

FAITH AND RENUNCIATION IN EARLY BUDDHISM: SADDHĀ AND NEKKHAMMA*

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As a part of a study on faith and renunciation in the Buddhist Nikāyas, this article focuses on the dyad saddhā-nekkhamma. Through a semantic investigation, it is possible to see that the quality of saddhā, being strongly related to wisdom and mindfulness, is considered in the Pāli formulas as a support of the whole meditative path. It is not a matter of belief in a dogma, but indeed an ability to recognize the dangers of defilements and the opportunity to overcome them through the development of the mind. Nekkhamma is the active side of saddhā. By trusting the wider perspective taught by the Buddha, the individual can let go of the fetters that condition the mind: nekkhamma is renunciation of the habitual structure of self.

“Ob es eine unerfüllte Sehnsucht ist,
die einen Menschen wahnsinnig macht?”
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1977, 89)

THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL PATH that we find in the Pāli Nikāyas ascribe a crucial role to the dyad *saddhā-nekkhamma* (faith-renunciation). The understanding of this role requires a semantic analysis of the terms. If we interpret the Buddhist thought in the Nikāyas by merely stick-

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ing to the common translations of these texts, there is a risk of misunderstanding their real meaning and the very purpose of Buddhist soteriology.

Therefore, in this paper I would try to apply a threefold but homogeneous approach to the Pāli Nikāyas:

1. a semantic analysis of the single terms;
2. a specific and comparative examination of compounds and formulas where the two terms appear;
3. a reflection on some wider contexts — *suttas* or groups of *suttas* that emphasize *saddhā* and *nekkhamma*.

This method, based on the evidences of the texts according to their structure and contents, and supported by some interesting suggestions of contemporary Buddhist scholars and thinkers, will enable us to consider faith and renunciation not as two separate factors of the Buddhist teachings, but as two closely interrelated manifestations of the wisdom (*paññā*) that leads the meditator from suffering (*dukkha*) to the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*). In Buddhism, intuitive wisdom, i.e. the capacity of seeing and knowing phenomena just the way they are — as expressed in the formula “*yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati*”¹ — without the stains of delusion, craving and aversion, is the most important cause of liberation. But the access to wisdom, to the liberating insight, is not very easy to find. The meditator needs to cultivate several instruments that are indeed available forms of wisdom. In many descriptions of the path, *saddhā* and *nekkhamma* are the first two steps, i.e. the most accessible forms of wisdom and essential requisites of Buddhist practice.

Saddhā is usually translated as ‘faith’, but it is not to be meant as a dogmatic belief. As stated in several *suttas*, dogmatic belief can definitely be dangerous to the spiritual path.² Yet, this lack of a dogmatic perspective does not lessen the importance of the term *saddhā* in the Pāli Canon. In the *Dantabhūmisutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya, which is an emblematic text of Buddhist soteriology, the whole path of liberation is based on

1. Cf. for instance the *Saṅgāravasutta* (S v.236, PTS v.124-126) and the *Abhayasutta* (S v.237, PTS v.128).

2. A very critical approach to dogmatic beliefs is found in the *Brahmajālasutta* (D 1.1-149, PTS 1.1-46), in the *Atthinukhoparyāyasutta* (S 1v.153, PTS 1v.138-140), in the *Pubba-koṭṭhakasutta* (S v.514, PTS 220-222) and in the *Kesamuttisutta* (A 11.66, PTS 1.188).

saddhā.³ Here faith is described as an intuitive understanding of how clinging to sense-experience leads to suffering. This understanding is embodied by the presence of the Buddha. Through listening to the teachings of the Buddha — that in the *Dantabhūmisutta* are compared to the kind, gentle words of an elephant tamer — the individual — compared here to an elephant — understands how suffering is created and reinforced, thus obtaining confidence in the Buddha himself.⁴ In the *Dantabhūmisutta* the Buddha represents the possibility of realising the end of suffering through a process of letting go, i.e. renunciation. Therefore it is a matter of faith in the Buddha, a faith that is not a blind belief, but a trust, a confidence in the Buddha and his teachings. In the *Suttas*, the existence of the Buddha proves the effectiveness of the path to freedom. In a way, the word *saddhā* implies not only this confidence, but all the factors of the path, that are strictly interconnected.

The relationship between the factors is particularly relevant in the case of *saddhā* and *nekkhamma*, two sides of the same coin. Renunciation is both a consequence of faith and its ‘negative’ form: *saddhā* is the positive facet of the path, i.e. cultivation (*bhāvanā*), *nekkhamma* is its negative dimension, i.e. purification (*visuddhi*). Actually, in the Buddhist Nikāyas we can observe two main aspects of the path leading to liberation (*vimutti*). The first aspect is usually called cultivation (*bhāvanā*). It consists basically in the cultivation of the wholesome factors, i.e. the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅgas*), the four tools of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*), the five faculties (*indriyas*) etc. The second aspect is purification (*visuddhi*), that is purification of the mind (*citta*) from unwholesome factors — hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*), defilements (*kilesas*), fetters (*saṃyojanas*), taints (*āsavaṇas*).

