

## Is *Paṭicca-samuppāda* a Theory of Everything? Jayarava Nov 2010.<sup>1</sup>

The holy grail of theoretical physics is a single mathematical expression – a Grand Unified Theory – from which all mathematical laws of nature can be derived, and therefore by which all phenomena in the universe can be explained. This quest for unity, for unification, goes back to the pre-Socratic philosophers, but modern physics has been spectacularly successful in unifying our conception of the universe – Galileo unified heaven and earth in the sense that the same physical laws apply to heavenly and earthly bodies; James Clerk Maxwell unified electricity, magnetism and light; Albert Einstein unified space and time; and matter and energy. More recently the goal of this quest has been referred to as a “Theory of Everything”.<sup>2</sup> It does not yet exist, but theoretical physics has made great strides in explaining various aspects of the universe in mathematical form, and have managed to unify almost all of their explanations. Vast resources are being employed to examine our world. At the largest scale through increasingly sophisticated telescopes, some based off planet like the Hubble Space Telescope; while the Large Hadron Collider is smashing protons and lead nuclei together in order to gain insights into the universe at the smallest level. As eminent Cambridge physicist John Barrow says: “Modern physicists believe they have stumbled on a key which leads to the mathematical secret at the heart of the universe”.<sup>3</sup> Barrow goes on to critique this approach to physics, but in doing so he is critiquing the predominant view.

Buddhists also seem to be interested in a Theory of Everything. The main candidate for an explanation of everything in the universe is *paṭicca-samuppāda*. So the Dalai Lama says “Dependent arising refers to the fact that all impermanent phenomena – whether physical, mental, or otherwise – come into existence dependent upon certain causes and conditions... the theory of dependent arising can be applied everywhere”.<sup>4</sup> Similarly for Payutto: “Dependent origination states that all things exist as interdependent factors, arising in an interrelated manner and continuing on according to a perpetual process of cause and effect that is without end.”<sup>5</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi says “The ontological principle contributed by dependent arising is as the name suggests, the arising of phenomena in dependence on conditions... whatever comes into being originates through conditions, stands with the support of conditions, and ceases when its conditions cease.”<sup>6</sup> Sangharakshita meanwhile describes dependent arising as “...the universal law of the impermanent and conditioned nature of all phenomena”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Dharmacārī Satyapriya and Dharmacārī Dhīvan for comments earlier drafts that helped me to substantially improve this essay.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to *Nature* John Ellis (2002) of CERN light heartedly pleads guilty “to coining TOE as a non-anatomical acronym for Theory of Everything in an article that appeared in *Nature* (323, 595–598; 1986).”

<sup>3</sup> Barrow p.1

<sup>4</sup> Dalai Lama, p.51.

<sup>5</sup> Payutto and Olson 1995, p.85.

<sup>6</sup> Bodhi 1995 p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Sangharakshita 1993, p.126.

Another version of a Buddhist Theory of Everything focuses on *karma*. Lama Zopa says: “A deeper explanation of how everything, including disease, comes from the mind is related to karma. External factors affect the body and the mind, but this doesn’t happen without causes and conditions. Everything that happens to us is a result, or an effect, so its cause has to exist beforehand.”<sup>8</sup> Kelsang Gyatso coming from another, more idealist, angle says “Buddha taught that everything depends on the mind.”<sup>9</sup> A further example is found in presentations about the five *khandha*, e.g. in Nyanatiloka’s definition ‘the khandhas... [sum up] all of the physical and mental phenomena of existence’<sup>10</sup>. Eviatar Shulman has provided a longer list of similar claims, more elaborately stated.<sup>11</sup>

These presentations of Buddhism all see Buddhist doctrine as explaining “everything” – sometimes with the caveat that the explanation is of impermanent or conditioned phenomena, but if one follows the threads one generally finds that unconditioned phenomena are eventually explained as far as they can be. In this essay I want to examine the idea that *paṭicca-samuppāda* provides Buddhists with a Theory of Everything, along with the idea that everything can be explained. I structure my argument around a close reading of the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* (S ii.16), a short but important text from the *Nidānasamyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. The main topic is how to define ‘right-view’ (*sammādiṭṭhi*) which the text does primarily in terms of the middle way qua the *nidāna* chain. However the theme that it is best known for is the Buddha’s denial that the terms ‘existent’ (*atthi*) and ‘non-existent’ (*natthi*) apply to the world (*loka*). It is a theme later taken up by Nāgārjuna in his master-work *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) which cites this text, and indeed David Kalupahana has described MMK as “a superb commentary” on the *Kaccānagotta*.<sup>12</sup>

A detailed investigation of what is meant by ‘the world’ and a discussion on ontology in the Pāli texts sets the scene. Sue Hamilton (2000) has argued that the Buddha<sup>13</sup> was talking about experience in his teaching, and this opens up questions such as what we mean by ‘things’, let alone ‘all things’. I ask the question “what, according to the Buddha, arises in dependence on causes?” The Buddha many times says: ‘I teach *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*’; and many Pāli texts show that it was precisely *dukkha* that he saw arising and ceasing in dependence on causes. What is the connection between *dukkha* and ‘all things’? I

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<sup>8</sup> Zopa and Cameron, p.83. Note that his view that even disease is due to karma is explicitly denied at S iv.230-1; A v.10.

<sup>9</sup> Gyatso 2001, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Nyanatiloka 1980: s.v. khandhas.

<sup>11</sup> Shulman 2007, p.299, n.3.

<sup>12</sup> Kalupahana (1986: 5) argues this point at some length in the introduction to his translation to the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in which he also translates the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta* [sic]. He argues that though Nāgārjuna cites in Sanskrit and uses slightly different terms, that he must have known a text not very different from surviving Pāli and Chinese recensions. There appears to be no doubt that MMK 15.7 is a reference to this sutta, and that it is the only clear reference to another Buddhist text in the MMK – a fact that has led some people to question whether Nāgārjuna was in fact a Mahāyānist, though I cannot take up that issue here.

<sup>13</sup> “the Buddha” here means the Buddha’s words as reported in the Pāli Canon, and may stand for the words of the historical Buddha, or simply the Buddhist tradition (with its authors, editors, redactors and commentators). My observations do not depend on any particular attitude to ‘the Buddha’, though my own view is that the Buddhist texts reflect, however dimly, a tradition stemming from a single person.

will argue that *paṭicca-samuppāda* was not intended as a Theory of Everything and that by employing it in this scope that at least one falsifiable conjecture is made. One possible objection to my argument which I will address is that whereas the *sutta* focuses on the twelve-fold formula, which is traditionally seen as a specific application of the general principle of conditionality, the general principle is universally applicable.<sup>14</sup>

Translation of the Kaccānagotta Sutta.<sup>15</sup>

Staying at Sāvattthi. Then the elder Kaccānagotta approached the Blessed One, and having greeted him he sat to one side and asked the Blessed One: right-view [is called] ‘right-view’, *bhante*, to what extent, then, is there right-view?

Ordinarily, Kaccāna, this world is constructed on a dichotomy – existence and non-existence. The origin of the world, Kaccāna, seen as it is with full understanding [shows] there is no non-existence in the world. Cessation of the world, Kaccāna, seen as it is with full understanding [shows] there is no existence in the world. Usually, Kaccāna, this world is bound by the tendency to grasp at stratagems (*upāya*).<sup>16</sup> This [one with right-view]<sup>17</sup> doesn’t have that tendency, doesn’t insist on [views such as] ‘it is my self’. He is not uncertain, or sceptical about, and has independent knowledge of this: ‘Arising is only arising of disappointment. What ceases with cessation is disappointment’. To this extent, Kaccāna, there is right-view.

Kaccāna: one extreme is to say that everything exists; and the second extreme is to deny that anything exists. The Tathāgata points to a foundation in the middle, which avoids both extremes. From the condition of ignorance there are volitions (*sankhārā*); from processes there is consciousness... etc [i.e. the forwards *nidāna* sequence]. Thus the whole mass of disappointment originates. With the remainderless cessation of ignorance, processes cease... etc [i.e. the reverse *nidāna* sequence] thus there is the cessation of the whole mass of disappointment.

## Right View

Kaccāna asks about the term *sammādiṭṭhi*, usually translated as ‘right-view’. *Diṭṭhi* is ‘a view’, and by extension ‘something understood’, since Pāli has the same metaphor that we use in English, i.e. *to see* is *to know*. In particular *diṭṭhi* is used in the sense of ‘ideology’ or

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<sup>14</sup> This important objection was raised by Dhīvan Thomas Jones in comments on a draft.

