

To Calm the Ruffling of Robes: Using Methods from Biblical Exegesis to Understand Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s and Bhikkhu Bodhi’s Rival Interpretations of *paṭiccasamuppāda*

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ABSTRACT

Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s and Ven. Bodhi’s interpretations of the twelve-fold formulation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent arising) are very different, and illustrate some of the differences between secular Buddhism and orthodox Theravāda. I apply a scheme derived from biblical exegesis to analyse their respective strategies of interpretation. The two exegetes differed in how they applied certain synchronic and diachronic analytical methods, as well as engaged methods. Some differences in interpretation result from differing intertextual analysis, specifically whether a particular text from one part of the Pāli canon could be validly relied on to support or refute a text elsewhere in the canon. Ñāṇavīra’s espousal of existentialist philosophy and the extent of hermeneutic trust or suspicion towards the orthodox Theravādin commentaries were notable influences on their interpretations. The method and findings have implications for our interpretation of texts and our assessment of those of others.

INTRODUCTION

Paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent arising) is a central doctrine of Buddhism. Ven. Ñāṇavīra and Ven. Bodhi¹ were both ordained as Theravādin monks in Sri Lanka, indeed both spent time at the Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa, but they

¹ Hereafter referred to Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi for brevity, with no less respect intended.

take dissimilar positions in interpreting this teaching. Furthermore, their different interpretations exemplify certain divisions in contemporary Buddhism between secular Buddhism and orthodox Theravādin Buddhism. On the one hand, Ñāṇavīra's 'this life' interpretation resonates with secular Buddhism's sceptical stance on rebirth (see Batchelor 2017, 111–25) and its reframing of the Dhamma as a method taught by the Buddha rather than an '-ism', i.e. as something to do rather than believe in (Batchelor 1997, 17). On the other hand, Bodhi's 'three lives' interpretation relies on an acceptance of rebirth according to *kamma*.

Given their starkly contrasting interpretations, is it possible to step back from the impasse to consider how they may represent different strategies of interpretation? In order to systematically analyse the methods of the two exegetes and understand more precisely how their interpretations were arrived at, I have applied a scheme adapted from one normally applied to biblical exegesis (Gorman 2020). I have chosen Gorman's scheme as the basis for mine because it encompasses all the main exegetical approaches and methods, and presents them in a coherent, understandable way.

I have found that the terms 'exegesis' and 'interpretation' are used inconsistently and sometimes synonymously. In accord with Gorman's (2020) terminology, I shall not maintain a clear distinction between the terms.²

DEPENDENT ARISING

Paṭiccasamuppāda has been expressed in various ways, but the focus here is on the twelve-fold formulation. The karmically driven 'three lives' interpretation of this formulation that is espoused by Bodhi may be summarised as follows:

- *avijjā* (ignorance) and *saṅkhārā* (formations) are *kamma* in the previous life
- their *vipāka* (result of *kamma*) is *viññāṇa* (consciousness), *nāmarūpa* (name and form), *saḷāyatana* (six sense bases), *phassa* (contact), and *vedanā* (feeling) in the present life

² In biblical studies, when a distinction is drawn, 'exegesis' refers to the process of examining a text to ascertain what its first readers would have understood it to mean, while 'interpretation' is the task of explaining or drawing out the implications of that understanding for contemporary readers and hearers (see Tate 2011, 1). Gorman (2020), however, includes within 'exegesis' methods which he terms 'engaged', that encompass interpretation in the specific sense of speaking to a contemporary audience. In adopting Gorman's terminology, this article will also use the word 'interpretation' to mean discerning either the original or the contemporary meaning of a text. I shall not therefore maintain a clear distinction between 'exegesis' and 'interpretation'.

- *taṅhā* (craving), *upādāna* (attachment), and *bhava* (being or becoming), are *kamma* in the present life
- their *vipāka* is *jāti* (birth) and *jarāmaraṇa* (aging and death) in the subsequent life.

Ñāṇavīra, however, disagrees with this notion that the *nidāna* sequence describes a causally related sequence of temporally successive phenomena. He questions how, if *vipāka* sometimes ripens a long time after an action – perhaps even in some distant future life – *paṭiccasamuppāda* could be describing the *kamma-vipāka* process. For him:

paṭiccasamuppāda has nothing to do with temporal succession (cause-and-effect). Precedence in *paṭiccasamuppāda* is structural, not temporal: *paṭiccasamuppāda* is not the description of a *process*. (2010a, 70)

The twelve *nidānas* are then the structurally related phenomena that make up the lived experience of being an ordinary person with the experience of being a self, a ‘someone’, an ‘I’. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is a structural principle with different applications. Because the Buddha’s teaching is concerned with a particular application – the problem of suffering and its cessation – and the sphere in which this problem arises is that of experience, the relevant particular items are *viññāṇa*, *nāmarūpa*, and the rest, as these are the fundamental categories of this sphere (Ñāṇavīra 2010a, 25).

Not only are the two interpretations very different, but they are expressed trenchantly. Ñāṇavīra’s ‘A Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda’ consists of 25 tightly argued sections. He states in a letter:

In any case, the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formulation (as I see it) does not admit of *alternative interpretations* – there is one and one only. I do not see that anyone offering a number of different interpretations as equally valid can possibly be right in any of them. (2010a, 162–3)

Bodhi, on the other hand, states that:

His [Ñāṇavīra’s] proposition sounds innocuous enough as it stands, until one discovers that the author sees this task as entailing nothing less than a radical reevaluation of the entire Theravāda exegetical tradition. Few of the standard interpretative principles upheld by Theravāda orthodoxy are spared the slashing of his pen. (1998a, 44)

Different interpretations of the twelve-fold formulation have previously been compared, notably by Jones (2009), who compares those of Buddhādāsa, Ñāṇavīra, Bodhi, and Jurewicz. By applying a scheme of exegetical methods, I aim to provide a more detailed explanation of how Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation of

this formulation differs from the orthodox Theravādin one as explicated and defended by Bodhi.

A full review of the different theories of text criticism and hermeneutics is precluded from this paper, but some comments, particularly on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, may illustrate some of the theoretical concerns underpinning exegesis of texts and the scheme of exegetical methods I have adopted.

HERMENEUTICAL UNDERPINNING

This paper deals with methods of interpretation and their application, so it may, then, appear ironic to mention Gadamer, who said, 'The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all' ([1975] 2013, xx). The paradox is, however, more apparent than real, because in addressing the question of how understanding is possible in a person's experience of the world, Gadamer is approaching hermeneutical enquiry at a more fundamental level (Palmer 1969, 163–4). Indeed, within philosophy, hermeneutics treats interpretation itself as its subject matter. Philosophically, hermeneutics therefore concerns the meaning of interpretation: its basic nature, scope, and validity, as well as its place within and implications for human existence (SEP, s.v. hermeneutics). A methodology for interpretation becomes necessary, then, at a different level of the interpretive disciplines. The universality of hermeneutics, according to Gadamer ([1975] 2013, xxvii–xix), nevertheless has implications for any interpretive methodology. For instance, 'the all-encompassing character of understanding raises the question of whether one can simply by fiat limit the purview of understanding or cut it down to one or another aspect' (Palmer 1969, 164). My response to this has been to adopt an integrated approach to exegesis, in a scheme that utilises various interpretive methods.

A comparison of Ñāṇavīra's and Bodhi's exegeses of *paṭiccasamuppāda* raises issues of the validity of different approaches to interpretation. The ideal exegesis might be considered one that produces results that are always and everywhere valid for anyone who follows the same procedure – as is the goal of the natural sciences. Some Buddhist commentators, however, regard scientific method as of limited value in leading to anything other than an intellectual grasp of the Dhamma (Sangharakshita [1957] 1987, 34–6). Gadamer's view is that attempts to look for an objective and verifiable history is limiting to true understanding ([1975] 2013, xxi–xxii). He would say that integration rather than restoration is the true task of hermeneutics; that understanding is always first and foremost guided by the subject matter and depends on the questions we are asking in the present. He also takes issue with the notion that the primary focus of

understanding should be to reconstruct the meaning of a text according to its author (*mens auctoris*) ([1975] 2013, xxviii; Dostal 2002, 40–1). But he does not reject this completely as a means of interpretation, and I include biographical detail on Ñāṇavīra in order to inform the assessment of his exegesis.

