

# Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality*: An Assessment

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## ABSTRACT

Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality* has exerted a certain influence on Buddhist Studies, from translations of the Pāli *Nikāyas* to interpretations of doctrine. Far beyond proposing translations for *papañca* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*, the book lays out a thesis, supported and illustrated by frequent citations from the *Nikāyas*, concerning the role of concepts and language itself in perpetuating bondage to *samsāra*. Concepts and language are said to obscure reality in a self-perpetuating cycle that bars us from liberation. The thesis has intuitive force and profound implications for understanding the Pāli sources. However, the presentation is flawed by inconsistencies, lack of clarity, and overly interpretive translations of the Pāli – it is not even clear in important details precisely what Ñāṇananda's intended thesis is. The present offering is an attempt at clarifying this seminal work so as to enable building upon it. The given thesis is elucidated, making its problems explicit, and suggesting resolutions, arriving finally with a proposal of what he may have intended. Along the way, I indicate where given support from the *Nikāyas* is weak.

## Keywords

Pāli *Nikāyas*, Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality*, *papañca*, language

Bhikkhu Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, first published in 1971,<sup>1</sup> has exerted a certain influence on Buddhist Studies. Maurice Walshe, in his translation of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, for example, credits the book with having established the meaning of *papañca* (1987, 587, note 606) and his translation is evidently influenced by Ñāṇananda's interpretations (e.g. at p. 329). Bhikkhu Bodhi acknowledges the influence of this 'penetrative study' (1995, 1203, note 229) in his and Ñāṇamoli's translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. The book has been cited by many others and is frequently mentioned and praised on popular Buddhism websites. The book is subtitled '*An Essay on Papañca and Papañca-Saññā-Saṅkhā*' but is not a sustained treatment of the meaning of these important terms; that argument is completed by page 5. Rather the book is an extended elaboration and defence of a broad thesis within which the given interpretations of these terms play a central role. That thesis is highly suggestive for interpretations of the *Nikāyas*. Yet the presentation is flawed by inconsistencies, lack of clarity, and perhaps overly interpretive translations of the Pāli – it is not even clear in important details what the thesis is. An assessment is needed to enable the rethinking that I believe would allow us to build on this

<sup>1</sup> First published 1971 by the Buddhist Publication Society, author listed as Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda. I here use the more recent (2012) edition published by Dharma Grantha Mudrana as it includes 'a few alterations and corrections of misprints' (2012, vii) otherwise the text is virtually identical. The pagination is similar but not identical. Excluding index and preface, the 2012 edition has 142 pages, the 1971 original 131. Intervening reprints vary.

seminal work. The present offering is an attempt in this direction and my purpose here is limited to elucidating the given thesis, making its problems explicit and suggesting resolutions. Along the way, I indicate where given support from the *Nikāyas* is weak. This is not, however to suggest that the thesis is or isn't inconsistent with the *Nikāyas*, but only to show that greater support is needed. A number of philosophical and linguistic issues are implicitly raised by Ñāṇananda's treatment but he does not explicitly engage with them and it is far beyond the scope of the present article to explore them.

The first chapter, '*Papañca* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*' occupies over four-fifths of the book and presents, develops, and defends the thesis. The remaining four chapters, while of interest in their own right, are more-or-less digressions on the main theme and are not covered here. The chapter is divided into sections whose headings suggest the development of the theme. However, the treatment is rather meandering, with a claim in one place often being clarified and supported in multiple isolated statements scattered throughout the book. This makes it impossible to give a section-by-section critique that does justice to the main ideas.

## The thesis

Simply stated, the thesis of *Concept and Reality* is, as I summarise it:

For the unenlightened individual, sense experience leads to thinking and 'conceptual proliferation' generating 'concepts tinged by the proliferating tendency'; those concepts then return to oppress the individual and to bind him or her to *saṃsāra*, while also feeding into further proliferation generating more concepts and deepening the bondage in a 'vicious circle'.

Central to his argument is the interpretation of *papañca* as 'conceptual proliferation', and of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* as concepts characterized by such proliferation.

The argument is based primarily on a passage from the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*,

*Cakkhuñcāvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānati taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi, taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññā-saṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgata-paccuppannesu cakkhuvīññeyyesu rūpesu. (M I 111–112; cited on p. 3)<sup>2</sup>*

Ñāṇananda (2012, 3) translates:<sup>3</sup>

Visual consciousness, brethren, arises because of eye and material shapes; the meeting of the three is sensory impingement; because of sensory impingement arises feeling; what one feels one perceives; what one perceives, one reasons about; what one reasons about, one turns into '*papañca*' (*papañceti*); what one turns into '*papañca*', due to that '*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*' assail him in regard to material shapes cognisable by the eye belonging to the past, the future and the present.

<sup>2</sup> Pāli passages quoted as they appear in the book. Some vary from the PTS versions, but without change of meaning as far as I can tell. I have also silently corrected a few obvious typographical errors in these citations. Ñāṇananda does not say what version he is using.