In the Nikāyas freedom from suffering is the result of a process of intuitive understanding, which is supported by the practice of mindfulness. Knowing and seeing the phenomena as they are (*yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati*) leads to freedom. The *Dantabhūmisutta* displays how this faculty of seeing is cultivated because of faith (*saddhā*) and is cleansed, purified through letting go (*nekkhamma*).

3. M 125 (M III.213-222, PTS III.128-137). See also the *Gaṇakamoggallānasutta* (M 107, III.74-78, PTS II.266-III.7), which can be considered a shorter version of the *Dantabhūmisutta*.

4. *So taṃ dhammaṃ sutvā tathāgate saddhaṃ paṭilabhati* (M III.218, PTS III.134). See also D I.191 (PTS I.63), D I.280 (PTS I.100), M I.291 (PTS I.179) etc. Cf. Caruso (2005, 117-127).

POSSIBLE MEANINGS OF SADDHĀ

In many *suttas* *saddhā* is meant as confidence in the awakening of the Buddha and in his qualities. As an example, in the *Indriyasamyutta* we find the formula “*ariyasāvako saddho hoti, saddahati tathāgatassa bodhim*”, “the noble disciple is confident, he has confidence in the awakening of the Tathāgata”.⁵ This formula is followed by a list of adjectives of the Buddha, expressed by a very common formula: “Such indeed is the Blessed One, accomplished, fully awakened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of the worlds, incomparable leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed” (*iti’pi so bhagavā arahaṃ sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussānaṃ buddho bhagavā’ti*).⁶ This depiction of the Buddha is a reminder of the path (*vijjācaraṇa*) and of the goal of the path (the ultimate awakening expressed by the other terms). Faith so evoked is an actual step toward final liberation, as emphasized by the passages in the Canon where *saddhā* is an obvious prerequisite of *vimutti*. We have, for instance, the formula “who has faith in this teaching is liberated” (*ime dhamme evaṃ saddahati adhimuccati*), or the compound “liberated by faith” (*saddhāvimutta*). In the first case, the teaching is about impermanence, that in Early Buddhism is a truth that has to be investigated and directly apprehended. Yet, an attitude of faith in this teaching is considered a step toward liberation.⁷ The compound *saddhāvimutta*, that can be easily translated with “liberated by faith”, is a clear example of the crucial role played by faith in the liberating process. The *Kīṭāgirisutta* lists seven kinds of meditators, among them the faith-follower (*saddhānusārin*) and the one liberated by faith (*saddhāvimutta*).⁸ The *saddhānusārin* has not yet overcome taints, but “has faith in and love for the Buddha” (*tathāgate c’assa saddhāmattaṃ hoti pemamattaṃ*). The *saddhāvimutta* has reached a certain degree of liberation, being one who has had “his taints partly destroyed by his seeing with wisdom” (*paññāya c’assa disvā ekacce āsavā*

5. S v.479-481 (PTS v.196-199).

6. *Ibidem*. These qualities are known as the “nine qualities of the Buddha” (*nava-buddha-guṇa*). Cf. Skilling (1998, 195).

7. This formula is repeated in all the *suttas* of the *Okkantasaṃyutta* (S III.302-311, PTS III.224-228). The commentary so explains the formula: “He reaches perfect liberation by faith” (*saddhādhimokkhaṃ paṭilabhati*, SA III.302-311, PTS II.346).

8. M 70 (I.182, PTS I.477-479). The same list is shortly mentioned in the *Saṅgītisutta* (D 33, III.332, PTS III.254).

parikkhīṇā honti). His faith in the Buddha is deeper, more strongly established (*tathāgate c'assa saddhā niviṭṭhā hoti mūlajātā paṭiṭṭhitā*). In this same *sutta* the Buddha says that the accomplishment of knowledge (*aññārādhana*) is the result of a gradual process that begins with *saddhā*. As we are going to see, faith seems to be an embryonic form of that wisdom, which is, by analogy, a mature form of faith-confidence. It is noteworthy that in the commentaries the compound *saddhāvimutta* is explained by describing a person that insightfully contemplates (*yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*) the Four Noble Truths, i.e. suffering (*dukkha*), its roots (*dukkhāsamudaya*), its end (*dukkhanirodha*) and the path leading to the end of suffering (*dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā*).⁹

In other *suttas*, *saddhā* is described as the knowledge of impermanence: impermanence of the six sense-realms (*saḷāyatanas*); impermanence of the five aggregates (*khandhas*); impermanence of experience, concepts, thoughts and craving related to the five aggregates; impermanence of the six elements (*dhātus*).¹⁰ This fact may look like an oxymoron, but it is indeed a clear evidence of the osmosis between confidence and knowledge, showing how *saddhā* is far from being “blind faith”. *Saddhā* seems to be a step beyond intellectual knowledge, because intellectual knowledge can easily be affected by the detrimental influence of defilements. Summing up, the individual, by observing experience through confidence, sees all phenomena as impermanent, conditioned, and turns passionately, devotionally and, in a way, spontaneously, toward the unconditioned qualities embodied by the Buddha. In these two very definitions of faith we have a hint of what renunciation is: an inner movement from the conditioned world to the realization of the Unconditioned (*amatadhamma*), i.e. *nibbāna*, the final goal of the Buddhist path. This is not merely a shift of desire from one object to another. It is rather a change of perspective: desire of the conditioned realm is *taṇhā*, craving, thirst, and there is attachment in it; desire of the Unconditioned is *chanda*, aspiration, or *saddhā*, faith, and, instead of attachment, there is renunciation in it, as pointed out by the compound *nekkhammachanda*. It is an ontological difference. In other words, *saddhā* indicates what the

9. See for instance DA III.150 (PTS III.890) and MA II.182 (PTS III.189). Furthermore, in order to illustrate the meaning of *saddhāvimutta*, both texts use the formula of the *Kitāgirisutta* to emphasize that the observation of phenomena through intuitive wisdom destroys taints.

