

Sāti's encounter with the Buddha

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The *Mahā-taṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta* (MN 38: MTSS) is famous for the entertaining and illuminating episode involving Sāti, a fisherman's son and Buddhist *bhikkhu* who got it wrong. Sāti's mistake was to have understood the Buddha's teaching on consciousness and personal identity as a form of Upaniṣadic essentialism:

As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is the very same consciousness which transmigrates, and not another'.¹

Sāti is of course condemned, both by the *bhikkhus* who first hear this view, and then by the Buddha himself. After asking whether Sāti has 'become warm' (*usmī-kato*) in the Dhamma-vinaya ('no' is the inevitable answer),² the Buddha states that Sāti 'insults us, destroys himself, and keeps on generating much demerit'.³ The episode involving Sāti is reminiscent of the Buddha's encounter with Ariṭṭha, recorded in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22). Both texts have a complicated narrative structure, and are of considerable importance for the correct understanding of early Buddhist thought.⁴

¹ MN I.256: *tathāhaṃ bhagavatā dhammaṃ desitaṃ ājānāmi yathā tad ev' idaṃ viññānaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññaṃ ti.*

² MN I.258: *taṃ kim maññaṭha bhikkhave, api nāyaṃ sāti bhikkhu kevaṭṭaputto usmīkato pi imasmiṃ dhammavinaye ti? kiṃ hi siyā bhante, no h' etaṃ bhante ti.*

³ MN I.259. *atha ca paṇāyaṃ sāti bhikkhu kevaṭṭaputto attanā duggahitena amhe c' eva abbhācikkhati, attānañ ca khaṇati, bahuñ ca apuññaṃ pasavati pasavati. taṃ hi tassa moghapurisassa bhavissati dīgharattaṃ ahitāya dukkhāya.*

⁴ For an analysis of the structure of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, see Wynne 2010.

1. The structure of the MTSS

It is surprising that the structure of the MTSS, such an important and complicated discourse, has not yet been analysed in detail. We will here attempt to rectify the situation. Through a conceptual analysis we will try to reconstruct the textual history of the MTSS, and draw some important conclusions about intellectual history. The basic textual divisions of the MTSS are as follows:

1. The account of Sāti's wrong view, culminating in the Buddha telling the *bhikkhus* that Sāti has not 'warmed up' and has generated much demerit (Ee I.256-59, Be paragraphs 396-99).
2. A short account of the dependent origination of cognition, likened to various types of fire (Ee 259-60, Be 400).
3. The Buddha questions the *bhikkhus* on 'what has come into being' (*bhūtam idan ti*; Ee 260-61, Be 401).
4. A section on the four 'nutriments' or 'foods' (*āhāras*: material food, contact, intention, and 'consciousness'), and their conditioned genesis, running into a general account of the twelve links of dependent origination (Ee 261-64, Be 402-06).
5. The Buddha questions the *bhikkhus* about their understanding of personal identity with regard to the past (*pubbantam*) and future (*aparantam*), and related matters, culminating in the statement that the *bhikkhus* have been well inducted into the Dhamma, which is directly evident, timeless etc. (Ee 264-65, Be 407).
6. A section on the maturation of a person, and the conditioning of experience, starting with the 'descent into a womb' of a *gandhabba*, and ending with a teaching on the dependent origination of cognition (Ee 265-67, Be 408-09).
7. A long version of the *bhikkhu*'s path to liberation, focusing on renunciant disciplines and the four *jhānas*, and finally culminating in a cessationist version of dependent origination (Ee 267-71, Be 410-14).

This brief synopsis shows that the MTSS is rather long for a Majjhima discourse, so much so that it is hard to fathom the Buddha's statement that he has given a 'concise' teaching:

Remember this as my concise (account of) liberation by destroying thirst, whereas the *bhikkhu* Sāti, the fisherman's son, has got tangled up in a great net of thirst'.⁵

If the MTSS ever was a 'concise' discourse it must have been expanded in the course of its transmission. We will keep this in mind as we analyze the different portions of the text, for a redaction of a concise discourse into a very complex one is unlikely to have been carried out seamlessly. Redactors leave 'fingerprints': if the text was expanded, a close analysis might reveal thematic and terminological discontinuities..

2. Sections 1-2: *viññāṇa*, cognitive conditioning and fire (Ee 259-60, Be 400)

When the Buddha asks Sāti what he means by a transmigrating *viññāṇa*, Sāti states 'it is that which speaks, feels, (and) experiences the result of good and bad karma, here and there'.⁶ The Buddha's problem is not the idea of karmic retribution, but Sāti's reification of 'consciousness' or 'sentience' (*viññāṇa*) into a person's feeling of being the experiencer of things. The Buddha thus responds that *viññāṇa* is dependently originated (*paṭiccasamuppannaṃ*), i.e. not generated without appropriate causes.⁷ This point is illustrated by likening *viññāṇa* to fire, which differs depending on what is burnt: logs, tinder, grass, cow-dung, chaff, rubbish, and so on. Whatever *viññāṇa* is, it comes in different, basic, forms, there being no essence common to all.

