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THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN EMPTINESS, DEPENDENT ORIGINATION, AND NIRVĀNA IN EARLY BUDDHIST LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

The *Śūnyatā* (Sanskrit) or *Suññatā* (Pāli) is a recurring theme in Buddhist texts, and it is mostly connected to the discourses believed to be given by the Buddha that have been compiled as *Mahāyāna Sūtras*. Later, the *Madhyamaka* school that *Ācārya Nāgārjuna* founded further developed *Śūnyatā* as a philosophical doctrine. The concept of emptiness in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism has been studied in many contexts in the past; however, the antecedents of the concept in early Buddhist schools have received little attention and require further investigation. The concept of emptiness in early Buddhism is about the wisdom or right view that leads to the mind being completely emptied of self-attachment, emptied of the two extremes, and thus attaining the highest peaceful state, completely free from anxiety or distress. Moreover, Dependent Origination (P. *paṭiccasamuppada*, Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*) is one of the fundamental principles of the Buddha's teachings. In SN 12.65 and SĀ 287, Buddha states that the realization of Dependent Origination leads to "nirvāna" (P. *nibbāna*, Skt. *nirvāna*), and it can be postulated that both Dependent Origination and *nirvāna* are associated with emptiness. This study seeks to investigate the correspondence between the concepts of Dependent Origination, *Nirvāna*, and Emptiness through a comparative analysis of Pāli and Chinese texts.

ABSTRACT

Śūnyatā has been one of the central themes in the large corpus of the teachings of the Buddha. Furthermore, it is presented in various ways in different discourses of Buddhist *Sūtras*, giving one the freedom to interpret its intended connotative meaning. This research, therefore, aims to look deeper into the correspondence between the concepts of Dependent Origination, *Nirvāna*, and Emptiness on the model of a comparative study of the Pāli and Chinese texts. Because if the researcher considers and emphasizes the Pāli sources without comparing them to the Chinese version, then one is studying Pāli Buddhism, not early Buddhism. For studying early Buddhism, paying attention to both the Pāli and Chinese versions of the early canon is essential.

Dependent Origination: According to SN 12.65¹ and SĀ 287², when the Buddha attained enlightenment, he discovered that the entire phenomenal world is Dependent. Then he proclaimed, revealed, and taught this realization that leads to *nirvāna*. According to SN 12.21, Dependent Origination refers to this principle: "When this exists, that exists; this arises, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist; this ceasing, that ceases".³ This statement refers, in particular, to the origin of suffering (*dukkha*) and the cessation of suffering. The Buddha refers to this principle as "The ancient path of the Exalted One" (*purāṇamaggo purāṇañjaso pubbakehi sammāsambuddhehi*). According to both texts SN 12.65 and SĀ 287, after having discovered and fully realized the *dharma* of Dependent Origination in his meditation, the Buddha says:

Likewise, *bhikkhus*, I have seen the ancient path, the ancient path followed by the Perfectly Enlightened Ones of the past. And what

¹Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 601-604.

²SĀ 287 at T02, no. 99, p. 80b24

³SN 12.21 Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 552. And, SN 12.61, Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 596.

is the ancient way, the ancient way? It is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I have followed this path, and through it, I have directly come to know aging and death, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. I directly recognized birth ... existence. . clinging ... desire ... feeling ... contact ... six sense bases ... name-and-form ... consciousness ... volitional formations, their origin, their cessation, and the path leading to their cessation.⁴

A representative formulation of Dependent Origination lists twelve factors⁵; however, in early Buddhist texts, this representative formulation is not constant. In addition to the usual twelve factors, there are also descriptions that list five factors⁶, eight⁷, nine⁸, ten⁹, eleven factors¹⁰.

SN 12.20¹¹ and its Chinese counterpart SĀ 296¹² as well as SĀ 299¹³ states that Dependent Origination is not something created by the Buddha himself or others: whether the Buddha arises in the world or not, it is a state of *dharma* (P. *dhamaññhitatā*, Skt. *dharma-sthititā*), the certainty of *dharma* (P. *dhama-niyāmatā*, Skt. *dharma-niyāmatā*), the fact of causation (P. *idappaccayatā*) element (nature) of *dharma* (Skt. *dharma -dhātu*). In other words, the texts in the *Pāli* and Chinese versions record that Dependent Origination is the principle of nature, of phenomena as they are. In SN 20.7, the Buddha says: “Those discourses delivered by the *Tathāgata* (Buddha) are profound, deep in meaning, supramundane (*lokuttarā*), associated with emptiness (*suññatā*,-*paṭisaṃyuttā*), are being recited, they will not be eager to listen to them, nor apply their mind to understand them, and they will not think those teaching should be studied and mastered.¹⁴ Discourse (*suttanta*) means the teachings or *dharma* of the Buddha. This teaching is profound, it has profound meaning because it is transcendental and connected to emptiness. As shown above, the Buddha used Dependent Origination as the basis for teaching the *dharma* (nature of phenomena) that leads to *nirvāna* (cessation of suffering), so the *dharma* of Dependent Origination is also profound. Thus, two profound *dharma*s are associated with emptiness: Dependent Origination and *nirvāna*. In SN 6. 1, the

Buddha says:

I have penetrated this *dharma* which is profound, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond the realm of thought, subtle, realizable only by the wise. ... namely causation: Dependent Origination (*idappaccayatā: paṭiccasamuppādo*). Even this is difficult to see, namely the stilling of all activities, the renunciation of all impurities, the extinction of craving, detachment, cessation: *nirvāna* (*sabbasañhārasamatho sabbupadhi-paṭinissaggo taṇhakkhayo virāgo nirodho: nibbānaṃ*).¹⁵

Similarly, in SĀ 293, the Buddha says:

I teach the monks this *dharma*: noble, transcendental, connected with emptiness, according to the *dharma* of Dependent Origination.... Profound is this, namely, Dependent Origination; still deeper and more difficult to see, namely, renunciation of all attachments, extinction of craving, fading away of desire, cessation: *nirvāna*¹⁶. Indeed, these two *dharma*s are composed (Skt. *samskrta*, P. *samkhata*, i.e., Dependent Origination) and un compounded (Skt. *Asaṃskṛta*, P. *Asaṃkhata*, i.e., *nirvāna*) compounded arises, persists, changes, passes away. The un compounded is not arising, persisting, changing, or passing away.¹⁷

All mentioned above indicate that the discourses in the *Pāli* and Chinese versions record that the Buddha used Dependent Origination to show the way to *nirvāna*, stating that both Dependent Origination and *nirvāna* are profound and connected to emptiness. These two versions also show that he denoted that one should first realize the *dharma* (nature of phenomena) of Dependent Origination and then attain the wisdom of *nirvāna*.