10. See S III.146-149 (PTS III.179-180) and 302-310 (PTS III.224-227).

practitioner is searching for, i.e. final liberation, while *nekkhamma* indicates what the individual is progressively leaving behind, i.e. attachment to the sense-realm. The two terms describe the same kind of motivation, just seen from two different perspectives. This motivation springs from wisdom, is based on wisdom and leads to wisdom: it has intuitive wisdom (*paññā*) as its texture and frame. The faculty of seeing, contemplating reality, is the actual object of faith. If we look more closely, we realize that faith is a capacity of seeing the truth. Needless to say, in the examples just observed it is not the final, liberating insight, but it is the first blossoming of the faculty of knowing and seeing. Yet, *saddhā* is not only a beginner's requisite, but it is also a quality of a Buddha. It is obvious in the *Lakkhaṇasutta*, where *saddhā* is one of the marks (*lakkhaṇas*) of a Buddha, together with morality (*sīla*), learning (*suta*), renunciation (*cāga*), wisdom (*paññā* or *buddhī*) and others. These are not momentary conditions, but are indeed the qualities that a Buddha can never lose (*na parihāyati*).¹¹ In the *Saṅkhārūpapattisutta*, these same five qualities are entitled to let a monk decide about his future after death. He can decide either to reappear in beautiful realms or not to reappear again, by realizing the end of the taints (*āsavānaṃ khayā*) and therefore the final liberation (*vimutti*).¹² As faith generally is in the Tathāgata himself, the questions are: why would the Buddha have faith? Who or what is the object of his faith? We have previously seen that initial faith is in the qualities embodied by the Buddha, in his awakening, in his knowledge, etc. Also, faith is in the Four Noble Truths. As *saddhā* is a *lakkhaṇa* of the Buddha, it needs eventually to transcend the person of the Buddha and be focused on the very factors of awakening and on the possibility, represented by the Buddha and largely expounded in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, to reach final liberation from suffering.

Saddhā is the access to the path and its goal, embracing in some way the whole process, so proving to be, just like *paññā*, a transcendent quality. The difference between 'preliminary faith' and 'awakened faith' is probably to be found in the level of understanding. The first kind of faith is a glimpse into the Four Noble Truths and it is necessarily sustained by the presence of the Buddha, the latter is the full realization of them.

11. D 23 (D II.224, PTS III.165). The commentary (DA II.225, PTS III.936) defines this faith as "suitable faith" (*okappana-saddhā*) or "the faith of serene, luminous confidence" (*pasāda-saddhā*).

12. M 120 (M III.160-175, PTS III.99-103).

Therefore, the fact that *saddhā* appears at the beginning of the liberating process does not imply that it is a tool to be put aside after its application. On the contrary, it is a quality to be cultivated, because it is intrinsically precious.

‘NEGATIVE’ AND ‘POSITIVE’ FACETS OF NEKKHAMMA

The *Nadīsotasutta* of the *Itivuttaka* defines *nekkhamma* as “going against the stream”.¹³ Here renunciation is meant in a literal sense and is renunciation of the world, of the home life, of women and so on. But in the Pāli Canon renunciation is meant both as an ‘external’ renunciation and as an ‘inner’ renunciation, the former being a symbol of the latter. The stream is much more than an external lifestyle. The stream is essentially an image for *taṇhā*, craving, rather than for the objects of craving. The inner renunciation is the conversion from the powerful grip of craving to the release of letting go.

One of the possible etymologies of *nekkhamma* is *nikkhamati* (Skr *niṣkramati*), that means leaving the household life, retiring from the world; it can be seen as a metaphor of letting go of the ego, the self-view. From a traditional perspective, *nekkhamma* derives from *nikkāma* (Skr *naiṣkāmya*), emancipation from *kāma*, sense-pleasure: in the commentary *nekkhamma* is explained to be the quality of being free from *kāma* (*kāmato nissataguṇena*, or *kāmānaṃ nissaraṇaṃ*).¹⁴ It could, indeed, be a play on words where both meanings are involved.

According to Thanissaro (1993, 45), “the Buddha recommends relinquishing attachment to sensuality, not because sensual pleasures are in any way evil, but because the attachment itself is dangerous: both in terms of the pain experienced when a relished pleasure inevitably ends, and in terms of the detrimental influence such attachment can have on a person’s action — and thus on his or her future condition”.

