

THE NOMINAL AND THE CONCEPTUAL

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1. The *dhamma* theory leads to what is known as *dhamma*-realism. This means that only the *dhammas* exist in a real and ultimate sense. If this is so, how can we explain the objects of common-sense realism, which is a kind of naive realism that recognizes the reality of such objects, as for example, chairs and tables?
2. It is as an answer to this question that the Abhidhamma developed the theory of *paññattis*, concepts and designations, together with a theory relating to two degrees of truth, namely, the consensual (*sammuti*) and the ultimate (*paramattha*).
3. This situation leads to the recognition of two levels of reality:
 - a. Ultimate reality consisting of the *dhammas*, that is, irreducible psycho-physical events
 - b. Conceptual reality consisting of the *paññattis*, that is, products of mental interpretation
4. In the context of Indian Philosophy, the theory of *paññatti* assumes much significance. In most of the Indian Philosophical Systems, as for example, the Samkhya, and the Nyaya-Vaisesika, such categories as "time" and "space", and such notions as "unity, identity, and universality" are elevated to the level of substantial entities. The problem for the Ābhidhammikas was how to explain such categories and notions without committing themselves to the same metaphysical assumptions. The theory of *paññatti* was the answer to this.
5. The term *paññatti* conveys such meanings as making known, laying down, manifestation, designation, appellation, notion, and concept. In the Abhidhamma it is used in a technical sense to mean concept or designation. This technical meaning can be traced to the Buddhist Discourses, where we find the well-known saying of the Buddha on the use of language. "These, Citta, are names (*samaññā*), expressions (*nirutti*), turns of speech (*voḥāra*), and designations (*paññatti*), which are in common use in the world. And of these the Tathāgata makes use indeed, but is not led astray by them".
6. Again, in another Buddhist Discourse it is said that the division of time into "past", "present", and "future" and the designation of time as, "was", "is", and "will be" are three pathways of expression (*nirutti*), three pathways of designation (*adhivacana*), and three pathways of concept-making (*paññatti*).

7. *Paññatti* means not only name or designation but also meaning. As noted above, *paññatti* has to be distinguished from *dhammas*, the category of the real. Thus we have two levels of reality: The category of *paññatti* representing that which exists as name and concept, on the one hand, and the category of the *dhammas*, on the other, representing that which exists as ultimate constituents of existence.
8. The difference between the two categories can be explained as follows:
 - a. That which depends on the operation of the mind.
 - b. That which exists independently of the operation of the mind.
 While the former owes its being to the act of cognition itself, the latter exists independently of the cognitive act.
9. While a *dhamma* is a thing established by its own nature (*sabhāva-siddha*), a *paññatti* is a thing merely conceptualized (*parikappa-siddha*). The former is an existent verifiable by its own distinctive characteristic. The latter is a product of the mind's synthesizing function, and, therefore, it exists only by virtue of conceptual thought.
10. These two categories are mutually exclusive but together exhaustive of the whole of the knowable (*ñeyya-dhamma*). Besides these two categories a third category does not exist.
11. Since *paññattis* represent the category of the conceptual, they do not have an objective existence. Therefore, they cannot be brought under mind or matter. They are neither conditioned nor unconditioned.
12. The earliest Abhidhamma definition of *paññatti* in its technical sense is found in the Dhammasangani, as follows:

“That which is an enumeration, that which is a designation, an expression, a current term, a name, a denomination, the assigning of a name, an interpretation, a distinctive mark of discourse on this or that *dhamma*”. (Translation by Mrs. Rhys Davids: Buddhist Psychological Ethics).

There are two kinds of *paññatti*:

- a. *Nāma-paññatti*, concept-as-name.
- b. *Attha-paññatti*, concept-as-meaning.

The first is defined as "that which makes known" (*paññāpanato paññatti*). The second is defined as "that which is made known" (*paññāpiyattā paññatti*).

13. The former is a definition by way of agency (*kattu-sādhana*) and the latter is a definition by way of object (*kamma-sādhana*). What both definitions attempt to show is that

nama-paññatti which makes *attha-paññatti* known, and *attha-paññatti* which is made known by *nāma-paññatti*, are mutually inter-dependent and therefore logically inseparable.