Dependent Origination, Nirvāna, and Emptiness: The meditative concentration on emptiness or “*suññatāvihāra*” (abode of emptiness), “emptiness” means “absence of desire (*taṇhā*) or desire (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*)”; and in the term “*suñña-loka*” (empty world), “emptiness” means “non-self.” These two meanings of “emptiness” refer to the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*) or the world (*loka*). However, the complete cessation of desire or craving, hatred, and delusion manifests the supramundane emptiness, *nirvāna*: *asaṃkhata* (uncompounded, unconditioned, absolute). The definition of “*nirvāna*” is: “extinction of desire” (*taṇhakkhayo*), and this is identical to the definition of “*asaṃkhata*”: “extinction of desire, extinction of hatred, extinction of delusion” (*rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo*) (SN 38.1).¹⁸ Thus, of the above two meanings, emptiness as “not-self” is of crucial importance to the vision of the *suñña-loka* (empty world), but the “complete disappearance of desire” is crucial because of its association with the “uncompounded” *nirvāna*. “Emptiness” refers to *nirvāna*, the uncompounded, the supramundane, because the supramundane is desireless. “Emptiness” also refers to Dependent Origination, the compound world (*loka*): the compound world is empty of itself (the “empty world” of *suñña-loka*), and when one sees this, one can develop the emptiness that consists in the cessation of all defilements (*kilesa*) and all suffering (*dukkha*); one can attain *nirvāna*.

Dependent Origination is profound and has a deep meaning because of the connection with emptiness, profundity *nirvāna*, based on this principle: “When this exists, that exists; this arising, that arising” - indicating the origin of suffering: the world (*loka*); “when this does not exist, that does not exist; this cessation, that ceases” (SN 12.61),¹⁹ - indicating the cessation of suffering: *nirvāna*. Emptiness is

⁴Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 603.

⁵(1) actions (*samkhārā*), conditioned by ignorance (*avijjā*), arise (or exist); (2) conditioned by activities, consciousness arises (*viññāna*); (3) consciousness-conditioned by name-and-material-form (*nāma-rūpa*) arises; (4) conditioned by name-and-material form, the six sense-spheres (*saḷāyatana*) arise; (5) conditioned by the six sense spheres, contact (*phassa*) arises; (6) conditioned by contact, sensation (*vedanā*) arises; (7) conditioned by feeling arises craving (*taṇhā*); (8) conditioned by craving, attachment (*upādāna*) arises; (9) conditioned by attachment arises becoming (*bhava*); (10) conditioned by becoming arises birth (*jāti*); (11) arise conditioned by birth; (12) aging and death along with grief, lamentation, pain, depression, and despair (*jarā-maraṇa-soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassa-upāyāsa*); thus arises (exists) this whole mass of suffering.

⁶Without the factors of 1. Ignorance, 2. Activities, 3. Consciousness, 4. Name and material form, 5. Six sense spheres, 6. Contact, and, 7. Feeling. In SĀ 283 at T02, no. 99, p. 79a25 and the Pāli counterpart SN 12.57. 592.

⁷Without the factors of 1. Ignorance, 2. Activities, 3. Consciousness, 4. Name and material form. In SN. 12.12, 541 and Chinese counterpart SĀ 372 at T02, no. 99, p. 102a12

⁸Without the factors of 1. Ignorance, 2. Activities, 3. Consciousness. In SĀ 284 at T02, no. 99, p. 79b23; and the Pāli counterpart SN 12.58, 592.

⁹Without the factors of 1. Ignorance, 2. Activities. In SĀ 288 at T02, no. 99, p. 81a9 and the Pāli counterpart SN 12.67, 607.

¹⁰Without the factors of: 1. Ignorance. In SĀ 367atT02, no. 99, p. 101b8 and the Pāli counterpart SN 12.84, 620.

¹¹Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 511.

¹²SĀ 296 at T02, no. 99, p. 84b12

¹³SĀ 299 at T02, no. 99, p. 85b21

¹⁴*Evameva kho, bhikkhave, bhavissanti bhikkhū anāgatamaddhānaṃ, ye te sutt antātathāgatabhāsītā gambhūrā gambhūratthā lokuttarā suññatappaṭisaṃyuttā, tesubhaññamānesu na sussūsīsanti na sotam odahissanti na aññā cittaṃ upaṭṭhāpessanti na cate dhamme ug gahetabbaṃ pariyāpuniitabbaṃ maññissanti.*

Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 709.

¹⁵Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 231.

¹⁶SĀ 293at T02, no. 99, p. 83c2-15

¹⁷T02, no. 99, p. 83c13-17

¹⁸Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 1294

¹⁹Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 596.

therefore based on Dependent Origination to connect with the composite: the world (*loka*), the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), and the un compounded: *nirvāṇa*. Dependent Origination is, therefore, the compounded and un compounded principle.

The discourses in the *Pāli* and Chinese versions record that the Buddha used Dependent Origination to show the way to *nirvāṇa*, stating that both Dependent Origination and *nirvāṇa* are profound and connected to emptiness. These two versions also show that he indicated that one should first realize the *dharma* (nature of phenomena) of Dependent Origination and then attain the wisdom of *nirvāṇa*. For example, on SN 12. 70²⁰ and SĀ 347²¹, he says that “*Susīma*, first [one gain] knowledge of the state of *dharma* (the nature of phenomena), then [there is] knowledge of *nirvāṇa*.”²²

‘Knowledge of the state of *dharma*’ (P. *dhamma-ṭhiti-nāṇa*, Skt. *dharma-sthiti-jñāna*) refers to knowledge of the *dharma* of Dependent Origination.²³ According to both the *Pāli* and Chinese texts (SN 12. 70 and SĀ 347), a person who attains this knowledge of the state of *dharma* is called ‘one who is wisdom liberated’ (P. *pañña-vimutta*, Skt. *Prajñā-vimukta*), so the person who attains “knowledge of *nirvāṇa*” (P. *nibbāna-nāṇa*, Skt. *nirvāṇa-jñāna*) which comes after he has “knowledge of the state of *dharma*” is called “one who has twofold-liberation” (P. *ubhatobhāga-vimutta*, Skt. *Ubhayato-bhāga-vimukta*).²⁴ Both “the liberation of wisdom” (P. *pañña-vimutti*, Skt. *Prajñā-vimukti*) and “twofold- liberation” (P. *ubhatobhāga-vimutti*, Skt. *ubhayatobhāga-vimukti*) entails first the knowledge of the *dharma* of Dependent Origination and then the knowledge of the *dharma* of *nirvāṇa*.