The object of renunciation is not only the object of craving, what the mind is attached to, but it is also — and especially — craving itself. We have just seen how the definition of *nekkhamma* in the commentaries indicates a condition of emancipation from *kāma*, i.e. from indulging in sense-pleasures. Also, some *suttas*, among them the *Dvedhāvittakkasutta* of Majjhima Nikāya and three *suttas* of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, explicitly equate the

13. *Paṭisoto ti kho bhikkhave nekkhammassetaṃ adhivacanaṃ* (Iti IV.109, PTS 114-115).

14. MA III.214 (PTS IV.197).

cultivation of *nekkhamma* with the abandoning (*pahāna*) of *kāma*.¹⁵ This point is very important: what is meant by sense-pleasure? The *Suttas* list six sense-doors, including the mind. Every door can be either affected by *kāma* or contemplated through *paññā*.¹⁶ In the first case, sense-experience is contaminated by attachment, whilst wise contemplation protects the sense-doors from the threat of attachment. In this perspective, *kāma* is clearly a synonym for *taṇhā*. Liberation is essentially the end of attachment, as we see in the following formula quoted from the *Salāyatanaṣaṃyutta*: “Free from attachment, the monk gains final liberation” (*anupādāno [...] bhikkhu parinibbāyati*).¹⁷ In other words, the most important aspect of renunciation is renunciation itself, the very act of letting go. More than renunciation in a strictly ascetic sense, *nekkhamma* is the realization of the roots of suffering (*dukkha*), a realization followed by the intention of being liberated and finally followed by the very act of letting go of those roots.

If we disregard the implications of wisdom (*paññā*) in this process, the word renunciation could be easily misunderstood. In the Western culture, it often evokes a sense of deprivation, of losing something of worth and/or of losing something enjoyable. This idea is widely confuted by two elements that emerge from an attentive reading of the Nikāyas. The first evidence is given by the several descriptions of the ‘inner’ objects of renunciation: hindrances, defilements and, in short, every form of identification with a separated self. As inner renunciation is far more difficult than external renunciation, the *Suttas* encourage the latter as a practice to understand the first, which is quite subtle to realize.

We can get useful clues from some considerations on *nekkhamma* expressed by a contemporary Buddhist thinker, Ajahn Munindo, a western

15. The three *suttas* of Aṅguttara Nikāya are the *Vitakkasutta*, the *Saññāsutta* and the *Dhātusutta*. The formula slightly changes depending on the content of the *suttas*, i.e. the factor to be cultivated or abandoned (*-vitakka*, *-saññā* and *-dhātu*). So we have three similar formulas: *kāmavitakkassa pahānāya nekkhammavitakko bhāvetabbo — kāmasaññāya pahānāya nekkhammasaññā bhāvetabbā — kāmadhātuyā pahānāya nekkhammadhātu bhāvetabbā* (A VI.109-11, PTS III.446-447). The *Dvedhāvittakkasutta* focuses on the compounds tied with *-vitakka* and draws a simple but clear map, depicting the direction of grasping and the direction of letting go (M I.206-215, PTS I.114-118). In both examples here represented, the process is repeated with the two ‘companions’ of *nekkhamma*, namely *abyāpāda* and *avihiṃsā*, that we will discuss later in order to understand better the meaning of *kāma*.

16. A detailed account on the contemplation of sense-experience is in the *Mahāsalāyatānikasutta* (M 147, M III.428-435, PTS III.287-290). I treated this subject in Giustarini (forthcoming).

17. S IV.118ff. (PTS IV.102ff.).

monk in the Thai forest tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. He effectively stresses the quality of renunciation in the monastic life and, at the same time, describes it as an instrument to discover a deeper form of simplification:

[...] there is tremendous benefit in being able to give up that which is extra — to be able to let go of that which is not necessary and to live a simple life. [...] These things that monks and nuns may give up are not in themselves the real point of renunciation. These outer gestures of renunciation are forms for encouraging an inner letting go (2005, 117-118).

The second interesting element to be considered is the combination of the term *nekkhamma* with terms like *sukha* (happiness, joy), *rata* (delighted), *chanda* (desire, aspiration). We have already mentioned *chanda*, a term that is generally translated as desire but whose real meaning is closer to *saddhā* than to *taṇhā*. Though *chanda*, when compounded with *raga*, *kāma*, etc., means desire in a negative sense, i.e. craving, it often expresses a high aspiration, a desire to be free from defilements. In many cases *chanda* is found in compounds with *nekkhamma*. Several passages of the Canon underline the importance of desiring renunciation. Therefore, *taṇhā*, craving, would not be a free expression of desire, but the repression of a deeper desire for freedom.¹⁸

Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, we could wonder whether there is a matter of unsatisfied desire behind the madness of craving/aversion and the resulting illness (*dukkha*). The occurrence of the term *chanda* in the Pāli Canon seems to give a positive answer. The mind, blind to desire for renunciation and for consequent release, cleaves to a reactive approach that it believes to be the best way to gain happiness. So, desire for sensorial satisfaction (*kāmachanda*) is not wrong in itself, but it is a sort of fog that covers a higher sort of desire (*nekkhammachanda*). As the sensorial world is generally ruled by the power of defilements, it is not trustworthy: trust in the world eventually leads to disappointment (*dukkha*). The energy of trust has to be directed to awakening, to liberation, and this conversion is *saddhā*. By changing the object of trust, the object - and the quality - of desire changes too. Because of *saddhā*, *kāmachanda* becomes *nekkhammachanda*.