If *viññāṇa* is conditionally generated, it cannot be an organ or faculty, or even an *essence*, which 'averts' to an object. Hence it cannot correspond to the English term 'consciousness'. The standard early Buddhist analysis of cognition, not stated here, states that 'the coming together' (*saṅgati*) of

⁵ MN I.270-71: *imaṃ kho me tumhe bhikkhave saṅkhittena taṅhāsaṅkhaṃvimuttim dhāretha, sātīm pana bhikkhum kevaṭṭaputtam mahātanhājālatanhāsaṅghāṭapaṭimukkan ti.*

⁶ MN I.258: *yvāyaṃ bhante vado vedeyyo tatra tatra kalyāṇapāpakānaṃ kammānaṃ vipākam paṭisaṃvedetī ti.*

⁷ MN I.258. *nanu mayā moghapurisa anekapariyāyena paṭiccasamuppannaṃ viññāṇam vuttaṃ mayā, aññatara paccayā n'atthi viññāṇassa sambhavo ti.*

object, organ and *viññāṇa* results in 'contact' (*phasso*). 'Contact' is the actual point at which cognition begins, and the starting point for what we would call 'consciousness' proper – the point from which the different qualities of experience can be felt as 'sensation'. As already explained in the current issue of this journal, the term *viññāṇa* must instead refer to a more basic level of awareness, a sort of pre-noetic, transitive, sentience.

It is important to bear in mind these points about 'contact', in order to understand the Buddha's response to Sāti. As we have seen, Sāti thinks *viññāṇa* is a person's sense or 'feeling' of being an experiencer. Sāti is a sort of Cartesian, or rather, an ancient Indian version of it, in that his ideas are similar to early Upaniṣadic teachings, in which *viññāṇa* really is a person's sense of being a perceiver, and so is an essential substance which perceives. This understanding is repeatedly stated in the Yājñavalkya section of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

- The one here, consisting of consciousness among the vital functions (BU IV.3.7. *yo 'yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ prāṇeṣu*).
- This immense, unborn self, which consists of consciousness among the vital functions (BU IV.4.22. *sa vā eṣa mahān aja ātmā yo 'yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ prāṇeṣu*).
- The unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the unperceived perceiver (BU III.7.23. *adr̥ṣṭo draṣṭāśrotāḥ śrotāmataḥ mantāvijñāto vijñātā*).
- Consciousness, bliss, *brahman* (BU III.9.28. *vijñānam ānandaṃ brahma*; Gombrich 1990: 15).
- This great being, without inner and outer, a single mass of consciousness (BU II.4.12. *idam mahad bhūtam anantam apāraṃ vijñāna-ghana eva*; Norman 1997: 92).

Although these early Upaniṣadic ideas go beyond Sāti's definition of *viññāṇa*, it is easy to see that the latter belongs among them. According to the pre-Buddhist understanding of Yājñavalkya, the self is the perceiver lying behind cognitive acts, a pure consciousness which transmigrates from one lifetime to the next. Why did Sāti come to hold this distinctly un-Buddhist view? A further reason for Sāti's error might be inferred from the Buddha's similar exchange with Ariṭṭha in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22). On this dialogue, Gombrich (1996: 24) has commented as follows:

The occasion for this whole discourse is given by Arittha, who obstinately declared that he understood the Buddha's teaching in a certain sense. The Buddha repudiated Arittha's interpretation of his words with an attack on clinging to the words rather than the spirit. In effect the Buddha said, 'Whatever precise words of mine Arittha may be quoting, he has missed what I meant.

Exactly the same could be said of Sāti. Given the very flexible use of the term *viññāṇa* in the Pali discourses, it is possible that Sāti willingly misinterpreted a metaphorical use of the term, in order to read his own Upaniṣadic preferences into it. There is some Suttanta evidence for this. At SN 12.59, the Buddha talks about the 'descent of consciousness' (*viññāṇassa avakkanti*),⁸ although this seems to be a metaphor for the dependent origination of experience:

For (a person) abiding, *bhikkhus*, observing the 'taste' in phenomena, which leads to bondage, there is a descent of 'consciousness'; from consciousness there is name and form ... etc. ...⁹

Metaphorical accounts of cognition such as these could have given support to Sāti's predilection towards Upaniṣadic thought.

3. Section 3: *bhūtam idan ti* (Ee 260-61, Be 401)

The scene is thus well set. Sāti's view has been stated, clearly and adamantly, and the Buddha has responded even more decisively. But the next part of the discourse begins rather opaquely, with the following exchange between the Buddha and the *bhikkhus*:

Do you see, *bhikkhus*, that 'this' (*idan*) has come into being (*bhūtam*)?

Yes, venerable sir.

Do you see that its arising is due to its own food (*tad-āhāra-sambhavan*)?

⁸ The term 'descent' is used later on in the MTSS (MN I.265) to refer to the 'descent into a womb' (*gabbhassāvakkanti*) of a *gandhabba*.

⁹ SN II.91: *saññojanīyesu bhikkhave dhammesu assādānupassino viharato viññāṇassa avakkanti hoti. viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ ...pe...*

Yes, venerable sir.

Do you see that with the cessation of its food, what has come into being is subject to cessation (*nirodha-dhammaṃ*)?

Yes, venerable sir.¹⁰

The Buddha then asks whether a person might become perplexed due to doubt (...*kañkhāto uppajjati vicikicchā ti*) about certain related matters. These correspond to the three questions he has just asked:

- a. whether 'this' has come into being,
- b. whether 'this' is caused by food/nutriments, and
- c. whether 'this' will cease with the cessation of its nutriment.

