind that the twelve *āyatana*s and the eighteen *dhātus*, along with the five *khandhas*, represent three methods of classifying the totality of *dhammas* that make up all conditioned phenomena; three modes of analysing human experience.

At this stage the Buddha lists various types of emptiness, one of which is emptiness by change (*vipariṇāma-suññam*). To the question ‘What is emptiness by change?’ his reply is:

Born materiality is empty of *sabhāva* (*sabhāvena suññam*); disappeared materiality is both changed and empty. Born feeling is empty of *sabhāva*; disappeared feeling is both changed and empty. . . Born apperception. . . Born volitions. . . Born consciousness. . . Born becoming is empty of *sabhāva*; disappeared becoming is both changed and empty. This is emptiness by change.<sup>28</sup>

Obviously the entire meaning of this excerpt depends on how the phrase *sabhāvena suññam* is interpreted. Taking into account the context, namely, expounding the predication of the world by the term ‘empty’, and which *dhammas* are listed in the above *mātikā*, this extract means that the totality of human experience is devoid of an enduring substance or of anything which belongs to such a substance, because this totality is dependent on many and various conditions, and is of the *nature* of being subject to a continuous process of origination and dissolution. It should be noted that the passage deals with the totality of *dhammas* and with classes of them as they work together, not with each and every single *dhamma* separately. Inasmuch as the issue at stake is the *dhammas* in their totality and their being subject to constant change, it is close in spirit to the teaching of impermanence as expressed in the *Nikāyas*.<sup>29</sup> There it is frequently repeated that impermanent, conditioned phenomena are of the nature of origination and decay, whereby the word employed to denote this nature is *dhamma*.<sup>30</sup> In this context, then, the term *sabhāva* is interchangeable with *dhamma* in its sense of ‘nature’.

This sense may be taken as roughly corresponding to the non-technical and broad meaning of *pakati*. In the Pali texts *pakati*, the Pali equivalent of the Sanskrit *prakṛti*,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid: *cakkhu kho, ānanda, suññam attena vā attaniyena vā. rūpā suññā attena vā attaniyena vā. cakkhuvīññānaṃ suññam attena vā attaniyena vā. cakkhusamphasso suñño attena vā attaniyena vā. yam p’ idam cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitam sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā, tam pi suññam attena vā attaniyena vā. sotaṃ suññam . . . pe . . . saddā suññā . . . ghānaṃ suññam . . . gandhā suññā . . . jivhā suññā . . . rasā suññā . . . kāyo suñño . . . phoṭṭhabbā suññā . . . mano suñño . . . dhammā suññā . . . manovīññānaṃ suññam . . . manosamphasso suñño. yam p’ idam manosamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitam sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā, tam pi suññam attena vā attaniyena vā.* This entire extract appears at S IV 54.

<sup>28</sup> Paṭi II 178: *katamaṃ vipariṇāmasuññam? jātaṃ rūpaṃ sabhāvena suññam. vigaṭaṃ rūpaṃ vipariṇataṃ c’ eva suññaṃ ca. jātaṃ vedanā sabhāvena suññā. vigaṭā vedanā vipariṇatā c’ eva suññaṃ ca . . . pe . . . jātaṃ sañkhārā . . . jātaṃ viññānaṃ . . . jātaṃ cakkhu . . . pe . . . jāto bhavo sabhāvena suñño. vigaṭo bhavo vipariṇato c’ eva suñño ca. idam vipariṇāmasuññam.* The five *khandhas* are followed by the sense organs and their corresponding objects, the six respective types of consciousness and so forth, concluding with the *paṭiccasamuppāda* twelvefold formula. Succeeding consciousness are 199 of the 201 *dhammas* listed in Treatise I 5–8, excluding the last two *nidānas* of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula.

<sup>29</sup> And as represented by the formula *sabbe sañkhārā aniccā*.

<sup>30</sup> D II 157; S I 6, 158; S II 193: *aniccā vata sañkhārā, uppāda-vaya-dhammino*. The Buddha’s last words on his deathbed are: ‘conditioned things are of the nature of decay’ (*vaya-dhammā sañkhārā*, D II 156).

is not a technical philosophical term and, unlike in the Sāṃkhya-Yoga, it has a limited metaphysical bearing. *Pakati* denotes the regularity with which things normally occur in nature: the normal custom or innate predispositions of persons, the order of occurrences in the environment and that which is common to all or shared by all. For instance, *pakati* is employed with reference to the innate character – virtuous or bad – of people, to the inborn capacities of sense perception or the natural strength of the body; when a habit has become so natural that one performs it automatically and effortlessly, or when it is raining during the rainy season. In this respect the Pali usage of *pakati* is similar to the meaning of the term *dhammatā*, namely, the regular orderliness of the encountered world. The word *dhammatā* is used in the *suttas* to denote events which are natural, normal and regular, such as the flowing of water, the blowing of wind or the behaviour of a monk endowed with right view. These events should not be understood as occurring because of *dhammatā*; rather their happening is itself *dhammatā*. In the commentaries, this sense of *dhammatā* – which has no metaphysical or ontological bearing – is equated with *sabhāva* as ‘nature’ and with *niyāma* as the ‘order of things’.<sup>31</sup>