<sup>3</sup> In a note on page 2, Ñāṇananda writes that he depends on PTS translations 'to a great extent' but 'may not be able to cite them verbatim always.' The translation of this passage, at least, varies considerably from I.B. Horner's. Translations from the Pāli are those given in *Concept and Reality* unless otherwise noted.

The formula is repeated for each of the other five senses, including the mind. *Papañca*, Ñāṇananda notes, ‘conveys such meanings as “spreading out”, “expansion”, “diffusion”, and “manifoldness”’ (p. 4), and because *papañceti* follows *vitakketi* here, Ñāṇananda takes it to mean ‘consequent prolificity in ideation’, understanding *vitakketi* as initial thought (p. 4). Thought he understands, in turn, as sub-vocal speech (p. 5), reinforcing his claim in that *papañca* can mean ‘verbosity’ in ‘common usage’ (p. 5). The word is often used in this sense in the commentaries, but he does not expand on this suggestive connection. I see little justification for translating *papañceti* with ‘turns into *papañca*’. PED has ‘to have illusions’, ‘to imagine’, ‘to be obsessed’ and Horner, for example translates, ‘what one reasons about obsesses one’. Ñāṇananda’s overall interpretation, in any case, is at least plausible and he may have felt that ‘turns into’ gives force to that interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Given that *vitakka* is typically followed by *vicāra* in the *Nikāyas*, he suggests that *vicāra* has a ‘finer sense of investigation and deliberation’, while *papañca* indicates the tendency of the ‘imagination to break loose and run riot’ (p. 4). He fails to make use of this potentially useful distinction, however, noting only that, ‘what often passes for “*vicāra*” might turn out to be “*papañca*” when viewed from a higher stand-point’ (p. 4).

On the strength of this interpretation, Ñāṇananda interprets *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* as ‘concepts, reckonings, designations or linguistic conventions characterised by the prolific conceptualising tendency of the mind’ (2012, 5), or more briefly and frequently, some variation of ‘concepts tinged with the proliferating tendency’. *Saṅkhā* is defined in PED as ‘1. enumeration, calculation, estimating ... 2. number ... 3. denomination, definition, word, name’. Ñāṇananda only mentions the third: ‘In view of the close relationship between “*papañca*” and the linguistic medium, it appears that, “*saṅkhā*” ... may be rendered by such terms as concept, reckoning, designation or linguistic convention’ (p. 5). The ‘close relationship’, however, is at this point merely plausible, and the proffered translation seems calculated to support his thesis rather than to be derived from textual or linguistic considerations. He does not address the significance of *saññā* in the compound. He is now able to explain the second part of the passage, ‘due to that “*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*” assail him’, as saying that percepts come to be objectified and fixed in words and that these, as concepts proliferated in previous experience, and indeed ‘the whole repertoire of language’, take on an illusory objective stability as a ‘labyrinthine network of concepts’, and that this, ‘tangled maze with its apparent objectivity entices the worldling and ultimately obsesses and overwhelms him’ (pp. 6, 7). *Papañca*, ‘tends to obscure the true state of affairs’ (p. 5) and the sense is that we mistakenly come to believe that reality consists in objective, enduring entities corresponding to the concepts, or even that we mistake the concepts themselves for reality. He does not explicitly say so, however; neither does he mention ‘reality’ here, though on page 30 he writes of being ‘estranged from reality’ and of ‘slipping into unreality’ (see below). The sense of confusing concepts with reality is reinforced much later in the book where, in a critique of pre-Buddhist movements, he writes, ‘With their triple *papañca* they created their own “worlds” and found themselves thrown into them’ (p. 79) and ‘Thus [the Buddha] declared that in the terminology ... of the Noble Ones ... the

<sup>4</sup> Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi’s translation of the passage resembles Ñāṇananda’s and Bodhi acknowledges the influence in Note 229 (1995, 1203). This note includes an interesting discussion of the basic thesis of *Concept and Reality* and on the translations of *papañca* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*. Given that Ñāṇamoli died before *Concept and Reality* was published, the note and probably translation must be attributed to Bodhi.

“world” is indistinguishable from the concept thereof’ (p. 80). Earlier he had written that the, ‘world of concepts’ ‘melts away’ in the meditation of an *Arahant* (p. 58).

The apparent objectivity of concepts, he maintains, is due to ‘certain peculiarities’ of language itself, specifically the stability of vocabulary and grammar necessitated by their public character (p. 6). Though the assertion is perhaps not unreasonable, there is no hint of such an understanding in the *sutta* itself, and Horner’s translation seems more straightforward: ‘What one reasons about obsesses one; what obsesses one is the origin of the number of perceptions and obsessions which assail a man’, evidently taking *saṅkhā* in the sense of ‘number’, *saññā* as ‘perceptions’, and *papañca* as ‘obsessions’.