After this, the Buddha asks whether such perplexity can be abandoned when one sees 'this', its nutriment and cessation as they really are (...*yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā vicikicchā sā pahīyatī ti*). The Buddha then asks whether the *bhikkhus* have any perplexity about these matters (...*vo ettha nibbikicchā*), before finally asking if they have seen each point well, with correct understanding, as it really is (...*yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya sudiṭṭhan ti*). This cross-questioning is fairly clear, but none of it explains the really difficult issue: what does the expression *bhūtam idan* mean?

The commentary takes *bhūtam idan* to refer to the group of five aggregates: 'therein, *bhūtam idan* (means) this (group) of five aggregates, which has been born, has come into being, and is produced...'.¹¹ This seems a little forced. Buddhaghosa wants *bhūta* to refer to an individual being, and so evades the neuter gender of the pronoun *idan* by creating a neuter derivative, *khandhapañcakaṃ*. But this has nothing to do with the previous discussion of *viññāṇa* and fire; Buddhaghosa's explanation is almost certainly based on what he knows is contained in the next part of the text (section 4). It is important, however, that the compound *nirodha-dhamma-* here qualifies *bhūtaṃ*, since it usually qualifies aspects of experience such as the aggregates, the links of dependent origination,

¹⁰ MN I.260: *bhūtam idan ti bhikkhave passathā ti. evam bhante. tadāhārasambhavan ti bhikkhave passathā ti. evam bhante. tadāhāranirodhā yaṃ bhūtaṃ taṃ nirodhadhamman ti bhikkhave passathā ti. evam bhante.*

¹¹ Ps II.307. *tattha bhūtam idan ti idaṃ khandhapañcakaṃ jātaṃ bhūtaṃ nibbattaṃ...*

vedanā etc. It does not normally qualify the person as a whole: the Suttapiṭaka contains no statement like 'a being (*bhūtaṃ*) is subject to cessation'. The 'thing' which has 'come into being' cannot, therefore, refer to a person as a whole.

In fact, the simple and obvious referent of *idan* is the neuter noun *viññāṇaṃ*. We have seen that immediately before this, the Buddha's response to Sāti (section 2) focuses on the different categories of *viññāṇa*. The Buddha points out that 'sentience' (*viññāṇaṃ*) is dependently originated, stating 'there is no arising of sentience without a cause (*aññātra paccayā n' atthi viññāṇassa sambhavo*)?'.¹² The term *sambhava* (production, origination, arising etc.) is also used in section 3, when the Buddha asks 'do you see, *bhikkhus*, (that this) has its arising through its own nutriment' (*tadāhārasambhavan ti bhikkhave passathā ti*). Since the Buddha talks about the arising (*sambhavo*) of both 'sentience' and 'this thing', in quick succession, the two are likely to be synonymous. Indeed, 'nutriment' (*āhāra*) can easily be equated with the 'fuels' which define the different types of fire to which *viññāṇa* is likened (section 2). The Buddha has switched metaphors, but the meaning is essentially the same: sentience is likened to a fire which requires fuel or nutriment. If so, sections 1-3 of the MTSS form a coherent whole.

4. Section 5: the thicket of views (Ee 264-65, Be 407)

In the final part of section 3, the Buddha reflects on the correct attitude with which this teaching is to be approached:

If, *bhikkhus*, you were to cling to this view, thus purified and cleansed - to cherish, treasure, and make it one's own - would you understand, *bhikkhus*, that the Dhamma has been taught to be like a raft, for crossing over, not for grasping?

We would not, venerable sir.¹³

The Buddha then puts the same question in the negative 'If you were not to cling...', and the *bhikkhus* answer in the affirmative, agreeing that Dhamma

¹² MN I.258. *nanu mayā moghapurisa anekapariyāyena paṭiccasamuppannaṃ viññāṇaṃ vuttaṃ, aññātra paccayā n' atthi viññāṇassa sambhavo ti.*

¹³ MN I.260. *imaṃ ce tumhe bhikkhave diṭṭhiṃ evaṃ parisuddhaṃ evaṃ pariyodātaṃ allīyetha kelāyetha dhanāyetha mamāyetha, api nu tumhe bhikkhave kullūpamaṃ dhammaṃ desitaṃ ājāneyyātha nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāyā ti. no h' etaṃ bhante.*

is 'like a raft, for crossing over'. So far, the text is subtle but coherent. Sāti has misunderstood the Buddha, and in response the Buddha has clarified his understanding of *viññāṇa* as conditioned sentience, and made sure that the *bhikkhus* understand this, with the aid of two metaphors for its origin (fuel and food/nutriment). Finally, the Buddha has also pointed out that these ideas would be subverted if a person grasps at them, as seems to be the case with Sāti. These questions, which end section 3, run naturally into the questions which begin section 5, on the various conceptual forms that grasping might take:

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you refer back to the past (thinking), 'Did we exist in the past, or did we not? What were we in the past; how were we in the past; having been what, what did we become in the past?'

We would not, venerable sir.

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you look forward to the future (thinking), 'Will we exist in the future, or not? What will we be in the future; how will we be in the future; having been what, what will we be in the future?'

We would not, venerable sir.

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you have doubts about yourselves now, in the present (thinking), 'Do I exist, or not? What am I; how am I; this being has come from where, and where will it go?'