If exegesis requires the reading of a text, how is the process of reading best considered? The successful act of reading may be said to engage the reader in an interpretive project that knows no end and is new on each act of reading (McKenzie and Haynes 1999, 90; Davey 2006, 1–2). It may also be viewed as a conversation between the world of the reader and the world of the text – a conversation that is informed by the world of the author. The locus of meaning is then to be found in the interplay between all three worlds (Tate 2011, 5–6).

The foreignness of a text sometimes seems to suggest its complete otherness, but instead, Gadamer invites us to conceive of difference as a means to transformation, which he terms a ‘fusion of horizons’ ([1975] 2013, 312–17). He argues we cannot truly read, interpret, or understand a text until we engage with it, until we somehow fuse its ‘horizon’ with our own. When Gadamer speaks of ‘horizons’, it is in a context in which he is trying to explain how we can have a meaningful relation between text and present. Just as the visual horizon delimits one’s visual field, the epistemic horizon frames one’s situation in terms of what lies behind (tradition, history), around (present culture and society), and before one (expectations). This becomes relevant to any discussion of exegeses by thinkers such as Bodhi and Ñāṇavīra, who differ in their outlooks on tradition, culture, and philosophy. Horizons in Gadamer’s sense, however, are open and dynamic, and the fusion of what initially appeared to be two distinct horizons of past and present signifies understanding, in his view.

Exegesis of texts may involve a search for a deeper truth that is incarnate in the language of the text. Indeed, the search for ultimate truth through the text’s language may be considered the most important task of hermeneutics (see Tate 2011, 1–2). Any comparison of Ñāṇavīra’s and Bodhi’s exegeses might, then, seek to assess their success in revealing a deeper meaning of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, a central Buddhist doctrine.

How should we regard the role of translation in exegesis? A translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the reader lives. They should attempt to preserve the meaning, but nevertheless, ‘every translation is at the same time an interpretation... Where a translation is necessary, the gap between the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction must be taken into account. It is a gap that can never be completely closed’ (Gadamer [1975] 2013, 402). ‘Even if it [the translation] is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original’ (Gadamer [1975] 2013, 404). Interpreting a text translated into another language might be called a ‘second-level interpretation’. A ‘first-level

interpretation’ would be an interpretation of a text in the original language – by a native speaker or hearer, or by someone who has acquired some knowledge of the original language. A second-level interpretation occurs when an interpreter seeks to understand the content of a translation, but such an interpreter is always one step removed from the original, regardless of how well the text has been translated (Hayes and Holladay 2007, 6; see also Sangharakshita [1957] 1987, 41–3). As the exegeses of Bodhi and Ñāṇavīra are drawn directly from texts in Pāli, the original language, they may be considered first-level interpretations.

THE SCHEME OF EXEGETICAL METHODS

I arrived at a scheme of exegetical methods by adapting one intended for biblical exegesis (Gorman 2020, 8–21 and 259).³ My intention was to produce a scheme that would be applicable to Pāli text interpretation, accessible and readily utilisable.⁴ It necessarily encompasses diverse approaches to exegesis in order to take account of different theories of textual criticism. The exegetical methods that I identified in Ñāṇavīra’s and Bodhi’s exegeses are outlined for easy reference in Tables 1–4.

As shown in Table 1, exegetical approaches are of two kinds: **analytical** and **engaged**. The former focuses on a text’s historical development or its literary features. As such, this approach does not require an interest in the text as anything other than a historical artefact or literary work. With an **engaged** approach, however, the exegete brings their own perspectives to bear in interpreting the text for a contemporary audience – they may be said to have a personal, vested interest in the text and its interpretation. Gorman summarises the different approaches as follows:

the analytical approach is often said to be interested in the world behind the text (historical–critical emphasis) or the world within the text (literary–critical emphasis), whereas an engaged approach is concerned

³ Supplementary or alternative material was drawn from Hayes and Holladay (2007) and McKenzie and Haynes (1999).

⁴ Some minor changes were made to wording in order to make the content compatible with Buddhist terminology, e.g. under ‘intertextual analysis’, ‘biblical texts’ was changed to ‘canonical texts’. I also diverged from Gorman on certain points, e.g. while he states that a synchronic approach looks only at what scholars call the final form of the text (2020, 11), I think a more common view is that such an approach may be applied to the version of a text at any point in time – not necessarily its final form.

about the world in front of the text – the world the text creates, or could create, for its interpreters. (2020, 9)

Table 1. Analytical and engaged exegetical approaches

	Analytical approaches		Engaged approaches
	Diachronic methods	Synchronic methods	
Other names	historical–critical	close reading	existential, perspectival, participatory
Applied:	across time	within time	across and within time
Look at:	the origin and development of a text through time	the form of a text at any point in time	the interpreter’s role in discerning contemporary significance of a text

Analytical approaches are of two kinds: **diachronic** – ‘across time’ and **synchronic** – ‘same time’ or ‘within time’. An **analytical diachronic** (or historical–critical) approach therefore focuses on the origin and development of a text, i.e. it takes a longitudinal view. Two such diachronic methods were applied by the exegetes: traditional and historical criticism (see Table 2).

Table 2. The analytical diachronic methods employed in Nānavīra’s and Bodhi’s exegeses

Diachronic method	Aim
traditional criticism	to understand the growth of a tradition over time, from its original oral or written form to its incorporation into a later text
historical criticism	to ascertain the events that surrounded the production of the text

Traditional criticism seeks to understand the development of a tradition over time, from its original oral or written form to its expression in a later text. **Historical criticism** attempts to ascertain the events that surrounded the production of a text, including the purported events narrated by the text itself. These methods were applied particularly in relation to the development of commentaries on the Pāli canon and their influence on exegesis.

The other analytical approach to exegesis is termed **synchronic** (meaning ‘same time’ or ‘within time’). This approach takes an analytical ‘snapshot’ of the form of a text at any particular time. So it is not interested in the longitudinal view or history of the text; instead ‘it is interested in the world – the words,

images, references to history and culture – within the text we have’ (Gorman 2020, 11–12). Both exegetes placed reliance on an analytical synchronic (or close reading) approach in their interpretation of Pāli *suttas*, and I have identified the application of several different synchronic methods (see Table 3).

Table 3. The analytical synchronic methods employed in Nānavīra’s and Bodhi’s exegeses

Synchronic method	Aim
lexical, grammatical, and syntactical analysis	to understand the text’s vocabulary (words and idioms), its grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items (syntax)
literary criticism	to understand the text as literature by using either traditional or more recent models of literary criticism that are employed in the study of literature generally
intertextual analysis	to determine the canonical texts and other texts, that are quoted, alluded to, or echoed in the text
reader-response criticism	to approach the text in terms of the values, attitudes, and responses of its readers

Lexical, grammatical, and syntactical analysis attempts to understand a text’s vocabulary, grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items (syntax), while taking into account the norms of usage at the time the text was produced. **Literary criticism** seeks to understand the text as literature, by using either traditional or more recent methods of literary criticism that are employed in the study of literature generally. **Intertextual analysis** attempts to identify the canonical and other texts that are quoted, alluded to, or echoed in the text. **Reader-response criticism** approaches the text in terms of the values, attitudes, and responses of its readers. Here, the interpretive gaze is taken away from the text to the response generated in the reader and the reader’s role in the process of constructing meaning (Tate 2011, 273).