<sup>15</sup> This and all translations are mine. Pāli text from CST.

<sup>16</sup> *upāyupādānābhinivesavinibandho* i.e. *upāya-upādāna-abhinivesa-vinibandho*. CST has *upaya*° meaning ‘clinging’ rather than *upāya*° ‘stratagem’, but the reading *upāya*° is supported by PTS edition, and the Sri Lankan and Thai canons according to the CST footnote. This issue is discussed more fully below.

<sup>17</sup> SA 2.33: ‘*Tañcāyaṃ*’ means *that* clinging and grasping, and *this* noble-disciple. *Tañcāyanti tañca upayupādānaṃ ayaṃ ariyasāvako*.

‘worldview’. *Sammā* (Sanskrit *samyañc*) is from the root  $\sqrt{añc}$  ‘to bend’.<sup>18</sup> The prefix *sam-* here makes it mean ‘to bend with’. There is an applied meaning which is ‘pay respects’, i.e. ‘to bow to’. Indian metaphors often seem to owe a lot to living in places where rivers were very important, and we can see *sammā* as suggesting a path which follows the curves of the river. In contemporary idiom we might even say that it means ‘going with the flow’. *Sammā* is contrasted with *micchā* which derives from  $\sqrt{mith}$ . Dwight Whitney (1885) has summed up the sense of  $\sqrt{mith}$  nicely by “alternate and altercate”.<sup>19</sup> *Micchā* suggests going against the flow, ‘altercating’. From this metaphor we understand a right-view as a worldview which goes along with the world, that is, a view of the world as it really is. Indeed the Buddha phrases his response in terms of how a person sees ‘this world’ (*ayaṃ lokam*). But what is meant by ‘this world’ in this context? It is important to understand just how the Buddha was using this word *loka* before attempting to interpret his other statements.

This World.

The word *loka* is almost always translated simply as ‘world’, i.e. ‘the world’ as more or less synonymous with definitions two or three in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (9<sup>th</sup> ed.):

2. a. the universe or all that exists; b. everything. 3. a. the time, state, or scene of human existence. b. (preceded by *the, this*) mortal life.

In fact English speakers tend to identify, though of course not exclusively, with the first of the two ideas that the Buddha goes on to critique. We think of the ‘the world’ as everything that exists; or as an existent, subset of everything. In considering the meaning of *loka* we are fortunate to have a long essay on the word in Vedic and Sanskrit by the great Dutch philologist Jan Gonda. Gonda (1966) traces *loka* to an Indo-European (IE) root *\*louka*,<sup>20</sup> related to the Latin *lūcus* ‘an open place in a wood, or a stretch of open country’. The primary meaning is ‘an open space’ or ‘open to the light of day’, and for instance in Baltic languages words from this root ousted those from IE *\*agro* for open stretches of ground. In English the word *lea* ‘an open field, or meadow’, and probably the *loo* of Flemish *Waterloo*, are cognate. According to Gonda the Vedic ‘loka’ was:

- a ‘place’ or position of religious or psychological interest which distinguished itself from other (real or imaginary) localities by a special value, function or significance of its own.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Following accepted practice, and because morphology is typically clearer in Sanskrit, I will cite verbal roots in Sanskrit.

<sup>19</sup> Whitney s.v. *mith*.

<sup>20</sup> Words with an asterisk are hypothetical or conjectured forms of a prototype Indo-European language which seem to account for the forms found in other IE languages, both living and dead.

<sup>21</sup> Gonda 1966:15.

In Vedic *loka* is distinguished from near synonyms *sthāna* (to stand; a place or state) or *deśa* (a region, country). Other translations which Gonda suggests for *loka* in various contexts are: ‘place, space, domain, room’; ‘sphere’, especially in the sense of where one belongs; and ‘a place to settle’, especially in the Upaniṣads with respect to rebirth, a place where one is reborn.

Though *loka* is very often translated as ‘world’ the two are not cognate. The word ‘world’ is peculiar to the Germanic languages and combines *wer* ‘man’ with *\*ald* ‘old age’. The original meaning was ‘life on earth, this present life’; as opposed to the afterlife.<sup>22</sup> ‘*Loka*’ and ‘world’ do substantially overlap semantically – in addition to meaning ‘all that exists’, both can be used in a subjective sense: ‘one’s own world’ for instance; or for subsets, e.g. ‘the world of football’. However, Gonda is more than doubtful about the utility of the blanket use of ‘world’ which he describes as “very inadequate” to translate *loka*.<sup>23</sup>

*Loka* in Pāli has a similar range of uses, i.e. a realm, or place that has some significance, e.g. *devaloka* ‘the world of the gods’; *kāmaloka* ‘the domain of pleasure’. When used in compounds it often refers to places where one can experience rebirth, echoing Vedic usage. When used on its own in Buddhist texts *loka* tends to mean the *perceptible* world, though not exclusively (see below). In Pāli ‘the world’ has a stronger suggestion of subjectivity than in the English ‘world’ – though we do use it in this way when we talk, for instance, of someone ‘living in their own in a world’. PED also suggests that to a Pāli hearer *loka* is closely related in quality to *ruppatti*: “to be vexed, oppressed... (always with reference to an illness or pain)”.<sup>24</sup> The suggestion here is that ‘the world’ is *saṃsāra*, the world of repeated rebirth; and therefore suffering.

When the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* refers to ‘this world’ it means ‘one’s world’, though it is not correct to think of this world as ‘subjective’. The Buddhist ‘world’ emerges from the interaction of sense faculty and sense object, so for instance: ‘The consciousness that arises with forms and the eye as condition is called eye-consciousness’ (M i.259)<sup>25</sup>; or ‘dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises: these three together constitute contact’ (M i.111)<sup>26</sup>. This perspective on consciousness means that the terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ do not quite apply. The world as we know it results from the interaction of the two.

In the *Rohitassa Sutta* the eponymous young deva asks the Buddha: “Is there a way to know, or see, or to reach, the end of the world – where there is no birth, no aging, no death; no dying and being reborn – by travelling?”<sup>27</sup> The answer is that one cannot reach the goal by physically travelling.<sup>28</sup> Ānanda, being asked to explain the same phrase in the

<sup>22</sup> *wer* is related to Sanskrit *vīr* ‘man, strong’. Etymology from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

<sup>23</sup> Gonda 1966:15.

<sup>24</sup> PED sv *loka* and *ruppatti*

<sup>25</sup> *cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati viññānaṃ cakkhuvīññānant’eva sankhaṃ gacchati*

<sup>26</sup> *cakkhuñcāvuso, paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññānaṃ, tiñṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*

<sup>27</sup> *Rohitassa Sutta* (S 2.26, PTS S i.61; also A 4.45, PTS A ii.47) *yatha nu kho bhante na jāyati na jīyati na mīyati na cavati na upapajjati, sakkā nu kho so, bhante, gamanena lokassa anto ñātum vā daṭṭhum vā pāpunītum vā ti?*

<sup>28</sup> Another reading of this suggests itself to me. “Is there a way, by going [around] to know or see the end of the world where there is no birth, aging, death, falling [from heaven], rebirth [on earth].” I conjecture that

*Lokantagamana Sutta* SN 35.116, says: “This is called ‘the world’ in the discipline of the Buddha – that by which in the world one is a perceiver of the world (*lokasaññī*) and thinks of the world as one’s self (*lokamānī*)”.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore it is the six senses by which one is a perceiver of the world, and identifies oneself with the world.<sup>30</sup> The world here is the ‘world as experienced through the senses’ rather than as an external reality. Returning to *Rohitassa Sutta* the Buddha further clarifies by saying:

However I say, friend, there is no making an end of disappointment, without reaching the end of the world. And, friend, it is right here in this arm-span measure of body endowed with perception and cognition that I declare the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.<sup>31</sup>

This further reinforces the idea that ‘this world’ in the *Kaccānagotta* is not ‘the world’ as we usually think about it, but the more like the kind of world we refer to when we say someone who “lives in a world of their own”. If we turn to Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the *Rohitassa* at this point we find that he equates *loka* with *dukkha*, and associates the four truths of the noble ones<sup>32</sup> with the world, the origin and cessation of the world, and the way to the cessation of the world. He then says:

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Rohitassa may have a view of rebirth consistent with the early Vedic model in which one cycles endlessly around between heaven and earth, between rising and falling – c.f. BU 4.4.6; Jurewicz (2004, 2006); and Obeyesekere (2002). Rohitassa may well be asking whether *samsāra* naturally exhausts itself, and the Buddha’s reply is that it does not, but requires some intervention. In the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* (MN 49) where a Brahṃā called Baka (Heron, with the figurative meaning of ‘cheat, deceiver’ c.f. Monier-Williams s.v. *baka*) declares that beyond this [the same cycle] there is no escaping (*natthaññaṃ uttari nissaraṇanti*), whereas at BU 4.4.7 free from desire, and realising the identity of *ātman* and *brahman* one is released from *samsāra*.