We would not, venerable sir.

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you say: 'Our teacher is respected, we speak out of respect for our teacher?'

We would not, venerable sir.

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you say: 'An (other) ascetic speaks thus, we and (other) ascetics speak thus?'

We would not, venerable sir.

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you refer to another teacher?

We would not, venerable sir.

Bhikkhus, knowing and seeing thus, would you fall back on the various vows and auspicious ceremonies of the many other ascetics and Brahmins?

We would not, venerable sir.

Good, *bhikkhus*, I have inducted you into this teaching which is directly evident, timeless, 'come and see', leading on, to be known by the learned for themselves.¹⁴

In this exchange, 'knowing and seeing thus' must refer to 'this view, thus purified and cleansed', mentioned at the end of section 3. In other words, 'this view' refers to the Buddha's analysis of cognition, and his negation of Sāti's view: 'this view' is the conceptual basis on which questions such as 'Did I exist', 'What will I be in the future?', 'Where have I come from?' would not even be asked. The Buddha's point is that once one has understood that there is no such thing as an essential experiencer, this wrong way of thinking simply stops; the questions about individual existence *do not apply*.

¹⁴ MN I.264-65. *api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā, pubbantaṃ vā paṭidhāveyyātha: ahesumha nu kho mayaṃ atītam addhānaṃ, na nu kho ahesumha atītam addhānaṃ, kin nu kho ahesumha atītam addhānaṃ, kathan nu kho ahesumha atītam addhānaṃ, kiṃ hutvā kiṃ ahesumha nu kho mayaṃ atītam addhānaṃ ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā, evaṃ passantā aparantaṃ vā ādhāveyyātha: bhavissāma nu kho mayaṃ anāgatam addhānaṃ, na nu kho bhavissāma anāgatam addhānaṃ, kin nu kho bhavissāma anāgatam addhānaṃ, kathan nu kho bhavissāma anāgatam addhānaṃ, kiṃ hutvā kiṃ bhavissāma nu kho mayaṃ anāgatam addhānaṃ ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā, etarahi vā paccuppannam addhānaṃ ajjhantaṃ kathaṃkathī assatha: ahan nu kho 'smi, no nu kho 'smi, kin nu kho 'smi, kathan nu kho 'smi, ayaṃ nu kho satto kuto āgato, so kuhiṃgāmī bhavissatī ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā, evaṃ vadeyyātha: satthā no garu, satthugāravena ca mayaṃ vademā ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā, evaṃ vadeyyātha: samaṇo no evaṃ āha samaṇā ca, na ca mayaṃ evaṃ vademā ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā, aññaṃ satthāraṃ uddiseyyāthā ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. api nu tumhe bhikkhave evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā, yāni tāni puthusamaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ vatakotūhalamaṅgalāni tāni sārato paccāgaccheyyāthā ti. no h' etaṃ bhante. nanu bhikkhave yad eva tumhākaṃ sāmaṃ nātāṃ sāmaṃ diṭṭhaṃ sāmaṃ viditāṃ, tad eva tumhe vadethā ti. evam bhante. sādhu bhikkhave, upantā kho me tumhe bhikkhave iminā sandiṭṭhikena dhammena akālikena ehipassikena opanayikena paccattaṃ veditabbena viññūhi.*

The close of section 3 and the beginning of section 5 thus bring to attention a general convergence of ethical and theoretical malpractice: Sāti has violated the ethics of the Dhamma through selfish grasping, based on a misunderstanding of the Buddha's critique of self. Whereas section 3 had concluded by focusing on the ethical aspect of this grasping, section 5 brings attention back to the analytic point of the Buddha's critique of self. An important parallel to the questions of section 5, from the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (MN 2), makes this quite clear.¹⁵

In MN 2, after outlining the very same ways of thinking about individual destiny as are found in the MTSS (regarding the past, present and future), the Buddha adds that for the person who 'attends incorrectly' by thinking in this way, one of six views will arise (*tassa evaṃ ayoniso manasikaroto channaṃ diṭṭhīnaṃ aññatarā diṭṭhi uppajjati*). The last of these views is an expanded version of Sāti's idea: 'that which is my self, (which) speaks, feels, (and) experiences the result of good and bad karma, here and there; that self of mine, permanent, fixed, eternal, not subject to change, will remain the same forever'.¹⁶ We see here the full implications of Sāti's view spelt out: he is indeed offering a version of the Upaniṣadic self, based on using his mind wrongly.

The *Sabbāsava Sutta* parallel reinforces the point that the Buddha's focus in section 5 is wrong thought. The queries one might have about individual existence are the product of *thinking wrongly*, and lead to such incorrect notions as the idea of a reified substance of personal experience. Exactly this has happened to the *bhikkhu* Sāti. His belief in a reified substance of personal experience is due to thinking wrongly, involving no little amount of selfish grasping. It seems that sections 1-3 & 5 of the text are closely connected. A couple of further points support this.

