

Reflections on Truth and Experience in Early Buddhist Epistemology*

... we have to conclude that
Nibbāna is actually the truth,
and that saṃsāra is a mere perversion.

Bhikkhu K. Ñāṇananda (2015 [2003–2012], p. 453)

1. Introduction and outline

In the discourse that tradition has handed down as his first sermon after the realisation of Nirvāṇa,¹ the Buddha states that he awakened by attaining ‘knowledge and vision in correspondence with reality’, which he placed as the foundation of his own claim to unsurpassable full awakening. This declaration amounts to an admittedly exceptional first-person claim to truth, and it points to the establishment of a ‘correspondence theory of truth’, wherein the truth or falsity of a statement depends on whether it accurately describes the world, that is, whether it really ‘corresponds’ to facts (Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 352). Here the expression ‘in correspondence with reality’ renders the Indic terms *yathābhūta-/yathābhūtaṃ*, literally, ‘as it has come to be’, ‘just as it is’, ‘like it is’, ‘as it truly is’, thereby ‘in conformity with reality’, ‘factually’, ‘in truth and fact’, etc. I prefer to speak of being ‘in correspondence with’ rather than ‘in accordance with’ (as in, e.g., ‘knowledge and vision according to reality’) as an attempt to do justice to the correspondence theory of truth that I see at the basis of the Buddha’s statement and epistemological approach, which regards truth as correspondence with a fact, consisting in a relation to reality. A truth statement made on such a premise is based on a relational property that involves a relation to reality.²

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1 This is the sermon on the turning the wheel of Dharma (Pāli *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*/Sanskrit *Dharmacakrapravartana Dharmaparyāya*); see, e.g., SN 56.11 at SN V 420,25 and Vin I 8,31 for the Pāli version. For translations and comparative studies of the parallels see Chung, 2006 and Anālayo, 2015, pp. 347–388.

2 On the significance of the expression *yathābhūta-/yathābhūtaṃ* in relation to liberating knowledge in the early Buddhist discourses see Anālayo, 2011 I, pp. 72–73 note 228 and 2012a, pp. 124–192.

The Buddha's attainment of knowledge and vision in correspondence with reality is articulated in terms of the arising of 'eye' (figuratively meant), knowledge, wisdom, superior knowledge and clarity, and it is then directly related to four noble 'truths' (Pāli *sacca*/Sanskrit *satya*):

- 1) the truth of (the presence of) *dukkha/duḥkha*,
- 2) the truth of the arising of *dukkha/duḥkha*,
- 3) the truth of the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha*,
- 4) the truth of the way out of *dukkha/duḥkha*.

Here *dukkha/duḥkha* is the unsatisfactory character of impermanent and conditioned experiences. Pleasant feelings and lofty meditative attainments are also *dukkha/duḥkha* (unsatisfactory) according to the Buddhist analysis: for this reason I prefer to avoid the common translation of *dukkha/duḥkha* as 'suffering' and leave this key term untranslated.

The Buddha's knowledge and vision are seen as completely purified in three aspects in relation to each truth, twelve modes in total:

- knowledge and vision of each of the noble truths,
- knowledge and vision of what is to be done in regard to each truth,
- knowledge and vision that what was to be done in regard to each truth has been accomplished.

He is on record as stating that as long as these four noble truths in their twelve aspects were not seen by him with insight as they are, he did not teach the world that he had completely realised full awakening. However, as soon as they were seen by him with insight as they are, he taught the world that he had completely realised full awakening, based on the truth and fact of his liberation.

Such a first-person claim to truth comes with the implicit assertion that others have the potential to engender the same. The fourth noble truth in particular shows the means to that end: the noble eightfold path leading out of *dukkha/duḥkha*. The cultivation of this path culminates in full awakening and communicating the possibility to actualise this motivates the teaching activity of the Buddha.

I would like to explore this interplay between subjective experience and an invitation to intersubjective verification of the same. That is, I will (or hope to) show that the Buddha's declaration of knowledge and vision in correspondence with reality is the starting point for epistemology in early Buddhism and that consequently Nirvāṇa informs the entire early Buddhist approach to truth and valid pathways to knowledge.

I begin with preliminary information on early Buddhism. I then focus on the unsystematic nature of the Buddha's claim to truth, highlighting its soteriologically-informed character (1), which qualifies the truth in question as the highest or superior truth (1.1). After that, I discuss the 'experiential' dimension of truth in early Buddhism (2), wherein descriptions of both the 'mundane' (2.1) and the 'supramun-

dane' (2.2) deploy a terminology that speaks of 'experiential domains' (*āyatana*s). Next, I highlight the centrality of the notion of 'contact' (*phassa/sparśa*) in relation to the 'experiential' and the 'conceptual' in early Buddhist gnoseology (2.1.1). This includes not only ordinary sensory and mental contact, but also the sub-type of meditative 'contact' (2.1.2), and it covers specific occasions of being liberated (2.2.1). The implications of the early Buddhist notion of contact also explain the idea of contacting the cessation of contact with the realisation of Nirvāṇa (2.2.2), and of becoming thereby emancipated from 'concept' qua reckoning or predicability (2.2.3). Afterwards, I briefly position the epistemic validity of personal realisation as an authoritative means of final knowledge (3). Lastly, I conclude with reflections on the intersubjective validity of the Buddha's liberating knowledge (4) and on the early Buddhist choice to refrain from adopting a rhetoric of subjective experience (5).

Early Buddhism

Buddhism originated at the time of the consolidation of state formation in Gangetic India, in an essentially oral culture, when early Indian societies were transitioning from their pre-historical to early-historical stage. Buddhist ideas and texts vastly changed in form and content in the course of their subsequent transmission. Their discovery by the Europeans led to further transformation in how they are understood. For this reason, notions such as legitimate means of knowledge, assertion of truth, subjectivity, scriptural authority, etc., come in the plural rather than in the singular in the Buddhist traditions. They are layered chronologically and are also doctrinally diverse.

What I take as my point of reference in this article is the Buddha of 'early Buddhism', as portrayed by the corpus of the so-called 'early Buddhist texts' that can be considered the closest approximate testimonies to Buddhist thought and practice between the fifth to the third century BC (Anālayo, 2012b). These texts are the orally transmitted discourses of the Buddha and his disciples as recorded in canonical scriptural collections that came to be transmitted independently by a number of textual traditions and communities in India, as well as in the early layers of the Buddhist monastic code, similarly transmitted in a variety of recensions. These textual sources are now preserved in Indic languages – Pāli, Sanskrit and Gāndhārī – and in primary and secondary translations mostly in Chinese, to a lesser extent in Tibetan, and occasionally also in Central Asian languages. Understood in this way, 'early Buddhism' comprises a somewhat rough but justifiable textual, doctrinal and historical periodisation.

2. The four noble truths: a soteriologically-informed epistemology³

Unlike later tradition, notably the Abhidharma, the great philosophical schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, and the logical-epistemological school of Pramāṇa, early Buddhism does not present systematic expositions of ‘episteme’ or ‘epistemology’. How these notions are articulated needs to be reconstructed through close readings of teachings delivered in discursive style. Here the four noble truths and their implications emerge explicitly and implicitly as the epistemic and epistemological foundation of early Buddhism.

Even the very modelling of the four noble truths is expository and not systematic in nature. Its linear format serves a didactic purpose, rather than a descriptive intent of recording the exact content of the unfolding of the awakening experience as such, or a normative intent of prescribing how such an experience must unfold. Probably deploying a medical model known in ancient India (Anālayo, 2015, pp. 25–40), this fourfold scheme conveys a soteriological vision that is both diagnostic and curative, in that it proceeds from acknowledging the presence of *dukkha/duḥkha* (1) to locating its cause in craving (2), affirming the possibility of complete health intended as the permanent remission of the disease of *dukkha/duḥkha* (3), and laying down a course of treatment to that end by way of the noble eightfold path (4). In a departure from this pragmatic strategy, later tradition debated the concomitant or else sequential character – in practice – of the insights described by each of the four noble truths. Such debates began relatively early in the history of Buddhist thought and were influenced by the inception of systematic modes of mind mapping that eventually manifested in the fully-fledged Abhidharma scholasticism.⁴

A systematic approach is also reflected in the practical scholasticism of the contemporary *vipassanā* or insight tradition of meditation, which originated in Burma/Myanmar and then spread to South and Southeast Asia and to the West. Based on canonical and post-canonical Theravāda Abhidhamma texts and commentaries, teachers and instructors may expect that with the breakthrough to stream-entry the practitioner must have a detailed cognition and realisation of the sixteen aspects of

3 Needless to say, my use of terminology such as ‘soteriology’, ‘soteriological’ and ‘soteriologically-informed’ does not envisage a doctrine of salvation, liberation, emancipation or freedom in general that posits an ‘elsewhere’ or other world where σωτηρία occurs or will occur.

4 Cousins (1996, p. 52) identifies the gradual realisation in which the sixteen aspects of the four truths are separately known in successive moments versus the single-moment realisation in which the four truths are realised simultaneously in a single moment as one of the key areas of debate which eventually separated the two main Abhidharma traditions of Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda. Bhikkhu Anālayo (2014a, pp. 139–140) shows this difference is already adumbrated in the treatment of the four truths in the description of the supramundane path factors in an early Buddhist discourse (which in fact signals the early development of an Abhidharmic mode of thought).

the four noble truths more or less in conformity with the ‘content’ pertaining to each of them. According to the doctrinal model embraced by this tradition, the truths are to be separately known in successive, distinct mind moments in line with the notion that the mind can take only a distinct object at a time, and with the doctrine of momentariness.⁵

The *vipassanā* tradition takes as its foundation for meditation practice an expanded version of the ‘Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness’, called the ‘Greater Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness’ (*Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*). This discourse contains a detailed analysis of the four noble truths that is a later textual addition reflecting concerns for analytical comprehensiveness and, as a whole, it is unique to the Theravāda vis-à-vis the other early Buddhist transmission lineages.⁶ The amplified treatment of the four noble truths in this discourse thus decidedly expands the scope of the cognition and realisation of the four noble truths that come to be expected by this contemporary Buddhist tradition.