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, then, endorses a broad notion of *sabhāva* as an essential nature that the *dhammas* share, but it is by no means clear that this nature necessarily defines what a *dhamma* is, or that a *dhamma* exists by virtue of this nature which it possesses.<sup>32</sup> Nor is the relation between *lakkhaṇa*, *sabhāva* and *dhamma* spelled out: nowhere is it stated that a *dhamma* is defined, identified or exists by its *sabhāva*; or that it is marked by a set of *lakkhaṇas* or by any single unique *lakkhaṇa*; or that a *dhamma*’s *sabhāva* is to be identified in any way with its set of *lakkhaṇas*, or yet again that the latter is possessed by or constitutes those *sabhāva* and *dhamma*. The text merely presents the Buddha as saying that things have no particular nature, *sabhāva*, in a way that parallels his saying that they have no self, *attā* – for instance, in the *Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta* at S III 66ff as later interpreted with *anattā* taken as a *bahuvrīhi*. This suggests that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s author is simply showing that this basic point applies equally when one uses the brahminical term *svabhāva*. As *ātman*, too, was a brahminical term, history is more or less repeating itself.<sup>33</sup>

That this notion of *sabhāva* represents a shifting point between the Sutta and the Aṭṭhakathā periods and does not yet carry the technical sense attached to it in the commentaries is shown by comparing the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* with its exegesis in Mahānāma’s Commentary, the *Saddhammappakāsinī*, (6th century CE). In his commentary Mahānāma seeks to present the text as a systematic exposition of the way to arahantship. In doing so, he draws heavily on the *Visuddhimagga* and his exegesis is often laden with metaphysical implications that exceed the laconic, aphoristic account of the original text.<sup>34</sup> Mahānāma initially analyses the compound *sabhāva* as *sayam bhāvo*, or *sako bhāvo*, that is, ‘essence by itself’ or ‘essence of itself’, explaining this to mean ‘arising by itself’ (*sayam eva uppādo*) or ‘own-arising’ (*attano yeva uppādo*). Given this interpretation, to translate *bhāvo* as ‘nature’

<sup>31</sup> This sense of *dhammatā* occurs in D II 12ff; M I 324. Both commentaries gloss *dhammatā* as *sabhāva*: Sv II 432 & Ps II 401 respectively. On the meaning of *dhammatā* and its sense of *sabhāva* see Rahula (1974), pp. 182–184. For *pakati* in the sense of the innate nature of the person or of a normal, ordained monk as distinct from one who is on probation: Vin II 4–6, 22–25, 173–175, 178; intrinsically virtuous nature: D II 12, M III 120, Nett 191; natural law or the regular order in nature: Mil 120–121. On the meaning of *pakati* in the Pali texts see Jacobsen (1993), esp. pp. 78, 80–81 & 83–85.

<sup>32</sup> As is the case in the *Dhammasaṅgani*. Cf. Gethin (1992), p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> This idea was suggested to me by Richard Gombrich.

<sup>34</sup> Warder (1997), Introduction to the *Paṭis* trans., p. xlii.

is inappropriate, for the commentator points to the narrower and more technical sense of essence.<sup>35</sup> Mahānāma then turns to an explication of the coupling *sabhāvena suññam*. First, he states that essence, *bhāva*, is but a figurative designation for *dhamma*, and since each single *dhamma* does not have any other *dhamma* called ‘essence’, it is empty of essence other than itself. This, in fact, reveals a different analysis of *sabhāva*, as ‘the essence that it has of itself’ (*sakassa bhāvo*). It thus follows that every single *dhamma* has a single ‘essence-hood’ (*ekassabhāvatā*).<sup>36</sup>

In ordinary language the term ‘essence’ is often employed synonymously with ‘nature’, but there is a significant difference between the two. Essence is bound up with the notion of necessity, for it singles out what necessarily determines an individual – i.e., a distinguishable particular – as that very item, thus assuming the role of an item’s individuator. An essence has the status of a particular: it is not a property had by a certain object (whether a substance, process or event), but the latter’s definition, and hence it cannot be predicated of other members within the domain of that object. In this sense essence is detached from ontology altogether: it does not account for the existence of its possessing item – a *dhamma* in our case – but determines what this item is in distinction from any other item of that kind. *What* something is and *that* it is are two distinct issues and the latter is not necessarily implied by the former. Unlike an essence, a nature does not individuate its associated particular and may be common to many different particulars within a certain domain; its metaphysical status is that of a universal. Essence, though, may also have an ontological significance: a renowned line of thought in the history of metaphysics holds that essence is meant to account for its associated particular’s existence as an individual. Accordingly, an essence is what constitutes its possessing particular as the very item it is: it does not merely define the individuality of this particular within its domain, but is the cause of this particular’s being an actual, unified individual. This causal role, too, is not shared by a particular’s nature: the essence alone is the cause of there being an actual particular. A particular’s nature is the sum total of the concurrent attributes this particular possesses; it is neither what determines the particular’s individuality nor the cause of its existence as such.<sup>37</sup>