To the extent that they have engaged with the argument, other scholars would seem to concur with the characterization of Ñāṇananda’s thesis given above, though not always agreeing with the thesis itself. Sue Hamilton understands Ñāṇananda as referring to a proliferation of thoughts and imaginings. She asserts, however, that he fails to recognize the sense of *papañceti* as ‘making manifold’; for her the problem is not an excess of concepts but that ‘in seeing things as manifold one is attributing independent existence to them, and to oneself as perceiver’ (Hamilton 1996, 57). Nyanaponika<sup>5</sup> too understands Ñāṇananda as problematising the proliferation of concepts. He would seem to disagree with Ñāṇananda however, understanding these words in terms of ‘diffuseness’ and ‘differentiation’ and translating the passage, ‘Whatever man conceives (*vitakketi*) that he differentiates (*papañceti*); and what he differentiates, by reason thereof ideas and considerations of differentiation (*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*) arise in him’ (Nyanatiloka 1980, 233). In spite of explicit agreement with Ñāṇananda’s translation of *papañca* on page 141, Steven Collins actually translates *papañceti* as, ‘has (vain) imaginings’ and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* as ‘Imaginings, ideas, and estimations’ (Collins 1982, 141, 285 n. 7). More or less agreeing with Ñāṇananda’s interpretation as presented above, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi translate, ‘What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man’ (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, 230). Evidently there are multiple defensible ways of understanding these terms and of interpreting this passage. Like Ñāṇananda, each of these scholars plugs his or her preferred translation into multiple passages, yielding divergent but plausible readings. None of these scholars, however, has engaged with Ñāṇananda’s argument extensively or in detail.

### Concepts as bonds

Ñāṇananda claims a close association of *papañca* on the one hand with *taṇhā*, *māna*, and *diṭṭhi* on the other, with each said to entail the other. The connection to the present *sutta* is rather strained, but Ñāṇananda cites several commentarial texts asserting the association and even identity of *taṇhā–māna–diṭṭhi* with *papañca* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* (Ñāṇananda 2012, 11–12). Recognizing the mutual entailment between them, he yet reserves a kind of priority for *papañca/papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*: ‘Nevertheless “*papañca*” can be regarded as something fundamental to *taṇhā*, *māna* and *diṭṭhi*’ (p. 12). The message of the *sutta*, he concludes (pp. 12–13), is that,

<sup>5</sup> Given that Nyanatiloka Bhikkhu died in 1957, these comments must have been written by Nyanaponika Bhikkhu, the editor of the 1980 edition of *Pali Buddhist Dictionary*.

If one does not entertain Craving, Conceit and Views (*taṇhā, māna, diṭṭhi*) with regard to the conditioned phenomena involved in the process of cognition, by resorting to the fiction of an ego, one is free from the yoke of proliferating concepts and has thereby eradicated the proclivities to all evil mental states.

This sentence would seem first to give priority to *taṇhā-māna-diṭṭhi*, but to reverse the priority at the end. It seems to mean that 1) proliferating concepts constitute a yoke that leads to evil mental states, 2) *taṇhā-māna-diṭṭhi*, themselves ‘evil mental states’, motivate the proliferation, but also 3) the proliferation motivates those same evil states. He may want to say that that proliferating concepts provide the link through which *taṇhā, māna*, and *diṭṭhi* are reinforced over time, or simply that the two are mutually reinforcing, and that purifying the mind requires (also?) the elimination of conceptual proliferation. In any case, the decisive role of concepts is central to his thesis.

Ñāṇananda carries this to the point of warning against thinking and concepts altogether. Under ‘Path to Non-Proliferation’ he asserts (p. 30),

The consummation of the training in sense restraint, therefore, consists in the ability to refrain from ‘thinking in terms of’ (*maññanā*) the data of sensory experience. The chimerical and elusive nature of sense data is such that as soon as one thinks in terms of them, one is estranged from reality.

Given that the mind is included in the senses, this would seem to indicate refraining from thinking at all. In support of this odd claim, he cites Sn 147, *yena yena hi maññanti, tato taṃ hoti aññathā*, translating as, ‘In whatever egoistic terms they think of an object, *ipso facto* it becomes otherwise’ (p. 30). The ‘egoistic terms’ he associates with *maññanā* would seem to have its justification elsewhere in the passage, but if he means this as an interpretation of *maññanā* itself, he may be problematizing only a particular mode of thinking; however, it seems more consistent with the body of *Concept and Reality* and the preceding statement to suppose that he finds all conceptual thought problematic. He more often translates *maññanā* with ‘imaginings’. In any case, a more direct translation would be, ‘Whatever they think/imagine/conceive, it is otherwise’, and the context is that ‘they’ are thinking about self, not about, or necessarily in terms of, sense experience. Ñāṇananda continues with a discussion of the ‘relentless tyranny of the empirical consciousness’ (p. 30) and the claim that ‘No sooner does one clutch at these [sense] data with “*maññanā*” (imaginings) than they slip into unreality’ (p. 30). He has by now equated *maññanā* with *papañca*, an equation supported by the commentaries. It is unclear whether ‘they’ in this sentence refers to ‘one’, ‘data’, or ‘imaginings’.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that sense experience has now come to share the blame, presumably because in the *Madhupiṇḍika* formula, sense experience leads to *vitakka* and *papañca*.