Back to early Buddhism, according to the autobiographical account of the Buddha’s quest for awakening, his full liberation took place by way of directly knowing in correspondence with reality the influxes (*āsava/āsrava*), their arising, their cessation, and the path leading to their cessation. In the Pāli version of the relevant passage, each of these aspects is specifically placed in direct correlation to each of the four noble truths.⁷ The influxes are the detrimental influences of sensuality, (craving for) becoming and ignorance that fester in the mind.⁸ Thus infected, the mind discharges its own inner ‘pus’ by way of further unwholesomeness, which worsens the sore. With the eradication of the influxes, the pus is removed and the wound healed, thus preventing the recurrence of disease.

Another exposition relates the Buddha’s liberation to having seen in correspondence with reality the arising and passing away of feeling tones (*vedanā*), the grat-

5 On momentariness see von Rospatt, 1995 and 1998.

6 Anālayo, 2011 I, pp. 90–91 with note 328; Anālayo, 2013a, p. 171; Anālayo, 2014a, pp. 94–100. Bhikkhu Ānandajoti (2011 [2005], p. 6) explains: “[i]n the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* ... there is considerable expansion of that basic statement [of the four noble truths], as the Truths are analysed and defined. The major part of the material comes verbatim from The Discourse giving the Analysis of the Truths (MN 141) inserted wholesale into the discourse here. There is a difference though, as the material that forms the explanation of the Origination and Cessation is greatly expanded after their basic statements, with a further analysis. We can also find that sub-analysis in another discourse, this time coming from the *Nidānasamyutta*, SN 12.66, the Discourse about Determining (*Sammāsanasutta*).”

7 MN 36 at MN I 249,4, EĀ 31.8 at T II 672a14, fragment 338r7 in Liu, 2010, pp. 120 and 235, T 1428 at T XXII 781c1. On the significance of the aorist Pāli verbal form *abbhaññāsīm*, ‘I knew by experience’, or ‘I knew thoroughly’ (in correspondence with reality), in this passage, see Anālayo, 2011 I, p. 243 note 191 and 245 note 194.

8 On this term see Anālayo, 2017a, pp. 325–330.

ification in them, their drawbacks, and the release from them.⁹ Elsewhere he is on record as affirming to have reached awakening only when he directly knew in correspondence with reality a range of facts: the gratification, drawbacks, and release in regard to the four elements;¹⁰ the gratification, drawbacks, and release in regard to the five aggregates of clinging;¹¹ the nature, the arising, the cessation, and the path leading to the cessation of the five aggregates of clinging;¹² the gratification, drawbacks, and release in regard to the six senses and their objects;¹³ the gratification, drawbacks, and release in regard to the five faculties;¹⁴ the gratification, drawbacks, and release in regard to the world.¹⁵

These passages are not mutually contradictory, nor do these different listings imply the pursuit of each and every possible content of experience. The above are all different angles – rather than specific contents – of subjective experience. What matters are the dynamics of the dependent arising and ceasing of subjective experience on account of craving (the origin of *dukkha/duḥkha*) and its abandonment (the cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha*) that manifest from whichever angle one looks at it.

Now if epistemology “has always been one of the most important – if not the most important – field of philosophy” (Niiniluoto et al., 2004, p. viii), its primary relevance comes all the more to the fore in the case of a teaching based on an indisputable first-person statement of having attained an unbiased type of knowledge of the principles of subjective reality, such as the one made known by the Buddha. As summed up in the introduction to a *Handbook of Epistemology*,

[i]f epistemology is understood extensively, it covers everything that focuses on knowledge or cognition: psychology, sociology, logic, history, physiology, pathology, axiology, metaphysics, and several other things. On the other hand, episte-

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- 9 DN 1 at DN I 16,33, DĀ 21 at T I 91a14 (translated in Anālayo, 2017c, p. 126), Up 3050 at D 4094, *mngon pa, ju* 144b2 and P 5595, *mngon pa 'i bstan bcos, tu* 166a5.
- 10 SN 14.31 at SN II 169,25 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 645–646) and SN 14.32 at SN II 171,4 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 646–647).
- 11 SN 22.26 at SN III 27,28 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 873–874); SN 22.27 at SN III 29,1 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 874–875), SĀ 14 at T II 2c11 (translated in Anālayo, 2012c, pp. 23–34); discourse quotation in the *Dharmaskandha*, Dietz, 1984, p. 47,20; other parallels given in Anālayo, 2012c, p. 23 note 66.
- 12 SN 22.56 at SN III 58,28 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 895–897) and SĀ 41 at T II 9b7 (translated in Anālayo, 2014b, pp. 18–23).
- 13 SN 35.13 at SN IV 6,4 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1136–1137); SN 35.14 at SN IV 8,3 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1137, SN 35.15 at SN IV 8,27 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1137–1138); SN 35.16 at SN IV 9,31 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1138); discourse quotation in the *Dharmaskandha*, Dietz, 1984, p. 48,22; cf. also SN 48.29 at SN V 206,8 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1679).
- 14 SN 48.21 at SN V 203 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1676–1677).
- 15 AN 3.101 at AN I 258,22 (translated in Bodhi, 2012, p. 340, where it is numbered 3.104). On all these occurrences cf. Anālayo, 2012a, pp. 181–182.

mology conceived more restrictively investigates the sources, values (cognitive), principles, and limits of knowledge. (Woleński in Niiniluoto et al, 2004, pp. 3–4)

The implications of the noble truths and of ‘truth’ (*sacca/satya*) in general in early Buddhism certainly extend beyond the most restrictive definition of epistemology and cover several fields of the more extended definition. Early Buddhist truth also covers soteriology because it is primarily informed by a soteriological concern, namely, liberation from *dukkha/duḥkha*.¹⁶

Another core domain of early Buddhist truth is ethics in that the means and aims of truth are coterminous with ethics. All fully awakened beings are held incapable of acting under the influence of desire, hatred, delusion or fear, which are the basic mental states motivating any form of intentional unwholesomeness on the physical, verbal and mental level.¹⁷ With truth fully realised and a mind completely pure and clear, ethical perfection becomes spontaneous, no longer a moral imperative or an intentional form of restraint whereby, for example, lust is not acted out or anger is held in check so as to prevent it from spilling over.

2.2 The ‘highest truth’ of Nirvāṇa

In a discourse attested in a range of parallel versions, the Buddha identifies the ‘highest noble truth’ with Nirvāṇa itself. This is said to be of an ‘undeceptive’ or ‘non-falsifying’ nature (*amosa-dhamma/amoṣa-dharma*). Contrary to that which deceives or falsifies, Nirvāṇa does not deceive nor falsify. This terminology does not imply that the truth of Nirvāṇa is understood as in itself unfalsifiable in the sense that it could not be verified. To the contrary, the noble eightfold path as a whole is a project of subjective verification of the highest noble truth by way of its direct existential actualisation.

The passage in question concerns a monastic who possess the highest wisdom and has attained the knowledge of the complete cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha*. The latter amounts to the third noble truth, that is, the truth of Nirvāṇa itself. The de-

16 Perhaps even better than with the English ‘episteme’ as broadly used in contemporary Western philosophy, *sacca/satya* might also correspond well with the notion of ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*) in Ancient Greek philosophy. Greek ἀλήθεια literally means ‘the state of not being hidden; the state of being evident’ and, by extension, ‘unconcealedness’, ‘disclosure’, ‘reality’, ‘factuality’, ‘truth’; it is the opposite of λήθη (*lēthe*), which literally means ‘oblivion’, ‘forgetfulness’, ‘concealment’. The term *alētheia* was later revived in the twentieth century by Martin Heidegger, but in the sense of how an ontological world is disclosed to the subject, and how through disclosure things are made intelligible for human beings, as part of a structured construction of meaning.

17 DN 29 at DN III 133,14 with a parallel in DĀ 17 at T I 75b16.

scription in the parallel versions of the liberation of this monastic alternatively qualifies Nirvāṇa or liberation as the highest truth:¹⁸

tassa sā vimutti sacce ʔhitā akuppā hoti. tañ hi ... musā yaṃ mosadhammaṃ, taṃ saccaṃ yaṃ amosadhammaṃ nibbānaṃ. tasmā evaṃ samannāgato bhikkhu iminā paramena saccādhiṭṭhānena samannāgato hoti. etañ hi ... paramaṃ ariyasaccaṃ yadidaṃ amosadhammaṃ nibbānaṃ. (MN 140 at MN III 245,15)

The liberation of such a one, being founded upon truth, is imperturbable. For that is false ... which has a deceptive nature, [and] that is true, which has an undeceptive nature, [that is,] Nirvāṇa. Therefore a monastic thus endowed is one who is endowed with such supreme foundation of truth. Indeed ... this is the supreme noble truth, namely Nirvāṇa, which is of an undeceptive nature.