<sup>29</sup> S iv.95: *yena kho, āvuso, lokasmim lokasaññī hoti lokamānī – ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye loko*. I follow Gombrich’s (1996) suggestion on translating *lokamānī*. He observes that the commentary, and Pāli literary style, would suggest reading *lokasaññī* and *lokamānī* as synonyms (c.f. Bodhi 2000: ‘a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world’, p.1190; and his note referring readers to the *Rohitassa Sutta*, p.1413, n.98). However “... *mānī* at the end of a compound... never means simply ‘thinking of’. It seems always to have a reflexive sense, ‘thinking oneself to be x’, as in *paṇḍitamānī* ‘thinking oneself to be very clever’.” (p.94) Gombrich connects this with the eternalistic view which identifies experience of the world with selfhood, though in this article he doesn’t catch the connection to the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* where one of the six speculative views is: “As the world, so myself” (*so loko so attā*: M i.135). PED links *mānī* to *māna* ‘conceit’ rather than *mano* ‘mind’.

<sup>30</sup> Identifying self and world is one of the wrong views in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, discussed in Norman 1981, and Gombrich 1990.

<sup>31</sup> S i.62: *na kho pañāhaṃ, āvuso, appatvā lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa antakiriyaṃ vadāmi. Api ca khvāhaṃ, āvuso, imasmimyeva byāmamatte kaḷevare sasaññimhi samanake lokañca paññapemi lokasamudayañca lokanirodhañca lokanirodhagāminiñca paṭipadanti*. Mrs Rhys Davids translated *byāmamatte kaḷevare* as ‘this fathom long carcass’ which is certainly a striking rendition, but *byāma* refers to an arm-span which is typically somewhat less than a fathom.

<sup>32</sup> I follow K. R. Norman (2006: 21) in translating *ariyasaccā* as a *tatpuruṣa* ‘the truths of the nobles’. According to Norman, the translation as a *karmadhāraya* ‘noble truth’ is possible, but not given prominence in the Pāli commentarial literature. See also Norman (1990).

Thus he should see: ‘I do not, friend, declare these four truths in grass and wood, but I declare them only in this body of the four great elements.’<sup>33</sup>

This is presented as a quote from the Buddha, although it does not seem to occur in the canonical texts that have come down to us. Buddhaghosa appears to be saying here that *paṭicca-sammupāda* applies only to one’s world of experience, rather than to external objects.

In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22) the Buddha does appear to be talking about things when he says: “I also see no possession that is permanent, constant, eternal, unchanging, remaining forever.”<sup>34</sup> However what is impermanent here is *possession*, rather than *the thing possessed*. We know this because the statement is linked to the person who thinks: “it was mine, [now] it is not mine; it might be mine, but I can’t get it”<sup>35</sup>, and thus suffers because of something externally non-existent [*bahiddhā asati*]. In the context of a worldview which understands life to continue on through many successive rebirths no possession can be owned indefinitely if only because one repeatedly dies and leaves everything material behind.

In the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* the Buddha points out that we observe ‘arising of the world’ (*lokasamudaya*), and that this makes a non-sense of the proposition that nothing exists in the world; and contrarily that observing ‘ceasing of the world’ (*lokanirodha*) denies the notion that everything exists – at least it denies any kind of *permanent existence* in, or of, the world. Buddhaghosa makes an interesting observation at this point in his commentary. When the text refers to ‘arising of the world’ he says that ‘the world’ here means *saṅkhāra-loka*,<sup>36</sup> and that ‘cessation of the world’ is the disruption of *saṅkhārā*.<sup>37</sup> *Saṅkhāra* being a very difficult word to translate, or even understand, this might not be seen as a clarification. However the equating of *saṅkhāra* and *loka* here reinforces the idea that *loka* refers to the world of experience. *Saṅkhārā* here probably means things ‘compounded’, i.e. made up of *dharmas*, such as when sense faculty meets sense object. It might also suggest ‘volition’, with reference to six kinds of *cetanā* (e.g. at S iii.60). Either way Buddhaghosa is clearly working within the paradigm of world as experience.

In the *Loka Sutta* (S 12.43, PTS S ii.73) the Buddha asks the rhetorical question: “what is the origin of the world?”. His answer is:

With the eye and forms as condition, eye-consciousness arises. The coincidence of the three is contact. On the basis of contact there are sensations, which give rise to desires. Desires are fuel which support becoming.<sup>38</sup> With becoming there is birth, and

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<sup>33</sup> Rohitassasuttavaṇṇanā (SA i.116): iti – nāhaṃ, āvuso, imāni cattāri saccāni tiṇakatṭhādīsu paññapemi, imasmim̐ pana cātumahābhūṭike kāyasmim̐ yeva paññapemi’ti dasseti.

<sup>34</sup> M i.137 Ahampi kho taṃ, bhikkhave, pariggahaṃ na samanupassāmi yvāssa pariggaho nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ taheva tiṭṭheyya.

<sup>35</sup> M i.136 *ahu vata me, taṃ vata me natthi; siyā vata me, taṃ vatāhaṃ na labhāmī’ti.*

<sup>36</sup> SA ii.32 *lokasamudayanti loko nāma saṅkhāraloko, tassa nibbatti.*

<sup>37</sup> SA ii.32 *lokanirodhanti saṅkhārānaṃ bhaṅgaṃ.*

<sup>38</sup> *upādāna* is typically translated as ‘clinging’. This is neither bad philology, nor bad doctrine. However Richard Gombrich (2009) has shown how the word more literally means ‘the thing which supports an active process’ i.e. fuel (see especially chp 8). The equation that “desire fuels becoming” plays on the metaphor of becoming

from birth old-age, and death; and grief, lamenting, misery, dejection, and trouble are produced. *This is the origin of the world.*<sup>39</sup>

Here we have a portion of the *nidāna* chain which we usually associate with the arising of *dukkha*, so here also *loka* is equated with *dukkha*, i.e. with the experience of disappointment. Note that ‘the world’ comes into being on the basis of contact between sense organ and sense object – forms – so that here forms are not logically included in ‘the world’, they are part of the conditions which *give rise to* ‘the world’. Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the *Kaccānagotta* directly associates the term *lokasamudaya* with origination in the *nidāna* sequence,<sup>40</sup> i.e. what arises from the *nidāna* sequence is ‘the world’. The conclusion of this exploration is clear and I will leave it to Bhikkhu Bodhi, prolific translator of Pāli texts and one of the foremost living authorities on Theravāda Buddhism, to articulate it:

“The world with which the Buddha’s teaching is principally concerned is ‘the world of experience,’ and even the objective world is of interest only to the extent that it serves as that necessary external condition for experience.”<sup>41</sup>

Did the Buddha have an ontological position?

The idea that the Buddha might have been concerned with ontology – a theory about being, or what exists in an external reality – dies hard however. In the notes to his translation of the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* Bhikkhu Bodhi contrarily states: “The Buddha’s utterances at 22:94 [*Flower Sutta*], for example, show that he did not hesitate to make pronouncements with a clear ontological import when they were called for”.<sup>42</sup> In the *Flower Sutta* the Buddha says:

“Bhikkhus, I don’t dispute with the world, the world disputes with me. A Dhammavādin doesn’t quarrel with anyone in the world. That which the wise agree ‘it

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being like a fire. It can be helpful to think in these terms as it emphasises *how* the active process of becoming is kept going by our hedonic responses. See also SN 44.9 (PTS SN iv.401) where this relationship is more specific: “when a being has laid down this body, but hasn’t yet been reborn, I call that ‘fuelled by craving’ (*taṇhūpādānaṃ*) because craving is the fuel at that time. (*Yasmiṃ kho, vaccha, samaye imaṅca kāyaṃ nikkhipati, satto ca aññataraṃ kāyaṃ anupapanno hoti, tamahaṃ taṇhūpādānaṃ vadāmi. Taṇhā hissa, vaccha, tasmīṃ samaye upādānaṃ hotī ti.*) Those with such fuel are reborn, and those without are not.