18. In the *Kīṭāgirisutta* the word *chanda* is indicated as a step in the gradual process to liberation (M II.183, PTS I.479-480). Here it is found alone, but it is clear that its role is definitely positive. The translation of Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, uses the term 'zeal' (Ñāṇamoli, Bodhi 1995, 583).

This very desire for renunciation leads to a deeper happiness. The clear evidence of this is to be found in the final parts of the following compounds: *nekkhammarata* (A VI.43, PTS III.346; Th 691, PTS 70) *nekkhammasukha* (M II.156, PTS I.454; M III.186, PTS III.110, DhP 272, PTS 39) *nekkhammachandābhirata* (D III.203-217, PTS III.147-159). These compounds indicate that renunciation has in itself a taste of final freedom. Not only that, but the happiness resulting from the intelligent attitude of renunciation in turn leads to a deeper understanding, as seen in the *Dantabhūmisutta*. A preliminary deliberate effort to let go of defilements, taints, fetters etc. is necessary to allow one to contemplate them. Letting go is a purification of the mind from the taints that prevent a clear view. The process of letting go and the process of understanding coincide. Furthermore, *nekkhammachanda* is the best definition of *saddhā* in the Buddhist Nikāyas: faith is desire to let go, to release the holding to the sense-realm.

If there is joy in renunciation, as these compounds seem to demonstrate, *nekkhamma* would mean, using a locution of Ajahn Munindo, “[...] saying ‘no’ to the force of compulsion [...]” (2005, 121). Understanding defilements implies a willingness to abandon them, and this willingness has to be cultivated, because they have a particular force and can easily obstruct the faculty of seeing and contemplating.

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We have previously seen that *nekkhamma* is defined as the abandoning, letting go (*pahāna*) of sense-gratification (*kāma*). The term *pahāna* provides a better understanding of the role of *nekkhamma* in the path to liberation. In comparison with *nekkhamma*, *pahāna* seems to be more a result of the contemplative process than one of its prerequisites. In fact, *pahāna* often follows contemplative formulas and introduces the patterns of *samādhi*. In a typical description of *samādhi* we read: “By the abandoning of them (worries and memories of worldly life, i.e. defilements) the mind becomes internally steady, quiet, unified and recollected” (*tesaṃ pahānā ajjhattam eva cittaṃ santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodī hoti samādhīyati*).¹⁹ In many cases, *pahāna* is the fruit of the practises of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*), especially the

19. See for instance the *Vitakkasaṅṭhānasutta*, where the objects of *pahāna* are unwholesome thoughts (*akusalā vitakkā*) bound up with ignorance, craving and aversion (M 20, I.216-221, PTS I.118-122). In the *Kāyagatāsatisutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya, the same formula represents an excellent example of the role played by letting go in the contemplative process (M 119, III.154-155, PTS III.89-94).

exercise of mindfulness of the body (*kāyagatāsati*). The *Āsavasutta* of the *Satipaṭṭhānasamyutta* connects the cultivation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* with the abandoning of taints (*āsavas*).²⁰ In the *Kāyagatāsativagga* of the Aṅguttara Nikāya the application of mindfulness to the body allows the letting go of ignorance (*avijjā*), of ego-centred thoughts (*asmimāno*), of the fetters (*saṃyojanas*) and the removal (*samugghāta*) of latent tendencies (*anusayas*).²¹ In several texts the contemplation of impermanence is a precursor of abandoning ignorance (*avijjā*). The *Avijjāvagga* of the *Salāyatanasamyutta*, for instance, describes in short the practice of “knowing and seeing” every sense-door, every sense-object, every sense-consciousness, every sense-impingement and the consequent pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations as impermanent. In the first *sutta* of the *Avijjāvagga*, the *Avijjāpahānasutta*, this practice leads to the abandoning of ignorance.²² In the following *suttas*, the same process leads to the letting go of fetters (*saṃyojanas*), poisons (*āsavas*) and latent tendencies (*anusayas*).²³

As *pahāna* seems to be an effect of the contemplative process, *nekkhamma* apparently describes a part or even a prerequisite of that process. In the *Dantabhūmisutta*, as we have said, *nekkhamma*, opposing the power of attachment, is the second factor of the process of liberation. *Nekkhamma* is accompanied by *saṃvara*, that is the resistance to the power of attachment, the ability not to obey attachment’s orders. This control results in ethics (*sīla*), in guarding the sense-doors (*indriyesu guttadvāra*) and in moderation in eating (*bhojane mattaññu*). Only after establishing and reinforcing these qualities it is possible to cultivate the foundations of mindfulness, i.e. the four *satipaṭṭhānas*.