此解脫住真諦，得不移動。真諦者，謂如法也，妄言者，謂虛妄法。... 成就彼第一真諦處。 (MĀ 162 at T II 692a13)

With such liberation one is established in truth and has attained imperturbability. Truth is that which is in accordance with the Dharma, falsehood is that which has the nature of delusion ... attaining such liberation is the foremost domain of truth.

de'i rnam par grol ba bden pa'i byin gyis brlabs mchog dang ldan par 'gyur ro. ... brdzun pa'i mchog ni brdzun pa slu ba'i chos so. ... bden pa rnams kyi mchog ni 'di lta ste ji lta ba nyid do. de'i phyir de dang ldan pa'i dge slong bden pa'i byin gyi rlabs mchog dang ldan par 'gyur ro. (Up 1041 at D 4094, *mngon pa, ju* 40b5 and P 5595, *mngon pa'i bstan bcos, tu* 44a5)

The liberation of such a one is endowed with the supreme foundation (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of truth ... supreme falsity has the nature of being false and deceptive ... supreme among the truths is to be regarded [such knowledge and vision] just as it is. On account of that, a monastic who possesses that [very truth] becomes possessed of the supreme foundation of truth.

This discourse passage is also quoted in verse by one of the foremost Indian Buddhist thinkers, Nāgārjuna. The verse additionally spells out that all that which is fabricated (as opposed to the unfabricated of Nirvāṇa) is deceptive:¹⁹

18 Cf. Anālayo, 2011 II, p. 800 note 207; for a synoptic presentation of this passage in the various discourse versions see also Stuart, 2015 II, pp. 283–285.

19 The available discourse parallels lack this specification, thus it remains open to question whether this is an explanatory gloss inserted by Nāgārjuna or else it was already part of the discourse version he cites. The *Prasannapadā*, in the commentary on this stanza, includes the statement in the discourse citation; see de La Vallée Poussin, 1970 [1903–1913], p. 237,11: *sūtra uktaṃ tan mṛṣā moṣadharmā yad idaṃ saṃskṛtaṃ etaddhi khalu ... paramaṃ satyaṃ yad idam amoṣadharmā nirvāṇaṃ sarvasaṃskārās ca mṛṣadharmāṇa iti*. The scriptural source of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* stanza is given in a few other works of Candrakīrti; see Scherrer-Schaub, 1991, pp. 122–123 note 65 and Li, 2012, pp. 192–194. On this passage cf. also Warder, 1973, p. 80.

*tan mṛṣā moṣadharmam yad bhagavān ity abhāṣata |
sarve ca moṣadharmāṇaḥ saṃskārās tena te mṛṣā. (Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā
XXX.1, Ye 2011: 210)*

The Blessed One stated: “that which has a deceptive nature is false.”
All fabricated states are of a deceptive nature, whereby they are false.

The contrast between what deceives and what is true recurs in another discourse passage, according to which those who apprehend a self in what is no self (wrongly) conceive that ‘this is true’. As a result of such a conceiving, “that itself is the falsity” (*mosadhammam hi ittaram*), whereas Nirvāṇa is unfalsifying in its nature (*amosadhammam nibbāṇam*).²⁰

The highest truth of Nirvāṇa is explicitly presented as subject to experiential realisation in yet another discourse passage preserved in Pāli and Chinese:

... kāyena c’ eva paramam saccam (B^c: paramasaccam) sacchikaroti, paññāya ca nam ativijja (C^c: paṭivijja) passata. (MN 70 at MN I 480,9)

... one personally²¹ realises the highest truth and sees it by having penetrated it with wisdom.

... 身諦作證，慧增上觀. (MĀ 195 at T I 752b6)

... one personally realises the truth, through wisdom and superior insight.

Such a truth, envisaged as the highest, does not come dichotomically paired with a relative, conventional or provisional truth in the same manner this is understood in later tradition.²² The superlative need not rely on a comparative by constructing a relative term of comparison.²³

A similar use of a superlative that does not presuppose a comparative in the discourses is the idea that Nirvāṇa is the highest only in the sense that it is ‘the highest good’ or ‘the highest goal’ (*parama-attha/parama-artha*) to be attained. In later Buddhist thought, however, this expression “came to acquire absolutist connotations” (Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], p. 286). In early Buddhism the only sense

20 Sn 756–758 at Sn 147,16 (translated in Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], p. 289 and Bodhi, 2017, pp. 288–289).

21 On the instrumental *kāyena*, literally ‘with the body’ (cf. *shen* 身 in the Chinese passage), as an idiomatic expression to convey personal and direct experience in the sense of ‘with one’s whole being’ see Schmithausen, 1981, pp. 214 and 249 note 50; Radich, 2007, p. 263; Harvey, 2009, p. 180 note 10 and Anālayo, 2011 I, pp. 379–380 note 203.

22 I intend to take up the topic of the Buddha’s negotiation with conventional language and worldly parlance in early Buddhist thought in another publication presently under preparation.

23 For the use of the superlative cf. also, e.g., the declaration “this is indeed the highest knowledge”, *etaṃ kho paramam ñāṇam* in AN 6.45 at AN III 354,27 (translated also in Bodhi, 2012, p. 917); the parallel line in a stanza in MĀ 125 at T I 614c26 does not use a comparable expression.

in which the highest truth of Nirvāṇa is ‘absolute’ is the literary sense of this term, derived from Latin *absolutus*, namely ‘loosened’, ‘emancipated’, ‘freed’, in this case, quite literally, from conditioned experience itself, and epistemically unrestricted by it.

Early Buddhism does recognise a progressive deepening of the transformative effects of truth, from the first stage of awakening and experience of Nirvāṇa onwards as the mind becomes purified from sensuality and aversive tendencies (second to third stage) and craving for any form of existence and I-conceit whatsoever (fourth and final stage). Yet this does not imply that there is an initial, partial truth vis-à-vis a final, whole truth. Moreover that the highest truth is indeed such is shown by the fact that there is no quantitative or qualitative difference in the final cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha* and the eradication of the influxes that are attained by the Buddha and by a fully awakened Buddhist disciple respectively.

Even from the perspective of an awakened person, there is no need in early Buddhism for the positing of a relative truth to be used in his or her relationship with the world. With the first stage of awakening there is already a penetrative knowledge of the construct of language in relation to self-identity so that ordinary language, divested of any metaphysical expectation, becomes metaphysically unproblematic (although the tendencies towards reification that come with language and concepts are not fully left behind until full liberation). There is no existential dissonance with the conventions of language that would call for negotiation by way of *ad interim* cognitive and verbal constructs.

Furthermore, the absence of a dichotomy between provisional and ultimate truth is also consequent to the early Buddhist gnoseological model which does not operate with a range of so-called ultimate realities that are categorised as ‘experiential’ in the sense of being liable to being experienced regardless of how they are named or defined, as against any other internal or external object which is considered a ‘concept’ and thus not an ‘ultimate’ but a ‘conventional’ reality.²⁴ This will become clearer in the following sections of this article, where I take up the notions of ‘experience’ and ‘concept’ presupposed by the early Buddhist discourses.

To summarise up to this point, no epistemic dichotomy between conventional and ultimate truth is implied by the establishment of Nirvāṇa as the highest truth. At the same time, early Buddhist thought clearly conceives of divides between what is both epistemically and soteriologically true (Nirvāṇa) and what is both epistemically and soteriologically false (all unawakened metaphysical distortions), between what is mundane and what is supramundane, and between what is morally wholesome and thus soteriologically relevant and what is morally unwholesome and thus soteriologically counterproductive.

24 Cf. Dhammadinnā, 2017, pp. 171 and 178. On the distinction between these two levels of truth as a post-canonical development see also Anālayo, 2003, p. 100 note 27.

3. ‘Experience’: *āyatana* and *phassa/sparśa*

As the highest truth basically is a matter of ‘experience’, in this section I pinpoint the terminology and notion of ‘experience’ as implicitly or explicitly articulated in the early Buddhist texts. In broad terms, ‘experience’ in early Buddhism can be subdivided in:

- a) mundane or worldly: the ‘world’,
- b) supramundane or unworldly: Nirvāṇa.

The key term here is *āyatana*, ‘sphere’, ‘domain’, ‘base’. Together with ‘contact’, *āyatana* forms the basic terminology in early Buddhism that denotes the occurrence of subjective experience. An identical *āyatana*-terminology is also applied to the not-of-the-world, unworldly liberated ‘experience’ of Nirvāṇa. Therefore, given that *āyatana* appears to cover the entire experiential range that is possible for the mind, from the ordinary to the highest, for the purposes of my present discussion I propose to render it as ‘experiential domain’, so as to draw attention to its experiential property.