<sup>39</sup> *Cakkhuṅca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññānaṃ. Tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso. Phassapaccayā vedanā; vedanāpaccayā taṇhā; taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ; upādānapaccayā bhavo; bhavapaccayā jāti; jātipaccayā jarāmarāṇaṃ sokaparideva-dukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti. Ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, lokassa samudayo.*

<sup>40</sup> SA ii.32 *Apica lokasamudayanti anulomapaccayākāraṃ. Lokanirodhanti paṭilomapaccayākāraṃ.* The terms *anuloma*<sup>o</sup> and *paṭiloma*<sup>o</sup> in this context refer to the *nidāna* sequence in terms of origination and cessation respectively.

<sup>41</sup> Bodhi (2000) p. 394, n.182.

<sup>42</sup> Bodhi 2000: 734, n.29

does not exist in the world'; I too say 'it doesn't exist'. That which the wise agree 'it exists in the world'; I too say 'it exists'." <sup>43</sup>

The sutta continues by asking what the wise agree doesn't exist in the world? The answer is 'forms, feelings, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness that are permanent, stable, eternal, and not subject to change' do not exist in the world. These are, of course, the five *khandhā*. The wise agree that permanent *khandhā* do not exist, and impermanent *khandhā* do exist. Do these words have an ontological import?

The use of *loka* in the passage cited above is slightly ambiguous, but my reading is that two different senses are being used. In the first sentence *lokena* ('with the world') is equated with *kenaci lokasmim* ('anyone in the world') in the second, and therefore '*loka*' must be being used in the sense of 'people in the world', else the passage makes little sense. However the Buddha then uses *loke* ('in the world') as the frame for discussing existence and non-existence (*atthi/natthi*) in terms of the *khandhas*. Note that two different forms of the locative singular are used (*loke/lokasmim*) as if to mark the two different uses.

It is here that Sue Hamilton's insights into the *khandhas* are so vital. Conventional definitions do give the *khandhas* an ontological shade: 'the *khandhas*... [sum up] all of the physical and mental phenomena of existence"<sup>44</sup>; "the five 'aggregates' or components which collectively constitute the human individual... *without remainder*".<sup>45</sup> Hamilton has shown this to be a category error. The *khandhas* in the Pāli Canon are not the sum total of the human individual, but rather "... they are the factors of human experience (or, better the experiencing factors) that one needs to understand in order to achieve the goal of the Buddhist teachings."<sup>46</sup> Hamilton coined the term 'apparatus of experience' for the *khandhas*, which, though it is has yet to find acceptance, is a far more useful rendering than 'aggregates'. However, as I have already emphasised, experience is not simply subjective – it arises out of the interaction between the subjective and objective.<sup>47</sup> Hamilton invokes the *Sabba Sutta* (SN 35:23) which states that "everything" (*sabbaṃ*) is the senses and their objects, and that trying to establish an alternative to "this all" (*idaṃ sabbaṃ*) is to look in the wrong place (*avisayasmim*). 'Everything' here is synonymous with 'the world'. The *Sabba Sutta* is clearly referencing a Vedic idiom which equates *loka* with *idaṃ sarvaṃ*, and both with 'creation' and with *brahman*, but to pursue this avenue would take us too far from the main topic.<sup>48</sup>

Glenn Wallis comments on the use of the word *visaya* ('range, domain') in the *Sabba Sutta*: "immediate experience is not only our proper range [*visaya*] but, if we are honest about

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<sup>43</sup> PTS SN iii.138: *nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, lokena vivadāmi, lokova mayā vivadati. Na, bhikkhave, dhammavādī kenaci lokasmim vivadati. Yaṃ, bhikkhave, natthisammataṃ loke paṇḍitānaṃ, ahampi taṃ 'natthi'ti vadāmi. Yaṃ, bhikkhave, atthisammataṃ loke paṇḍitānaṃ, ahampi taṃ 'atthi'ti vadāmi.*

<sup>44</sup> Nyanatiloka 1980: s.v. *khandhas*.

<sup>45</sup> Keown 2003. (My italics)

<sup>46</sup> Hamilton 2000: 29

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton 2000: 119

<sup>48</sup> For more on the Vedic use of *sarvaṃ/idaṃ sarvaṃ* see especially: Gonda 1955, 1982.

the manner in which our lives actually unfold moment by moment, our *only* range – immediate experience is *all* that there is.”<sup>49</sup> I think Wallis goes a little too far here. He suggests an absolute – “all that there is” – when what the Buddha means is more like ‘all we can *know*’ (i.e. the point is epistemological, not ontological). A more pragmatic reading in line with Hamilton’s findings on the *khandhas* would be ‘all we need to know for the purposes of ending suffering’. The reason for drawing attention to the senses and their objects as the proper domain for enquiry is not to give a complete description of reality (i.e. not directed towards constructing a theory of everything), but to highlight the mechanisms which create disappointment so that it can be overcome – i.e. the Buddha, if he is a philosopher at all, is a pragmatic philosopher. The problem of disappointment can be traced to the cognitive aspects of experience, and this is where the Buddha focuses his efforts. As Hamilton puts it the Buddha’s project was to direct attention “...to understanding the nature and mechanics of experience, by means of one’s cognitive process”.<sup>50</sup>

That the *khandhas* do not reflect an ontology is also brought out in the *Phena Sutta* (S 22.95) where form, sensations, apperceptions, volitions, and consciousness are like a lump of foam, a water bubble, a mirage, a plantain trunk, and like an illusion – they are empty and hollow. The Buddha does not say that form is a lump of foam, only *like* a lump of foam. Form is only the experience of resistance, the experience of colour, shape, temperature, etc. When one examines any experience, one only generates more experience – looking we have a sight experience, feeling we have a touch experience, reasoning we have a mental experience. One cannot get behind experience to find the pure object, one can only experience it in a variety of ways.

Though it seems clear that the Buddha was not making an ontological point, this does not mean that Buddhist doctrines do not have *any* ontological implications. Eviatar Shulman (2008) for instance points out that in the *nidāna* sequence mind (*viññāna*) precedes body (*rūpa*), and this implies “a metaphysics which seems to believe that objects – real objects! – are conditioned by consciousness”.<sup>51</sup> As an ontological position this conflicts with Western ontologies. However these are *implications* rather than bald statements, and are teased out by scholars rather than emphasised by the Buddha. The Buddha was not concerned with ontological definitions; not concerned with ‘existence’ or ‘reality’; but with experience. Even though Shulman explores such ontological implications he is still clear about their relative importance:

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<sup>49</sup> Wallis 2007: 82. Wallis also translates *visaya* as ‘sensorium’.

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton 2000:115

<sup>51</sup> This assumes that *rūpa* in *nāmarūpa* means the physical body which is the received tradition. Hamilton argues that *rūpa* as a *khandha* refers to the body as “the physical locus of one’s experience”, rather than the body as physical object. As she says *rūpa* is defined in terms of the four elements – earth, water, fire, and wind – representing the experiences of resistance, fluidity, heat, and movement. (2000: 72). By defining *rūpa* in terms of experience, rather than physical properties Hamilton remains within the paradigm she has set up, and avoids some of the metaphysical pitfalls.

The 12 links are an explanation of mental conditioning, an analysis of subjective existence. They do not deal directly with the manner in which all things exist. The ontological implications are no more than an offshoot of the discussion... (p.306)<sup>52</sup>

I have been building a case for a particular reading of ‘this world’ in the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* and in the Pāli texts more generally. This reading – this hermeneutic of experience – is useful because it avoids problems associated with more metaphysical approaches – we do not need to discuss for instance the nature of being, nor the problem of what we can know about the world, since these questions do not arise as major problems if we are *only* dealing with experience. By steering the discussion away from metaphysics we avoid many insoluble problems, and it leads to a more pragmatic reading of the Pāli Canon generally. I think by this time we can already see that the case for *paṭicca-samuppāda* being a theory of everything is seriously weakened since not everything is included in the scope of the Pāli texts.

This world is constructed on a dichotomy.