Ñāṇananda begins the previous section, the ‘Bondage of Concepts’, by quoting the *Vepacitti Sutta* (S IV 202) to the effect that ‘conceptual proliferation’ (translating *papañcita*) is among the bonds of Māra (p. 16). In this *sutta*, *maññita*, *iñjita*, *phandita*, and *mānagata* accompany *papañcita* with the same treatment: ‘I am’ (‘I shall be’ etc.) is said to be ‘imagination’, ‘agitation’, ‘palpitation’, *papañcita*, and ‘conceit’. As such, they are each ‘a disease, ... an abscess, a barb’, to be avoided. Even if *maññita* were translated ‘thinking’ or ‘conceptualization’ this passage does not constitute a claim by the Buddha that concepts in

<sup>6</sup> Ñāṇananda’s English is less than perfect and ‘they’ could well refer to ‘one’.

general bind us to *samsāra*, and ‘agitation’ and ‘palpitation’ seem to point more to momentary attitudes or emotions than to thought. What is explicitly said to be a bond in this *sutta* is *maññamāno*, which could indeed mean conceptual thought, but could also indicate having opinions, taking something *as* something, imagining (PED s.v. *maññamāno*). In any case, it is thoughts/imaginings related to ‘I am’ that are the problem here, not thought or concepts in general. Ñāṇananda draws perhaps the strongest evidence for the need to avoid thinking from the *Sakkapañha Sutta* (D II 277) where the Buddha says that mental states not accompanied by ratiocination (Ñāṇananda’s translation of *avitakka-avicāra*) are superior to those ‘accompanied by ratiocination’ (*savitakka-savicāra*). Though he does not point it out explicitly, this *sutta* would seem to give the most nearly direct support to his definition of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* as concepts in that the practices here given, which include the superiority of non-thinking, prepare one for the path to the cessation of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*, translated here as ‘concepts tinged with the proliferating tendency’ (pp. 24–25). That, however eviscerates his earlier provisional distinction between *papañca* and *vicāra*, given that what here is said to be superior is the absence of *vitakka-vicāra* (*papañca/papañceti* as a single term does not occur in the *sutta*). The connection between thinking and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* is not univocal, however. The practices discussed here are the pursuit of that happiness, unhappiness, and equanimity which results in an increase of *kusalā dhammā*, with the added comment that such happiness and so on accompanied by *avitakka-avicāra* is superior. Other virtuous practices, including restraint of the senses, follow in this *sutta* with no further mention of *vitakka*. The noted superiority of *avitakka-avicāra* may indeed simply be a reference to progressing from the first to the second *jhāna*.

Just prior to the above passage, the Buddha says that *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* is the origin of *vitakka*, which in turn is the origin of *chanda*. Ñāṇananda notes that this reverses the sequence of the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* and suggests a feedback loop in which concepts generated by the proliferating tendency spark more proliferation of concepts in a ‘vicious circle’ producing ever more oppressive concepts (p. 24). This dovetails nicely with the *Madhupiṇḍika* formula in which *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* returns to assail the person who had engaged in *papañcita* – with *vitakka* substituted for *papañca* rather than preceding it. Such self-reinforcing cycles certainly do occur in human psychology and pointing out possible references to them in the Pāli material is a valuable contribution.

### The superstitions of grammar

Language itself is painted as a part of the problem, and in particular the ‘superstitions of the grammatical structure’ (Ñāṇananda 2012, 29). By this he means inflection, the conjugation of verbs and declension of nouns. ‘By establishing a correspondence between the grammar of language and the grammar of nature, [the average person] sets about weaving networks of “*papañca*”’ (p. 50). Through inflection, ‘concepts are invested with the necessary flexibility and set on their tracks to proliferate as *taṇhā*, *māna* and *diṭṭhi* “*papañca*”’ (p. 52). One pursuing *Nibbāna*, on the other hand, ‘endeavours to refrain from egoistic imaginings based on the flexional pattern’ (p. 50). He gives no clue as to why ‘egoistic imaginings’ would be so based, and his statement that inflection is an ‘elementary feature in language’ (p. 50) is mistaken. Sinhala (and Pāli) is more highly inflected than, say, English, and languages like Thai are not inflected at all; yet ‘egoistic imaginings’ seem quite as common across the board. The discussion is based on the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (M I 1) in which the

Buddha runs through ways of thinking about abstract realities (earth, water, fire, wind, etc.) using inflections among other constructions. However, there is no implication that we are forced to think ‘on the earth’ (*paṭhaviyā*), ‘from the earth’ (*paṭhavito*), ‘earth is mine’ (*paṭhaviṃ meti*) (Ñāṇananda’s translations, p. 49) by the inflections. Indeed, *paṭhaviyā* does service for the dative, genitive, instrumental, and ablative as well as locative. The point of the *sutta* seems to be rather that I tend to understand and live in the world mistakenly as *my* world, as my possession, perhaps indeed with the aid of abstractions, intellectual constructs, concepts; but concepts and grammar *per se* are not blamed in this *sutta* for leading me astray.