3.1 Mundane experience: The ‘world’ as an *āyatana*

The ‘world’ is basically defined as the presently arisen experience by way of the six sensory domains or spheres (*saḷ-āyatana/ṣaḍ-āyatana*). This definition does not reflect the idea of what the ‘world’ is in common, unawakened parlance, but it is declared ‘in accordance with the practice of the noble ones’.²⁵ Each of the six sensory domains includes both the sense organ and the sense object: the five physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue and body) with their respective objects (sight, sound, smell, flavour and tangibles), and the mind, here mainly in the sense of thought-activity, that is included as the sixth sense, together with the respective mental objects (dhammas/dharmas). An important aspect here is that

[w]hile the five physical senses do not share each other’s respective field of activity, all of them relate to the mind as the sixth sense. That is, all perceptual processes rely to some extent on the interpretative role of the mind, since it is the mind which “makes sense” out of the other senses. This shows that the early Buddhist scheme of six sense-spheres does not set pure sense perception against the conceptual activity

25 SN 35.68 at SN IV 39,28 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1153) with its parallel SĀ 230 T II 56a24 (translated in Anālayo, 2019b, pp. 2–4; partial translation in Choong Mun-keat, 2000, p. 85); SN 35.82 at SN IV 52,3 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1162) with its parallels SĀ 231 at T II 56b11 (translated in Anālayo, 2019b, pp. 4–5) and Up 1010 (translated in Dhammadinnā, 2018, pp. 87–90). Another related definition of the ‘world’ is that this is just that by which one has a perception of the ‘world’ and a conceit of the ‘world’; see SN 35.84 at SN IV 95 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1163).

of the mind, but considers both as interrelated processes, which together bring forth the subjective experience of the world. (Anālayo, 2003, p. 217)

Needless to say, the above definition as per the noble usage does not involve a theory of relative linguistic expression. Its main point is that the world does arise in experience dependent on the impermanent concurrence of impermanent factors, being therefore inherently conditional. Whereas the definition of the world in the practice of the noble ones accords with ‘radical attention’ (*yoniso manasikāra*) that through wisdom knows conditionality as the source or matrix (*yoni*) of the ‘world’, its common concept is the product of ‘non-radical attention’ (*ayoniso manasikāra*) that ignores conditionality (cf. Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], pp. 481–482 and Anālayo, 2009).

3.1.1 The centrality of the notion of ‘contact’: The ‘experiential’ and the ‘conceptual’

‘Contact’ (*phassa/sparśa*, also *samphassa/saṃsparśa*) is the second key experiential term in early Buddhism. It points to the cradle or ‘experiential interface’ of any subjective event. In the classical description of the dependent arising of *dukkha/duḥkha* that takes the form of a twelve-link sequence, contact is conditioned by the six sense domains and in turn conditions the arising of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling tones (*vedanā*). Dependent on feeling tones, craving as the cause of *dukkha/duḥkha* arises, or else ceases. Thus contact is the barest fact of conscious experience. In its absence, there is no subjectively relevant world.

This notion of contact demonstrates that, at a fundamental level, in early Buddhism there is no divide between the ‘experiential’ (intended as a bare experience devoid of any conceptual component) and the ‘conceptual’. Even the most basic sensory experience *is* an ‘experience’ to the extent that it is known, which requires the activation of the conceptual functions of the mind. These are the five components of name (*nāma*) in the so-called group of name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*): feeling tone (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā/saṃjñā*), intention (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa/sparśa*) and attention (*manasikāra/manaskāra*).²⁶ As an indispensable component of experience, name involves the operation of a concept in order to apprehend material form as a conscious experience. Thus name is a cognitive structure that is conceptual and linguistic whilst it precedes the articulation of language as such.²⁷

26 E.g., MN 9 at MN I 53,11 (= SN 12.2 at SN II 3,33); for the description in the parallels see Anālayo, 2011 I, p. 70 note 220.

27 Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2015 [2003–2012], p. 5) gives the example of a toddler who is still unable to speak or understand language. Someone gives him a rubber ball, which the child has seen for the first time. He gets to know that object by smelling it, feeling it, perhaps trying to eat it, and finally rolling it on the floor and reckons it as something to play with. The toddler has recognised the rubber ball not by the name that the world has

Material form or embodiment (*rūpa*) as a part of name-and-form is defined in terms of the four great elements, namely earth for the experiential quality and perception of solidity, water for cohesion, fire for temperature, and wind for motion. (Needless to say, it is not the experience of hardness that makes a tooth hard, for instance, for the tooth is hard even when this is not experienced by someone, but the hardness is subjectively relevant only insofar as it is experienced.) Form becomes an object of experience only to the extent that it can be perceived. An object is cognised, and recognised, through the experience of resistance upon coming into contact with it (*paṭigha/pratigha*), giving rise to a perception of form (*rūpa-saññā/rūpa-samjñā*). This shows that there is no subjective experience of form independent of a perception of form. Matter is no more primary than concept – nor vice versa – for the experience of each involves the other through a relation of mutual conditionality. On account of this dynamic, concepts – starting from perception of form – are the very fabric of conditioned, dependently arisen experience.

Contact is at the centre of this dynamic in a two-tiered way: resistance-contact (*paṭigha-samphassa/pratigha-saṃsparśa*) and designation-contact (*adhivacana-samphassa/adhivacana-saṃsparśa*).²⁸ The qualities of name make possible designation-contact regarding form, and the qualities of form make possible resistance-contact regarding name. Thus contact is a hybrid interface that combines verbal impressions of form and resistant impressions of name.²⁹

Taken together, name-and-form constitutes the condition for as well as object of consciousness (*viññāṇa/vijñāna*). In this context, *nāma* stands only for those mental phenomena that are experienced by consciousness but does not include consciousness itself. Any object, i.e., name and form, or pure name in the case of the immaterial domains without form, requires consciousness in order to be experienced. In turn, consciousness depends on an object which provides the content of what it experiences. What arises through mutual dependency between name-and-form and consciousness is then appropriated by the average worldling as a self through craving.

It follows from the above that concepts are a basic ingredient in experience and that the divide ‘conceptual’ versus ‘experiential’ at the ordinary level of cognition does not occur in early Buddhist thought, precisely because the ‘experiential’ arises by way of a ‘conceptual’ input to become relevant to consciousness. Only Nirvāṇa is non-conceptual or, rather, a-conceptual, in that doing away with craving it steps

given it, but by those factors included under ‘name’ in *nāma-rūpa*, i.e., feeling tones, perception, intention, contact and attention, which constitute a sort of ‘prototype’ of ‘name’.

28 DN 15 at DN II 62,17.

29 The pair ‘nominal form’ and ‘formal name’ – a definition coined by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda – conveys the sense that, in experience, name and form are mutually ‘in-formed’; see Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], especially sermons 1, 2 and 26; cf. also Ñāṇananda, 2016 [2015–2016], especially sermons 1, 2, 9, 18 and 20.

out of the mutual dependency between name-and-form and consciousness in the dependent arising of selfhood and *dukkha/duḥkha*.

3.1.2 Meditative ‘contact’

Contact is in operation also in the case of meditative experience, which does not in this respect differ from any other mental circumstances. This is evident from all versions of the Brahmajāla, an important exposition devoted to the standpoints for the arising of (wrong) views and metaphysical conjectures.³⁰ This discourse stipulates that all those who give rise to doctrines and speculations, do so conditioned by contact, and it is impossible to establish any such doctrine in the absence of contact,³¹ in the sense that doctrines and speculations are seen as the end point of a proliferative process that is ignited by contact, which gets worked upon by ignorance and craving. Such a predicament is contrasted with that of one who knows in correspondence with reality the arising, the passing away, the gratification, the drawbacks, and the escape concerning these six senses. Such a one possesses a knowledge which is far superior to the stances upheld by all those who keep revolving around contact, because it leads out of all views.

In summary, there is a pervasive co-extensiveness of the experiential and the conceptual at the level of the conditioned realm due to the function of contact.

3.2 Supramundane experience: Nirvāṇa as an *āyatana*

The discourses state that one can have the perception of cessation³² and the perception of Nirvāṇa,³³ which confirms their experiential accessibility. In one passage, the Buddha is questioned whether there could be a state of concentration in which he would not be percipient of earth (and the other elements) in relation to earth (etc.), of the sphere of the infinity of space in relation to the sphere of the infinity

30 On the title of this discourse significance of the net (*jāla*) imagery see Anālayo, 2017c, pp. 176–178.

31 DN 1 at DN I 42,2: ... *tad api phassapaccayā*, “... and that too is due to contact”; DĀ 21 at T I 93c24: ... 彼因觸緣故，若離觸緣而立論者，無有是處， “[they give rise to a doctrine] conditioned by contact. It is impossible to establish [such a] doctrine without contact” (translated in Anālayo, 2017c, p. 173); Weller, 1934, p. 64,3 [§ 214]: *de yang reg pa’i rkyen las*, “that too depends on contact”; Up 3050 at D 4094, *mngon pa, ju* 153a6 and P 5595, *mngon pa’i bstan bcos, tu* 176b7: *de dag kyang reg pa’i rkyen can te*, “those too have the characteristic of depending on contact”.

32 AN 10.60 at AN V 108,26 (translated in Bodhi, 2012, p. 1413) and its parallel in D 38, *shes rab sna tshogs, ka* 277b4 and P 754, *sher phyin, tsi* 294b1 (translated in Anālayo, 2016b, p. 103), with the perception of cessation conflated with the preceding perception of dispassion due to a copying error.

33 AN 11.7 at AN V 318,10 (translated in Bodhi, 2012, pp. 1557–1559).

of space, of the sphere of the infinity of consciousness in relation to the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, of the sphere of nothingness in relation to the sphere of nothingness, of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception in relation to the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, of this world in relation to this world, of the other world in relation to the other world, of anything seen, heard, sensed, cognised, reached, sought after and examined by the mind, and yet he would be percipient. The Buddha replies in the affirmative, stating that this is when one perceives what is peaceful, etc., namely *Nirvāṇa*.³⁴

The *āyatana*-terminology more specifically recurs in descriptions of the supra-mundane, for, with reference to *Nirvāṇa*, it is emphatically stated that “there is that *āyatana*”:

atthi ... tad āyatanaṃ, yattha neva pathavī, na āpo, na tejo, na vāyo, na ākāśānañcāyatanaṃ, na viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ, na ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ, na nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ, n' āyaṃ loko, na paraloko, na ubho candimasūriyā. tatra p' āhaṃ ... n' eva āgatiṃ vadāmi, na gatiṃ, na ʔitiṃ, na cutiṃ, na upapattiṃ; appatiṭṭhaṃ, appavattaṃ, anārammaṇaṃ' ev' etaṃ. es' ev' anto dukkhassā ti. (Ud 8.1 at Ud 80,9³⁵)

There is ... that *āyatana*, wherein there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither the *āyatana* of infinite space, nor the *āyatana* of infinite consciousness, nor the *āyatana* of nothingness, nor the *āyatana* of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor the world beyond, nor the sun and the moon. There, I say ... there is also no coming, no going, no staying, no passing away and no arising; it is indeed not established, it is not proceeding, it has no object. This itself is the end of *dukkha*.