Dependent Origination and Impermanent: Realizing the *dharma* of Dependent Origination is the first step to understanding the profound *dharma*s of Dependent Origination and *nirvāṇa*, which are empty; however, since there are different levels at which the “emptiness” of Dependent Origination can be understood in early Buddhist texts, to observe the meaning of emptiness it is necessary to view it both from the point of view of impermanent (P. *anicca*, Skt. *anitya*) and from the point of view of the middle path (P. *maijhīmā paṭipadā*, Skt. *madhyamā pratipadā*). In other words, Dependent Origination is associated with emptiness both based on “impermanence” and the “middle way.” The Buddha’s path to liberation (*vimutti*) begins with recognizing suffering as the essence of life. From the point of view of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*),²⁵ one must attain full knowledge (*pariñeyya*)²⁶:

- (1) Fully knowledge (*pariñā*) of suffering (*dukkha*),
- (2) Removal (*pahāna*) of the origin of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*)
- (3) Attainment (*sacchikiriya*) of the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*) and,
- (4) Development (*bhāvanā*) of the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-paṭipadā*).²⁷

These Four Noble Truths apply an easier way to understand the principle of Dependent Origination to show how suffering arises and

how it can be stopped. Still, it is easy to overlook the fact that suffering (“the world”) and *nirvāṇa* (the supramundane) are based on the same principle. Seeing the nature of phenomena, developing the wisdom (*pañña*) that is associated with the cessation of suffering or a mind freed from the “flow of suffering” (*anāsavacittassa*), is identified as the noble, supramundane “right view” (*sammādiṭṭhi*).²⁸ This right view is said to be a leader or predecessor (*pubbaṅgama*) on the path to the cessation of suffering to liberation.²⁹ Consequently, seeing and knowing compounded nature as suffering is a significant observation in Buddhist thought. Dependent Origination shows that all compounded things are impermanent (*anicca*), and because they are impermanent, they also suffer. For example, in SN 12.20, after explaining Dependent Origination, the Buddha says:

And what, monks, is the *dharma* of “arisen by condition” (*paṭiccasamutpāda*)? Aging and death (and birth, becoming, attachment, desire, feeling, contact, the six sense spheres, name and material form, consciousness, activities, ignorance) are impermanent (*aniccam*), compounded things (or conditioned things, *saṅkhatam*), arising by condition (*paṭiccasamuppannam*), having the nature of perishability, (*khayadhammam*), the nature of decay (*vayadhammam*), fading away (*virāgadhammam*), cessation (*nirodhadhammam*).³⁰ These words are lacking in Chinese counterpart (SĀ 296).³¹ However, Dependent Origination implies compounded things are impermanent and subject to growth and decay, fading away, cessation, and renunciation can be seen in SĀ 283³² and many other texts in both *Pāli* and Chinese versions. Dependent Origination suggests that compounded things “arising by condition” are impermanent and thus have a perishable nature, a nature of decay, fading away, and cessation. The view that “that which is impermanent is suffering” can be seen in many texts of both the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* and the *Pāli Samyutta-nikāya*. For example, SN 36.11 and the Chinese counterpart SĀ 474 state that there are three kinds of feeling, but “whatever we feel is in suffering” (*yaṃ kiñci vedayitam taṃ dukkhasmin*). The reason why the Buddha states any sensation one experiences are in suffering in SN 36. 11: “Monk! Regarding the impermanence of compounded things, I said that whatever we feel is within suffering. Monk! About the perishable nature of compounded things, their nature of decay, fading away, ceasing, changing for the worse, I said that whatever we feel is suffering within.”³³

In the Chinese version SĀ 474 states:

The Buddha said to *Ānanda*: Because all compounded things (Skt. *saṃskārāḥ*) are impermanent (Skt. *anitya*), all compounded things naturally change, I said that all feelings are suffering. Also, *Ānanda*, because of the gradual stopping of compounded things, and the gradual calming of compounded things, I said that all feelings suffer.³⁴

Thus, although the two versions differ in wording, they share the common view that compounded things are impermanent (*anicca*); therefore, all feelings are suffering (*dukkha*). This teaching of

²⁸ MĀ 189 at T01, no. 26, p. 735b27 and the *Pāli* counterpart MN 117, 934-935.

²⁹ SN 45.1, 1523 and the Chinese counterpart SĀ 749 at T02, no. 99, p. 198b14

³⁰ *Katame ca, bhikkhave, paṭiccasamuppannā dhammā? Jarāmarāṇam, bhikkh ave, aniccam saṅkhatam paṭiccasamuppannam khayadhammam vayadhammam virāgadhammam nirodhadhammam.* Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 551.

³¹ SĀ 296 at T02, no. 99, p. 84b12

³² SĀ 283 at T02, no. 99, p. 79a25. And, SĀ 284 at T02, no. 99, p. 79b23

³³ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 1271.

Vuttam kho panetaṃ, bhikkhu, mayā: ‘yaṃ kiñci vedayitam, taṃ dukkhasm in’ ti. Taṃ kho panetaṃ, bhikkhu, mayā saṅkhārāṇaṃ yeva aniccataṃ sand hāya bhāsitaṃ: ‘yaṃ kiñci vedayitam taṃ dukkhasm in’ ti. Taṃ kho panetaṃ, bhikkhu, mayā saṅkhārāṇaṃ yeva khayadhammataṃ ...pe ... vayadhamm ataṃ ...pe ... virāgadhammataṃ ...pe ... nirodhadhammataṃ ...pe ... vip ariṇāmadhammataṃ sandhāya bhāsitaṃ: ‘yaṃ kiñci vedayitam taṃ dukkhasm in’ ti.

³⁴ SĀ 474 at T02, no. 99, p. 121a26-28

²⁰ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 612.