Having established that by ‘the world’ the Buddha seems to have meant the ‘world of experience’ we can now move onto the proposition that *this world*, i.e. the world of experience, is constructed on the dichotomy of existence and non-existence. By defining our terms very much in terms of experience we shift a discussion about existence out of the metaphysical, ontological mode and thereby simplify things considerably.

I’ve already mentioned the *Phena Sutta* and its simile comparing form to a lump of foam etc, but I want to go over that point again in more depth. While conscious and awake we are saturated with sensory inputs (including the mental sense). Our first task as conscious beings is to make sense of and interpret experience into a coherent picture, and integrate that with our present worldview, in order to successfully navigate through life. What apparatus do we have if we wish to confirm our impressions of experience? To confirm our physical feeling of being embodied, for instance, we may look at our body to see if it conforms to what we feel. Doing this over time gives rise to the mental experience of ‘familiarity’. Or we may compare our present experience to memories of past experience, and thus experience ‘remembering’. In other words we use experience to confirm and understand experience. We can turn to communication with other people to seek confirmation of our interpretation of experience: you might agree with my observation that objects have certain characteristics for instance. However I still receive your information through my eyes and ears, and process it with my mind. All experience is a product of sense faculty interacting with sense object. Direct, unmediated knowledge of a sense object is a contradiction in terms as to experience it we must be conscious of it, and from the Buddhist point of view consciousness is always conditioned.

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<sup>52</sup> I agree with the broad point being made, but dispute the use of terms like ‘subjective existence’. I think the terms *subjective* and *objective* obscure the Buddhist view of ‘the world’ as conditioned by subject and object. Adding ‘existence’ here only muddies the water.

Some Buddhists do suggest that the Buddha had “direct knowledge” (*abhiññā*) of “reality”, and that this was an important aspect his *bodhi*.<sup>53</sup> The idea that the Buddha was somehow omniscient is discussed and dismissed on textual grounds by David Kalupahana.<sup>54</sup> In fact the Buddha does not claim to be omniscient and is critical of those who do claim this.<sup>55</sup> In order to have such direct knowledge a faculty not related to, or interacting with, our other faculties including the mind, would need to come into contact with objects. Such a faculty is not directly accessible to our other faculties, nor could we know we have it until it becomes operational. Here we begin to move beyond metaphysics even and into the realm of mysticism. This kind of discourse became widespread in Buddhism. The Buddha himself frequently describes his insight as *yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana* ‘knowing and seeing things as they are’. Here again we see the importance of understanding the Buddha’s terms of reference, the world or domain in which he was operating, and in which they make most sense. The Buddha never says that he understand everything in the universe, or Reality. What he repeatedly says is that he understands suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the way to make suffering end.

The point here is not to deny an external reality; in fact consciousness only really makes sense from the early Buddhist point of view if there is an objective world to experience. Although the *Sabba Sutta* (SN 35.23) is well known and often cited in related discussions, it is not always remarked that the same words occur a little further on in the *Samyutta Nikāya* except that the word *sabbaṃ* is replaced by *dvayaṃ* ‘a pair’ (SN 35.92; PTS SN iv.67). The acceptance of such a duality is at odds with later Buddhist exegesis which frequently speaks in terms of a merging or breaking down of the subject/object duality, which is incidentally also a psycho-medical description of madness. In early Buddhism the subject/object duality is a given. Early Buddhist texts are primarily concerned with understanding the nature of experience, and more specifically with understanding the processes by which we have experiences, and how we interpret them. The pure subject and the naked object are never talked about as far as I know.

With regards to the ontological status of an experience we can only say that it is indeterminate. We have a certain experience but it does not ‘exist’ in any definite sense. Any given experience lasts only as long as our attention remains on the object and all other factors of experience are constant.<sup>56</sup> But we do *have* experiences – mental representations and responses are generated and move us towards or away from objects of the senses. Thus the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* reiterates that the claims that everything exists or that nothing exists are views which do not apply – they go against the flow.

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<sup>53</sup> Also included under the term *abhiññā* are a curious assortment supernatural abilities that we might put under the heading of ‘paranormal’.

<sup>54</sup> Kalupahana 1992: 43ff.

<sup>55</sup> In the *Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta* (M 71; M i.481ff) for instance

<sup>56</sup> I wish to avoid becoming entangled in the doctrine of ‘momentariness’ or to get involved in discussions of how long mind moments last. Such discussions are interesting intellectual exercises but take us too far from the main point being made here which focuses on our how our responses to sensations bind us to the world.

This was to become *the* great theme of the perfection of wisdom texts and of Nāgārjuna. It was in reference to just this point that Nāgārjuna cites the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* in MMK:

‘In the advice to Kātyāyana [i.e. Kaccāna] both ‘existence’ and ‘non-existence’;  
Are denied by the Blessed One who perceived becoming and non-becoming.’<sup>57</sup>

Here *bhāva* and *abhāva* are substituted for *samudaya* and *nirodha*, though I think we can see that they are more or less synonymous.

Within the context of this world of experience the Buddha points out that we observe this world arising and passing away. Just to labour the point, it would not be satisfying to say that ‘the world’ was observed arising and ceasing if we were talking about the objective world. Although we say “all things change” what is specifically referred to in the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* is the world of experience. This world of experience *is* constantly changing. I believe that this is what the Buddha is referring to in his teaching of the three characteristics. At Dhp 277 for example, we find ‘all compounded things’ are impermanent. I have mentioned that *saṅkhāra* is often interpreted as volitions (*cetanā*), but the word literally means ‘put-together’.<sup>58</sup> This is usually read as meaning ‘conditioned’, i.e. the thing we are aware of is there because the conditions are in place. We could read it as referring to sense object meeting sense faculty and giving rise to sense consciousness, the three together making ‘contact’ (*phassa*).

Our world of experience only arises because our sense faculties interact with objects, giving rise to consciousness. This fact of experience is what the Buddha puts forward as refuting the notion that the world doesn’t exist; that is, the fact of arising denies non-existence. Similarly when one of the tripod of supports is removed we lose contact and the experience ceases. This refutes the idea of any kind of permanent existence in or of the world.

I hope it is clear that in this world of experience that the terms ‘existent’ and ‘non-existent’ simply and straightforwardly don’t apply. The denial of existence *and* non-existence might be seen as paradoxical, as pointing to a mystical third state of being. I don’t wish to take on the place of mysticism in Buddhism, though it would be interesting to re-examine the role of mysticism through the lens of this hermeneutic of experience. What I do assert is that there is no paradox here, and we do not have to ponder whether or to what extent some ‘thing’ exists or not because following the *Sabba Sutta* we define this as outside our range (*avisaya*). Metaphysical questions then become inexplicable (*avyākata*) not because the Buddha does not know, or cannot say, but because the very question is posed outside his frame of reference.<sup>59</sup> This idea of experience being inexplicable in terms of existence and non-existence informs the early Mahāyāna and my reading of Nāgārjuna is that this was his understanding. That form lacks *svabhāva*, is ‘empty’ in Buddhist jargon, is a straightforward proposition in the world of experience. Without a clear understanding that the domain under

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<sup>57</sup> MMK 15.7 *kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayam | pratiṣiddham bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā ||*

<sup>58</sup> Compare the word ‘confect’ from Latin *con* ‘together’ and *facere* ‘to make’.

<sup>59</sup> Compare the discussion on this at Gethin 2008, p.168.

discussion is the world of experience, we have problems interpreting this idea except as a paradox, and in the Buddhism world it generates a series of metaphysical not to say mystical interpretations.

### The tendency to grasp

The Buddha points out that as a consequence of misunderstanding the world of experience in terms of existence and non-existence there is a tendency to grasp. As I pointed out above the long compound *upāyupādānābhinivesavinibandho* which I translate above as “bound by the tendency to grasp at stratagems” is problematic in that the canonical recensions are confused between *upaya* ‘clinging’ and *upāya* ‘stratagem’. Both words derive from the verb *upa√i* ‘to approach, attain’. *Upaya* is a verbal noun from the indicative (*upeti*), while *upāya* is from the causative (*upāyati*). Buddhaghosa treats *upayupādānābhinivesa*<sup>o</sup> as a triple *dvandva*, since the three terms are near synonyms, and *°vinibandho* as an instrumental *tatpuruṣa* i.e. ‘bound by clinging, grasping, and tendencies’. Reading *upāya*<sup>o</sup> means it makes more sense to treat *°upādānābhinivesa*<sup>o</sup> as a *dvandva*, and then both *upāya*<sup>o</sup> and *°vinibandho* as *tatpuruṣas* which leads to my rendering. But what does ‘grasp at stratagems’ mean? In other words what is it that we grasp at or cling to? Why does clinging bind us, and to what? Fundamentally what we grasp at is experiences that we believe will make us happy, or prevent us being unhappy. Starting from the idea that pleasurable experiences are what make us happy and unpleasant experiences are what make us unhappy, we employ strategies to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. It is the strategy of seeking out pleasurable experiences in order to be happy that binds us to the world of disappointing experiences. Seen in this way the statement becomes a truism of the kind: ‘if we seek pleasure in drugs, we become addicted to drugs.’