This passage clearly shows that the same experiential terminology encompasses the ordinary six-sense experience of the world and the immaterial spheres in which only the mental sense is active (both are unsatisfactory), and that which transcends them, namely *Nirvāṇa*. In short, as observed by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2015 [2003–2012], p. 512), “[s]ince it is something realizable, [the cessation of the six mundane sense spheres] is referred to as a ‘sphere’ in such contexts”.

That “such an *āyatana* should be known” (*āyatane veditabbe*) wherein the sense organs (the eye, etc.) cease and their respective perceptions (perception of form, etc.) fade away is emphatically stated in yet another textual passage.³⁶

Additional evidence for the experiential nature of *Nirvāṇa* is an instruction concerned with the unworldly type of sadness that one feels when longing for the as

34 AN 11.19 at AN V 353,19 (translated in Bodhi, 2012, pp. 1582–1583, where it is numbered as 11.18).

35 Translated also in Ireland, 1997 [1991] I, p. 102.

36 This is repeated as many as three times in the Pāli version, SN 35.117 at SN IV 98,3 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, p. 1191), but is abbreviated in the Chinese parallel, SĀ 211 at T II 53b12; see also the Pāli commentary at Spk II 391,3.

yet unattained supreme liberation of the mind. The abiding of noble ones in such a mental condition is called an *āyatana* (which I leave intentionally untranslated in the following citations):

kadā 'ssu nām' āhaṃ tad-āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharissāmi yad ariyā etarahi āyatanaṃ upasampajja viharantī? ti. (MN 137 at MN III 218,28)

When will I attain to and dwell in that *āyatana* to which the noble ones now attain to and dwell in?

我何時彼處成就遊，謂：處諸聖人成就遊？(MĀ 163 at T I 693a14)

When will I attain to and dwell in that *āyatana*, namely, the *āyatana* the noble ones attain to and dwell in?

bdag nam zhig na mchog gi skye mchod bsgrubs shing nye bar gnas 'phags pa'i skye mched nye bar bsgrubs shing nye bar gnas zhes? (Up 3069 at P 5595, *mngon pa'i bstan bcos, tu*, 192b4 and D 4094, *mngon pa, ju*, 166b7)

When am I going to attain to [such a] supreme *āyatana*, that is, the *āyatana* the noble ones have attained to and are firmly established in?³⁷

3.2.1 Five occasions (*āyatanas*) of being liberated

The *āyatana*-terminology further recurs in a listing of occasions of being liberated (*vimutta-āyatanas/vimukty-āyatanas*), five circumstances in which liberating insight may occur:³⁸

- 1) when hearing the Dharma,
- 2) when teaching the Dharma to others,
- 3) when reciting the Dharma,
- 4) when reflecting about the Dharma,
- 5) when cultivating formal meditation.

According to the canonical description, on each of these five occasions one penetrates the teachings in spirit and letter. Due to this, delight and joy arise, which lead on to tranquillity and concentration. These mental states (delight, etc.) correspond with the relevant awakening factors, seven mental qualities that are indispensable in order to awaken. A parallelism between the description of the occasions for being liberated and the awakening factors is also evident in the process that leads up

37 For another occurrence of the same see, e.g., MN 44 at MN I 304,33, with the parallels MĀ 210 at T I 789c14 and Up 1005 at D 4094 *mngon pa, ju* 10a6 and P 5595, *mngon pa'i bstan bcos, tu* 11b1.

38 DN 33 at DN III 241 and DĀ 9 at T I 51c3; DN 33 at DN III 279 and DĀ 9 at T I 53c15; AN 5.26 at AN III 21; *Saṅgīti-sūtra* with the *Saṅgīti-paryāya*, Stache-Rosen, 1968 I, pp. 149–153 [§ V.19].

to and corresponds to the direct realisation of the teachings through any of these five liberating circumstances, which would correspond to the development of the awakening factors of mindfulness and investigation of mind states in light of the teachings (Anālayo, 2012a, p. 297). This confluence is noteworthy because it offers an additional occurrence of the ‘experiential’ terminology of *āyatana* in connection with insight, liberation and awakening.

A version of the passage in question continues after the mention of concentration by explicitly stating that with a mind concentrated in this way one sees things in correspondence with reality.³⁹ This in turn “echoes a recurrent description in the ... discourses, according to which concentration leads to a vision of things according to reality, which then forms the basis for attaining liberation” (Anālayo, 2012a, p. 298).

Commentarial elaborations on this canonical passage depict the process leading from seeing things in correspondence with reality to actual liberation as occurring by way of the disenchantment and dispassion that arise based on such a vision; through them, liberation takes place.⁴⁰ Such a vision in correspondence with reality is precisely concerned with the four noble truths, thus issuing in disenchantment with regard to the five aggregates of clinging, followed by dispassion, through which passion, aversion and delusion will be overcome, and liberation will be achieved.⁴¹

In conclusion, since the occasions for being liberated necessitate direct contact with the truth, the use of *āyatana*-terminology in this context underscores the experiential dimension of soteriologically pertinent mental events.

3.2.2 Nirvāṇa: Contacting the cessation of contact

Saṃsāric existence (*bhava*) revolves in circles around contact as a process of *coming into* existence or becoming. Liberation from this continuity happens once the mind is emptied of the craving for stimulation by way of the six senses and of the clinging to experiences. Rebirth, as an epiphenomenon of such clinging,⁴² also comes to an end when craving for becoming fades away.

The saṃsāric axis between craving, contact and the senses is evident from the sequence of dependent cessation of *dukkha/duḥkha*: when there is no more craving for the hedonic tone of feelings that arises from contact, the phenomenological relevance of the ‘world’ ceases and the persistence of worldly contact is not sought

39 DĀ 9 at T I 51c9 and 53c20.

40 *Saṅgīti-paryāya*, T 1536 at T XXVI 424a11 and *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, Wogihara, 1971 [1932–1936], p. 54 (cf. also Pāsādika, 1990, p. 26).

41 T 1536 at T XXVI 425b1; these passages are noted in Anālayo, 2012a, pp. 298–299. On the insight themes of disenchantment and dispassion in relation to the meditative dynamics of the awakening factors see Anālayo, 2013a, pp. 195–226 and 2018, pp. 188–192.

42 The occurrence of rebirth is discerned for one who clings, not for one without clinging, in SN 44.9 at SN IV 398; cf. also the parallels SĀ 957 at T II 244b3 and SĀ² 190 at T II 443b4.

after. The mind is no longer inflated by worldly experience and it stops coming into existence. As the mind simply attends to its own (temporary) ending as the ending of conditioned experience itself,⁴³ the ‘world’ comes to cessation. This process is attendant on the fading away of craving. At this point there is no more ‘occurrence’ (*appavattam*),⁴⁴ and no more *dukkha/duḥkha*, for ‘occurrence’ is *dukkha/duḥkha* and ‘non-occurrence’ is the complete end of *dukkha/duḥkha* and becoming caused by craving.

This dynamic explains what the dependent cessation of the six senses practically involves, and it furthermore explains the use of ‘non-occurrence’ as an epithet of Nirvāṇa. Cessation of the six senses is about an ‘experiential irrelevance’ of the mundane, in the sense that the mind has turned away from the six senses that constitute the ‘world’. Nevertheless, the sense organs of course remain physically intact.

This is demonstrated by a discourse preserved in Pāli and Chinese spoken by the monk Ānanda, who is depicted rejoicing in the Buddha’s discovery of a way of emerging from *dukkha/duḥkha* for the sake of the “personal realisation of Nirvāṇa”. Here and in similar contexts, the discourses point to *verification* of the truth, *realising* by making it real, true, driving the truth home, making a truth one’s own – the highest truth of Nirvāṇa in the present case – as in the literal meaning of the Pāli phrase *nibbānassa sacchikiriya*. In the Pāli version Ānanda makes the following point:

... *tad eva nāma cakkhuṃ bhavissati, te rūpā tañ c’ āyatanaṃ no paṭisaṃvedissati*
... (AN 9.37 at AN IV 426,26⁴⁵)

... in as much as that same eye will actually be present, those visual forms will actually be present, and yet one will not be experiencing that *āyatana* ...

The same is repeated for the other mundane sense domains. The Chinese counterpart reads:

有眼有色，有耳有聲，有鼻有香，有舌有味，有身有觸，有意有法。而有比丘有是等法，能不覺知。(SĀ 559 at T II 146b28)

The eye is present and visual forms are present, the ear is present and sounds are present, the nose is present and odours are present, the tongue is present and tastes are present, the body is present and tactile objects are present, the mind is present and mental objects are present. And yet a monastic, there being such states (*āyatana*), is able not to experience them.

This description indicates that the experience of Nirvāṇa involves the cessation of contact by way of the six mundane senses. In fact, it would not be entirely accurate

43 AN 6.55 at AN III 377,30: *vayañ c’ ass’ ānupassati*, said of one whose mind is steadied, who attains to imperturbability, and who observes the vanishing of the mind itself (translated in Bodhi, 2012, p. 935).