Mahānāma oscillates between an epistemological and ontological interpretations of *sabhāva* as essence: his initial explanation of *sabhāva* as *sayam/sako bhāvo* draws on the epistemological sense of essence as an individuator of a *dhamma*. His analysis of *sabhāva* as *sakassa bhāvolekassabhāvatā*, though, relies on the ontological aspect of essence as the cause of a *dhamma*’s being. The meaning suggested here is that a *dhamma* is independent of other *dhammas* for its existence; it bears its own reality all by itself. The *sabhāva* is the cause of the *dhamma*’s actual existence and its evidence. The commentator begins by analysing *sabhāva* as *sva+bhāva*, ‘own-nature’, but eventually divides the compound into *sat+bhāva*, ‘real essence’. The latter has ontological repercussion for the *dhammas*’ existential status which the former explanation lacks.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Paṭis-a III 634: *sabhāvena suññan ti ettha sayam bhāvo sabhāvo, sayam eva uppādo ti attho. sako vā bhāvo sabhāvo, attano yeva uppādo ti*. Referring to Mahānāma’s commentary, Nāṇamoli indeed renders *sabhāva* as ‘essence’: n. 1 on Paṭis II 178 in his trans. of the text, p. 362.

<sup>36</sup> Paṭis-a III 634: *bhāvo ti ca dhammapariyāyavacanam etaṃ. ekassa ca dhammassa añño bhāvasaikhāto dhammo natthi, tasmā sakassa aññena bhāvena suññam, sako aññena bhāvena suñño ti attho. tena ekassa dhammassa ekassabhāvatā vuttā hoti*.

<sup>37</sup> Van Fraassen (1978), p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> This point was suggested to me by L.S. Cousins.

This exegesis over-interprets the concise indications of the original text and may give the impression that Mahānāma was here trying to accommodate the text to the intellectual milieu of his own epoch. Interestingly, he next offers an alternative elucidation of *sabhāvena suññam* – and a preferred one, as implied by the particle *athavā* that normally introduces the preferred explanation in a commentary – namely, ‘empty through having emptiness as its individual essence’.<sup>39</sup> This interpretation is more in harmony with the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s spirit. Yet even here Mahānāma discloses the influence of his contemporary intellectual milieu: first, he refers to ‘every single *dhamma*’ (*ekassa dhammassa*), thus attesting to the view that the emptiness of essence is a distinguishing mark unique to every single *dhamma*. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, as already noted, is concerned with the totality of *dhammas* and the universal nature they all share. Second, Mahānāma rejects the argument that the latter rendering of *sabhāvena suññam* means that the *dhammas* are completely empty, having no reality at all, by claiming that *dhammas* exist as real things, though only momentarily.<sup>40</sup> The commentator refers to *dhammas* as *sat*, as real existents, whereas the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* neither ascribes to the *dhammas* any ontological status nor mentions the doctrine of momentariness.

To sum up, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* sheds light on the conceptual shift from the Nikāya worldview to the Abhidhamma’s and specifically on the origination of the concept of *sabhāva*. It contains one of the rare canonical occurrences of this term in Pali literature; indeed it may be the earliest one. Although the text anticipates the post-canonical explanation of the *dhammas* based on their *sabhāva* and other later concepts such as *lakkhaṇa* or *ṭhitassa aññathatta*, these are indistinct and not yet endowed with their later technical meanings found in other para-canonical texts and clearly in the *Aṭṭhakathā*. If Buddhist thought eventually teased out an ontology from the concept of *sabhāva* and the *dhamma* theory – a possibility that calls for a re-assessment of what is meant by ‘ontology’ – then the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* demonstrates that this state of affairs is not attributable to the beginning of the Abhidhamma.

<sup>39</sup> Paṭis-a III 634: *athavā sabhāvena suññan ti. suññasabhāveneva suññam. kiṃ vuttaṃ hoti? suññasūññatāya eva suññam, na aññāhi pariyāyasuññatāhi suññan ti vuttaṃ hoti.* ‘Or else, *sabhāvena suññam* means “empty through having emptiness as its individual essence.” What does it mean? The meaning is “empty owing to emptiness as emptiness only, not owing to some other figurative sense of emptiness”.’

<sup>40</sup> Id., 634–35: *sace pana keci vadeyyūṃ sako bhāvo sabhāvo, tena sabhāvena suññan ti [...] taṃ vacanaṃ kacavaram iva chadditabbaṃ. [...] dhammā sakakkhaṇe vijjamānā evā ti niṭṭham ettha gantabbaṃ.* ‘Should some say: “*sabhāva* is its own existence and hence it is empty of its existence” [...] this statement is to be rejected as nonsense [...] the conclusion thus ought to be that *dhammas* only exist at single moments.’

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Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Dhātuk	<i>Dhātukathā</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇi</i>
Nett	<i>Nettipakaraṇa</i>
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
Paṭis-a	<i>Saddhammappakāsinī</i> ( <i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i> commentary)
Peṭ	<i>Peṭakopadesa</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i> ( <i>Majjhima-nikāya</i> commentary)
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
S	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>

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