²¹ SĀ 347 at T02, no. 99, p. 96b25

²² *pubbe kho Susīma dhammaṭṭhitiññāṇam pacchā nibbāne ñāṇanti*

²³ That is “*dhammaṭṭhitatā*” (the status of *dhamma*), in SN 12.20, 551. And its Chinese counterpart SĀ 299 at T02, no. 99, p. 85b21

²⁴ “twofold” because comprising both liberation through wisdom (*pañña-vimutti*), and meditative concentration (*samādhi*, state of concentrative meditation). In SN 8.7, 286 and the Chinese counterpart SĀ 1212 at T02, no. 99, p. 330a4

²⁵ SN 56.29, 1856 and the Chinese counterpart SĀ 382 at T02, no. 99, p. 104b13

²⁶ “To be known accurately” (adjective, gerundive of *parijānāti*), Davids T W Rhys and Wilhelm Stede, *Pāli-English Dictionary, Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede* (London: Published for the *Pāli* Text Society by Luzac, 1959), 968.

²⁷ SN 56.29, 1856 and the Chinese counterpart SĀ 382 at T02, no. 99, p. 104b13

suffering is expressed in terms of the “impermanence” of compounded nature: it is to be seen that impermanence is suffering in the nature of life. In other words, to know suffering in the nature of life is also to know that the “five aggregates,”³⁵ “six sense spheres,”³⁶ or “eighteen elements”³⁷ of Dependent Origination (compounded nature) are impermanent and that is the suffering of aging, death, sorrow, anxiety, depression, and suffering. This is the reality of the body and mind of sentient beings. The connection between impermanence and suffering is particularly in the sense that sentient beings are not aware of and unconsciously attach themselves to the impermanent nature of compounded things as mentally projecting a permanent entity (absolute essence) belonging to “myself.” Therefore, when compounded phenomena of attachments are constantly changing, or they become different, there is the suffering of grief, lamentation, pain, depression, and despair.³⁸ In other words, impermanence is suffering when one attaches (either internally or externally) to compounded phenomena as a self (entity) or as belonging to myself. This teaching about why sentient beings suffer impermanence is common to the Pāli and Chinese versions of the early Buddhist canon. Consequently, there is no doubt that impermanence is suffering in early Buddhist thought, as many early Buddhist texts say that “impermanence is suffering.”

Impermanent and Emptiness: We are concerned with how impermanence (and, therefore, suffering) is connected to emptiness. As noted above, in early Buddhism, “emptiness” has no-self as its primary meaning and *nirvāna* as its ultimate meaning. Thus the relationship between impermanence and emptiness is as stated in SĀ 270 that one who practices the perception of impermanence (*anicca-sañhā*) can create the perception of no-self (*anatta-sañhā*). The noble disciple's mind, which abides in the perception of non-self, is removed from self-conceit (*asmi-māna*) and passes into *nirvāna*.³⁹ The corresponding Pāli text, SN 22. 102, says that thus developed and practiced by monks, the perception of impermanence (*aniccasañhā*) exhausts all desire for sensuality (*kāmarāgam*), exhausts all desire for material form (*rūparāgam*), exhausts all desire to become (*bhavarāgam*), exhausts all ignorance (*avijjam*), removes all self-pride (*asmi-mānam*).⁴⁰ Similarly, another Pāli discourse, AN 9.3, states: “Meghiya, the one who thinks of impermanence, establishes the perception of no-self; thinking of non-self, rooting out self-pride attains *nirvāna* in this very life.”⁴¹ Thus, both the Chinese and Pāli versions record a close relationship between the idea of impermanence and the understanding of no-self (removal of self-pride) and *nirvāna*. Self-pride (*asmi-māna*)⁴² is the pride that attaches itself to the “I am”; it is egotism. Its removal is based on the insight of no-self (*anatta*). Exhausting all desire for sensuality, material form, and becoming, and all ignorance is the wisdom of liberation (*vimutti*). Seeing (*passati*) the nature of things as “impermanent” (= suffering) leads to the elimination of self-view and thus the realization of

nirvāna. Thus, for early Buddhism, this is the main way of “insight” (*vipassanā*)⁴³ leading to liberation. Insight into the compounded nature of the “five aggregates” or “six sense spheres” as impermanent is therefore called the “right view” (*sammādiṭṭhi*) in Early Buddhism.⁴⁴ And seeing that “the compounded nature is impermanent, that which is impermanent is suffering, that which is suffering is not-self” is also considered “right insight” or “right wisdom” (*sammappañña*).⁴⁵

Two formulations of the characteristics and emptiness

In early Buddhist texts, there are two formulations of these characteristics that can be observed in compounded things:

- (1) Impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), not-self (*anatta*).
- (2) Impermanent, suffering, empty (*suñña*), not-self.

The first formulation is the most common in both the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* and the Pāli *Samyutta nikāya*. These two versions contain frequent references to attaining liberation or *nirvāna* through insight into the “five aggregates” or “six sense-spheres” as “impermanent, suffering, and not-self.”⁴⁶ “Not-self” is also expressed as “not-belonging-to-self” (*anattaniya*) or “not-self and not-belonging to self, (*anattan-anattaniya*).⁴⁷ It is also defined in the *Samyutta nikāya* as “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself.”⁴⁸ The counterpart of this three-phase expression in the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* is: “this is self, this is not other than self, neither is self in this nor this in self.”⁴⁹ Set of three phrases – “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self” or “this is not self, this is not other than self, neither is self in this nor this in self” - is often seen in Pāli and Chinese versions.⁵⁰ By comparing the two traditions, it is therefore clear that this three-phase expression in early Buddhist texts has the same meaning as “not-self-and-not-belonging- self” “not-belonging-to-self” or just “not-self”; “impermanent, suffering, not-self” can be used as a set of principles for observing compounded nature. The Pāli tradition emphasizes only “impermanence, suffering and no-self,” while the Chinese tradition prefers the second four-term formulation, “impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self.” This is evident from the fact that these four terms often occur together as a set in Chinese texts⁵¹ but are not found together in Pāli, except in conjunction with other terms, as discussed below. These four terms sometimes occur in the corresponding Chinese and Pāli texts. For example, SĀ 259 states that the five aggregates should be seen as follows:

Five aggregates clinging like a disease, like a swelling, like an arrow, like a pain; as impermanence, as suffering, as emptiness, as not-self⁵² and the corresponding Pāli, SN 22.122, says that they should be seen thus: “A virtuous *Bhikkhu* should carefully attend to the five aggregates clinging as impermanence, as suffering, as sickness, as swelling, as an arrow, as pain, as illness, as alien, as decay, as emptiness, as not-