I certainly do not deny the possibility that grammatical structures influence how we think and even perceive. However, Ñāṇananda has neither demonstrated that the *Nikāyas* suggest such an influence nor has he engaged with the questions of how and to what extent such an influence may operate.

### Resuscitating concepts

The problematisation of concepts and grammar raises two serious difficulties. First, The Buddha himself used concepts and grammar extensively in conveying his teachings. Second, if concepts and grammar *necessarily* mislead, then the argument given here, consisting in concepts and grammar, is misleading. Ñāṇananda, to his considerable credit, explicitly recognizes both difficulties and attempts to address them.

Having declared that concepts are ‘brought about’, ‘crystallized’, ‘fabricated’, ‘agglutinated’ by the *āsavas*, he asserts that, having eliminated them, ‘concepts in the strict sense of the term cannot occur in the emancipated mind ... though [an *Arahant*] may think and speak with the help of worldly concepts’ (pp. 77–78). Apparently attempting to elucidate that sentence, he writes that for the *Arahant* concepts lose their ‘fecundity ... they will never fertilize or proliferate into any kind of rebirth’ (p. 78). Earlier, he has hinted that for the *Arahant*, concepts are outshined, as it were, by wisdom rather than eliminated (p. 60), and explicitly, that ‘all concepts have become transparent to such a degree [that they] have yielded to the radiance of wisdom’ (p. 64). Similarly, he suggests that *Arahants* ‘see *through* concepts’<sup>7</sup> (p. 64; see below for the context of these remarks), and that we ordinary folks too should look ‘*through*’ not ‘*at*’ them (p. 84): We should not take even doctrinal concepts as ultimate categories. This is illustrated very briefly in a footnote (p. 84) citing the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta*,

From a cow comes milk, and from milk curds, and from curds butter ... ghee ... junket; but when it is milk, it is not called curds or butter or ghee or junket. ... Just so Citta, when any one of the three modes of personality (i.e., the gross, the mental and the formless) is going on, it is not called by the names of the others. For these, Citta, are merely names ... And of these a Tathāgata ... makes use indeed, but is not led astray by them. (D I 202)

This passage is evidently a caution against taking verbal distinctions as absolute and I suspect that much could have been made of it in clarifying his position. However, we are left with concepts that, for the *Arahant*, cannot occur in the ‘strict sense’, but are nevertheless lacking in fecundity and are transparent. A distinction between concepts in the ‘strict sense’

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis here and throughout in the original.

and other concepts seems hinted at here, but there is no elucidation of what the distinction might be.

He seems also to recognize that his thesis, taken too literally, demolishes itself:

Hence the dialectician has to realise the fact that he is at the mercy of concepts even in his dialectical attempt to demolish concepts ... A dream may be proved false in the light of waking experience, but all the same, it is relatively true as a *fact* of experience. Similarly, the deluding character of concepts is a fact of experience and must not be ignored on that account. Concepts, for all their vicious potency to delude us, are not to be blamed *per se*, for they are merely objectifications or projections of our own *taṇhā*, *māna* and *diṭṭhi* ... Hence, in the last analysis, concepts have to be tackled at their source. They are not so much to be demolished, as to be comprehended and transcended. (p. 90)<sup>8</sup>

What ‘comprehended and transcended’ may mean is somewhat clarified in other remarks. Much, I think, could have been done with the passing recognition of concepts as facts of experience. In any case, Ven. Nāṇananda’s strategy in addressing the difficulty goes some distance toward allowing for the fact that the Buddha did think and use concepts and may also somewhat clarify what he means by ‘looking through’ concepts. The strategy is to recognize the ‘Relative Validity and Pragmatic Value of Concepts’, the title of the section beginning on page 36. Referring to the well-known parable of the raft, he writes that concepts may have utility in striving to reach the other shore, but that having arrived they must be discarded (pp. 38–40). As the raft is improvised of ‘twigs and branches’, *sammā-diṭṭhi* is ‘improvised out of the medium of language and logic in worldly parlance’ (p. 40). The point is now to avoid clinging dogmatically to concepts, rather than to avoid them altogether. Indeed, he notes later that prematurely rejecting all concepts would be like discarding the raft before having crossed the river (p. 94). Still, having arrived on the other shore even *sammā-diṭṭhi* is to be discarded (p. 38) and he elsewhere cautions that a person may ‘conceive attachment (*rāga*) or delight (*nandi*) for those very concepts which he utilises to attain *Nibbāna*’ (p. 72).