¹⁵ MN I.8: *so evaṃ ayoniso manasi-karoti: ahoṣin nu kho ahaṃ atītaṃ addhānaṃ, na nu kho ahoṣiṃ atītaṃ addhānaṃ, kiṃ hutvā kiṃ ahoṣiṃ nu kho ahaṃ atītaṃ addhānaṃ? bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgataṃ addhānaṃ, na nu kho bhavissāmi anāgataṃ addhānaṃ, kiṃ hutvā kiṃ bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgataṃ addhānaṃ, kathan nu kho bhavissāmi anāgataṃ addhānaṃ, kiṃ hutvā kiṃ bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgataṃ addhānaṃ ti? etarahi vā paccuppannaṃ addhānaṃ ajjhattaṃ kathaṃkathī hoti: ahan nu kho 'smi, no nu kho 'smi, kin nu kho 'smi, kathan nu kho 'smi, ayaṃ nu kho satto kuto āgato, so kuhiṃgāmī bhavissatī ti?*

¹⁶ MN I.8. *yo me ayaṃ attā vado vedeyyo tatra tatra kalyāṇapāpakānaṃ kammānaṃ vipākānaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti, so kho pana me ayaṃ attā nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tath' eva ṭhassatī ti.*

First, the Buddha's point in section 5, that his teaching is 'directly evident' (*sandiṭṭhiko*) and 'leads on' (*opaneyyiko*), is related to his point in section 3, about the Dhamma being like a raft, for crossing over (*nitharaṇatthāya*) not for grasping onto. In both sections the Buddha is at pains to point out the pragmatic purpose of his Dhamma, in contrast to Sāti's misconceived grasping at it. Second, in section 5 the Buddha asks the *bhikkhus* if they would say 'an (other) ascetic speaks thus, we and (other) ascetics speak thus'? This seems to be a clear reference to the fact that Sāti has voiced a non-Buddhist opinion, and so relates section 5 directly to the rebuttal of Sāti in sections 1-3.

In the *Sabbāsava Sutta*, views such as Sāti's are said to be 'the thicket of view, the wilderness of view, the twitching of view, the writhing of view, the fetter of view' (MN I.8: *diṭṭhigahanam diṭṭhikantāram diṭṭhivisūkam diṭṭhivipphanditam diṭṭhisamyojanam*). The terms 'twitching' (*visūka*) and 'writhing' (*vipphandita*) suggest cognitive malfunctioning, a state in which the mind does too much and a person gets lost in thought.¹⁷ This analysis is particularly appropriate to the Buddha's exposition in the MTSS so far: Sāti has lost his way in the 'thicket' of thought, due to cognitive malfunctioning. Sections 1-3 & 5 thus form an integral whole. What then of section 4?

5. Section 4: *āhāra & paṭiccasamuppāda* (Ee 261-64, Be 402-06)

In section 4 the Buddha discusses the four nutriments (*āhāras*) and the doctrine of dependent origination. We have seen that in section 3, the term *āhāra* refers to the 'nutriment' which generates 'this (thing) come into being' (*bhutam idan*); 'this' (*idan*) probably stands for *viññāṇa*, and if so *āhāra* refers to its cognitive causes, i.e. sense faculty and object. But the 'nutriments' of section 4 are entirely different. For they are said to generate not *viññāṇa*, but are rather the necessary preconditions 'for the endurance of beings who have come into being, and the assisting of those (beings) seeking birth'.¹⁸ The Buddha has apparently gone off on a tangent. What had been a discussion of Sāti's error, the dependent nature of *viññāṇa* and its 'nutriment' or generation, is now an analysis of individual continuity over time (and lifetimes).

¹⁷ This usage can be compared to the use of the same terms in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* and elsewhere, on which see Wynne (2010a: 147-48).

¹⁸ MN I.261. *cattāro 'me bhikkhave āhārā bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ ṭhitiyā, sambhavesīnaṃ vā anuggahāya.*

The overall result is confusing, if not baffling. The four nutriments of section 4 are material food (subtle or gross), contact, mental intention (*mano-sañcetanā*) and 'sentience' (*viññāṇa*).¹⁹ This disagrees with section 3, which talks about *viññāṇa* not as a nutriment, but as a result of nutriment. There are further problems. In section 4 the Buddha then asks what the cause of the four nutriments is (MN I.261: *kiṃnidānā kiṃsamudayā kiṃjātikā kiṃpabhavā*); the answer is thirst, which depends on sensation, which depends on contact, which depends on the six senses, which depend on name and form, which depend on *viññāṇa*, which depends on mental constructions, which depend finally on ignorance. This means that, according to this cessationist version of dependent origination, the four nutriments are said to depend on a causal sequence which *includes* some of the four nutriments: *viññāṇa* and 'contact' are 'nutriments', but they are apparently caused by themselves. In other words, they are both cause and effect, and the same is probably true of the third nutriment – 'mental intention' – if this is equivalent to mental constructions/volitons (*saṅkhārā*), the second link in the chain of dependent origination.

Gombrich (1996: 48) has correctly pointed out that the causal sequence explaining the generation of the four nutriments depends on 'a different process' from that outlined in the analysis of cognition to Sāti. The obvious explanation for this is that section 4 is an interpolation: it is less an attempt to explain the gist of the Buddha's critique of Sāti's Upaniṣadic essentialism, and more an attempt to add other teachings to the text, on literalist, scholastic, grounds.²⁰ A redactor probably noticed the terms 'nutriment' (*āhāra*), origination (*samabhava*) and a thing coming into being (*bhūtam idan*), in section 3, and so added extra teachings on the nutriments, which are supports for beings in existence (*bhūtānaṃ ... sattānaṃ*) and those seeking or coming into being (*sambhavesīnaṃ*). But the addition of a twelvefold version of dependent origination creates incoherence, and directs attention away from the meaning of the Buddha's encounter with Sāti.