One of the key errors we make is to mistake the experience of having a point of view and feeling embodied, for something more than this. If we step back from the narratives we tell ourselves and each other about experience we begin to see that the sense of being ‘I’ is also simply a narrative about experience, a mental process that arises and passes away in dependence on causes linked to the body as the locus of experience, and on comparing with memory as a reference point (though remembering is also experience). Do we mean then that the ‘self’ doesn’t exist? This has always been a vexed question for Buddhists, and continues to dog Buddhist scholarship as well as popular Buddhist discourses. If we take the view that self doesn’t exist then we have taken a view which, Buddhaghosa explains several times in his commentary on the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, is nihilistic/nihilism (*ucchedam/ucchedadiṭṭhi*). But we cannot take the other extreme and say that self exists either because that would be eternalistic/eternalism (*sassatam/sassatadiṭṭhi*). The sense of self arises in dependence on causes – it is a *dhamma*, a mental state, an experience; and therefore subject to the problems of all experiences: impermanence, disappointment, and insubstantiality.

Having established his terms, the Buddha then points out what constitutes right-view in those terms. So we now move onto how the Buddha defines right-view which he does by discussing what he sees arising from the process outlined in the *paticca-samuppāda* formula.

## Only Disappointment Arises

In the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* the Buddha explains that the one with right-view has no doubts or uncertainties about the statement: ‘Arising is only arising of disappointment. What ceases with cessation is disappointment.’<sup>60</sup> Buddhaghosa comments:

‘he does not doubt’ (*na kaṅkhati*) means he has no uncertainty (*kaṅkham*) about the statement: “only disappoint arises; disappointment ceases; no other thing called ‘a being’ exists here.”<sup>61</sup>

Only disappointment arises, and disappointment ceases. A very similar phrase is found in the ‘simile of the chariot’ in the *Vajirā Sutta* (SN 5.10). In response to provocation by Māra the *bhikkhunī* Vajirā says that the word ‘being’ (*satta*) is just a conventional expression used when the *khandhā* are present, then continues on to say:

Only disappointment is produced, disappointment persists, and ceases;  
Nothing other than disappointment is produced; nothing other than disappointment ceases.<sup>62</sup>

If we ask what it is that arises in dependence on causes, the answer here is *only dukkha* (*dukkhameva*), which in this context is primarily the disappointment felt when the experiential world fails to live up to our expectation of continuity and satisfaction. Note that above we found that the *nidānas* give rise to ‘the world’. The equation *loka = dukkha* is firmly established. Hamilton takes this equation even further by showing that the *khandhā* are also equated with *dukkha*. She concludes:

The *dukkha/khandha/world* teachings have not previously been recognised as collectively and interrelatedly relating to the metaphor of an individual’s pre-Enlightenment life.<sup>63</sup>

In other words the world of experience of an unawakened person is entirely disappointing. This is because we mistake the nature of even pleasant experience. The word ‘disappointment’ as a translation of ‘*dukkha*’ may sound too weak to some, will itself be disappointing, especially as we have become used to hearing that *dukkha* is ‘suffering’, epitomised in the wonderful Pāli compound *soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass’-upāyāsa*:

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<sup>60</sup> *dukkhameva uppajjamānaṃ uppajjati, dukkhaṃ nirujjhamānaṃ nirujjhati.*

<sup>61</sup> *na kaṅkhatīti dukkhameva uppajjati, dukkhaṃ nirujjhati, na añño ettha satto nāma atthī’ ti kaṅkhaṃ na karoti.*

<sup>62</sup> *dukkhameva hi sambhoti, dukkhaṃ tiṭṭhati veti ca;*  
*nāññatra dukkhā sambhoti, nāññaṃ dukkhā nirujjhatī ti* (S i.136)

<sup>63</sup> Hamilton 2000: 205. C.f. also A i.177 “in brief, there five masses of fuel [for becoming] are disappointment” (*saṃkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā*)

‘grief, lamenting, misery, dejection, and disturbance’. In this context suffering is not the pain of physical illness or injury, it is the mental and emotional suffering that comes from our misguided expectations of experience. This distinction is exemplified in the *Salla Sutta* (SN36.6) which talks about pain and suffering being like two arrows: one which wounds us physically, and one which represents the way our response to pain wounds our psyche. It is the second arrow which the Buddha is talking about here. When the noble disciple experiences an unpleasant sensation: “he experiences only one sensation, the physical [pain], not the psychical [suffering].”<sup>64</sup> That this disappointment can break our hearts, drive us mad, or in extreme cases prove fatal, does not take away the fact that it happens because we expect from experience something which it cannot deliver – we have a *micchādiṭṭhi*, a wrong or contrary view.

We need to be clear about this idea – that only disappointment arises and ceases – because it is precisely this that constitutes right-view in the *Kaccānagotta*. Right-view is not concerned with the rising and passing away of objects in the *physical* world, but to the arising and passing away of disappointment. This is not a statement about, let alone a denial of, an objective or physical world, merely a continued pre-occupation with disappointment completely in keeping with the Buddha’s oft stated goals.

The Buddha does not end here however. The problem of disappointment has a solution. So now we must look at his solution before summing up.

### The Middle Way and Dependent Arising

The Buddha points away from understanding experience in terms of existence and non-existence and towards understanding experience as a process. This process is modelled in the *nidāna* chain. The standard version of this chain has 12 links, though other versions exist.<sup>65</sup> In the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* the phrasing is interesting:

The Tathāgata has pointed out a foundation [*dhamma*] in the middle, which avoids both extremes.<sup>66</sup>

The main verb here is *deseti*. The applied sense is ‘teach’, but it literally means ‘to point’. What a spiritual teacher does is point out things to their disciple. What is pointed out is a *dhamma* – note the use of the singular here ‘a *dhamma*’. Explorations of the meaning of the word in a Buddhist context have so far produced a number of books and dozens of articles. *Dhamma* (Sk. *dharma*) comes from the root  $\sqrt{dhr}$  ‘to support, to hold’. In the case of mental states, what a *dhamma* actually does is support the process of awareness. As a label for the teaching of the Buddha it is the ethical *foundation* for living a good life, and ethics itself is the *support* for meditation from which comes wisdom in the form of seeing the

<sup>64</sup> *so ekaṃ vedanaṃ vedayati – kāyikaṃ, na cetasikaṃ.* (S iv.209)

<sup>65</sup> Some scholars esp Vetter have argued that the variation in the number of links, and the existence of several more fragments suggests that the sequence is composite.

<sup>66</sup> *ete te, kaccāna, ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti*

situation as it is (*yathābhūta-ñānadassana*). Here the sense is that the extremes are unstable and that avoiding them the Buddha points to a foundation from which one can work towards freedom from disappointment.

This foundation is spelled out in the *nidāna* sequence. With ignorance as a condition, there are the volitional processes; with the processes as condition, there is consciousness, etc.,<sup>67</sup> and ‘this is the origin (*samudaya*) of the whole mass of disappointment (*dukkhakkhandā*)’.<sup>68</sup> And of course with the ceasing of these the whole mass of disappointment ceases.<sup>69</sup> The abbreviations are in the Pāli text, which tells us that by the time it was composed the sequence was standardised.