Interpreters employing an **engaged** (existential, perspectival, or participatory) approach to exegesis generally wish to participate in the reality to which the text and its interpretation point. They are primarily interested not in the text as an end in itself, but in the text as something to be engaged with experientially (Gorman 2020, 14–16). While the biblical reader may believe that they are addressed by God in scripture (Gorman 2020, 177), a Buddhist may seek, through reading canonical *suttas* (discourses), an experience of feeling closer to the life of the historical Buddha, or may view the study of Buddhist texts as a means to *nibbāna* (Enlightenment). Indeed, some Buddhists would

consider the hope of Enlightenment as the only appropriate motive for the study of Buddhism (Sangharakshita [1957] 1987, 33).

Engaged criticism may be either synchronic or diachronic. Two engaged methods were utilised by the two exegetes, but in distinctly different ways (see Table 4).

Table 4. The engaged methods employed in Nānavīra’s and Bodhi’s exegeses

Engaged method	Aim
ideological criticism	to address and advance a particular political, social, or ethical agenda.
canonical criticism	to explore how the texts were transmitted and shaped by Buddhist communities to produce a canon, and how these texts are to be read and understood as parts of a collection of Buddhist writings

Ideological criticism aims to address and advance a particular political, social, or ethical agenda. In some contexts those employing ideological criticism have viewed a text (or the way it has been interpreted) as a reflection of power dynamics that can be harmful, especially to certain groups of marginalised people (Gorman 2020, 16).

There are two facets to **canonical criticism**. Firstly, there is a diachronic aspect of exploring how texts were transmitted and shaped by Buddhist communities to produce a final, stable collection, deemed authoritative and accepted as canonical. Secondly, there is a synchronic aspect of examining the place of a particular text in the entire canon, i.e. how it is to be read and understood as a part of the canon (Hayes and Holladay 2007, 27; Tate 2011, 84; Gorman 2020, 19–20). This means that texts can and must be heard not only in their historical and literary contexts, but also in their canonical context. It requires the interpreter to ask what role a text plays in the canon as a single entity. While a theologian might consider the bible as a divinely orchestrated whole that reveals the story and drama of salvation, this description would not apply to the Pāli canon. Its compilation cannot be considered as divinely orchestrated – in the sense of by a god. Yet it is not an arbitrary collection of texts, as the three Buddhist councils presumably imposed some selection and ordering of the texts that eventually constituted the canon. The presence of a canon therefore invites the interpreter to ask questions about the relationships of its various parts to one another – to put canonical texts in conversation with one another (Gorman 2020, 167).

Although this framework of methods is a means of classification, the categorisations should not be adhered to too rigidly. Which box a method is placed in is a matter of where the predominant focus lies. For instance, ‘close

reading' is a synonym for the analytical synchronic method in Table 1, but arguably may apply to analytical diachronic methods also. Canonical criticism is placed in Table 4 as an engaged method, but may also be applied as an analytical method. I shall now address aspects of the two interpretations under different headings relating to the exegetical scheme.

The analytical diachronic approach

This examines the development of a text and how it is understood through time. The orthodox interpretation of the twelve-fold formulation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* is explained by early Buddhist exegetes but most clearly by the 5th c. CE commentator Buddhaghosa, in Chapter 17 of his *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*). Nevertheless, there appears to be no unambiguous statement preserved in the Pāli *suttas* of the twelve *nidānas* applying over three lifetimes. Indeed, Jones proposes that:

the commentators, by assigning specific, literal meanings to each of the twelve *nidānas*, created out of *paṭicca samuppāda* a religious and metaphysical doctrine describing the rebirth process according to karma. (2009, 244)

Both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi are aware of the origins of the orthodox interpretation and its development across time, so both are adopting a **diachronic approach** with **traditional** and **historical criticism**. But they disagree on whether the orthodox explanation authentically represents the teaching of the Buddha. Bodhi believes the orthodox 'three lives' account explains in more detail what the Buddha taught:

[T]his interpretation, far from deviating from the Suttas, simply makes explicit the Buddha's intention in expounding dependent arising. (1998a, 45)

He goes on:

the three-life interpretation, though not explicitly stated in such terms [in the Sutta Piṭaka], is fully in accord with the Buddha's teachings. (1998a, 45)

So in his opinion, the orthodox interpretation, far from deviating from the *suttas*, simply makes explicit the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising. Bodhi appeals to the traditionality and historicity of the 'three lives' interpretation, telling us it has been 'maintained by the Theravāda tradition virtually from the time that tradition emerged as a distinct school' and that it:

can be found already in near-definitive form in the Vibhaṅga of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and the Paṭisambhidāmagga of the Sutta Piṭaka, works dating from around the 3rd century BC. (1998a, 47)

In a further appeal to authority in his argument, he states that:

It was also shared, with minor differences in details, by the early rivals of the Theravāda, the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsaṅghika, which suggests that at least in outline this way of explaining PS [*paṭiccasamuppāda*] already preceded the first schisms. The same three-life division can be found in the works of the great Mādhyamika [*sic*, Madhyamaka] philosopher Nāgārjuna (e.g. in his Mūla Mādhyamika [*sic*] Kārikā, chapter 26), and is also held in the present day by the Mahāyāna schools that have inherited the exegetical methodology of ancient Indian Buddhism. (1998a, 47)

Ñāṇavīra, however, disagrees about the compatibility of the orthodox interpretation with the Buddha's teaching as recorded in the Pāli discourses, arguing that the explanation the twelve *nidānas* offer for suffering and its cessation pertains to the present life, without *kamma* having a role.

The analytical synchronic approach

This exegetical approach looks at the form of a text at a particular point of its development – in this case its final form. Both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi are translators from Pāli to English, and in their attempts to understand a text's vocabulary, grammatical forms, and the relationships among these items (syntax), they are pursuing **lexical, grammatical, and syntactical analysis**. Also, in their reference to other discourses within the Pāli canon to elucidate or support an argument, both follow **canonical criticism**, an exegetical method which places a text in the context of a canon. I shall separate the discussion into the main areas of their disagreement.

1. Dukkha

For both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi, the Buddha's teaching is primarily concerned with suffering and its cessation, but they differ as to which kind of *dukkha* is addressed in the twelve-fold *paṭiccasamuppāda* formulation. Indeed, overarching their diverse exegeses of the twelve-factored formulation is how they understand *dukkha* in this context.

Ñāṇavīra contends that the kind of *dukkha* being considered is our present, existential stress or sense of unsatisfactoriness. He explains that in almost every formulation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* a particular set of items (*viññāṇa*, *nāmarūpa*,

saḷāyatana, *phassa*, and so on) recurs with little variation,⁵ because these items are aspects of experience and the problem of suffering arises in the sphere of experience. These *nidānas* are therefore essential to an understanding of suffering and its cessation (2010a, 25). While Ñāṇavīra views *dukkha* primarily as an existential anxiety that can only be resolved in the present, Bodhi contends that the *dukkha* with which the Buddha is primarily concerned is the problem of our bondage to *saṃsāra* – the round of repeated birth, aging, and death.

So for both exegetes, the formulation is an explanation of how suffering arises, but while Ñāṇavīra states ‘*paṭiccasamuppāda* has nothing to do with temporal succession and is not the description of a *process*’ (2010a, 70), Bodhi defends the orthodox interpretation as explaining rebirth occurring over three consecutive lives according to *kamma* and *vipāka*.

2. *Vedanā*

Ñāṇavīra employs **intertextual analysis** to argue against the orthodox view that *kamma* has a role in the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formulation. With this form of analysis, one seeks to identify and interpret other texts which address issues relevant to the text in question. Specifically, Ñāṇavīra argues from apparent inconsistencies between canonical texts that *vedanā* could not solely be *vipāka*.