³⁵ *Pañca khandha*: 1. *Rūpa khandha* (material form aggregate), 1. *Vedāna khandha* (feeling aggregate), 3. *Sañhā khandha* (perception aggregate), 4. *Samkhāra khandha* (activity aggregate), 5. *Vīñhāna khandha* (consciousness aggregate). These emphasize psychological analysis SN 22. *Khandha Samyutta*, 853. And its Chinese counterpart SĀ 107 at T02, no. 99, p. 33a6

³⁶ *Saḷāyatana*: the six sense faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind faculty). These emphasize physiological analysis SN 35. 1-207, 1133 and their Chinese counterpart SĀ 188-255 at T02, no. 99, p. 49b7

³⁷ *Dhātu*. The eighteen elements are six sense faculties with six external objects producing six consciousness SN 14. Dhātu *Samyutta* 1-10, 627, and their Chinese counterparts SĀ 451-455 at T02, no. 99, p. 115c27.

³⁸ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 883 (SN 22.43) and the Chinese counterpart SĀ 36 at T02, no. 99, p. 8a21

³⁹ T02, no. 99, p. 71a1-2

⁴⁰ *evameva kho, bhikkhave, aniccasañhā bhāvitā bahulīkatā sabbam kāmarāgaṃ paṇīyādiyati, sabbam rūparāgam paṇīyādiyati, sabbam bhavarāgam paṇīyādiyati, sabbam avijjampariyādiyati, sabbam asmi-mānam samūhanati.* Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 962.

⁴¹ *Aniccasañhāno, meghiya, anattasañhā sañhātī. Anattasañhānt asmi-mānasamu gghātāṃ pāpuṇāti diṭṭheva dhamme Nibbānaṃ 'ti.* (AN 9.3) Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 358.

⁴² Or arrogance or self-conceit

⁴³ This term comes from *vi + passati*. “*Passati*” means “see”, and the prefix “*vi*” here means “completely”, or “clearly”, with means “to see clearly”; “to have intuition”, to obtain spiritual insight.

Davidson T W Rhys and Wilhelm Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (London: Published for the Pāli Text Society by Luzac, 1959), 1405.

⁴⁴ SN 35.156 -157, 1217 and its Chinese counterpart SĀ 188atT02, no. 99, p. 49b7

⁴⁵ SN 22.15, 869 and its Chinese Counterpart SĀ 9 at T02, no. 99, p. 2a2

⁴⁶ SĀ 316-318 at T02, no. 99, p. 91a2, and SN 22.15-20, 870-871.

⁴⁷ SN 22.33, 877. SN 22.69, 909, SN 22.89, 942. And, SĀ 9-12 at T02, no. 99, p. 2a2

⁴⁸ SN 22.45, 884.

⁴⁹ SĀ 84 at T02, no. 99, p. 21c5 and the Pāli counterpart SN 22.45, 884.

⁵⁰ SN 22.15-17, 869- 870. And, SĀ 199 at T02, no. 99, p. 50c27

⁵¹ SĀ 2 at T02, no. 99, p. 1a16

⁵² SĀ 259 at T02, no. 99, p. 65b14-15 and the counterpart MN 75, 615 has “*This body is a disease, a tumor, a dart, a calamity, and an affliction*”, not mention the four terms.

self.”⁵³ In both versions, the basic set of four terms, “impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self,” is supplemented with additional words, four in Chinese, and seven in *Pāli*, that graphically indicate the concreteness of suffering. Additional terms are also placed differently in the two texts; however, “emptiness” is clearly part of the standard set: “impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self.” Thus, the above two formulations, whether three or four, are found in both traditions in the teachings concerning “insight.” Here one must examine the inclusion of “emptiness” in the fourfold set: “impermanence, suffering, emptiness, not-self.” Do these different wordings represent significant differences in meaning? What is the meaning of the word order where emptiness precedes non self? And do emptiness and no-self have the same meaning or not?

The EĀ 37.10 version states in this context that “impermanence is suffering; suffering is not-self; not-self is emptiness;”⁵⁴ “emptiness is this is not myself/this is not mine, self is not in this /I am not this,”⁵⁵ or “emptiness is neither existence nor nonexistence, which also means no-self.”⁵⁶ Thus, the sequence of four terms established in the EĀ tradition is: “impermanence, suffering, no-self, emptiness”; “not-self” comes before “emptiness,” and “emptiness” is mainly defined as “not-self.” Also, as mentioned above, “not-self” or “not belonging to self” is the key meaning of “emptiness,” while “*nirvāṇa*” is its ultimate meaning. In early Buddhism, to see the nature of compounded things is to see “what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is not-self,” “Impermanence, suffering, not-self” is the basic way, perhaps the only way, of insight leading to *nirvāṇa*. It follows that the addition of “emptiness” next to “not-self” to make a four-term set is based on the narrow or basic meaning of “emptiness,” not the ultimate meaning. Emptiness here means only “no-self” and “not-belonging-self,” or it means a set of three phrases: “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self” / “this is not self, this is not other than self, neither is self in this nor this in self.” Therefore, a four-term expression with “emptiness” before “not-self” says no more than a three-membered expression. The meaning is simply: “impermanence, suffering, not-self.” In conclusion, realizing “emptiness” by viewing the nature of compounded things—“five aggregates,” “six sense spheres,”... as “impermanence” focuses on understanding “suffering” in the nature of life, which is not permanent or absolutely self. This leads to detachment from “suffering” by destroying self-attachment (craving) and then to *nirvāṇa* - the cessation of suffering - by self-attachment. Therefore, “impermanence” is an important concept for understanding the meaning of emptiness in early Buddhism.

Emptiness, Dependent Origination, and the middle path: The Buddha calls Dependent Origination the “middle path” (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) because it avoids extreme views that are based mainly on self-view (*attadiṭṭhi*). Insight into Dependent Origination as the middle path is equated with “right view” and *nirvāṇa*. This is clearly stated in SN 12.15:

At *Savāthi*. Then the Venerable *Kaccānagotta* approached the Exalted One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him: Venerable Sir, it is said, right view, right view. In what way, venerable sir, is there right view?

This world, *Kaccāna*, for the most part, depends upon a duality upon the notion of existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence regarding the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world

as really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence regarding the world.