44 Ud 8.1 at Ud 80,15 (translated in Ireland, 1997 [1991] I, p. 102).

45 Translated also in Bodhi, 2012, p. 1301.

to state that the supramundane experience takes Nirvāṇa (the supramundane) as its ‘object’, because *objectification* and the very construct of an object (as well as of a subject) disappear with Nirvāṇa.

As seen above, the ordinary ‘mind-sense’ is included among the six senses. This does not mean that the supramundane experience takes place somewhere else outside the ‘mind’. It simply means that it takes place outside the mundane construct of the ‘mind’ subject to craving.

From this perspective, the basic definition of Nirvāṇa as the remainderless eradication of and freedom from passion, aversion and delusion, or as the remainderless eradication of and freedom from craving and ignorance, is just the counterpart to Nirvāṇa as ‘signless’ (*animitta*) liberation of the mind. This brings about the end of ‘perverted’ signification in terms of and under the influence of the same unwholesome states of passion, etc. That is, the ceasing of these states functioning as parameters, as reifiers, and as agents of signification – they become, literally, insignificant, meaningless.⁴⁶ This mode in turn amounts to the full realisation of emptiness, a freedom from experience, as it were, because the deluded sense-making, the making something out of the ‘things’ of experience, has ended. This is the experiential base of Nirvāṇa.

A related point is made in the statement according to which the arahant still has a meditative experience, for he or she “meditates” (*jhāyati ca pana*), though does not meditate or experience in dependence or on the basis of (*tam pi nissāyana jhāyati*) earth, on earth, water, fire, wind, the sphere of infinite space, the sphere of infinite consciousness, the sphere of nothingness, the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, this world or the world beyond, whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognised, attained, sought after, traversed by the mind.⁴⁷

Having transcended form and the formless, one who is released in cessation by the relinquishment of all supports has directly ‘contacted’ the deathless element (an epithet of Nirvāṇa), which is without support, that is, independent from ordinary contact and all that follows it.⁴⁸ This shows that the experience of the absence of any conditioned object cannot be reduced to the absence of ‘contact’ in absolute terms, which in turn suggests that early Buddhism does not appear to introduce an *ad hoc* cognitive model to account for the extraordinary experience of Nirvāṇa. The early texts are not preoccupied with the construction of a whole new terminology with

46 Cf. MN 43 at MN I 248,8–21 and SN 41.7 at SN IV 297,11–25: *rāgo ... pamāṇakaraṇo, doso pamāṇakaraṇo, moho pamāṇakaraṇo. ... rāgo ... kiṅcano, doso kiṅcano, moho kiṅcano. ... rāgo ... nimittakaraṇo, doso nimittakaraṇo, moho nimittakaraṇo.*

47 AN 11.10 at AN V 324,28 (translated in Bodhi, 2012, p. 1561) with its parallels SĀ 926 at T II 236a11 and SA² 151 at T II 431a13; see also a Gāndhārī fragment in Jantrasrisalai et al., 2016, pp. 87–88

48 It 73 at It 62,12: *kāyena amataṃ dhātuṃ phusayitvā* (B^c: *phussayitvā*; E^c: *phassayitvā*; C^c: *phassayitvā*, with note: *phusayitva*; S^c: *phussayitvā*, with note: *phusayitvā*) *nirūpadhiṃ* (translated in Ireland, 1997 [1991] II, p. 167 and Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], p. 366).

respect to the supramundane precisely because they could not and do not posit a ‘metaphysics’ of the supramundane as such.

A related aspect is that contact with the experience of pleasure and pain quite literally does not ‘contact’ or ‘touch’ a liberated one, whilst the experience itself is still occurring:

*phusanti phassā upadhiṃ paṭicca,
nirupadhiṃ kena phuseyyum phassā.* (Ud 2.4 at Ud 12,31⁴⁹)

Contact touches (or: ‘affects’) one dependent on supports (*upadhi*),
How can contacts touch (or: ‘affect’) one who is without support?

To contextualise further: the Buddha is on record for consistently refusing to entertain metaphysical speculations framed according to the Indian logical model of the tetralemma, a fourfold predication that was current in Indian philosophical circles at his time.⁵⁰ Two Pāli discourses reporting exchanges between two leading monastic disciples of the Buddha apply a disallowance of the tetralemma to Nirvāṇa itself, specifically in relation to the cessation of the six sense bases.⁵¹ One of them, which has a Chinese parallel,⁵² records a query as to whether, with the remainderless fading away and cessation of the six ‘domains for contact’ (*phassa-āyatana*), there is something else (1), there is nothing else (2), there is both (3), there is neither something else nor nothing else (4). In all four instances the answer is that it should not be said so. According to the Pāli version, this is because each of these statements amount to proliferating that which is not to be proliferated:

... iti vadaṃ appapañcaṃ papañceti. yāvatā ... channaṃ phassāyatanānaṃ gati tāvatā papañcassa gati; yāvatā papañcassa gati tāvatā channaṃ phassāyatanānaṃ gati. channaṃ ... phassāyatanānaṃ asesavirāganīrodhā papañcanīrodho papañcavūpasamo ti. (AN 4.174 at AN II 161,32)

... with such a saying one proliferates that which is not to proliferate. ... As far as the range of the six domains for contact extends, just so far extends the range of proliferation. As far as the range of proliferation extends, just so far extends the range of the six domains for contact. With the remainderless fading away and cessation of the six domains for contact there is the cessation of proliferation, the subsiding of proliferation.

49 Translated also in Ireland, 1997 [1991] I, p. 26 and Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], p. 367.

50 The most significant of these types of refutations from a soteriological perspective concerns the destiny of a *tathāgata* (an epithet for a fully liberated one) after death. On the term *tathāgata* see Anālayo, 2017b; on the tetralemma in relation to the *tathāgata* see the summary in Anālayo, 2017c, pp. 101–113.

51 AN 4.174 at AN II 161,1 and AN 4.175 at AN II 163,3 (translated in Bodhi, 2012, pp. 539–540, where they are numbered 4.173 and 4.174 respectively).

52 SĀ 249 at T II 59c27 (translated in Anālayo, 2019b, pp. 50–53), parallel to AN 4.174.

The Chinese parallel offers a complementary perspective, stating that each of the four propositions is void and null – literally, ‘empty words’, *xuyan* 虛言:

... 此則虛言。若言六觸入處盡：離欲，滅，息，沒已，離諸虛偽，得般涅槃，此則佛說。 (SĀ 249 at T II 60a20)

... this is indeed an unfounded statement. If one were to say: “when the six domains of contact have been eradicated, faded away, ceased, appeased and disappeared, one is apart from all that is unfounded [and] attains Nirvāṇa”, then this is indeed what the Buddha taught.

In summary, with falsehood relinquished, truth is attained, a truth that by its nature does not falsify (*amosa-dhamma/amoṣa-dharma*), as in a discourse passage cited earlier, to the point that the early texts do not even feel the need to build any kind of epistemic mystique of truth in spite of the “epistemological crisis” (Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], p. 518) brought about by the need of communicating teachings that collide with the ‘falsifying nature’ of ordinary perception.⁵³

3.2.3 Emancipation from concept and predicability

With mundane ‘contact’ being inoperative and the six mundane experiential domains that encompass ‘concept’ ceasing, Nirvāṇa occurs as an a-conceptual *āyatanā*. Nirvāṇa steps out of the paradigm of conceptuality in that it steps out of the paradigm of conditionality. By penetrating contact, and not appropriating anything dependently arisen by way of contact, it breaks free from the reification of a subject that experiences objects of experience and conceives itself as an ontologically independent entity. By transcending this dependency, Nirvāṇa is beyond reckoning and conceptuality. In short, it is beyond predicability.⁵⁴ This is the result of the permanent

53 Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2015 [2003–2012], p. 518) comments: “the Tathāgata who realized the cessation of the six sense-bases, was confronted with the stupendous problem of mediating with the world that could not even imagine the frightful prospect of a cessation of the six sense-bases. That is to say, when he reached the state of non-proliferation, *nippapañca*, by experiencing the cessation of the world through the cessation of the six sense-bases, the Tathāgata had to grapple with the serious problem of truth and falsehood in mediating with the world.”

54 In fact, all that can be said of the condition of a *tathāgata* by way of predicating it, is that, just like a fire that has gone out, “it is reckoned as ‘extinguished’”, *nibbuto t’eva saṅkham gacchati* in MN 72 at MN 487,30 (cf. Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], pp. 439–441); the quoted statement is not found as such in the parallels, which however all agree with MN 72 at MN 487,11 in explaining the similitude of the *tathāgata* to the extinguished fire because he is free from reckoning in terms of the five aggregates; see SĀ 962 at T II 245c28, SĀ² 196 at T II 445b17, andUp 3057 at D 4094 *mngon pa*, ju 158a2 and P 5595, *mngon pa’i bstan bcos*, tu 182b2.

dismantling of craving for sensory contact and of mindfulness being permanently established in the absence of any hindrance that may interfere with its presence.

When conditioned existence ceases, a concept-based ontology ceases to furnish the parameters for ‘experience’. Experience becomes an ontologically empty process. In the words of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2012 [1971], p. 81):

[e]xperience is itself the ultimate criterion of truth and not its predicability. Yet, from the worldling’s point of view, predicability is of the very essence of truth.