Hence section 4 is out of step with the teaching to the teaching on personal identity which surrounds it. It says nothing about the key issue, which is how to understand a person's sense of being an experiencer of things; it rather explains further causal factors necessary for an individual existence and continuity in

¹⁹ MN I.261. *kabaḷiṃkāro āhāro oḷāriko vā sukhumo vā, phasso dutiyo, manosañcetanā tatiyā, viññāṇaṃ catutthaṃ.*

²⁰ Gombrich (1996: 22) has pointed out that the Buddha's rebuke of Ariṭṭha in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* is a critique of literalism. The redactors of the MTSS unfortunately did not notice or understand the meaning of this teaching.

the first place. Sāti's 'doctrinalism' – his turning away from the pragmatic point of the Buddha's Dhamma and into the realm of *belief* – is thus lost sight of. So when the Buddha asks, in section 5, whether the *bhikkhus* would say 'an ascetic speaks thus, we and (other) ascetics speak thus', the force of the question is diluted by the long digression into dependent origination.

The end result of adding section 4 before the questions of section 5 is that an analysis of cognition, and the rebuttal of the incorrect idea that *viññāna* is a person's sense of being an experiencer, is turned into an exposition of personal continuity. This creates an entirely different *impression* of the Buddha's rebuttal of Sāti. Why will the *bhikkhus* not refer back to the past, nor look forward to the future nor have doubts about the present (section 5)? According to section 4, it is not because the *bhikkhus* understand that such questions are inappropriate, but rather because *the correct answer has already been given*.

In short, to the questions 'did we exist in the past ... what were we in the past?', dependent origination in its twelvefold form provides an answer along the lines 'yes we did exist in the past, in the form of a specific sequence of individual continuity'. To the questions 'will we exist in the future ... what will we be in the future?', dependent origination answers that 'yes we will exist in the future, in the form of a specific sequence of individual continuity'. And to the questions, 'this being has come from where, and where will it go?', dependent origination answers that 'it has come from a specific sequence of individual continuity, and will continue likewise'. The doctrine of dependent origination in its twelvefold form does not so much as hint that such questions are *inappropriate* or *fundamentally misguided*, as give answers to them. Section 4 thus obscures the meaning of a very important aspect of early Buddhist thought: the Buddha's encounter with Upaniṣadic essentialism.

6. Section 6-7: a person's habituation to pleasure, the path to awakening (Ee 265-71, Be 408-14)

Section 6 marks another abrupt departure in the MTSS, by introducing a new topic: the development of a person, from embryo until adulthood, focusing on the maturation of the sense faculties and the habitual indulgence in sensual pleasure (MN I.265-66). The teaching thus describes how a human being comes to be trapped in desire, attachment, becoming, and future birth and suffering. Part of this analysis is therefore identical to the last few links of the standard twelvefold version of dependent origination, from 'grasping' onwards (*upādāna*, *bhava*, *jāti*, *jarāmaṇa*).

In section 6, the item before *upādāna* is *nandī*, which can easily be identified with *taṇhā* in the standard doctrine. Prior to this, however, this version of dependent origination is quite different from normal. A *gandhabba*'s descent into the womb, the baby's nourishment through the breast-milk (or 'blood') of the mother, the maturation of a boy through adolescence until adulthood – none of this resembles the twelvefold version of the doctrine. It is rather an independent development of the idea of conditioning without any apparently prior knowledge of the seven causal factors which appear in the classical teaching before *upādāna*; at the least, there is no obvious way to connect the two teachings.

The spiritual solution to this version of conditioning is outlined in section 7 (Ee 267-71; Be 410-14), which describes a *bhikkhu*'s path to liberation, focusing on renunciant disciplines and the four *jhānas*. None of this has anything directly to do with the episode involving Sāti, although at the end of these sections the Sutta's title appears, '(the account) of liberation by destroying thirst (*taṇhāsankhayavimuttiṃ*)'; the Buddha also states that 'the *bhikkhu* Sāti, the fisherman's son, has got tangled up in a great net of thirst (*mahā-taṇhā-jāla-taṇhā-saṅghāta-ppaṭimukkan*).'

This is rather odd. The term *taṇhā* figures repeatedly in section 4 of the Sutta, although no more than any other item in the account of dependent origination; it would be strange to refer to the twelvefold version of dependent origination as if exclusively dealing with 'the destruction of thirst'. But the notion of a 'discourse on liberation through the destruction of thirst, in brief' makes sense of sections 6 and 7 of the Sutta: even if these sections lack the term *taṇhā*, they cover the five types of sense pleasure, delight (*nandī*), the process of becoming based on them, and their 'destruction'. More important than this, however, is the reference to Sāti's entanglement in a 'great net' of thirst, a clever joke on the fact that he is a fisherman's son. This must refer to the core of the text, i.e. sections 1-3 & 5. Indeed, these sections show that Sāti's idea is a form of grasping, in other words an expression of thirst or desire; they also contain an analysis by which the *bhikkhus* are said to be in a state of non-grasping, and so it is appropriate to talk about the destruction of the 'net of thirst'. If so, the text's conclusion probably refers to the original core of the text: sections 1-3 & 5.