He expands on the theme with the idea that concepts can be used to eliminate concepts: *sammā-diṭṭhi*, ‘embodies the seed of its own transcendence, as its purpose is to purge the mind of all views inclusive of itself’ (p. 41). Earlier, he introduced the metaphor of pegs in support of this claim. Commenting on the *Sakkapañha Sutta* passage cited p.5 above (D II 277) he writes, ‘It is significant that ... “applied and sustained thoughts” (*vitakka vicāra*) conducive to wholesome mental states are utilised to eliminate those conducive to unwholesome mental states’ (p. 26). Concepts, then, have relative value for a ‘carpenter-like operation for the deconceptualisation of the mind, whereby each successive “peg” is being replaced by a sharper one until at last he is able to pull out with ease the sharpest of them all’ (p. 26). The sense of ‘looking through’ concepts would then seem to be that the *Arahant* sees reality as it is, independent of concepts *about it*, while retaining facility in utilizing concepts as indicators directing others to such a vision and as tools for knocking out concepts. This makes sense, leaving aside the claim that concepts ‘cannot occur’ to him. However, it’s quite a stretch to understand the *Sakkapañha Sutta* as proposing the use of thoughts to eliminate thoughts and the *sutta* which he references for the ‘peg’ metaphor,

<sup>8</sup> From ‘Limitations of the Dialectical Approach’. The section however is more a critique of attempts to invalidate all concepts in general than a reflection on the present thesis. The relevance to *Concept and Reality* has already been given in bits and pieces scattered about earlier material.

the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta* (M I 119–122) does not describe a process of ‘deconceptualisation of the mind’. Rather it describes methods of cleansing the mind of *vitakkā chandūpasamhitāpi dosūpasamhitāpi mohūpasamhitāpi* ‘thoughts associated with desire ... aversion ... and confusion’ (tr. Horner), for the sake of achieving the *jhānas*. The techniques involve shifting focus to something that does not give rise to such ‘thoughts’, withdrawing attention from them, scrutinizing their peril, function and form, and outright repression. There is nothing here about using concepts to eliminate concepts, and indeed the *vitakkas* to be eliminated are almost certainly not concepts *per se*, but the fantasies, desires, and the like that arise to disturb the silently meditating monk. Moreover, the Buddha says at the close of the *sutta* that one who has mastered these techniques is able to avoid ‘thoughts’ he does not want and to ‘think’ whatever he pleases, *yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati* (M I 122).

Ultimately, according to Ñāṇananda, concepts are to be overcome (eradicated, seen through, etc.) through wisdom ‘which is immediate and intuitive’ (p. 26). Wisdom can eradicate the ‘illusion of an ego’ (p. 33), melt away the ‘world of concepts’ (p. 58), and ‘outshine’ concepts (p. 58), allowing the *Arahant* to ‘see through’ them (p. 64), making them ‘transparent’ (p. 70). Wisdom is able to complete what the concepts of the *Dhamma* can only begin (pp. 83–84).

### Where earth finds no footing – an application of the thesis

Ñāṇananda puts these ideas to good use in interpreting controversial passages in the *Udāna* and the *Dīgha Nikāya*.

In response to the question ‘Wherein do those four great elements viz. earth, water, fire and air cease altogether?’ the Buddha answers:

Consciousness which is non-manifestative [sic], endless, lustrous on all sides,  
Here it is that earth and water, fire and wind, no footing find ...  
Name and form, all these are here cut off without exceptions [sic],  
When consciousness comes to cease, these are held in check herein. (p. 61; from D I 222–223)

In the *Udāna* in connection with the death of the newly enlightened Bāhiya, the Buddha says,

There, where earth, water, fire, and wind no footing find,  
There are the stars not bright, nor is the sun resplendent,  
No moon shines there, there is no darkness seen.  
And then when he, the Arahant, has in his wisdom seen,  
From well and ill, from form and formless, is he freed. (Ud 1 10; p. 59)

Both passages are easily interpreted as indicating a transcendent *Nibbāna*-realm or ultimate reality, with the *Dīgha* passage possibly identifying it with a pure all-encompassing consciousness. Ñāṇananda disagrees, insisting the *Udāna* utterance is not part of the Buddha’s answer to the monk’s question about Bāhiya’s rebirth and taking issue with Dhammapāla’s understanding that the Buddha is describing *Nibbāna* as a sort of realm where all is light in spite of the absence of a sun or moon (pp. 50–60). He holds that, on the

contrary, in both passages the Buddha is speaking of the mind of the living *Arahant*, where the *concepts* of earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing and in which the light of wisdom outshines the *concepts* of the sun and moon.

This is a promising approach to such passages and I would like to have seen more done with it. Nevertheless, while the approach applies the notion that *Arahants* are in some sense beyond concepts, the interpretations do not constitute an illustration of concepts estranging persons from reality. Nāṇananda's claim is rather that certain words in these utterances may be misconstrued as referring to objective entities rather than to concepts of those entities. That leaves open the possibility that in other utterances the same words, and concepts, may refer to the objective entities themselves.

### Validation of the thesis

Nāṇananda 'validates' the thesis that concepts bind one to *saṃsāra* with reference to *Paṭicca-samupāda*, and in particular, the mutual dependence of *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa* as given in the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (p. 73). These two give rise to and turn back upon each other in a cycle, being as it were the engine driving the whole process. If either ceases, both cease, and the subsequent links must cease as well, thus constituting liberation. This is, I believe, an uncontroversial interpretation of the *sutta*. The connection with concepts, and the validation claimed, is that 'all pathways of *concepts* and *designations* converged on [said cycle], providing sufficient scope for wisdom to work its way through' the 'seething mass' of the *viññāṇa-nāma-rūpa* 'vortex' (p. 75). The relevance of this claimed convergence to the cessation of *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa* is perhaps somewhat clarified two pages later (p. 77):

'Form' (*rūpa*) can secure a basis in consciousness only in collaboration with 'name' (*nāma*) and this is where the concept comes in. Though matter ... cannot be completely transcended so long as one's physical body is there, 'name-and-form' as the concept of matter can be dissolved or melted away through wisdom.