Combined with control (*saṃvara*), renunciation is an antidote to reactivity, creating a space that allows one to observe and eventually defuse the conditioning process (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), i.e. the complex, automatic reactions deeply rooted in the mind. Sensorial gratification (*kāma*) seems to inhibit that observation, triggering a relationship with sense-objects that is based on dependence. Contemplation and consequent liberation

20. S v.416 (PTS v.189-190).

21. A 1.574 (PTS 1.44).

22. *Cakkhuṃ (sotaṃ [...] ghānaṃ [...] jivhaṃ [...] kāyaṃ [...] manaṃ [...] kho bhikkhu aniccato jānato passato avijjā pahīyati vijjā uppajjati. Rūpe aniccato jānato passato avijjā pahīyati vijjā uppajjati. Cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ [...] cakkhusamphassaṃ [...] yampidaṃ cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā tampi aniccato jānato passato avijjā pahīyati vijjā uppajjati* (S 1v.53, PTS 1v.31).

23. S 1v.54-59 (PTS 1v.31-32).

also result from the application of the dyad *nekkhamma-saṃvara* to the ‘*kāma*-companions’, i.e. *byāpāda* and *vihimsa*, as they are two forms of aversive reactivity to unpleasant sense-objects. Therefore, teachings on renunciation should indicate a suggestion to question the commands of the defilements. In other words, a suggestion to contemplate experience the way it is (*yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*) instead of blindly believing in the apparent ultimate happiness promised by the sense-world.

The attitude of renunciation is also suggested in a key-formula of the *satipaṭṭhānas*: “He contemplates the body in the body [...] feelings in feelings [...] the mind in the mind [...] the *dhammas* in the *dhammas* [...] ardent, fully aware and mindful, having abandoned craving and grief for the world” ([...] *kāye kāyānupassī* [...] *vedanāsu vedanānupassī* [...] *citte cittānupassī* [...] *dhammesu dhammānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā-domanassaṃ* [...]).²⁴ This emphasizes the role of renunciation in the very act of contemplating (*-anupassin*) and points to the two actual objects of renunciation: the relation of craving (*abhijjhā*) and grieving (*domanassa*) with the sense-world (*loka*). Furthermore, every single *satipaṭṭhāna* must be practised through the letting go of the whole web of thoughts connected with sense-gratification (*kāma*), as indicated in the formula “but do not think any thought tied with sense-gratification” (*mā ca kāmūpasamhitam vitakkaṃ vitakkesi*).²⁵ It would not be too much to affirm that the compound *abhijjhā-domanassa* is an eloquent synonym of the triad *kāma-byāpāda-vihimsa*.

Anyway, it is quite reductionist to consider *nekkhamma* as merely a prerequisite of the contemplative practice. This term, in fact, is used in the *Salāyatanavibhaṅga* (M 137) to describe a higher level of equanimity (*nekkhammasitā upekkhā*), in opposition to the lower level, represented by ordinary equanimity (*gehasitā upekkhā*).²⁶ Ordinary equanimity is “equanimity based on the household life” (Ñāṇamoli, Bodhi 1995, 1069) and it is unable to transcend sense-experience. On the contrary, equanimity based on renunciation is beyond sense-experience. That means that *nekkhamma* makes all the difference even in the case of an important fruit of contemplative life. Moreover, the compound *nekkhammādhimutta* (A VI.55, PTS III.376) confirms the direct connection between letting go and liberation, just as the compound *saddhāvimutta*, the formula “*ime dhamme*

24. See for instance the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* (D 22, D II.372ff.; PTS II.290ff.).

25. M III.220 (PTS III.136).

26. M III.306-9 (PTS III.217-220). See also S IV.270 (PTS IV.231-232).

evaṃ saddahati adhimuccati” and its comment “*saddhādhimokkhaṃ paṭilabhati*”, mentioned above, describe the relationship between faith and liberation.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF WISDOM
WITH FAITH AND RENUNCIATION

As *saddhā* and *nekkhamma* are the beginning of the path in many *suttas*, so in the exposition of the Noble Eightfold Path they are respectively connected to the first two elements, *sammādiṭṭhi* (right view) and *sammāsaṅkappa* (right intention). These two elements constitute the factors of *paññā* in the Noble Eightfold Path.

Right view is an initial understanding of suffering and its causes.²⁷ Similarly, *saddhā* is the same understanding joined with a confidence in the path transcending suffering. Rupert Gethin notes:

As the positive sequence of dependent arising begins with faith (*śraddhā/saddhā*), so the sequence of the eightfold path begins with right view (*samyag-dṛṣṭi/sammā-diṭṭhi*). Without some initial trust in the fact that there is a way out of suffering, without some seed of understanding of the nature of suffering and its cessation, we would never begin to look for the path and we would have no hope of finding it (Gethin 1998, 166).

According to Payutto, in the relationship between faith and wisdom lies the map of the whole Buddhist soteriology:

The course of training begins with some form of belief, which Buddhism calls faith or confidence (*saddhā*). This confidence may be based on beliefs established due to an initial satisfaction with the teachings, perhaps based on their reasonable nature, or being satisfied that the teacher meets the student’s needs. From here on, there is an increased acceptance of the teachings, and so education progresses to the point that a person sees the true logic of the teachings, which is often called proper under-

27. See for instance the *Sammādiṭṭhisutta* of Majjhima Nikāya (M 9, 1.89-104, PTS 1.46-55) and *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (A 1V.72, PTS 11.76-77). The synthetic exposition of the Eightfold Path in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* clearly describes *sammādiṭṭhi* as intuitive understanding of the Four Noble Truths and *sammāsaṅkappa* as the intention of letting go, of not dwelling in aversion and in harming (D 11.402, PTS 11.311-312).

standing. When this understanding increases and gradually becomes clearer — through actual practice and by comparing the teachings with actual experience — knowledge and insight become more certain. At this point, we can say that wisdom has reached the level of proper knowledge or insight (*sammāñāṇa*), a level beyond mere faith and beyond mere reason or logic (*diṭṭhi*). This is the end of the road, the attainment of meaning — that is, the freedom of final liberation that is called *sammāvimutti* (Payutto 1995, 199).