This world, *Kaccāna*, is, for the most part, shackled by engagement, clinging, and adherence, underlying tendency; he does not take a stand about “myself.” He has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only suffering arising; what ceases is only suffering ceasing. His knowledge about this is independent of others. In this way, *Kaccāna*, there is a right view.

“All exists”: *Kaccāna*, this is one extreme. “all does not exist”: this is the second extreme, the *Tathāgata* teaches the *Dhamma* by the middle: “with ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volition formations as condition, consciousness... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, cessation of consciousness... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.”⁵⁷

The content of this *Pāli* text is almost the same as that of SĀ 301.⁵⁸ The term “neither existence nor non-existence” has the same meaning as *nirvāṇa*. As stated in 2.2.3, *nirvāṇa* is unconditioned and uncompounded, neither arising nor passing away. Also, according to SĀ 249,⁵⁹ *nirvāṇa* is neither existence (remainder), non-existence (no residue), not both existence and non-existence, and not neither existence nor non-existence. This insight into Dependent Origination as the middle way does not mean attachment to the middle ground or being unsure which side is right. It means to be devoid (empty) of two extremes: the self-based view of existence and the self-based view of non-existence. And this directly implies the meaning of *nirvāṇa*. In other words, “the middle path of Dependent Origination” has the same meaning as “the emptiness of *nirvāṇa*.” This approach to insight is very different from the approach that focuses on “impermanence (= suffering)” to eliminate self-view and thus lead to *nirvāṇa*. The path of the right view of Dependent Origination as the middle path involves directly seeing that there is neither existence nor non-existence in the nature of phenomena to directly see the emptiness or non-property of phenomena and thus attain *nirvāṇa*. Regarding this middle path of Dependent Origination, the question arises of connecting impermanence, no-self, and *nirvāṇa*. According to SN 22.90⁶⁰ and SĀ 262⁶¹, *Bhikkhu Chanda* (P. *Channa*), who has not yet attained the wisdom of *nirvāṇa*, asks various other *bhikkhus* to teach him the *dharma*. They teach him that material (rūpa), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*sañña*), activity (*saṅkhārā*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are impermanent (*anicca*) and, as compounded things, are not self (*anatta*)⁶². *Chanda* replies: I know that material form, feeling, perception, activity, and consciousness are impermanent and, being compounded things, are not self.⁶³ However, I (*Chanda*) do not understand and do not rejoice when I hear about “calming all activities, renunciation of all attachments, the destruction of craving, disappearance of desire, cessation: *nirvāṇa*.”⁶⁴ The Chinese version (SĀ 262) has: “emptiness of all activities, renunciation of attachment, destruction of craving, the disappearance of desire: *nirvāṇa*.” So where *Pāli* has “calming” (*samatha*), Chinese has “emptiness.”⁶⁵

⁵⁷Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 544.

⁵⁸SĀ 301 at T02, no. 99, p. 85c17

⁵⁹SĀ 249 at T02, no. 99, p. 59c27 and the *Pāli* counterpart AN 4.174. According to these, to say that in *nirvāṇa* there is remainder, or there is no remainder, or there both is and is not remainder, or there neither is nor is not remainder is all meaningless argumentation.

⁶⁰Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 946.

⁶¹SĀ 262 at T02, no. 99, p. 66b6

⁶²Here Chinese counterpart adds “*nirvāṇa* is cessation” in SĀ 262 at T02, no. 99, p. 66b14

⁶³Here Chinese counterpart adds “*nirvāṇa* is cessation” SĀ 262 at T02, no. 99, p. 66b16

⁶⁴*sabbasaṅkharasamathe sabbhūpadhi paṭinissagge taṇhakkhaye virāge nirodhe nibbāne*

⁶⁵SĀ 262 at T02, no. 99, p. 66b8-18

⁵³*bhikkhunā ime pañcupādānakkhandhāniccato dukkhato rogato gaṇdato sall ato aghato ābādhato parato palokato suññato anattatoyoniso manasi kātabbā.*

MN 64, 436; AN 4.124, 507; AN 9.36, 1298.

⁵⁴T02, no. 125, p. 678c28-29

⁵⁵T02, no. 125, p. 715b4-6

⁵⁶T02, no. 125, p. 678c28-29

Chanda's point is that all activities (compounded things, *saṅkhārā*) are impermanent, not self. Still, *nirvāna* is not characterized by impermanence and non self. So there is something, some metaphysical entity, that one can attain in the cessation of *nirvāna* (the end of suffering). If there is complete emptiness in *nirvāna*, then who is the self? Or what is self-seeing (*passati*) *dharma* (the nature of phenomena)? This means that the *dharma* of compounded nature (*saṅkhata*) and un-compounded nature (*asaṅkhata*) are divided into two different things. Chanda recognized the impermanence and non-self of compounded nature (*saṅkhata-dhamma*) as essential to the cessation of suffering. Still, he could not admit the un-compounded nature (*asaṅkhata-dhamma*) of *nirvāna*, where all activities are empty (or “calm”) of self. *Chanda*, with this doubt, goes to ask Venerable *Ānanda*. *Ānanda* tells him, I heard the Buddha teach the venerable *Kaccāyana* “This world, *Kaccāyana*, usually depends on two [extremes]: existence and non-existence... (the contents are given above)”. To resolve *Chanda's* misunderstanding of impermanence, no-self, and *nirvāna*, *Ānanda* helps him understand compounded nature (*saṅkhata* = Dependent Origination) as neither existence nor non-existence and also as the end of suffering: *nirvāna*. Extreme views of existence and non-existence come from the view of self (*atta-dīṭṭhi*). The cessation of self-view or desire, hatred, and delusion is the un-compounded or unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) *nirvāna* itself. This means: “When suffering arises, it arises; when suffering ceases, it ceases; there is neither arising nor ceasing, and there is neither existence nor non-existence (MN 22.90).⁶⁶ To see the rising of the world (*loka-samudaya*) from the point of view of the middle path of Dependent Origination is to be averse to the view of non-existence and not to give rise to the view of existence (eternalism) and to see the ceasing of the world (*loka-nirodha*) from the point of view of the middle path of Dependent Origination is to be aside from the view of existence and not to give rise to the view of non-existence (annihilationism). This means that the middle way of Dependent Origination points both to the origin of the world (existence) and to the end of the world (non-existence): the world is impermanent and empty of itself. Therefore, the world (*loka*) as an illusion is an unreal and unstable arising nature (= ceasing nature) and is neither existing nor non-existence. If one sees this and gets rid of the self-view, the two extreme views fade away, leading to the emptiness of *nirvāna*.