14. This explains the significance of another definition: *Nāma-paññatti* is the term's relationship with the ideas (*saddassa atthehi sambandho*). *Attha-paññatti* is the idea's relationship with the terms (*atthassa saddehi sambandho*).
15. The first refers to names, words, signs, or symbols through which things real or unreal are designated. It is the "mere mode of recognizing" (*saññākāra-matta*), by this or that word whose significance is determined by worldly convention. It is created by worldly consent (*loka-sanketa-nimmitā*) and established by worldly usage (*loka-vohārena siddha*). The second, which is concept-as-meaning, refers to ideas, notions, or concepts corresponding to the words, signs, or symbols. It is produced by the interpretative and synthesizing function of the mind (*kappanā*).
16. The two kinds of *paññatti* represent two processes:
 - a. The Process of Verbalization.
 - b. The Process of Conceptualization.
17. Since *attha-paññatti* stands for the process of conceptualization, it represents more the subjective and dynamic aspect. Since *nāma-paññatti* stands for the process of verbalization, it represents more the objective and static aspect. For, the assignment of a term for what is constructed in thought, in other words, its expression through the symbolic medium of language, invests it with some kind of relative permanence and objectivity. It is so to say, crystallized into an entity.
18. According to its very definition, a *paññatti* exists by virtue of its being conceived (*parikappiyamāna*) and expressed (*paññāpiyamāna*). Hence, it is not correct to say that *paññatti* is that which is conceptualizable and expressible. For, its very existence is due to its being conceptualized and expressed.
19. The logical conclusion of the Abhidhamma theory of *paññatti* is that all hypostatized entities and all objects of reification are nothing but conceptual constructions, or logical abstractions, or pure denominations, with no corresponding objective realities. Only the *dhammas* are real and ultimate.
20. The characteristics common to all *dhammas* are known as universal characteristics (*sāmañña-lakkhana*). Three of the best-known universal characteristics are impermanence (*aniccatā*), suffering (*dukkhatā*), and self-lessness (*anattatā*). These three characteristics are fundamental to the Buddhist view of phenomenal existence. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, they are *paññattis* or conceptual constructions. They have no corresponding objective realities. As the Abhidhamma-Mūla-tīkā says, when we

consider them as separate abstractions, they too share the nature of conceptual constructs (*paññatti-gatiko*). For instance, in addition to, and distinct from, what is subject to impermanence, there is no separate entity called impermanence.

21. Comparative Concept (upanidha-pannatti): This refers to ideas based on mutual reference (annamanna-upanidha) or juxtaposition (sannivesa). Examples: “second” as against “first”; “third” as against “second”, “long” as against “short”.
22. Concept of Non-existence (abhava-pannatti): “non-existence” has no objective reality. However, some Schools of Indian Philosophy, particularly the Vaisesikas, consider it as an independent category (padartha). For Buddhism “non-existence” is not a real entity but a mere notion dependent on “existence” (abhavo bhavam nissaya pavattati). From the Buddhist perspective, one could argue that if “non-existence” is an independent entity, then it should in turn have another “non-existence” and thus, it could lead to what many Buddhist schools refer to as “the fallacy of infinite regress” (anavattha/anavastha).
23. Concepts established through adherence to wrong views (abhinivesa-pannatti): This embraces all substantial entities and categories postulated in non-Buddhist Schools of Thought, as for example, self (atta), primordial nature (pakati), god (issara). These concepts arise due to overstepping the bounds of “concepts”.

CONCEPT-AS-NAME (NAMA-PANNATTI): There are six varieties. They are as follows:

- a. Vijjamana-pannatti is a term that represents something that exists, in a real and ultimate sense. It is also called “verisimilar concept” (tajja-pannatti), because it refers to names and designations given to real existents (dhammas), as for example, “pathavi-dhatu” (earth-element), “vedana” (feeling), “sanna” (perception).
- b. Avijjamana-pannatti represents something that does not exist in a real and ultimate sense, that is, something dependent on the interpretative and synthesizing function of the mind. Examples: table, sun, moon, primordial nature of the Sankhya Philosophy, cosmic soul of Brahmanism.
- c. Vijjamanena-avijjamana-pannatti, a term representing a non-existent on the basis of a term representing an existent. Example: “tevijja” = “possessor of the three higher levels of knowledge”. Only the “higher levels of knowledge” exist, but there is no self-entity behind them.
- d. Avijjamanena-vijjamana-pannatti, a term given to a real existent on the basis of a term expressing a non-existent. Example “itthi-sadda” = “woman’s voice”. Here only the sound of the voice is real, but not the woman as a self-entity.
- e. Vijjamanena-vijjamana-pannatti: a term given to a real existent on the basis of

another term, which also represents a real existent. Example:
“cakkhu-samphassa” = “eye-contact”. Here “eye” represents one of the material elements and “contact” represents one of the mental elements.

- f. Avijjamanena-avijjamana-pannatti, a term that signifies a non-existent on the basis of another term which also signifies a non-existent. Example:
“khattiya-putta” = “warrior’s son”. Because both terms refer to persons as self-entities, both represent non-existent entities.

Concept-as Meaning (Attha-Pannatti)

There are six kinds of Concept-as-Meaning:

There are (1) such terms as “land”, “mountain”, and the like, so designated on account of the mode of transition of the respective elements; (2) such terms as “house”, “chariot”, “cart”, and the like, so named on account of the mode of formation of materials; (3) such terms as “person”, “individual”, and the like, so named on account of the five aggregates; (4) such terms as “direction”, “time”, and the like, so named according to the revolution of the moon and so forth; (5) such terms as “well”, “cave”, and the like, so named on account of the mode of non-impact and so forth; (6) such terms as *kasina* signs and the like, so named on account of respective elements and distinguished mental development.

All instances of Attha-Pannatti (Concept-as-Meaning) can be brought under two main headings, namely, collective-concepts (*samuha-pannatti*) and non-collective concepts (*asamuha-pannatti*). A collective concept is due to grasping a group, as one, that is, imposing unity on diversity. The best example of such grouping is the wrong belief in a living being as a self-entity. The correct position is that “distinct from the group”, there is no living being as a self-entity. It is by the resolution of the compact, that the true position becomes evident.

Two examples of non-collective concepts are “Time” and “Space”.