He points out that, as described at SN IV 230–1, *kamma-vipāka* is cited as only one out of eight reasons for bodily *vedanā*. Notably, this list is provided in the context of the Buddha being asked by the wanderer Moḷiyasīvaka about a doctrine held by some ascetics and Brahmins that all feelings are caused by what was done in the past. The Buddha tells him that by taking such a view, ‘they overshoot what one knows by oneself, and... what is considered to be true in the world’. Moḷiyasīvaka is told that feelings can originate from bile, phlegm, wind, imbalance, climate, carelessness, assault, and as a result of *kamma*.

Bodhi’s ingenious riposte to this is that the Buddha is not denying that *kamma* may induce illnesses and so on that then serve as the immediate causes of painful feelings (SN, tr. Bodhi 2000, 1435, note 252). In other words, Bodhi is saying that even if something else other than *kamma* appears to be the cause, *kamma* may yet be acting as an indirect cause in bringing about the more recent cause such as illness. The discourse does not say, however, that the Buddha is only enumerating immediate causes, and the Buddha seems to be making a salutary point, that to state that all feelings are caused by what is done in the past goes beyond what one can validly say on the basis of personal experience and what is generally held to be true.

Ñāṇavīra also notes that at AN I 176, *somanassa* (joy), *domanassa* (dejection), and *upekkhā* (equanimity) are included in *vedanā* in the specific context of the

⁵ DN II 56, for example, omits *saḷāyatana*.

paṭiccasamuppāda formulation.⁶ He argues that as these three feelings are mental and arise when the mind dwells on an object, they must involve *cetanā* (intention) and thus could not be *vipāka*. He also identifies that the same *sutta* (at AN I 174) warns that whoever thinks that all one's feelings are due to past acts shows no desire or effort to do what is skilful and to avoid the unskilful. In Ñāṇavīra's view, they therefore 'adopt a form of determinism making present action futile' (2010a, 14).

3. *The nexuses*

Constituting what Bodhi (1998a, 51) regards as 'the two main planks of Ven. Ñāṇavīra's interpretation' are two nexuses which are crucial to how the formulation is interpreted:

- a. *bhava* (becoming, or 'being' in Ñāṇavīra's translation), *jāti* (birth), and *jarāmaraṇa* (aging and death); and
- b. *avijjā* (ignorance), *saṅkhārā* (formations, 'determinations' in Ñāṇavīra's translation), and *viññāṇa* (consciousness).

a. *Bhava, jāti, and jarāmaraṇa*

In the orthodox interpretation, through *kamma-bhava* (the rebirth-producing kammic process of becoming), *jāti* (birth) and *jarāmaraṇa* (old age and death) result in a subsequent life.

Underlying the way Ñāṇavīra interprets these terms is his belief that the fundamental *upādāna*, or 'holding' (his translation), is *attavāda*, i.e. holding a belief in 'self'. He explains that the *puthujjana* (spiritually ordinary person) lives as if they were a 'self' encountering other 'selves', and this is referred to as *bhava* or 'being'. The *puthujjana* knows that people are born and die; since he thinks 'my self exists', so he also thinks 'my self was born' and 'my self will die'. So the *puthujjana* sees a 'self' to whom the words birth and death apply. Bodhi's view, however, is rather different – that the *suttas* unambiguously indicate that 'birth' refers to biological birth and 'aging and death' to biological aging and death, not to the *puthujjana*'s notion that 'my self was born; my self ages and dies'.

Bodhi argues further, using **intertextual analysis**, that when the Buddha defines *bhava* in the *suttas* concerning *paṭiccasamuppāda*, he does so merely by enumerating three types of becoming: sense-sphere becoming, fine-material-sphere becoming, and immaterial-sphere becoming. Moreover, Bodhi quotes from the *Bhava Sutta* (AN I 223–4), which describes *bhava* in the three spheres as a result of ripening *kamma*.

⁶ His mention of the 'specific context of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula' (2010a, 13) does suggest he acknowledges that context may be a significant factor in the interpretation of texts.

While Ñāṇavīra contends that *jāti* is ‘birth’ and not ‘rebirth’, and ‘rebirth’ is *punabbhavābhiniḃbatti* (*punabbhava-abhiniḃbatti*), as at MN I 294, Bodhi contends that although Ñāṇavīra is correct in so far as the word *jāti* does not by itself convey the sense of rebirth, within the context of *paṭiccasamuppāda* and elsewhere, it must be understood as implying rebirth, and that Ñāṇavīra’s distinction in translation between *jāti* and *punabbhavābhiniḃbatti* is spurious. Bodhi (1998a, 51–2) asserts that there are no *suttas* to be found in the Pāli canon that explain the terms of this nexus in the way in which Ñāṇavīra interprets them.

Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi’s differing interpretations here hinge on how they apply **lexical analysis**. In particular, the contrasting meanings they derive for the Pāli terms *bhava* (‘being’ or ‘becoming’) and *jāti* (‘birth’ or ‘rebirth’) are critical to their interpretations.

b. *Avijjā, saṅkhārā, and viññāṇa*

In the orthodox interpretation, *avijjā* (ignorance) and *saṅkhārā* (formations) as *kamma* in a previous life produce, as *vipāka* or the result of that *kamma*, *viññāṇa* (consciousness) in the present life. Crucial to their diverse interpretations of this nexus is how the two exegetes consider the Pāli word *saṅkhāra*. Essentially, both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi adopt narrow, but otherwise distinctly different, definitions in their **lexical analysis** of *saṅkhāra*. Ñāṇavīra states his meaning as follows:

The passage from the Cūḷavedallasutta... evidently uses *saṅkhāra* to mean a thing from which some other thing is inseparable – in other words, a *necessary condition*. This definition is perfectly simple and quite general, and we shall find that it is all that we need. (If a *saṅkhāra* is something upon which something else depends, we can say that the ‘something else’ is *determined* by the first thing, i.e. by the *saṅkhāra*, which is therefore a ‘determination’ or a ‘determinant’. It will be convenient to use the word *determination* when we need to translate *saṅkhāra*.) (2010a, 19)

Ñāṇavīra is thus adopting an exclusively active meaning for *saṅkhāra*, which is reflected in his translation as ‘determination’ or ‘determinant’. According to him a *saṅkhāra* is a conditioner, not a conditioned thing. He appears to regard this meaning as generally applicable, for instance applying it also to the ‘*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*’ etc. formula, whereas Bodhi applies a passive meaning in that context (see below).

Using **intertextual analysis** Ñāṇavīra (2010a, 15) turns to the description of the three types of *saṅkhāra* found in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (specifically at MN I 303; cf. SN IV 293), where the nun Dhammānā points out to Visākha firstly, that there are three kinds of determinations – *kāyasāṅkhāra* (body determination), *vācisaṅkhāra* (speech determination), and *cittasaṅkhāra* (mind

determination) – and secondly, that *assāsapassāsā* (in-and-out breaths) are body determination, *vitakkavicārā* (thinking) is speech determination, and *saññā ca vedanā ca* (perception and feeling) are mind determination. This is the case because the in-and-out breaths are bodily, thinking precedes speech, and perception and feeling are mental. If, as the orthodox interpretation says, *sañkhāras* are *kamma*, how is one to understand in-and-out breaths, thinking, and perception and feeling as bodily, verbal, and mental *kamma*? Nāṇavīra asks rhetorically, ‘Is my present existence the result of my breathing in the preceding existence?’ (2010a, 15).