7. The Chinese parallel (MĀ 201)

Anālayo has studied the Pali MTSS and its Chinese Madhyama Āgama parallel (MĀ 201),²¹ but found very few differences. The only difference between sections 1-3 of the texts is that in the Chinese MĀ version, after mentioning the simile of the raft, the Buddha ‘also asks the monks how they would answer if they were to be questioned by an outsider on the purpose and benefit of their view. The monks reply that the purpose of their view is disenchantment and dispassion.’ (Anālayo 2011: 253). In section 4 the only difference is a small addition in the Pali text (Anālayo 2011: 253), which includes the summary formulae of Dependent Origination: ‘when this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises’ and ‘when this is not, that is not; with the cessation of this, that ceases’ (MN I.262-64).

The Chinese MĀ has an addition in section 5: apart from the questions about the existence of the self in the three times, according to the MĀ the *bhikkhus* make a number of further statements, ‘such as that they would be incapable of committing any of the five heinous crimes, or would never go so far as to forsake their precepts and give up their practice of the path.’ (Anālayo 2011: 253). In section 6, the Pali version goes into more detail on the development of an embryo, by specifying the absence of necessary conditions, because of which an embryo would not develop; Anālayo notes that ‘while the *Madhyama-āgama* version simply enumerates the three conditions, the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse also mentions the possibility that the mother is not in season or that the being to be reborn is not present, both of which would prevent conception from taking place’. (Anālayo 2011: 254).

All this shows that the two texts are more or less identical. The only difference between the two texts that could be significant is found in section 7, where the Chinese MĀ version lacks almost the entire text on the path outlined in the Pali Sutta. Since this difference could be of great significance, we will treat it separately and in some detail in a future issue of this journal.

8. The original form of the MTSS

Our analysis has attempted to identify terminological and thematic discontinuities in the MTSS. And we have found that sections 4 & 6-7 diverge from the core of

²¹ Anālayo (2011: 251-52, n.227-28), has also noted that there are a number of Sanskrit fragments of the text.

the text, which is made up of sections 1-3 & 5. The initial episode involving Sāti (section 1), the Buddha's analysis of *viññāṇa* (2-3), and his cross-questioning of the *bhikkhus* to ensure they do not ask misconceived questions about personal identity (5), all form a coherent whole.

Section 4, on the four *āhāras* and dependent origination, is a later addition; at a certain point in the text's transmission, some redactor(s) could not help interpolating new teachings on the terms *bhūta*, *āhāra* and *sambhava*. All these terms are found in sections 1-3, albeit in a quite different sense from the same terms as used in section 4. The addition of section 4 subverts the meaning of the earlier text, so that the original focus on cognition is adapted to a new focus on the causal factors which enable personal continuity. The meaning of the original teaching was therefore obfuscated, especially since there is a fundamental flaw in the doctrine of four *āhāras*: a causal sequence in which some factors are said to *cause themselves* was a step into the doctrinal abyss.

The original text was also expanded by adding sections 6-7, on the human habituation to pleasure, and the path to awakening. Perhaps it was felt that a solution concerning the transformation of consciousness was required to conclude the Sāti episode; on the other hand, perhaps there really was a particular occasion when the Buddha responded to Sāti, and then went on to give another teaching on the path. The latter explanation should not be overlooked as a possibility. But a text-critical analysis should be based on what we know about the early texts (that they were all redacted), rather than what we suspect they might be (authentic teachings of the Buddha). This approach does not necessarily detract from the historical value of sections 4 and 6-7. The fact of their interpolation does not mean that they are inauthentic, although this point must be qualified by the facts that only one other Sutta mentions the *gandhabba* as the subject of rebirth, and that the four *āhāras* are a marginal aspect of the canonical Pali Suttas.²²

We conclude by noting that the extant MTSS, in both its MN and MĀ redactions, has three different versions of dependent origination: the dependent origination of cognition in sections 2-3; the standard twelvefold form of the doctrine in section 4, in connection to the four nutriments; and the peculiar version based on the descent of the *gandhabba* into a womb in section 6. It is correct, but hardly informative, to note that 'the present discourse's main concern ... is

²² On the descent of the *gandhabba*, see MN 93. Apart from the MTSS, the four *āhāras* are only mentioned in 7 Suttas: DN 33, 34; MN 9; SN 12.11-12, 12.63-4.

dependent arising' (Anālayo 2011: 256). This judgement overlooks significant differences within the text, and papers over the cracks that run through the early Buddhist textual tradition.

The same tendency to homogenise can be seen in Anālayo's description of the account of personal maturation and habituation to pleasure, in section 6, as 'a practical application of the previous treatment of dependent arising by way of its twelve links in forward and backward order, illustrating how delight in feeling leads to clinging and therewith to the conditioned arising of *dukkha*' (Anālayo 2011: 255). This is not quite correct. The account of personal maturation, from the descent of a *gandhabba* until the arising of grasping (*upādāna*), is a *particular* version of Dependent Origination, rather than a 'practical application' of its twelvefold form: there is nothing 'practical' about the idea of a *gandhabba* descending into the mother's womb, and in no way is the statement that the young boy starts to play games an *application*, of any sort, of the twelvefold chain of Dependent Origination.²³

In fact, the account of personal maturation in section 6 is an entirely original, in fact original, formulation of the basic idea of experiential conditioning. It is important to point out subtle differences between ideas such as these; in the present case, the fact that there are three versions of dependent origination, and a very clumsy handling of at least one of these (section 4), should be taken as a sure sign of redactional interference. These are exactly the 'fingerprints' of the redactors which we initially set out to investigate. A close analysis of these fingerprints reveals something very important, which had been obscured by the treatment of the MTSS as a homogenous whole: the meaning of the Buddha's critique of Upaniṣadic essentialism, by means of the dependent origination of cognition.