I now need to deal with the possible objection I flagged in my introduction. It is traditional to see the twelve-fold *nidāna* sequence as being a particular application of *paṭicca-samuppāda* the general formulation of which is the well know phrase:

*imasmiṃ sati, idaṃ hoti; imass’uppādā, idaṃ uppajjati.*  
*imasmiṃ asati, idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodha, idaṃ nirujjhati.*<sup>70</sup>

Eviatar Shulman makes a very salient point with respect to this formula which is that in all but one case these words are followed by “*yadidaṃ, avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā...*”. That is the so-called general formula is quoted and followed by the twelve *nidānas* with the conjunction *yadidaṃ*. As Shulman says:

If *yad idaṃ* meant ‘for example’ or ‘such as,’ we could accept the view that the 12 links are a private case of a general principle of conditionality. But it clearly does not. What it does express is more akin to ‘that is,’ or more precisely ‘that which is’. Hence it should be clear that the abstract formula relates precisely and only to the mutual conditioning of the 12 links.<sup>71</sup>

The single exception is in the *Cūlasakuludāyi Sutta* (MN 79) which Shulman dismisses as being intimately related with the subject matter of the 12 *nidānas* anyway – i.e. rebirth. To be precise it occurs in the context of a discussion of questions concerning past and future existences. The Buddha tells Udāyin to forget about the past and the future and says he will teach him *dhamma* and cites the *idaṃ hoti* phrase. (M ii.32). However Udāyin is not ready for this teaching and the conversation turns to what his current teacher says and a Socratic style deconstruction of it. That is to say the Buddha offers Udāyin the pith teaching, but in the end has to deal with other matters and takes a different approach.

Shulman’s conclusion is quite a radical re-reading of the traditional interpretation of this teaching. I accept his conclusion because the texts support it. The general principle is not

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<sup>67</sup> S ii.16: *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā; saṅkhārāpaccayā viññāṇaṃ pe...*

<sup>68</sup> S ii.16: *evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo hoti.*

<sup>69</sup> S ii.16: *evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho hoti.*

<sup>70</sup> e.g. at M i.263, M ii.32, iii.63 etc.

<sup>71</sup> Shulman 2007, p.307.

in fact a general principle but only applies to how *saṅkhārā* is connected with *avijjā*, and how *viññāna* to *saṅkhārā*, etc. I think this eliminates the objection, and at the same time reinforces the central thesis I am proposing. Shulman indeed draws the same conclusion: “There is no reason to believe that dependent-origination originally discussed anything but mental conditioning.”<sup>72</sup>

The *nidāna* sequence can be, and has been, interpreted in a number of ways, not all of which suggest a theory of everything. The received tradition sees the *nidāna* sequence stretch over three lifetimes; as an application of the principle of *paṭicca-samuppāda* to the process of rebirth as well as a generalised theory of everything. However when we look at the canonical texts it is not apparent that they were intended to be read this way – the three lifetimes model does not emerge naturally from the sutta references, but must be read back into them which creates a number of philosophical problems. Various approaches to interpreting the *nidāna* chain have been surveyed by Dhīvan Thomas Jones (2009a).

In contemporary Theravāda exegesis the three-lifetimes interpretation has been challenged by Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa and Bhikkhu Ñāṇavīra. Buddhādāsa decried the three-lifetimes interpretation as a “cancer” on the basis that spreading the links over three lifetimes means that criteria of the Dhamma being self-evident (*sandiṭṭhika*) and timeless (*akālika*) are denied – if essential parts of the process happened in a previous life then they are neither self-evident, nor timeless. Buddhādāsa saw the process of dependent arising happening in the present moment and related to the ‘birth’ of the ‘I’ conceit (*asmimāna*).<sup>73</sup>

Ñāṇavīra, like Buddhādāsa, emphasised that the Dhamma is supposed to be self-evident and timeless. He denied that the *nidāna* sequence describes “a causally related sequence of temporally successive phenomena”<sup>74</sup> One problem he identified was that *vipāka* sometimes apparently ripens a long time after an action – perhaps even in some distant future life. This disconnection means that *paṭicca-samuppāda* cannot be describing the *kamma/vipāka* process. Rather the sequence described something more like the construction of a house – the roof is not put on as a result of having walls, but rather is constructed upon the. The *nidāna* elements, then, are “structurally related phenomena that make up the lived experience of an ordinary human being, meaning, the experience of being a self, a ‘someone’, an ‘I’.”<sup>75</sup> Note that neither Buddhādāsa and Ñāṇavīra appear to see *paṭicca-samuppāda* as a theory of everything.

Elsewhere Joanna Jurewicz has attempted to show that the choice of terms for the *nidāna* elements are related to pre-existing Vedic terms in such a way as to make the *nidāna* comprehensible as a parody.<sup>76</sup> This research has been hailed by Richard Gombrich who describes Jurewicz as having ‘deciphered the original meaning of the chain of dependent origination’ and devotes a chapter in his recent book *What the Buddha Thought* to her ideas.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Shulman 2007, p. 307.

<sup>73</sup> Jones 2009a: 245-7.

<sup>74</sup> Jones 2009a: 248

<sup>75</sup> Jones 2009a: 248.

<sup>76</sup> Jurewicz 2000.

<sup>77</sup> Gombrich 2009: ix; and chp 9 ‘Causation and Non-Random Process’.

However in an unpublished dissertation Jones (2009b) has argued for a more cautious approach to the ‘parody’ interpretation because the evidence for it is rather circumstantial and “the early discourses appear to preserve very few clues that [parody] was the Buddha’s aim”.<sup>78</sup> I don’t see any suggestion of a parody in the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, but then in this text the *nidāna* chain is abbreviated and this suggests that it was already formulaic by the time the *sutta* was composed. This text is more like a reminder than a revelation.

There is another possible interpretation. Rather than being a *definition* of any process the twelfefold *nidāna* can be seen as the basis of a meditation practice – the starting point for a guided reflection on the nature of experience, and not definitional at all. Perhaps the model to some extent represents what actually happens *in* experience, but what is meaningful is the experience *of* reflecting on the sequence. In this view *paṭicca-samuppāda* is more like a recipe which must be followed in order to bake the cake, rather than a description of the cake.

## All Things

To sum up the argument of the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*: right-view is seeing with full understanding (*sammappaññāya passato*) that ‘this world’ – i.e. the world of experience which arises through the interaction between subject and object – is not characterised by existence and/or non-existence, but by arising and passing away; and having no doubt or uncertainty that what arises and passes away is disappointment itself. ‘The world’ and *dukkha* are synonymous. The Buddha, being primarily (or perhaps solely) concerned with relieving *dukkha*, focussed on the processes which give rise to it rather than grand metaphysical narratives. We could describe *dukkha* as a dysfunctional relationship to the process of becoming, as seeing existence and non-existence where there is only arising and passing away of disappointment. This dysfunction (*avijjā*) wounds us psychically. Breaking out of this worldview requires us to understand the way experiences arise and pass away in dependence on conditions, which is what the *nidāna* chain models.

These points are relatively passé. Sue Hamilton (2000) has discussed this interpretation at length; in many ways I am rehearsing her arguments, and drawing on much the same material to do so. She says, for example, that the Buddha’s teachings were seeking to direct attention “to understanding the nature and mechanics of experience, by means of one’s cognitive process” (p.115). That the Buddhist teachings apply to the world of experience is I hope established. However if all the ‘things’ that arise are just (disappointing) experiences, then we need to look again at the statement that “all conditioned things are impermanent” to see whether ‘all conditioned things’ has the same referent here. At Dhammapada 277 it is *saṅkhārā* that are impermanent (*anicca*) and translated as ‘all conditioned things’.

I have already mentioned that *saṅkhāra* is explained by *cetanā*. At S iii.60 the Buddha asks this question “what are *saṅkhārā*?” and his answer is given in terms of six kinds of *cetanā*, one each associated with the six modes of sensory perception. *Cetanā* derives from

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<sup>78</sup> Jones 2009b: 62.

the root  $\sqrt{cit}$  which also gives us the words *citta* 'mind' and *ceto* 'thought'.<sup>79</sup> The root  $\sqrt{cit}$  is defined in the dictionary as "knowing; thought, intellect, spirit, soul", but also "to perceive, fix the mind upon, attend to, be attentive, observe, take notice of"; and "to aim at, intend, design; to be anxious about, care for; to resolve". So  $\sqrt{cit}$  concerns what catches our attention on the one hand, and what we move towards on the other; or what is on our minds, and what motivates us (emotions are what 'set us in motion'). Hence *cetanā* is translated as 'volition' or 'will'; and hence *saṅkhārā*, being explained in terms of *cetanā*, is also translated as 'volitions' in this context. This suggests that *saṅkhārā* the 'conditioned things' which are impermanent, also belong to the sphere of experience – *saṅkhārā* are not 'things' in the sense of external objects. However many of the metaphors for conditioned things are objects. The classic example being the chariot in the Vajirā Sutta (SN 5:10; PTS S i.136) which I have already cited above.