Bodhi’s **intertextual analysis** is rather different. Elsewhere (2005), he attributed different meanings to *sañkhāra* in different contexts, and he opines that the typology delineated above does not occur in the context of *paṭiccasamuppāda* and so is not applicable to it (1998a, 58–9). He argues that that particular description of the three types of *sañkhāra* – *kāyasañkhāra*, *vācisañkhāra*, and *cittasañkhāra* – as in-and-out breaths, thinking, and perception and feeling respectively always occurs in the course of a discussion on the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññavedayita-nirodha*). It is intended to prepare the way for an explanation of the order in which the three types of *sañkhāra* cease when a monk enters the attainment of cessation, and this should be assigned to a completely separate compartment from any discussion of *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

So both Nāṇavīra and Bodhi apply selectively **intertextual** and also **canonical analysis** as they interpret how texts are to be read and understood as parts of collections of early Buddhist writings – the canon, or the canon plus early commentaries. While Nāṇavīra applies a typology of *sañkhāra* from another part of the canon to support his criticism of the orthodox interpretation, Bodhi adopts instead a narrow definition of *sañkhāra* in the context of the formulation as kammically driven volitions, which supports the orthodox model. Nāṇavīra’s understanding of *sañkhāra* is also narrow – its meaning having a positive sense as a determinant or determination in every context (2010a, 19). A *sañkhāra* is a conditioner rather than conditioned.

As Jones (2009, 244) observes, the early Buddhist exegetes interpreted *sañkhāra* in the context of *paṭiccasamuppāda* narrowly as the past volitional formations, that is, past *kamma*, on the basis of which the present person arose (as with Bodhi’s interpretation). But the *suttas* describe *sañkhāra* very generally as bodily, verbal, and mental formations, with no reference to time or *kamma* – an explication which Nāṇavīra prefers.

While Nāṇavīra’s meaning may reflect a failing in his **intertextual analysis** to acknowledge the different meanings of *sañkhāra* in different canonical texts, it does provide a readily intelligible and coherent interpretation of the doctrine below.

4. ‘*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*’ etc.

sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā;
sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā;
sabbe dhammā anattā.

All determinations are impermanent;
All determinations are unpleasurable (suffering);
All things are not-self.⁷

By way of explanation, Ñāṇavīra says that a *puthujjana* regards whatever thing he identifies as self as permanent, indeed more permanent than anything else. When he sees:

the *saṅkhāra* on which this thing depends, is impermanent, he sees that this thing, too, must be impermanent, and he no longer regards it as ‘self’. Thus, when *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* is seen, *sabbe dhammā anattā* is seen. And similarly with *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*. (2010a, 20)

Against this, Bodhi turns to the commentaries (which Ñāṇavīra does not draw on)⁸ for his interpretation that in such statements as ‘*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*’, etc., *saṅkhārā* should be understood as *saṅkhata-saṅkhārā*, that is, as conditioned things – a passive meaning (1998a, 62; 2005). This is more compatible with the scientific ‘universal flux’ model which Ñāṇavīra regards as inimical to understanding the Dhamma (2010a, 47).

5. *Dhamma sandīṭṭhika akālika*

This frequently repeated phrase (*pericope*) in the Pāli canon describes the Buddha’s teaching (Dhamma), and is also interpreted very differently by the two exegetes. Ñāṇavīra questions how, if the Buddha has said that the Dhamma is *sandīṭṭhika* (immediately visible) and *akālika* (not involving time) (MN I 265), the twelve items, *avijjā* to *jarāmaraṇa*, can all be seen at once, if according to the orthodox interpretation they are spread over three successive existences.

Bodhi argues, however, that although the application of the formulation involves temporal extension over a succession of lives, what one sees with immediate vision is not the connection between particular events in the past, present, and future, but the conditional relationships obtaining between types of phenomena: that phenomena of a given type B arise in necessary dependence

⁷ *Dhammapada* 20.5–7, vv.277–9; translation according to Ñāṇavīra (2010a, 20).

⁸ He deliberately does not turn to commentarial explanations, as he believes that the commentators have taken up metaphysical and non-existential interpretations at odds with the meaning of the *suttas*.

on phenomena of type A, that phenomena of a given type C arise in necessary dependence on phenomena of type B (1998b, 173–4). So Bodhi argues that Ñāṇavīra’s **lexical analysis** of *sandittihika* and *akālika* in this context is too literal, and it is the underpinning principle of conditionality that may be seen immediately.

Lastly, in this look at the analytical synchronic methods employed by the two exegetes, I shall examine a *sutta* that Bodhi considers exemplary in describing the ‘three lives’ interpretation, and consider to what extent it could yield an alternative interpretation compatible with Ñāṇavīra’s existential one.

6. *The Bālapaṇḍita Sutta*

Bodhi (1998b, 165–7) turns to the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta* (SN II 23–4), which he says ‘confirms the three-life interpretation of PS [*paṭiccasamuppāda*] almost as explicitly as one might wish’ (165). In my translation of the *sutta* below, I provide two alternative translations (in bold) at key points. The first is Bodhi’s translation, labelled (B) (SN: Bodhi 2000, 549–50), the second is a putative translation that would be compatible with Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation in an existential sense, labelled (N).

Bālapaṇḍita Sutta

At Savatthī. ‘Monks, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body **has thereby originated** (B) / **is identified with [as self]** (N) (*evam ayaṃ kāyo samudāgato*). So there is therefore the dyad of this body and external name-and-form. Contact is dependent on this dyad. When contacted through one or other of the six sense fields, the fool experiences pleasure and pain.’

The Buddha says the same regarding a wise man, then asks the monks what therefore the difference between a wise man and a fool might be. The monks defer to the Buddha, who says:

‘Monks, for the fool, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body has **originated** (B) / **become identified with [as self]** (N) (*evam ayaṃ kāyo samudāgato*). For the fool that ignorance has not been overcome and that craving has not been finished with. For what reason? Because the fool has not followed the holy life for the complete end of suffering. Therefore, with **the breakup** (B) / **the failure** (N) of the body (*kāyassa bheda*), the fool **fares on to [another] body** (B) / **remains attached to the body [as self]** (N) (*kāyūpago hoti*). **Faring on to [another] body** (B) / **Remaining attached to the body [as self]** (N) (*kāyūpago*), he is not freed from birth, aging, and death; not freed

from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; not freed from suffering, I say.

‘Monks, for the wise man, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, this body **has originated** (B) / **become identified with [as self]** (N) (*evam ayaṃ kāyo samudāgato*). For the wise man that ignorance has been abandoned and that craving has been utterly destroyed. For what reason? Because the wise man has lived the spiritual life for the complete destruction of suffering. Therefore, with **the breakup** (B) / **the failure** (N) of the body (*kāyassa bheda*), the wise man **does not fare on to [another] body** (B) / **is not attached to the body [as self]** (N) (*na kāyūpago hoti*). **Not faring on to [another body]** (B) / **not being attached to the body [as self]** (N) (*akāyūpago hoti*), he is freed from birth, aging, and death; freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; freed from suffering, I say.

‘This, monks, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the wise man and the fool, that is, the living of the spiritual life.’

Bodhi reads into this *sutta* the past causes (ignorance and craving) of present existence, the present results of those causes (the body, the sense bases, contact and feeling), the present causes of future existence (ignorance and craving), and future results (birth, aging, and death in a future existence). He summarises his position as follows: ‘Thus in this short *sutta*, which fills out the bare-bones standard formula with some strips of flesh, however lean, we can discern the exegetical tools of the Commentaries already starting to take shape’ (1998b, 167). As Jones has pointed out, however, Bodhi’s exegesis:

shows only that this particular *sutta* is especially amenable to the later three lives interpretation with its associated exegetical methods. There is nothing in it to prove that it was intended to be understood in the terms of later religious metaphysics. (2009, 252),

Moreover, Jones believes it can be read in Ñāṇavīra’s existential sense along the following lines:

The ordinary person, unaware of reality and caught up with craving, identifies himself or herself with ‘this body’; having done so, he or she assumes a perceptual situation of self and world in which experience is possible, and therefore continues in existence as a self, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Without spiritual effort and insight, this situation will roll on, an existential structure of experience that destines the puthujjana to unsatisfactoriness as long as it continues. (2009, 252)