9. Appendix: Internal Parallels to the MTSS

A number of the sections of the MTSS have parallels in the Pāli Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas:

Section 3 is given an expanded treatment at SN 12.31 (Ee II.47-50), where the Buddha refers to what has been spoken 'in the Pārāyana, in the enquiry of Ajita' (SN II.47: *vuttam idaṃ sārīputta pārāyane ajitapañhe*), and cites Sn 1038 of that text;

²³ MN I.266. *yāni tāni kumārakānaṃ kīlāpanakāni tehi kīlāti.*

the focus is the statement in Sn 1038 that there are ‘those who have contemplated/understood the Dhamma, and also the many in training’ (*ye ca saṅkhātadhammāse, ye ca sekhā puthū idha*). In effect, the Buddha makes a rather artificial connection between the *Ajita-māṇava-pucchā* and the MTSS: when Sāriputta is unable to explain the meaning of Sn 1038, the Buddha asks the first question of the section 3 of the MTSS: ‘Do you see that this (thing) has come into being, Sāriputta?’ (*bhūtam idan ti sāriputta passasī ti*). The rest of the Sutta consists of Sāriputta giving a slightly altered version of section 3 of the MTSS. This looks like a relatively late redactional use of one text (the MTSS) in an exegesis of another (the *Ajita-māṇava-pucchā*).

Much of **Section 4** is stated at **SN 12.11** (Ee II.11-12), except that the latter does not go into as much detail as section 4 (it lacks the sections contained in Be paragraphs 403, 405-06). Either section 4 of the MTSS is an expansion of SN 12.11, or else SN 12.11 is a contraction of MTSS (4).

Sections 4 & 5, on the twelvefold version of dependent origination and the questions about individual existence in the three times, is given a fresh treatment at **SN 12.20** (Ee II.25-27). SN 12.20 looks like a fairly late composition, containing expressions only occurring here (e.g. SN II.26. *yā tatra tathatā avitathatā anaññathatā idappaccayatā, ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave paṭiccasamuppādo*), or more or less only here (e.g. SN II.25 = AN I.286: *ñhitā va sā dhātu dhammaññhitatā dhammaniyāmatā idappaccayatā*). SN 12.20 also states that after discovering and revealing dependent origination, the Buddha then asks (his *bhikkhus*) ‘Do you see (dependent origination)’; the question ‘do you see (SN II.25. *passathā ti*) is reminiscent of section 3 of the MTSS. Apart from its relatively late features, this use of *passathā ti* suggests that Sn 12.20 is derived from the MTSS.

Much of **sections 6 & 7**, on a child’s maturation, the adult’s habituation to pleasure, the rising of a Tathāgata in the world, and the *bhikkhu*’s path to liberation, is repeated at **AN 10.99**. But the context is different. The point of AN 10.99 is to emphasise that

each level of the path is superior to what comes before. Hence the Buddha repeatedly asks Upāli, ‘So what do you think, Upāli, is this abiding more excellent and supreme than the previous abidings?’ (AN V.207: *taṃ kiṃ maññasi upāli nanvāyaṃ vihāro purimehi vihārehi abhikkantataro ca pañītataro cā?*). Besides the four *jhānas*, the path scheme includes the four formless states and culminates in *saññāvedayitanirodha*, the highest attainment. Whatever the relationship between the texts is, the MTSS is certainly not derived from AN 10.99. It is more likely that AN 10.99 is a new application of the MTSS.

Some parts of sections 6 & 7 are found in a number of SN Suttas (SN 35.115, 35.196, 35.197 and 35.200). These SN Suttas use the MTSS text on faulty cognition (section 6, Be paragraph 409) and transformed cognition (section 7, Be paragraph 414) to explain the terms (*a*)*guttadvāra*, (*an*)*avassuta* and (*a*)*saṃvara* (twice). The SN texts seem to have used the MTSS account of faulty and transformed cognition to a new end. For in section 7 of the MTSS, the *bhikkhu* is said to abide ‘with mindfulness of body established, with an immeasurable mind; he realises as it really is, the release of mind, release through understanding’ (MN I.270: *upaṭṭhitakāyasati ca viharati appamāṇacetaso. tañca cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*). This is obviously an account of liberation, rather than just an account of ‘restraint of the senses’ and so on, as the SN texts state.

These internal parallels suggest a general direction of influence from the MN to the SN (and AN). All of the SN and AN texts were possibly derived from the MN, which shows that the MTSS was a rich source for early Buddhist speculation.

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Pali citations are taken from the PTS (Ee) editions; Be refers to the Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana, accessed from the electronic edition of the Vipassana Research Institute. Pali citations are numbered according to the volume and page numbers of Ee; the numbering of individual Suttas, as mentioned in the main body of text, follows the method of SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/>).

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