The analogy of *saddhā* with *paññā* or *vijjā* proves again *saddhā* as a real instrument of understanding rather than a mere ideological creed.²⁸ In the same way, it shows that wisdom is not only an intellective faculty, but it is indeed an intuitive, we could even say devotional attraction toward liberation (*vimutti*).

Just as right view is an intuition of the path leading to freedom, so right intention is the willingness to follow the path. This intention is expressed by three compounds: *nekkhammasaṅkappa*, the intention of letting go, *abyāpādasāṅkappa*, the intention of not dwelling in aversion, corresponding to loving kindness (*mettā*), and *avihiṃsasāṅkappa*, the intention of not harming.²⁹ On the opposite, *micchāsaṅkappa* means dwelling intentionally in sense pleasures (*kāmasāṅkappa*), in aversion (*byāpādasāṅkappa*) and in harming (*vihiṃsasāṅkappa*). The presence of *nekkhamma* together with *abyāpāda* clearly defines *nekkhamma* as completely devoid of aversion. From that, we can draw a conclusion that any possible negative connotation is denied by a negative term, namely *abyāpāda*. The texts seem to consider renunciation very different from ‘rejection’, since rejection is absolutely incompatible with non-aversion. It reminds us of the episode told in the *Asubhasutta*, where the Buddha left for a solitary retreat and, on his return, found many monks had committed suicide after practising the ‘cultivation of impurity’ (*asubhabhāvanā*), a specific tool to understand impermanence (*anicca*) and develop detachment (*virāga*).³⁰ The so-called negative attitudes taught by the Buddha, such as *nekkhamma* and *asubha*, can be easily misinterpreted, and this risk is stressed in the *Suttas*. That is one of the reasons we have to examine the texts always keeping in mind the general contexts and the structures of formulas. In a similar way, when we read

28. Cf. Gethin (2001, 106-116) and Giustarini (2005, 265-268).

29. Cf. for instance the *Mahācattārikasutta* (M 117; M III.137; PTS III.73).

30. S v.985 (PTS v.320-322). See Hamilton (1996, 181-182).

in the *Dantabhāmisutta* that the prince Aggivessana does not understand the teachings because his mind is obscured by *kāma*, we should interpret *kāma* as a reference to all three ‘negative attitudes’, i.e. *kāma*, *byāpāda* and *vihimsa*.

In the *Dukkhasutta* (A VI.75, PTS III.429), the three modes of *sammāsāṅkappa* are said to promote a state of happiness (*sukhaṃ viharati*), and that reasserts the cause-effect relationship between renunciation and joy. There is another interesting conclusion that we can draw from the dynamics of *nekkhamma*, *abyāpāda* and *avihiṃsa*: the fact that these three qualities are to be cultivated (*bhāvetabba*), whilst *kāma*, *byāpāda* and *vihimsa* are to be abandoned, delineates a process that is not only based on, but it is accompanied by *nekkhamma* in all its stages.³¹ In other words, rather than a single, definitive act of renunciation, *nekkhamma* seems to be a practice, a training in the art of releasing the heart-mind (*citta*). In the case just observed, cultivation (*bhāvanā*) and purification (*visuddhi*) are exactly the same process where negative terms (*nekkhamma*) and positive ones (*bhāvetabba*) converge. There is no real paradox in the combination of a negative lexicon with an assertive lexicon. On the contrary, they can balance each other.

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As we have seen, the first two elements of the Noble Eightfold Path are traditionally ascribed to the area of wisdom (*paññā*). The analogy between this dyad of the path and the dyad consisting in *saddhā* and *nekkhamma* seems to indicate the latter as a sort of compass on the path to freedom. Therefore, *saddhā* and *nekkhamma* are together one form of intelligence that discerns between what is wholesome, useful (*kusala*) and what is harmful, dangerous (*akusala*). In the *Dantabhūmisutta* the fact that *saddhā* arises through listening to the Buddhist teachings suggests that it is an intrinsic quality of the mind, a potential virtue that was previously dormant and then becomes awakened by the Buddha’s teachings. Applying this suggestion to the concept of luminous mind (*pabhassaracitta*) mentioned in Aṅguttara Nikāya, we can assume that *saddhā* is a ray of *pabhassaracitta*, that symbolizes the full development of *paññā*.³²

31. Cf. A VI.109-11 (PTS III.446-447), mentioned above. Another interesting example is found in the *Laṭukikopamasutta*, where the joy derived from renunciation (*nekkhamma-sukha*) has to be practised, cultivated, frequently exercised (*āsevitabbaṃ*, *bhāvetabbaṃ*, *bahulikātabbaṃ*, M 66, II.156, PTS I.454).