According to Jones, ‘It is hard on strictly linguistic grounds to know why this [putative Ñāṇavīra-type interpretation] should be an impossible interpretation of the sutta’ (2009, 252). But is an interpretation of this kind too much of a stretch in terms of departure from faithfulness to the Pāli? Critical in judging to what extent this *sutta* is amenable to exegesis in Ñāṇavīra’s existential sense is how one may translate with **lexical** and **grammatical analysis** certain Pāli words or phrases:

evam ayam kāyo samudāgato

Samudāgata is the past participle of *samudāgacchati* [*saṃ+udāgacchati*], which means ‘to result, rise; to be got, to be at hand’ (PED, 620). Bodhi’s translation is ‘this body has thereby originated’. This is the most obvious rendering of the Pāli and may be interpreted to refer to the body in a new life. There is, however, no meaning of this being as a result of *kamma*. An exegesis more compatible with Ñāṇavīra’s existential interpretation would have to be something like ‘this body has become identified with’, with the implication that the spiritually ordinary person identifies their body with self. Such an exegesis does stretch the possible meaning of the Pāli.

kāyassa bheda

According to the PED (456), *bheda* means ‘breaking, rending, breach, disunion, dissension’. So *kāyassa bheda* is most readily translated as ‘from the breakup of the body’. While the most obvious interpretation would be the dissolution of the body at death, the phrase could perhaps also be taken to mean the failure of the body with aging or illness – in spite of which the spiritually ordinary person remains attached to the body and identifies it with self in Ñāṇavīra’s existential sense.

kāyūpaḡo

With **grammatical analysis**, Bodhi correctly points out that Ñāṇavīra’s rendering of *upaḡa* as ‘has arrived at’ is actually an error: the word functions not as a past participle (that would be *upaḡata*) but as a suffix signifying present action. This is an example of a translational error potentially leading to misinterpretation. Bodhi renders it as ‘faring on to’. This is compatible with PED’s meaning of ‘going to, getting to, reaching’ (124), which it cites as the meaning in *kāyūpaḡa* (SN II 24 (this *sutta*)).

Bodhi contends that *kāyūpaḡo hoti* ‘denotes movement towards the fruition of past kamma – movement fulfilled by the process of rebirth’ (1998b, 161); but *upaḡa* cannot be made to mean ‘according to *kamma*’ (see Jones 2009, 258, note 3). So while *upaḡa* may be translated as ‘going to’, there is no meaning in the word per se that this is according to *kamma*. However, meanings for *upaḡa* can be found which would be more compatible with exegesis in Ñāṇavīra’s

existential sense. The PED provides an alternative meaning of *upaga* as ‘attached to, belonging to, being at’ (124), although the examples provided suggest that this meaning is normally in compounds other than with *kāya*. Cone’s *Dictionary of Pali* provides similar meanings for *upaga* as ‘being in or on; belonging to, pertaining to’ (I 440), and the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* provides a meaning of *kāyūpaga* as ‘attached to the body’.⁹

In summary, Bodhi’s translation does appear to be a more obvious, faithful one, although notably, a role for *kamma* is not specified in the *sutta*. The *sutta* may therefore be interpreted readily as pertaining to the ‘three lives’ model, but it does not mention a role for *kamma*. My attempt to provide a putative translation of the *sutta* compatible with Ñāṇavīra’s existential interpretation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* tends to stray from the accepted meanings of certain terms, notably *evam ayaṃ kāyo samudāgato*. *Kāyūpaga*, however, may translate as ‘attached to the body’ – a meaning which would be compatible with Ñāṇavīra’s interpretation. So while this particular *sutta* is especially amenable to the orthodox ‘three lives’ interpretation, it does not so easily accommodate Ñāṇavīra’s ‘this life’ interpretation.

A HERMENEUTIC OF TRUST OR SUSPICION?

A fundamental difference between Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi relates to the extent of the texts on which they rely. Furthermore, many of the differences between their exegeses stem from this. It is an issue that relates to canonical criticism, which addresses how texts are to be read and understood as parts of a canon. Accordingly, the basic attitude or fundamental interpretive posture to a Buddhist text can take one of two forms: either trust or suspicion. The former attitude is known as a **hermeneutic of trust** or consent, while the latter attitude is called a **hermeneutic of suspicion** (Gorman 2020, 22).

If we consider a wider collection of Buddhist writings – the Pāli canon and the traditional Theravādin commentaries – Ñāṇavīra places total reliance on the *Sutta Piṭaka*, apart from certain parts of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (a hermeneutic of trust). He regards the commentaries and *Abhidhamma* as unreliable sources, however, and indeed considers having read the commentaries a disadvantage (a hermeneutic of suspicion).¹⁰ On the other hand, Bodhi, in his readiness and

⁹ Available at: https://cpd.uni-koeln.de/search?article_id=27137.

¹⁰ ‘These books of the Pali Canon correctly represent the Buddha’s Teaching, and can be regarded as trustworthy throughout. (Vinaya-piṭaka:) Suttavibhaṅga, Mahāvagga, Cūlavagga; (Sutta-piṭaka:) Dīghanikāya, Majjhimanikāya, Saṃyuttanikāya, Aṅguttaranikāya, Suttanipāta, Dhammapada, Udāna, Itivuttaka, Theratherīgāthā. (The Jātaka verses may be authentic, but they do not come within the scope of these Notes.) No other Pali books whatsoever should be taken as authoritative; and

confidence to accept the Theravādin commentaries and the *Abhidhamma* as trustworthy source material, displays a much broader hermeneutic trust in the traditional Theravādin texts – canonical and commentarial.¹¹

In summary, Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi differ in their trust towards certain texts. Additionally, they differ in their trust towards other interpreters. While Bodhi places confidence in traditional commentators, Ñāṇavīra largely distrusts any interpreters apart from himself.

ENGAGED APPROACHES TO EXEGESIS

Those following an engaged approach are not primarily interested in the text as an end in itself – whether understood in terms of its formation (**diachronically**) or a version at a point in time (**synchronically**) – but in the text as something to be engaged with (Gorman 2020, 15). Engaged exegetes are looking for an inherent existential significance in a text, non-engaged exegetes might be said to keep the text at an existential distance.

Authorship of parts of the Pāli canon may be unclear, but this is not the case with Ñāṇavīra's *Notes on Dhamma* and Bodhi's response to his note on *paṭīccasamuppāda*. The authorship here is certain, and furthermore, their readings of texts for contemporary significance are likely to be influenced by their personal, religious, social, economic, ethnic, racial, historical, and geographical contexts (Gorman 2020, 6). Alter expresses this well: 'The author addresses us with a representation of or their reflection on life spun out of the densely tangled stuff of his own lived life' (1999, 2). It may also be said that the meaning we, as readers, derive from an exegetical text results from an interplay of the worlds of text, reader, and author (Tate 2011, 5–6). The text and what the reader brings to their reading therefore also contribute to an interpretation.

Turning to the authors of the exegeses, Bodhi is a prolific renowned translator of Pāli texts, and may be viewed as a staunch supporter of Theravāda

ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned' (Ñāṇavīra 2010a, 3, note a).