Let me take this suggestion further by proposing a thought experiment. Imagine a diamond in ancient India at the dawn of the second urbanisation; say around 1500 BCE. It is polished and sparkling (though probably not cut). At this time we only have our senses with which to examine it: there are no microscopes or lens. Also we have no theoretical view that might help us understand the object: no theory of atoms and forces, no chemistry or physics to speak of. The diamond is handed down from generation to generation, each new recipient marvelling at the stone's beauty. Part of the value of a gemstone is that time does not diminish or tarnish it. After many generations no one can remember when it was found and polished, or any other details of its provenance.<sup>80</sup> It is as it is, and always has been as far as anyone knows or can tell. The Buddha is born a thousand years after the diamond is first found, and meets the present owner of it. He sees it, holds it. He questions the owner about it. For all intents and purposes he establishes that the diamond has never changed (in living memory) and as far as anyone knows there is no real prospect of it ever changing.

Even modern technology would be hard pressed to measure natural changes in a diamond on the scale of a human lifespan, or even on the scale of human civilisation – naturally occurring diamonds are typically millions of years old already. Although we know that diamonds *can* change if we apply external force or heat, if left alone they are incredibly inert, and do not change *spontaneously* in ways we could detect.

In effect, then, to the unaided modern eye, as to the ancient Indian eye the diamond *does not change*. The very existence of something as stable as a diamond points to a fatal flaw in the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence *if it is concerned with an external reality*. From the point of view of someone living in Iron Age India, then, the proposition that "everything changes" is actually false. This is the falsifiable conjecture I referred to in my introduction. At this point we might be prepared to invoke modern scientific insights to save

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<sup>79</sup> The etymology of *citta/cetas* is complex in that they are clearly linked concepts though traditional grammars say there are two roots:  $\sqrt{cit}$  'to perceive, know'; and  $\sqrt{cint}$  'to think'. They are obviously originally one and the same. PED notes that *cit* is likely to be the older of the two forms since it is sometimes explained in terms of *cint*, but never the other way around. (s.v. *cinteti* p.269a). Whitney (1885, p.47) concurs that *cint* derives from *cit*.

<sup>80</sup> There are a number of famous diamonds in modern times with histories spanning several centuries, but whose origins are now obscure. See for instance Balfour (1997).

the day. And yes through the sensitive instruments of scientists we can demonstrate that atoms are never static. But this does not solve the problem because it would suggest that the Buddha was simply speculating, and happened to get it right by accident; or that he was omniscient or at least hyperscient. Either of these positions is problematic for a number of reasons which I've already explored to some extent. However we need not dwell on this.

Consider that even when a diamond stays stable, the consciousness arising in dependence on it continues to fluctuate because the object is only one part of the equation. Our relationship to the diamond is affected by the physical environment: light, setting, air quality; by our relationship to the diamond: ownership, proximity, personal wealth, social status; by psychological factors: our mood, aesthetic sensibility, attitude to wealth, our needs, and quite importantly *where our attention is at any given moment*. Attention creates a constantly shifting gestalt. Our 'world' in this sense is always changing, even when the object of consciousness, the external physical world, is not observably changing. The implication is that the only way for the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence to be self-consistent is if it applies to this world of experience arising out of the interaction between the subject and object, and *only* this world. As a theory of everything *paṭicca-samuppāda* fails.

This is not to say that we do not observe physical change, or cause and effect. We do. However consider that the European intellectual tradition has been aware of the changing nature of things for many centuries, from the same time period the Buddha lived, without it resulting in the kind of breakthrough we associate with the Buddha.<sup>81</sup> Plato records in the *Cratylus*: "Heraclitus says, you know, that all things move and nothing remains still, and he likens the universe to the current of a river, saying that you cannot step twice into the same stream." Galileo, discussing change and the possibility of an unchanging heaven, compares a changing world with an unchanging diamond:

"Those who so greatly exalt incorruptibility, inalterability, etc., are reduced to talking this way, I believe, by their great desire to go on living, and by the terror they have of death... There is no doubt whatever that the earth is more perfect the way it is, being alterable, changeable, etc., than it would be if it were a mass of stone or even a solid diamond, and extremely hard and invariable."<sup>82</sup>

Galileo was very much aware of change in the universe – his whole reputation in the history of ideas is that he observed change and insisted on it, especially where orthodoxy said there could be none. Newton was also an acute observer of change and in his laws of motion provided mathematical formalism for ideas first proposed by Galileo. Newton and Leibniz simultaneously developed a mathematics to describe changing systems – the calculus. Following the discovery of atoms we now understand, for example, the phenomena of temperature in terms of the motions of atoms and molecules – even atoms bound up in

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<sup>81</sup> Fowler (1921). Note that Heraclitus is thought to have died around the time the Buddha was born.

<sup>82</sup> cited in Klein and Lachièze-Rey 1999, p.33.

molecules or trapped in crystals continue to vibrate.<sup>83</sup> The cessation of motion is only possible at theoretical ‘absolute zero’ temperature. Furthermore within the atom we understand subatomic particles to be in constant motion. At the other end of the scale cosmologists tell us that the entire universe is expanding. The physical sciences have for centuries focussed on motion, change, and transformation.

That things change, that *everything* changes is not profound Eastern wisdom: it is a truism. There are superficial similarities between the Buddhist worldview and the findings of science, but one is ideological and one empirical. Buddhists were not in a position to observe that everything changes, and the claim is simply an extension and generalisation of the observations made by the Buddha about the mind. Indeed the ancients must have observed, like Galileo, that a diamond does not change, until scientists made the observations that revolutionised the modern worldview by showing that it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even so, such observations are not direct and must be taken on faith by the vast majority of people. The Buddhist response to the notion that the Western intellectual tradition has long been aware that everything changes is that we do not *act* as though we believe it. This only takes us back to the notion that the Buddha’s focus was on our relationship to experience, rather than the nature of reality – that we know things change but act as though they do not is not an insight into ‘Reality’, but an insight into human behaviour. The physical sciences provides us with a far more searching, comprehensive and useful analysis of the physical world than traditional Buddhism.

At the beginning of this essay I cited the words of physicist John Barrow on the search for a theory of everything. His book finishes with the words: “There is no formula that can deliver all truth, all harmony, all simplicity. No Theory of Everything can ever provide all insights.”<sup>84</sup> His objection is not that the various theories of science cannot be unified, but that such unification will not fulfil promise of explaining everything. Recently Stephen Hawking has made much the same argument.<sup>85</sup>

Treating *paṭicca-samuppāda* as a theory of everything creates metaphysical problems because it strays out of the natural realm for its application. Like physicists we ask too much of our theory, we move beyond what it can realistically tell us, and imagine a situation in which we will have full knowledge of the universe – effective omniscience.

I have attempted to show that the paradigm argued for by Sue Hamilton on the basis of a hermeneutic of experience – i.e. taking the Buddha as primarily or only talking about experience – provides a coherent view of Buddhist doctrine, and is broadly supported by early Buddhist texts. It may be that there are further doctrinal objections to be dealt with, and more work is required to establish how this reading might affect Buddhism in practice – how would we characterise ethics and meditation in this view? It clearly must affect our understanding of the nature of the Buddha’s awakening.

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<sup>83</sup> This physical fact is seized upon by the New Age, and blended with Hindu mysticism to create the idea of healing crystals.

<sup>84</sup> Barrow p.246.

<sup>85</sup> Hawking and Mlodinow. (2010)

I suggest that Hamilton's paradigm should be attractive to Western practitioners since it tends away from seeing *bodhi* in metaphysical, mystical or magical terms without devaluing or diminishing the achievement or its significance for humanity. *Bodhi* seen in this way is not only comprehensible, but it is clearly a realistic and rational goal for people to aspire to. It also cedes to science the study and description of the physical universe, and thus avoids one of the main pitfalls for religions in the modern era. But it clearly offers a pivotal role for Buddhist practice in how we relate to the world of the senses, and offers a potential revolution in perception and in well-being.

## Abbreviations

CST	Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tripiṭaka, Version 4.0.
M	Majjhima Nikāya
MMK	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā aka Madhyamakaśāstra
PED	Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary
PTS	Pali Text Society, especially PTS editions of the Pāli Tipiṭaka
SA	Samyutta Aṭṭhakathā
S	Samyutta Nikāya

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