In another publication I suggested a reading of the early Buddhist cessation of existence in terms of transcendence of the so-called ‘hermeneutical limit’, the prison of the subject, thanks to the emancipation from the epistemic closure of name-and-form and consciousness (Dhammadinnā, 2017). Craving, conceit and views are responsible for the arising of an ‘ontology’ of the conceptual experience – or experiential concept – of name-and-form and consciousness. With the eradication of the influxes, the ontology of ‘concepts’ also comes to an end in the mind of a fully awakened being to the extent that existence comes to an end (*bhava-nirodha*). Name-and-form and consciousness continue to be experienced, but they are emptied of the conceptual *qua* existential status and investment that occurs in the presence of the influxes. Notably, such an emancipation from the hermeneutic limit is nevertheless described with the help of the same experiential terminology: Nirvāṇa is an *āyatana*.

From yet another perspective, the ‘conceptual’ itself becomes a matter of experiential penetration in the application of radical attention (*yoniso manaskāra/yoniso manasikāra*), through which one turns to the dependency and conditionality of the conceptual, and this again could be called ‘experiential’. As one of the five components of ‘name’, attention (*manaskāra/manasikāra*) engenders experience. As a form attention that concords with truth, radical attention engenders liberating insight into the fabric of experience.

Although Nirvāṇa is in itself a-conceptual, its concept is of course made use of as a goal to aim at in mind training. On the other hand, Nirvāṇa itself may be subject to ignorant conceptualisation just like any other concept or designation that is reified by way of craving and clinging. In fact Nirvāṇa appears as the last in a list of twenty-four concepts that are misappropriated, starting from sense experience at the level of the earth element, all the way up to more abstract notions.⁵⁵ In this way, the unawakened person tends to produce conceivings even in regard to Nirvāṇa, “on the basis of such conventional usages as ‘in *Nibbāna*’, ‘from *Nibbāna*’, ‘on reaching *Nibbāna*’ and ‘my *Nibbāna*’. By hypostasizing *Nibbāna* they develop a substance view, even of this concept, just as in the case of *paṭhavi*, or earth” (Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], p. 281). A liberated person instead does not delight in and cling to Nirvāṇa. In the words of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2015 [2003–2012], pp. 283–284):

55 MN I at MN I 4,3 with its parallel EĀ 44.6 at T II 766a25, Nirvāṇa is however not taken up in similar presentations in MĀ 106 and T 56; on this passage see Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012]: 281–284 and Anālayo 2011: I 24–26.

[this] betrays an enslavement to the syntax. When one says ‘the river flows’, it does not mean that there is a river quite apart from the act of flowing. Likewise the idiom ‘it rains’ should not be taken to imply that there is something that rains. It is only a turn of speech, fulfilling a certain requirement of the grammatical structure. ... So it has to rain for there to be rain. The implicit verbal sense becomes obscured, or else it is ignored. A periphrastic usage receives acceptance. So the rain rains, and the river flows. A natural phenomenon becomes mystified and hypostasized.⁵⁶

To recapitulate, the early Buddhist model of conceptuality, and its transcendence, is rooted in the notion of contact. What is eliminated with the a-conceptual experience of Nirvāṇa is the ontology of concepts, not the operational dimension of concepts in the daily life of an awakened being.⁵⁷

4. Epistemic validity of first-person knowledge

The epistemic validity of personal realisation in early Buddhism is evident when positioning the Buddha’s grounds for making his claim to truth in relation to the grounds for an authoritative proclamation of valid final knowledge (*añña/ajñā*) recognised in ancient India before and during his time.

In a Pāli discourse, he replies affirmatively to a query by a group of monastics whether there exists a method whereby final knowledge can be declared. Such a method is said to exist apart from, or independent of, the following five criteria: faith, personal preference or liking, oral tradition, examination-and-reasoning, and intuitive acceptance of a view.⁵⁸ The method consists in the practice of the establishment of mindfulness, here exemplified by assessing whether, having seen a form with the eye (etc.), there is lust, aversion or delusion internally, one knows them accordingly as present; or, if there is no lust, aversion or delusion internally, one also knows them accordingly as absent. All these conditions “are to be understood by seeing them with wisdom”, which qualifies as a method of proclaiming final knowledge that is independent from the five criteria listed above. The identification of successful practice of the establishment of mindfulness as a method for full liberation is a core aspect of the early Buddhist path.⁵⁹

56 Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2015 [2003–2012], p. 284) figuratively speaks of an “animistic trend of thought”, so that wherever there is an activity, one imagines some form of independent life.

57 On the ‘non-conceptual sense’ in later tradition see Sharf, 2018 and, particularly in Yogācāra sources, Kramer, 2017.

58 SN 35.152 at SN IV 139,5 (translated in Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1214–1215).

59 See, e.g., Anālayo, 2013a, pp. 247–251. Bhikkhu Anālayo (2013a, p. 250) sums up: “[t]he final goal of the gradual practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* [establishment of mindfulness], undertaken within the context of the noble eightfold path as the practical implementation of the fourth noble truth, is clearly the attainment of full awakening.”

The five methods (and their respective criticisms) recur in the Pāli version of another discourse, a discourse that is also attested in two different Sanskrit fragmentary versions.⁶⁰ In lieu of the five sources listed above, one of the Sanskrit versions presents claims based on what is seen, heard, sensed and cognised. Claims made on this basis, but in the absence of personal realisation, can lead to dogmatic adherence to an oral tradition.⁶¹

The context of the exposition of the five methods in this discourse is an exchange with a Brahmin who had confronted the Buddha with the claim that the Brahminical oral tradition is the sole depository of the truth. In the Pāli and one of the two Sanskrit versions the Buddha responds by querying the Brahmin whether the past sages held to be the founders of this tradition had personal realisation of the truth.⁶² This points to the importance of authenticity with respect to claims to truth, in the sense of basing them on personal realisation and, above all, embodying the qualities that should ensue from such a realisation.

In a further discourse preserved in Pāli and in a fragmentary Sanskrit version, the Buddha acknowledges the existence of diversity among recluses and Brahmins who proclaim the fundamentals of the holy life after having themselves reached the consummation and perfection of such superior knowledge.⁶³ Among the grounds for such proclamation, first-person knowledge pertains to those who rely on superior knowledge of the Dharma, attained on their own among things not heard before.⁶⁴ This is identified by the Buddha as the basis for what he discovered and taught, and it is called *diṭṭhadhamma-abhiññā/dr̥ṣṭadharmā-abhijñā*, a knowledge which is superior by virtue of having as a basic principle (dhamma/dharma) the fact that it is 'seen' (*diṭṭha/dr̥ṣṭa*), conveying a sense of self-evident, incontrovertible immediacy here-and-now.⁶⁵

60 MN 95 at MN II 170,27; for a fuller discussion I defer to the comparative study by Bhikkhu Anālayo (2011 II, pp. 557–563).

61 Schøyen fragment 2376/1/6a 4v1 in Hartmann, 2002, pp. 5 and 11.

62 In MN 95 at MN II 169,17 the point is whether they could claim they knew and saw the truth, *aham etaṃ jānāmi, aham etaṃ passāmi, idam eva saccaṃ moghaṃ aññan ti*, whereas the Sanskrit version in SHT III 883aV2 makes the point of having personal and direct realisation of five qualities, that are not preserved in the fragment, but likely refer to personal attainment of the fruits of truth, asceticism, celibacy, study, and generosity (or their equivalents); cf. Anālayo, 2011 II, p. 560 note 156.

63 The Sanskrit version has two additional grounds not pointing to epistemological modalities as such but to the import of specific doctrines (the denial of causality on the part of the Ājīvikas and the attribution of all circumstances to former deeds on the part of the Jains). These can be left aside in the present context.

64 MN 100 at MN II 211,19: *pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu sāmāy-eva dhammaṃ abhiññāya*; cf. fragment 347v5–6 in Zhang, 2004, p. 11: *pūrvam anuśruteṣu dharmeṣu svayaṃ dharmān abhijñāya {{dr̥ṣṭa}}* ○ *svayaṃ dharmān parijñāya* and SHT IV 165 folio 26Va+c: *(a)nanuśruteṣu dha[rm]e(ṣu svaya)[m]-anuprāptaḥ*.

65 Bhikkhu Anālayo (2011 II, p. 581) notes that in the Sanskrit version the relationship between the exposition on the grounds for claiming superior knowledge and the account of

In summary, first-person knowledge is explicitly identified as the Buddha's legitimate ground for making a claim to truth, and it is indispensable to qualify an authentic teacher and teaching.

5. Intersubjective validity of liberating knowledge

The formulation of the four noble truths as an epistemological method made available to others demonstrates that the Buddha intended his own superior liberating knowledge to be both verifiable and attainable by others. Such an epistemic conviction unmistakably emerges from the following injunction to practitioners:

tasmātiha ... evaṃ sikkhitabbaṃ: imasmiñ ca saviññāṇake kāye ahaṅkārama-maṅkāramānānusayā na bhavissanti, bahiddhā ca sabbanimittesu ahaṅkārama-maṅkāramānānusayā na bhavissanti, yañ ca cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ upasampajja viharato ahaṅkāramamaṅkāramānānusayā na honti, tañ ca cetovimuttiṃ paññā-vimuttiṃ upasampajja viharissāmā ti. evañ hi kho ... sikkhitabbaṃ. (AN 3.32 at AN I 133,24⁶⁶)

Therefore ... you should train like this: “there will be no underlying tendencies to conceit in terms of I-making and my-making in regard to this body endowed with consciousness, there will be no underlying tendencies to conceit in terms of I-making and my-making in regard to all external signs, and we will enter and dwell in that liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, through which there are no underlying tendencies to conceit in terms of I-making and my-making for one who enters and dwells in it.” It is indeed like this ... that you should train.