¹¹ The traditional Pāli commentarial material consists mainly of the commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) on the canonical texts and Buddhaghosa's (5th c. CE) *Visuddhimagga*. The latter is closely connected to the *aṭṭhakathā* and 'seems to quote from the old *Aṭṭhakathā* much more extensively than the extant commentaries do' (von Hinüber 1996, 125) – the 'old *Aṭṭhakathā*' being commentarial texts in Prakrit and Sinhala which are thought to have formed the basis for the *aṭṭhakathā* and *Visuddhimagga*. The Pāli commentaries and sub-commentaries are immensely valuable for translation. They are, however, separated from the *sutta* texts by more than seven or eight centuries, although possibly based on much earlier commentarial material (Kuan 2019, 4–5).

orthodoxy.¹² Some readers may know less about Ñāṇavīra, and his biographical details may help us understand his exegesis and inform the meaning we draw from it. The following information on Ñāṇavīra is resourced from Hiriko (2019) and Ñāṇavīra (2010a and b):

Ñāṇavīra

Ñāṇavīra's writings, especially *Notes on Dhamma*, have achieved a significant following in Theravādin circles. Born on 5 January 1920 as Harold E. Musson, the later Ñāṇavīra was the product of an upper-class Edwardian English army family. He was educated at Cambridge University, and during World War II served in Algeria and Italy. In Italy, his interest in Buddhist thought was prompted by reading a book called *La Dottrina del Risveglio* [*The Doctrine of Awakening*] (1943) by Julius Evola, which he went on to translate into English. During his time in Sorrento, Harold had met another soldier, Osbert Moore (later Ñāṇamoli). Having returned to England in 1946, Musson led a pleasant bohemian existence, but both he and Moore experienced a sense of dissatisfaction with life and left England in October 1948 with the intention of becoming Buddhist monks in Ceylon.

At the Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa in 1949, Musson and Moore both received novice ordination from Ñāṇatiloka, and in 1950 they received higher ordination at the Vajirārāma monastery, Colombo. Both returned to the Island Hermitage, but while Ñāṇamoli was to spend almost his entire monastic life there, Ñāṇavīra moved to a remote part of south-east Ceylon, where he lived alone for the rest of his life in a one-room *kutī* (basic dwelling). His initial aspiration was to attain advanced stages of *samādhi* (concentration), but health problems interfered with meditation. As a result he spent more of his time reflecting on doctrinal and philosophical issues, and writing.

His thinking on Buddhist doctrine and philosophy was influenced by the philosophical schools of phenomenology and existentialism – particularly as expressed by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. He made it clear, however, that such ideas could only clear the path of western thinking for receptivity to the Dhamma. On 26 June 1959 he considered he had attained *sotāpatti* (stream entry). His health problems had, however, made concentration in meditation impossible, and he eventually took his own life on 5 July 1965.

¹² For more biography, see Bodhi (2020, 580).

Bearing in mind Gadamer's reservations about *mens auctoris* as a means to understanding, does the life of Ñāṇavīra go any way to explaining his very personal interpretation of *paṭiccasamuppāda*? Any conclusions must certainly be tentative, but perhaps there are some clues in his biography to the origins of his very individual interpretation. Firstly, Ñāṇavīra's war experiences may have set him on a spiritual quest – rather like the character Larry Darrell in Somerset Maugham's book *The Razor's Edge*. Ñāṇavīra had a privileged upper-class background, which, one could speculate, may have fostered a confident, even arrogant, independence in his intellectual enquiry. It is apparent that existential philosophy exerted a strong influence on his interpretive reading of the texts. The stress and pain of his medical conditions would only have accentuated his focus on an interpretation that concerned the arising and relief of *dukkha* in this life. His relative isolation was likely not ideal for exegesis, which may be considered a conversation with readers of the text past and present (Gorman 2020, 6). He chose a hermitical life, living for most of his ordained life in a solitary *kutī* near a rural village. So he did not live in a monastic *saṅgha* (community) with other monks with whom he could discuss his ideas. Against this, he did correspond extensively with Ñāṇamoli, a skilled translator of works such as the *Visuddhimagga*. In most of Ñāṇavīra's correspondence, however, he was generously offering his knowledge and insights to support and instruct others, for instance Sister Vajirā (see Ñāṇavīra 2010a, 485–96).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The exegetical scheme adopted above has helped elucidate the orthodox 'three lives' interpretation as espoused by Bodhi, and in particular how it takes the meanings of the various *nidānas* and their sequence in the literal sense of a linear causal chain, assuming a role for *kamma* at two nexuses in the sequence. A narrow meaning of *saṅkhāra* as 'kammic formations' is adopted, which is compatible with this model. This interpretation has come to represent a metaphysical explanation of a person's passage through *samsāra* (unenlightened, mundane existence). Exegetes of the earliest texts must, however, take into account the mutual influence between texts and tradition. While the discourses have informed traditions of interpretation and practice, those very traditions may also have shaped how the *suttas* are read and interpreted (Hayes and Holladay 2007, 11–12). As a consequence, traditions of interpretation that developed around the *Sutta Piṭaka*, such as the Theravādin commentaries, have come to be regarded by some as almost as important as the *suttas* themselves.

In contrast, Ñāṇavīra's interpretation of the twelve-membered formulation has a psychological and existential resonance applied to this life. Such a 'three life' interpretation also has early origins. Anālayo points out that such an

interpretation is recognised in the *Vibhaṅga* (144 2; 145 14), which he regards as the second and probably earliest book of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka* (2008, 94). He states:

at least from the perspective of the *Vibhaṅga*, the term ‘birth’ [as one of the twelve links of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formulation] can meaningfully be applied to the coming into being of mental states in the present moment as well as to rebirth in another life. (2008, 94)

As shown above, interpreting the *Bālapanḍita Sutta* in the existential sense of Ñāṇavīra was problematical, but this particular *sutta* lends itself more readily to a ‘three lives’ interpretation. The question remains, however, as to whether Ñāṇavīra imposed his own existentialist perspectives onto Pāli texts describing *paṭiccasamuppāda*, given that there is a limit to how far an exegete’s personal contexts may validly influence an interpretation (Gorman 2020, 7). While Ñāṇavīra’s translations from the Pāli may be less close to the original meaning than Bodhi’s, his interpretation may perhaps be viewed as a creative attempt to portray the formulation as non-metaphysical and conveying existential meaning to someone seeking a release from suffering in their present life. Such an interpretation may also be more accessible to those sceptical of a role for *kamma*. For these reasons it may represent a more meaningful interpretation for the contemporary western Buddhist.

Stephen Batchelor, a foundational proponent of secular Buddhism, describes sensing an immediate affinity with Ñāṇavīra on reading *Clearing the Path* (2010, 137) and has written extensively about him (2010, 136–49; 2017, 28–72). Both he and Ñāṇavīra have criticised aspects of Buddhist orthodoxy and have been influenced by existentialist philosophers. Ñāṇavīra nevertheless retained a ‘fundamentalism which sits uneasily with the skeptical rigor that characterises so much of his writing’ (Batchelor 2010, 146–7). For while Batchelor brings scepticism to notions of rebirth, non-human realms of existence, *kamma*, and the central aim of Buddhism being freedom from the cycle of repeated rebirth, Ñāṇavīra seems never to have questioned these ideas (Batchelor 2010, 146–7). In accord with their shared espousal of existential philosophy, both of them prefer to frame the Four Noble Truths as tasks, rather than metaphysical truths.¹³

¹³ Ñāṇavīra views them as ‘the ultimate tasks for a man’s performance – Suffering commands “Know me absolutely!”; Arising commands “Abandon me!”, Cessation commands “Realise me!”, and the Path commands “Develop me!”’ (2010a, 258). Batchelor expresses the tasks using an acronym, ELSA: Embrace, Let go, Stop, Act: ‘One **embraces** dukkha, that is, whatever situation life presents, **lets go** of the grasping that arises in reaction to it, and **stops** reacting so that one can **act** unconditioned by reactivity’ (2017, 98).

In terms of **lexical analysis**, Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi interpret certain key words differently, notably *bhava*, *jāti*, and *saṅkhāra*. There are also selective differences relating to **intertextual analysis** and **canonical criticism** – specifically, in their attitudes to apparent contradictions thrown up by other texts, the extent to which context should influence interpretation, and how a particular text should be viewed in its relationship to others in a collection of texts such as a canon. This touches on whether doctrinal content should be regarded as universally applicable or as not necessarily transferable from one *sutta* to another. After all, a *sutta* presents a teaching to a particular audience, in a certain context, at a particular time, with perhaps a specific purpose.