The characteristic of Middle path of Dependent Origination:

Early Buddhist texts present other characteristics of the “middle path of Dependent Origination.” The following are examples.

(1) The middle way of neither sameness nor difference. SĀ 297 says:

Then the Buddha said to the monks: I will teach you the *dharma*, namely: “*Dharma-Discourse on the Great Emptiness*” (Skt. *Mahāsuññata dharmaparyāya*) ... one who holds the view that the soul (or life or self, Skt. P. *jīva*) is the same as the body (Skt. *śarīra*, P. *sarīra*), it has no sense of a noble life. And for the one with a different opinion that says the soul is one thing and the body another, the noble life is also meaningless. When either of these two extremes does not govern the mind, it moves rightly towards the middle path, that is, the noble, supramundane, true nature of phenomena, without distortion, having the right view, namely: Conditioned by birth, aging, and death and similarly conditioned are birth, becoming, attachment, desire, feeling, contact, six sense-spheres, name-and-form, consciousness, and activities. Conditioned by ignorance, activities arise...when ignorance ceases, activities cease, and so on...and all this mass of suffering ceases. This is called the “*dharma discourse of great emptiness*.”⁶⁷

The Pāli counterpart, SN 12. 35-36⁶⁸, has almost the same content but lacks the words: “*Dharma-discourse of the Great Void*.” However, as noted in 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, both traditions have other texts in which the

Buddha takes Dependent Origination as the basis for the teaching associated with emptiness; and describes the meditative state of emptiness (*kong sanmei/suññatā-vihāra*) as the meditation abode of elders or great men (*mahāpurisa-vihāra*). Thus the use of the word “great emptiness” in SĀ 297 to denote the middle path of Dependent Origination is consistent with the terminology of early Buddhism.

(2) The middle way of neither eternalism nor annihilationism. In SĀ 300, the Buddha says:

To declare that the one who acts is [the same as] the one who experiences [the result] is to fall into the eternal view (P. *sassata-dīṭṭhi*). To state that one acts and the other experiences [the result] are to fall into the annihilationist view (P. *uccheda-dīṭṭhi*). Teaching the essence and teaching the *dharma*, I avoid these two extremes. I teach the *dharma* of the middle way, namely: When this is, that is, this arises, that arises. Conditioned by ignorance, activities arise... and thus is the origin of all this mass of suffering. Ignorance ceases, activities cease, ... and that is the end of this whole mass of suffering.⁶⁹

The same discussion of neither eternalism nor annihilationism occurs in SN 12. 17.⁷⁰

(3) The Middle Way neither comes nor goes. In SĀ 335, the Buddha taught that

I will teach you the *dharma*,... namely, “*Discourse on Emptiness In Its Ultimate Meaning*” (Skt. *paramārtha-sūnyatā-sūtra*) ... What is the discourse on emptiness in its ultimate meaning? Monks, when the eye arises, there is no place from which it comes; when it ceases, there is no place for it to go. Thus an eye arises, which is not real; as soon as it arises, it disappears completely. It is the result of [previous] action (*karma/kamma-vipāka*), but there is no doer (Skt. *Akarṭṛka* = non self); when these aggregates (Skt. *Skandhāḥ*) cease, other aggregates continue, except conventional *dharma* (Skt. *Dharmasamketa*). The same teaching also applies to the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, except for conventional *dharma*. Conventional *dharma* means: Because this exists, that exists; because this arises, that arises, thus: Conditioned by ignorance are activities; conditioned by activities is consciousness and so on... and thus arises this whole mass of suffering. And again, when this does not exist, that does not exist; when it ceases, that ceases. When ignorance ceases, activities also cease; when activities cease, consciousness ceases, and so on... and so this whole mass of suffering ceases. This is called “*Discourse On Emptiness In Its Ultimate Meaning*.”⁷¹

Similarly, in SĀ 273, the Buddha says that

Monk, just as two hands coming together produces sound, so conditioned by the eye and visible forms arises eyes consciousness, and these three things together create contact. From contact arises feeling, perception, and volition. All these phenomena are non-self, impermanent; they are without a permanent self, not eternal, not stable, changing. Why is this so?

Monk, these have the nature of birth, aging, death, ceasing, and rebirth. Monks, all compounded things, are an illusion, a flame, ceasing in an instant, being not real; they come (arise) and go (cease).

⁶⁶Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 946-947.

⁶⁷SĀ 297 at T02, no. 99, pp. 84c12-85a9

⁶⁸Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 573-575.

⁶⁹SĀ 300 at T02, no. 99, p. 85c10-15 and the Pāli counterpart SN 12. 17 *Ete ubho ante anupagamma majjhena Tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti* (without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the *Dharma* by the middle)

⁷⁰Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publ., 2001), 545-548.

⁷¹Étienne Lamotte, “Three Sutras from the SAMYUKTAGAMA Concerning Emptiness,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (1993): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1558/bsrv.v10i1.15234>, 2-7.

SĀ 335 at T02, no. 99, p. 92c13-25

Therefore, monks, with regard to all empty compounded things, you should know, rejoice in, and be mindful of (awake to) this: All empty compounded things are empty of any permanent, eternal, lasting, unchanging nature; they are empty of self and of belonging to self.⁷²

These two texts, SĀ 335 and SĀ273, lack a *Pāli* counterpart and describe the six sense-spheres as conditioned by nature, empty of each other, and thus empty of coming or going. In SĀ 335, “conventional *dharmā*” refers to Dependent Origination, and the non-self that does not come or go together with Dependent Origination *dharmā* is called “emptiness in its ultimate meaning” (Skt. *parimārtha-śūnyatā*). These two texts indicate that the cause and effect of conditioned nature in each moment of arising and passing away (disappearing) reveals the nature (*dharmā*) of the passage of time. These causes and effects in time are neither the same nor different, and nothing remains constant even for a single moment in the series of causes and effects.