He is saying that eliminating the concept of matter would end the *viññāṇa-nāma-rūpa* cycle, leading directly to liberation. Even if we accept this at face value, however, the critique of concepts in general has not been validated. But it seems passing strange that simply holding or relinquishing a concept of matter would be the key to bondage and liberation, or indeed that the *nāma-rūpa* of *Paṭicca-samupāda* refers specifically to a concept of matter. I suspect that Nāṇananda intended a more general interpretation, say *nāma-rūpa* as concepts of objects of consciousness as a whole (*rūpa* generalized from visual form). He does not, however, make any such possibility explicit.

The claim is that all concepts and designations converge on the vortex, with the implication that they drive the cycle. He supports the claim with a passage from the *Mahānidāna Sutta*:

*Ettāvatā kho Ānanda jāyetha vā jīyetha vā miyetha vā cavetha vā uppajjetha vā, ettāvatā adhivacanapatho, ettāvatā niruttipatho, ettāvatā paññattipatho, ettāvatā paññāvacaram, ettāvatā vaṭṭam vaṭṭati itthattam paññāpanāya, yadidaṃ nāmarūpaṃ saha viññāṇena.* (D II 63)

Translated (p. 75),

In so far only, Ananda, can one be born, or grow old, or die, pass away or reappear, in so far only is there any pathway for verbal expression, in so far only is there any pathway for terminology, in so far only is there any pathway for designations, in so far only is there any sphere of knowledge, in so far only is the round (of *samsaric* life) kept going for there to be any designation of the conditions of this existence.

Walshe's translation is a bit clearer,

Thus far, Ānanda, we can trace birth and decay [etc.], thus far extends the way of designation, of concepts, ... the sphere of understanding, thus far the round goes as far as can be discerned in this life, namely to mind-and-body together with consciousness.

The passage does not say that the cycle is constituted by or depends on concepts and designations, but rather that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* in some sense constitute the range of what *can* be known conceptually. It says that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* demark the limits of conceptual knowledge, not that concepts cause there to be *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa*. Now, I very much suspect that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* can be usefully understood as having some connection to concept formation. However, Ñāṇananda has failed to show that such an understanding is a workable interpretation of the source material and is thus far from exploring the dynamics of such an interpretation.

It is in this context that Ñāṇananda writes that concepts are brought about by the *āsavas* (see above p. 7). The *āsavas* in turn are eliminated through wisdom, such that 'concepts ... cannot occur' (p. 78). This allows him to mention *avijjā* and *saṅkhāra*, the two items preceding *viññāṇa* in the standard formula of *Paṭicca-samupāda*, *avijjā*, being 'leavened, as it were' by the *āsavas*, and the *saṅkhāras* as the 'dynamic manifestations' of the *āsavas* (p. 78). Nowhere does Ñāṇananda note that the *āsavas* include *kāmāsava*, *bhavāsava*, *avijjāsava*, and (sometimes) *diṭṭhāsava*; in any case, the assertion that *āsavas* bring about concepts remains unsupported. We note here that while he has been concerned to give causal priority to concepts over *taṇhā-māna-diṭṭhi*, Ñāṇananda here clearly gives that priority to the *āsavas* in spite of their close resemblance to *taṇhā-māna-diṭṭhi*. However, the *āsavas* are not mentioned outside this single, albeit long, paragraph.

Apparently continuing the attempt to validate his thesis, Ñāṇananda claims that the Buddha, 'declared that in the terminology ... of the Noble Ones ... the "world" is indistinguishable from the concept thereof' (p. 80) followed by several supposedly supporting passages that he accurately summarizes as, 'the world is what our senses present it to us to be' (p. 81), slipping from the sense experience discussed in the *sutta* to the 'concept thereof' (not discussed in the *sutta*) of his claim. I fail to see the relevance to the present argument. Neither that the world is what is presented by the senses nor that it is a conceptual structure entails that concepts bind us to the cycle of rebirth.

In an attempt to show that we wrongly take 'predicability' rather than experience as the ultimate criterion of truth, he cites the *Samyutta Nikāya*:

*Akkheyyasaññino sattā - akkheyyasmi patitṭhitā*  
*akkheyye apariññāya - yogaṃ āyanti maccuno*  
*akkheyyaṅca pariññāya - akkhātāraṃ na maññati*  
*taṃ hi tassa na hotīti - yena naṃ vajju taṃ tassa natthi (S I 11)*

Translated (pp. 81–82) as:

Men, aware alone of what is told by names,  
 Take up their stands on what is expressed.  
 If this, they have not rightly understood,  
 They go their ways under the yoke of Death.  
 He who has understood what is expressed,  
 He fancies not, as to 'one who speaks'.  
 Unto him such things do not occur,  
 And that by which others may know him  
 That, for him, exists not.