This excerpt shows that the Buddha's superior knowledge is presented as having intersubjective validity. I speak of ‘intersubjective validity’ in the sense that others who have followed the Buddha's path and reached its end can then subjectively know for themselves that their own minds have become irreversibly free from all unwholesome tendencies and thus retrospectively verify that the Buddha's path and liberation are actually true.⁶⁷ The quoted excerpt moreover points to an organic alignment between episteme (first-person experience of the truth of Nirvāṇa) and epistemology (in short, the four noble truths) in early Buddhist thought.

the Buddha's awakening is particularly evident as the Brahmin who is the protagonist of the exchange explicitly inquires in what way the Buddha lays claim to direct knowledge, which then forms the occasion for the delivery of the autobiographical account on the part of the Buddha.

66 Translated also in Bodhi, 2012, p. 229 (where it is numbered 3.33), with a parallel in SĀ 982 at T II 255b25; cf. also SĀ 1026 at T II 268b2.

67 I am not concerned here with a possible application, from a perspective internal to the early discourses, of the idea of intersubjective validity to the case of the Buddha's telepathic knowledge of the mind of others as having become fully liberated.

Intersubjective verifiability as the property of a certain knowledge (a) to be accurately communicated between different individuals and (b) to be reproduced under varying circumstances for the purposes of verification is an essential principle of the empirical investigation at the core of the Scientific Revolution that marked the emergence of modern science during the early modern period in Europe. Needless to say, as the crucial epistemic role of the extrasensory *āyatana* of Nirvāṇa demonstrates, early Buddhism is a ‘world’ apart from empiricism intended as the theory that all knowledge is based on experience derived from the senses, a view that developed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century in Europe, stimulated by the rise of experimental science. In the early Buddhist analysis, it is the unawakened ordinary person who relies only on sense perception in the pursuit of knowledge, lacking insight on the functioning of sense perception that comes with higher knowledge. He or she attributes reality to the concepts arisen based on the senses, takes their existence for granted, and injects a sense of self into them, on account of mere conceivings that ignore the dependently arisen nature of sensory perception.⁶⁸ The awakened mind understands not through perception (which simply corroborates that which the mind has already constructed by grasping it as a concept), but through higher knowledge. That is, it sees ‘through’ perception, and understands that sensory perception itself is constructed by the mind.⁶⁹

6. The early Buddhist refrain from a ‘rhetoric of experience’

The present article was written partly in pursuit of the question whether or not the early Buddhist texts do actually embed a ‘rhetoric of experience’, an issue voiced in contemporary Buddhist academia by Robert Sharf (1995, pp. 246 and 259) among others:⁷⁰

the Buddhist emphasis on “inner experience” is in large part a product of modern and open lay-oriented reform movements” ... a product of twentieth-century reforms inspired in part by Occidental models. ... [Such a concept of] religious experience is a relatively late and distinctly Western invention.

The philosophical reading of the early Buddhist teachings I tried to articulate suggests that the emphasis on ‘inner experience’ is not a product of modern reform

⁶⁸ See the discussion of basic pattern of behaviour of all minds object in Ñāṇananda, 2015 [2003–2012], pp. 268ff.

⁶⁹ On the role of the mind in the construction of sensory experience, and the potential of mindfulness to become aware of such a construction process in light of findings of cognitive psychology see Anālayo, 2019a.

⁷⁰ Cf. also Sharf, 2000, p. 271 and see the critical replies in Anālayo, 2013b, pp. 32–33 note 63 and Dhammadinnā, 2014, pp. 105–106 note 92. On the concept of ‘experience’ in the encounter between India and the West see the important essay by Halbfass (1988 [1981], pp. 378–402).

movements, as it can be detected in essential gnoseological terminology and notions emic to early Buddhist thought.⁷¹

Contact is the cradle of ‘experience’ in early Buddhism. The experiential domain (*āyatana*), being dependent on contact, can be identified as the basic early Buddhist term for the emergence of experience. The same terminology is used to map mundane and supramundane experience. Therefore the valid gnoseological status not only of ‘experience’ in general but specifically of an ‘experiential truth’ (or an experience of soteriologically significant truth) is also not the outcome of an interpretative construction but it is placed at the core of early Buddhist soteriology. In other words, truth and experience converge inasmuch as truth is in correspondence with (awakened) reality.

Additionally, the refrain from the adoption of substantially different epistemological modalities to account for the supramundane as opposed to the mundane, and from the positing of a provisional versus an ultimate truth, subtly demonstrates a radical disinterest in the pursuit of a rhetoric of experience or glorification of subjectivity and first-person claims not liable to intersubjective communication and validation. Nor is a ‘felt-sense’ of supposedly immediate experience devoid of conceptuality envisaged as cognitively possible, let alone epistemically valid.

The limits of contemplative or meditative experience are also clearly recognised in early Buddhism. Experience is indeed held to be the chief culprit for the arising of wrong views. Meditative experience, just like any other form of experience, depends on contact. Interestingly, as many as 49 out of 62 grounds for formulating (wrong) views in the already mentioned Brahmajāla arise from, at least to an extent, experiences that are meditative in nature (cf. Bodhi, 1992 [1978], p. 6; Anālayo, 2003, pp. 45 and 2009). The attribution of the arising of wrong views to direct extrasensory, meditative perception appears to imply a ‘critique of conclusions drawn from meditative experience’ and an awareness of claims to truth based on misappraisals of subjective experience. This in turn further confirms that the early Buddhist theory of knowledge is careful not to subscribe to any self-legitimising rhetoric of subjective experience or subjectivity in general whilst subjectivity and intersubjective verification are the cornerstones of its epistemology and soteriology.

This draws my study to a close and brings me back to the four noble truths in relation to the highest truth of Nirvāṇa expressed by the Buddha as unequivocal assertions of truth to be taken on their own terms as a point of departure for one’s own existential actualisation of the same.⁷² As already pointed out by Lance Cousins

71 After submitting this article, publications by Burton, 2002 and 2004 (reviewed or discussed by Timm, 2005; Werner, 2005; Gray, 2007; Mills, 2007; Showler, 2008 and Shulman, 2014, pp. 49–50) problematising the epistemic value and efficacy of knowledge in Buddhist soteriology came to my attention. In an already lengthy paper, I am not able to engage with his writings, though the topics I broached do address some of the concerns he voices.

72 Cf. Anālayo, 2016a, p. 296: “the four noble truths as what according to tradition marks the beginning of the Buddha’s teaching activities have the realization of Nirvāṇa as their foun-

(2001, p. 134), there would in fact be some support in the early discourses for calling the Buddha an *ekaṃsavādin*, that is, a ‘propounder of an unequivocal truth’: “[a]lthough this exact term is not found, but ... we find the Buddha declaring that he has made known *ekaṃsika* teachings, namely the Four Noble Truths.”

katame ca te ... mayā ekaṃsika dhammā desitā paññattā? idaṃ dukkhaṃ ti ... mayā ekaṃsiko dhammo desito paññatto. ayaṃ dukkhasamudayo ti ... mayā ekaṃsiko dhammo desito paññatto. ayaṃ dukkhanirodho ti ... mayā ekaṃsiko dhammo desito paññatto. ayaṃ dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ti ... mayā ekaṃsiko dhammo desito paññatto. kasmā ca te ... mayā ekaṃsika dhammā desitā paññattā? ete ... atthasaṃhitā, ete dhammasaṃhitā, ete ādibrahmacariyakā, ete nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattanti. tasmā te mayā ekaṃsika dhammā desitā paññattā. (DN 9 at DN I 191, 34⁷³)

But what teachings have I declared as unequivocal? “This is *dukkha*”: this is an unequivocal teaching I have declared. “This is the arising of *dukkha*”: this is an unequivocal teaching I have declared. “This is the cessation of *dukkha*”: this is an unequivocal teaching I have declared. “This is the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*”: this is an unequivocal teaching I have declared. And why have I declared these as unequivocal teachings? [Because] they are conducive to welfare, they are conducive to the Dharma, they pertain to the holy life; they lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to appeasement, to higher knowledge, to full awakening, to Nirvāṇa. That is why I have declared these as unequivocal teachings.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
B ^c	Burmese edition (Chatṭha-saṅgāyana)
C ^c	Ceylonese edition (Buddhajayanti)
D	Derge edition (Tōhoku)
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīrgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>

dition. Independent of whether one considers texts like the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and its parallels to be descriptive or prescriptive, a meditative ‘experience’, by way of the realization of the cessation of *dukkha* through the attainment of Nirvāṇa, clearly assumes a central role for the foundational teachings in early Buddhist thought.”

73 Translated also in Walshe, 1987, pp. 165–166. Parallels: DĀ 28 at T I 111a21 (translated in Ichimura, 2018 III, p. 131) and DĀ (Sanskrit) 34, 420r4 Melzer, 2006, p. 270,6 [§§ 36.63–64] (translated in Melzer, 2006, p. 271), where the declaration is however made with reference to the state of the world, *lokasya sthitiḥ*.

P	Peking edition (Ötani)
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
S ^e	Siamese edition
SHT	<i>Sanskrit Handschriften aus den Turfan-Funden</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA, 2016)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>

Note

When quoting text editions I have adjusted the sandhi, punctuation, capitalisation etc. and simplified some of the text-critical conventions for the sake of consistency and ease of reference. Pāli texts are quoted from the editions of the Pali Text Society. The references to the canonical quotations in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* follow the numbering system established by Honjō (1984) and the readings are from my own working edition. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

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