(4) The Middle Path of the Fourteen “Non-Declarations” (P. *avyākata*, Skt. *Avyākṛta*). These are fourteen kinds of extreme views based on self-view:

- a) the world is permanent,
- b) the world is unstable,
- c) the world is permanent and impermanent,
- (d) the world is neither-permanent-nor-impermanent;
- e) the world is finite,
- f) the world is infinite,
- (g) the world is both finite and infinite,
- (h) the world is neither finite nor infinite;
- (i) life (or soul) is body,
- (j) life is distinct from the body;
- (k) there is a *Tathāgata* (Buddha) after death,
- (l) does not exist after the death of the *Tathāgata*,
- (m) after death the *Tathāgata* exists and does not exist,
- (n) does not exist or exist after the death of the *Tathāgata*.⁷³

All of this is considered meaningless argumentation (P. *papañca*, Skt. *prapañca*)⁷⁴ and is not to be declared (*avyākāta*, *avyākṛta*).⁷⁵ The emptiness of the middle path is the disappearance of all such extreme views.

(5) The middle path is neither the happiness of a sense of pleasure nor the suffering of self-mortification. This refers to the practice of the middle path - the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyaṭṭhaṅgika magga*). According to MN 139⁷⁶ and MĀ 169⁷⁷, the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads to the realization of *Nirvāṇa*, consists in a practice that does not approach either of these extremes: the happiness of a sense of pleasure and the suffering of self-mortification.

Emptiness and Middle Path of Dependent Origination: The emptiness based on the middle path of Dependent Origination

⁷²Mun-keat Choong, *Annotated Translation of Sutras from the Chinese Samyuktagama Relevant to the Early Buddhist Teachings on Emptiness and the Middle Way* (Songkhla, Thailand: International Buddhist College, 2010), 64-65.

SĀ 273 at T02, no. 99, p. 72c8-16

⁷³Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 590 and the Chinese counterpart is SĀ 962 at T02, no. 99, p. 245b26

⁷⁴SĀ 408 at T02, no. 99, p. 109a27 and the *Pāli* counterpart is SN 56.8, 1841-1842.

⁷⁵SĀ 957-961 at T02, no. 99, p. 244a9, and the *Pāli* counterpart is SN 44.9, 7, 8, 11, 10, 1392-1395.

⁷⁶Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 1080.

⁷⁷MĀ 169 at T01, no. 26, p. 701c15-17 and the *Pāli* counterpart MN 139

eliminates all extreme views, and the practical path is the “Noble Eightfold Path.” This is not just an idea; it is a practical philosophy of life, based on the reality of body and mind, to develop, to see the middle way, leading to the extinction of the self-view and the realization of *nirvāṇa*. In early Buddhism, *nirvāṇa* is expressed only in terms of the cessation of suffering, the complete emptiness of self-view or desire, hatred and delusion. The uncompounded or unconditioned *nirvāṇa* is beyond all arguments about being and non-existence (= self-view); the middle path of Dependent Origination points to it. Consequently, compounded nature (Dependent Origination) and uncompounded nature (*nirvāṇa*) are not opposed to each other as contrasting entities. No wonder, then, that Dependent Origination and *Nirvāṇa* are said to be deep, hard to see, and associated with emptiness. To summarize, the middle path of Dependent Origination focuses on the path of losing oneself from extreme self-view and is directly related to the meaning of *nirvāṇa*. Therefore, in early Buddhism, there was a deep relationship between emptiness and the right view of the middle path.

In my view, Dependent Origination is associated with both the origin and the end of the world (suffering), so it suggests the emptiness of both time and space by emphasizing the realization of “time” (impermanence) as not self. Arising (implying existence) and passing away (implying non-existence) show time as arising and passing away and space as existing and non-existent. From non-existence to being, it arises; from existence to non-existence, it ceases; or from the future arises the coming into the present, and from the present, the transition into the past ceases. This arising and passing away is the passage of time (impermanence), implying the existence and non-existence of space (the world). Thus, the dependent origin focuses mainly on “time” as conditioned (P. *saṅkhata*, Skt. *Samskṛta*); arising and passing away points to the emptiness of time and space neither arising nor passing away, just as neither existence nor non-existence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the investigation into the interrelationships among emptiness, dependent origination, and *Nirvāṇa* in early Buddhist literature presents profound insights into Buddhism's foundational tenets and philosophical underpinnings. The texts elucidate a coherent and interconnected framework of concepts that elucidate the trajectory toward enlightenment and liberation. Emptiness, or *Śūnyatā*, emerges as a pivotal doctrine accentuating the inherent absence of intrinsic, autonomous existence in all phenomena. This profound realization challenges conventional ontological perspectives, prompting a reevaluation of the nature of reality and a recognition of the interdependent and impermanent nature of all phenomena. Dependent origination (*Praṭītyasamutpāda*) further expounds upon emptiness by expounding the intricate causal nexus perpetuating the cycle of suffering (*saṃsāra*). By acknowledging the interdependence of actions and experiences, early Buddhist literature underscores the imperative of cultivating wisdom and ethical conduct to break free from the ceaseless cycle of birth and death. The culmination of this inquiry culminates in *Nirvāṇa*, the ultimate objective of Buddhist practice. Described as the cessation of suffering and the extinguishment of ignorance, *Nirvāṇa* embodies the profound realization of emptiness and the rupture of the chain of dependent origination. Early Buddhist literature depicts *Nirvāṇa* as a state of supreme serenity and liberation, where all suffering is extinguished, and the enlightened individual attains the highest echelons of wisdom and compassion.

The investigation into the interplay among these fundamental principles reveals that emptiness, dependent origination, and *Nirvāṇa* are not isolated or disparate teachings but form an intricately connected and mutually reinforcing conceptual framework. Embracing these principles offers a transformative path toward liberation, guiding practitioners in realizing their true nature and transcending suffering. Furthermore, the correspondence among these concepts transcends mere theoretical discourse, representing a pragmatic roadmap for cultivating wisdom, ethical living, and

compassion in daily life. Early Buddhist literature exhorts individuals to engage in mindfulness, meditation, and introspection to deepen their understanding and experiential realization of these profound truths. In conclusion, exploring the correspondence between emptiness, dependent origination, and *Nirvāna* in early Buddhist literature constitutes a timeless and invaluable guide for seekers of truth and liberation. As scholars continue to delve into the rich teachings of early Buddhist literature, it becomes evident that these principles are not confined to a particular epoch or locale but remain pertinent and transformative in contemporary society. Through diligent practice and contemplation, individuals can traverse the path charted by the ancient wisdom of Buddhism, ultimately achieving liberation from suffering and attaining the boundless freedom of *Nirvāna*.

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