The occurrence of apparent contradictions between texts in the Pāli canon is perhaps unsurprising if it is the product of a process of transmission including a pre-literary phase – a process which a traditional–historical criticism would seek to reconstruct (McKenzie and Haynes 1999, 91–2). But a significant explanation would appear to be the Buddha’s ‘skill in means’ in adapting his teaching according to the audience. Gombrich mentions some of the evidence for this pragmatism in the Buddha’s teaching (2018, 90–6). For instance, the parable of the raft in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN I 135) may be interpreted as a caution against clinging too literally to any doctrine (Gombrich 1997, 24). Also, in the *Bahuvedanīya Sutta* (MN I 398) two of the Buddha’s followers argue over the number of kinds of feeling that the Buddha has taught – is it two or three? The Buddha tells them he has at different times taught different numbers of feelings according to the context. So the Buddha restated his Dhamma in different ways, from different perspectives, in different contexts, with no single, absolutist, dogmatic method (see also Karunadasa 2018, 3–4). This contrasts with the Brahmins’ regard of Vedic texts as eternal, and only efficacious when correctly recited by themselves as a select, hereditary group of priests.

Both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi might be considered as **engaged exegetes**, as they both view Pāli canonical texts as potentially transformative – as means to Awakening. In their approaches to exegesis, then, they are self-involving, not treating the text as merely a historical or literary artefact but as something to engage in experientially – as something that could or should affect their lives (Gorman 2020, 15–16). Indeed, the study and interpretation of Pāli canonical texts might be regarded as devotional reading, analogous to *lectio divina* (an approach to reading the bible that uses contemplation and meditation in the context of prayer to encounter God) (Gorman 2020, 20). Engaged approaches tend to challenge the ideologies of education and knowledge pervasive in the West since the Enlightenment, which tend to equate knowledge and education with the acquisition of information (Gorman 2020, 21). Congruent with an engaged approach, then, is Ñāṇavīra’s antithesis of scientific method as a means of understanding the Dhamma, e.g. in his criticism of regarding *anicca* as

universal flux and his utilisation of existentialist philosophy. His attitude to science would also accord with Gadamer's view of scientific method as limiting understanding.

While both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi pursue engaged approaches, to what extent do they pursue **ideological criticism**, which has the goal of addressing and advancing a particular political, social, or ethical agenda? At its most extreme this is termed **eisegesis** – an interpretive practice in which we read our own traditions and opinions into the text, rather than listening to what the text itself actually says (Hayes and Holladay 2007, 15–16). Such an interpretation may tell the reader more about the eisegete than about the text.

Both Ñāṇavīra and Bodhi run the risk of eisegesis. Bodhi may be said to be reading texts in the light of traditional Theravādin commentaries, while Ñāṇavīra's interpretation of text is coloured by his espousal of existential philosophy. Ñāṇavīra is viewing *paṭiccasamuppāda* through an existential lens, stating, 'It [how one interprets *paṭiccasamuppāda*] is a matter of one's fundamental attitude to one's own existence – is there, or is there not, a present problem or, rather, anxiety that can only be resolved in the present?' (Ñāṇavīra 2010a, 17). His view, however, is that while existential philosophies may prepare one for the Buddha's teaching, they are no substitute for it. The questions prompted by existential philosophies are those of a spiritually ordinary person (*puṭhujjana*), but a noble one (*ariya*) who has understood the Buddha's teaching has ceased to consider such questions as valid. Nevertheless the *ariya* 'would never have reached the point of listening to the Buddha's Teaching had he not first been disquieted by existential questions about himself and the world' (Ñāṇavīra 2010a, 7–8). So Ñāṇavīra's exegesis of canonical texts on *paṭiccasamuppāda* is an interpretation of how suffering comes about in this lifetime and of how it may be overcome. Indeed, he regarded the appropriate reader of his *Notes on Dhamma* to be 'subjectively engaged with an anxious problem, the problem of his existence, which is also the problem of his suffering', stating further that:

there is therefore nothing in these pages to interest the professional scholar, for whom the question of personal existence does not arise; for the scholar's whole concern is to eliminate or ignore the individual point of view in an effort to establish the objective truth. (Ñāṇavīra 2010a, 3)

The *Notes* were not therefore meant for the scholar, but for the reader concerned for their own welfare. This is important, as the intended readership inevitably influences the writing of a text – 'every literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience' (Eagleton 1983, 84). By taking account of the values, attitudes, and responses of intended readers in his writing, Ñāṇavīra was applying **reader-response criticism**.

By way of summary, Bodhi might be said to epitomise the exegete and Ñāṇavīra the interpreter – if ‘exegesis’ is taken to mean the process of examining a text to ascertain its original meaning, and ‘interpretation’ the drawing out of the implications of that understanding for a contemporary audience, a distinction sometimes drawn in biblical study (Tate 2011, 1). It might even be said that Bodhi adopts analytical methods akin to that of the *Abhidhamma*, while Ñāṇavīra’s approach is more in tune with the indirect methods of the *Sutta Piṭaka* such as similes and metaphors.

Jewish exegesis eventually came to include *remez* (allusion or allegory), and the standard practice for Christian theologians throughout most of the Middle Ages was to look in the bible for the allegorical or symbolic meaning, as well as literal, ethical, and eschatological meanings (Hayes and Holladay 2007, 19). Perhaps Ñāṇavīra’s methods might then be viewed as in a long tradition of figurative or allegorical interpretation of religious texts.

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

This study was a learning process for me. Firstly, I learned that a scheme of possible exegetical methods, such as the one I have adopted, can greatly assist in identifying which specific methods Buddhist thinkers have used in their interpretation of Buddhist texts. I think it also now helps me clarify the nature of my own interpretations. It is also apparent that useful resources may be drawn from other religions, as I adapted a scheme normally used for biblical study.

I became more aware of the apparent inconsistencies that may be found between different texts within the Pāli canon. Perhaps it should not have been a surprise, given the Buddha’s ‘skill in means’ when teaching. The two exegetes differed on whether certain texts could validly be used to support or refute a text elsewhere in the canon. This means that one should be cautious about drawing evidence from one part of the canon to argue for or against an interpretation of a text in another part.

I began this enquiry through a fascination with the life and writings of Ñāṇavīra. Among other things, I admired his uncompromising interaction with the Pāli texts. *Notes on Dhamma* makes for a challenging read. Even if you disagree with some of his translations, you have to respect his resolute attempts to get to grips with the meaning of the Pāli discourses. To interpret the Buddha’s teachings as well as one can does really mean reading them in their earliest written forms – whether it is Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan. My own experience is that as my knowledge of Pāli improved, I became increasingly unlikely to trust any English translation without searching out the Pāli from which it was derived.

It became increasingly apparent that hermeneutic trust or suspicion represented an area of fundamental difference between the two exegetes. In particular, the confidence of Bodhi and the suspicion of Ñāṇavīra towards the orthodox Theravādin commentaries influenced their interpretations of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. In the case of Ñāṇavīra, another significant factor was his espousal of existentialist philosophy. My conclusion is that an exegete inevitably brings their biases to their conversation with a text, and this needs to be borne in mind in assessing their interpretation.

We cannot be certain whether the Buddha's original teaching of the twelve-fold formulation was actually about rebirth or existential concerns or both. Indeed, many of the texts in the canon are in an outline or even skeletal form on which different yet valid interpretations may be hung. So we must sometimes accept a pluralism of interpretive possibilities. This is not necessarily a disadvantage for the practising Buddhist. Just as the Buddha adapted his teachings according to context, so might we perhaps draw on an interpretation that best alleviates our *dukkha* according to our needs at a particular time – provided of course the interpretation is valid. I conclude that Ñāṇavīra's and Bodhi's exegeses are very different, yet both are valid as interpretations of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, that most profound Buddhist doctrine.

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