32. A I.49-52 (PTS I.10), A III.102 (I.253-256), A V.23 (PTS III.16-19). Cf. Harvey (1995,

It is important to notice that not only *nekkhamma* arises out of wisdom, of the capacity to see the way things are, but also that real wisdom is possible only in renunciation. In fact, the clearest evidence of the close relationship between wisdom and renunciation is perhaps to be found in the following formula that occurs only in the *Dantabhūmisutta*: “[...] what is to be known through renunciation, to be seen through renunciation, to be experienced through renunciation, to be realized through renunciation [...]” ([...] *yaṃ taṃ nekkhammena ñātabbaṃ, nekkhammena daṭṭhabbaṃ, nekkhammena pattabbaṃ, nekkhammena sacchikātabbaṃ* [...]).³³ Another interesting example of the cooperation between *saddhā*, *nekkhamma* and *paññā* is explicitly stated in the list of the five faculties (*indriyas*): faith (*saddhā*), energy (*virīya*), mindfulness (*sati*), recollection (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The second element, *virīya*, includes ‘positive’ effort and ‘negative’ effort, i.e. abandoning (*pahāna*): the change of perspective promoted by *saddhā* involves that the energy previously invested in grasping is now directed to a wholesome letting go. In the same way, the energy previously invested in indulging in the field of the six senses is now directed to contemplation. In fact, the next two *indriyas* are *sati* and *samādhi*. With *samādhi*, energy is not dissipated anymore, and such recollection allows the release of wisdom (*paññā*). If we look attentively at the five *indriyas*, we can see that they are consubstantial. Each faculty can not really exist and efficiently operate without the other four. At the beginning, we have ‘wise’ faith and ‘wise’ effort. At the end, we have that wisdom where faith, energy, mindfulness and recollection converge. This is implicitly stated in the *Pubbakoṭṭhakasutta* of the *Indriyasamyutta*, where each *indriya* is said to lead to the deathless, i.e. to liberation.³⁴ It would not be possible if they were merely the separate steps of a gradual process: on the contrary, they have in some way to share the same qualities.

166-179); 1989, 93-100.

33. M 125 (M III.214-217; PTS III.129-131).

34. “The faculty of faith [...] the faculty of energy [...] the faculty of mindfulness [...] the faculty of recollection [...] the faculty of wisdom, cultivated and pursued, leads to the deathless, has deathless as its goal and accomplishment” (*saddhindriyaṃ* [...] *viriyindriyaṃ* [...] *satindriyaṃ* [...] *samādhindriyaṃ* [...] *paññindriyaṃ bhāvitam bahulikatam amatogadham hoti amataparāyanam amatapariyosānam*, S v.514, PTS v.220-222). As mentioned above, this *sutta* is also a clear example of a critical approach to dogmatic beliefs. Here Sariputta affirms that for him the efficacy of *indriyas* is not based merely on belief, not even belief in the Buddha, but it is fully realized through wisdom (*paññā*). The Buddha praises Sariputta for this statement.

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Faith and renunciation are indeed two manifestations of wisdom. Faith is an insight into the truth, a capacity to see the way things are (*yathābhūtam*) and renunciation is the natural consequence of this insight. That means that, because of understanding suffering and its roots, there is a spontaneous willingness to let go of these causes. In a way, faith is the inner side of wisdom, and *nekkhamma* is the apparent side of it. Of course, this consideration would not be possible if we overlook the understanding that in Early Buddhism wisdom is not merely an analytical approach to reality, but is rather a contemplative, intuitive, liberating process. This is a fluid, dynamic process, it does not happen once and for all. *Saddhā*, faith, expresses clearly its dynamics, the inner shift from suffering to the end of suffering. Without an initial clear understanding of *dukkha* and of the four Noble Truths, faith would be only a blind belief, a purposeless wandering in the realm of suffering.

In a sense, everyone has faith, i.e. everyone looks for happiness, everyone is on a path. But without wisdom, without a contemplative approach, this path, this quest, cannot transcend pain, sorrow and despair. On the contrary, wisdom (*paññā*) sheds a light (*saddhā*) on the plain but crucial map of the four Noble Truths. *Saddhā*, in turn, encourages mindfulness and investigation (*sati-sampajañña*), which are the operative instruments of *paññā*. It is a virtuous circle, the wheel of the Dhamma. In the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha synthetically expounds, as a final teaching, the path of faith and mindfulness: he suggests to take refuge in the Dhamma (faith) by practicing the four *satipaṭṭhānas* (mindfulness).³⁵ Here, again, we can draw the conclusion that the actual object of faith, which is contemplative, intuitive wisdom, reveals the actual object of renunciation, i.e. the resistance to cultivate mindfulness and wisdom. *Saddhā*, faith, seems to be the deliberate choice to adopt a contemplative attitude regarding the phenomenal world and *nekkhamma*, consequently, is a wise surrendering to this attitude.

35. D 16 (D II.165, PTS II.100-101).

ABBREVIATIONS

A	<i>Āṅguttara Nikāya</i>
D	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
DA	<i>Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Iti	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
M	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MA	<i>Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i>
S	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
SA	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society

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