Bhikkhu Bodhi more simply, and I think, more accurately translates (2000, 99):

Beings percipient of what can be expressed  
 Become established in what can be expressed.  
 Not fully understanding what can be expressed,  
 They come under the yoke of Death.

But having fully understood what can be expressed,  
 One does not conceive 'one who expresses.'  
 For that does not exist for him  
 By which one could even speak of him.

Ñāṇananda comments, 'Thus the worldling is at the mercy of concepts' (p. 82). Even if we allow that *akhāti* (declares, tells) refers to concepts,<sup>9</sup> the passage says that it is the failure to understand that constitutes bondage, not the concepts themselves. It would have been interesting to have explored the reference of 'understand' (*pariññāya*) here (the expressions themselves, what they refer to, the mode or possibility of expression, etc.). However, Ñāṇananda passes directly into a digression on 'existence' and 'non-existence' as false concepts (p. 83).

We have drifted rather far from the promised validation of the thesis of the bondage of concepts, and it cannot be said that the validation has succeeded.

## Interpretations

In spite of shortcomings in Ñāṇananda's efforts to defend the thesis, it has intuitive force and further attempts to understand it may be in order. In general terms and expanded a bit from what was given earlier we may now characterize the thesis as:

Sense experience leads to thinking and 'conceptual proliferation', generating 'concepts tinged by the proliferating tendency'. Those concepts then return to oppress the individual, while also driving the further proliferation of concepts, drawn also from new sense experiences, in a vicious cycle of bondage. Concepts obscure reality, and together constitute a 'world' detached from reality. Living in that 'world', we are bound by concepts to *saṃsāra*. Liberation thus involves overcoming concepts in some sense. *Taṇhā*, *māna*, and *diṭṭhi* are intimately involved with

<sup>9</sup> But *akkheyya*, as an optative, would mean 'might tell', 'can tell', etc., thus Bodhi's 'can be expressed', or 'expressible', 'expressibility'.

concepts and in maintaining the cycle, though concepts retain priority in some sense. Wisdom has a role in achieving liberation from concepts.

What this means in concrete detail is not so clear. For one thing, overcoming concepts seems variously to mean eradicating them, transcending them, and seeing through them. Indeed ‘concept’, ‘concept tinged by the proliferating tendency’, and ‘reality’ are nowhere defined. No explicit distinction is made between ‘concept’ and ‘tinged concept’ and he tends to treat them as equivalent terms. It is important, at the same time, to keep in mind that Nāṇananda seems to affirm the existence of reality independent of concepts (p. 81); at any rate I shall take it as such here. The problem, then, is not that we take it that there *is* objective reality, but rather that we are ‘estranged’ from reality by our concepts, and that that estrangement is, in some vague way, implicated in our bondage.

He may well be saying that we each build up a conceptual picture of the world, a reification, in his terms ‘crystallization’, of experience, which we continue to reaffirm and add to by recycling and re-affirming the same set of concepts and by generating new concepts reifying new experiences in ways that reinforce the existing conceptual structure. The self-referential nature of that structure would mean that it becomes more and more detached from independent reality,<sup>10</sup> somewhat resembling the ‘epistemic closure’ that haunts political discourse, isolating individual movements in self-affirming worldviews. To the extent that we live in terms of the structure rather than directly in terms of independent reality, we become less and less able to know things as they really are and hence to see the way to liberation. To construct a suggestive example:<sup>11</sup> Suppose that I begin to think that my wife is unduly and unfairly critical of me. Every new criticism, mild or harsh, comes to be understood as undue and unfair, confirming and strengthening the earlier assessment. But I now also begin to perceive criticism where it may or may not be intended. She says, ‘I miss my mother’, and I take that to mean, ‘I’m not happy living with you’. In extremis, I may even come to believe that she is *unconsciously* criticizing me with manifestly innocent or even complementary statements. ‘That’s a lovely painting,’ she says of my latest effort, and she means it *on the surface*. I tell myself, however that she is subconsciously, *really*, saying, ‘You’re no Gauguin. You’re wasting your time and mine. Get a real job.’ That is, I build up an interpretative framework, a ‘world’, built upon the premise that my wife is unduly and unfairly critical – and I understand and respond in those terms; I live in that ‘world’ and am finally wholly incapable of experiencing and understanding her in any other way without threatening the integrity of my world. That is to say, I have become detached from the reality of my wife and our relationship and am thus condemned to repetitive dynamics that I do not comprehend.

Nāṇananda may be suggesting that all unenlightened individuals engage in similar processes. He does not directly say so, however, and the closest he comes to an example is in discussing canonical questions and answers about where the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing. These examples, however, involve no misconstrual of the world; rather they suggest that the reference of certain words may be misunderstood.

<sup>10</sup> By ‘independent reality’ I mean beings and the world ‘as they are’, i.e. distinct from opinions about them, concepts of them, references to them etc. Whether and to what extent ‘reality’ may be truly ‘independent’ of concepts is a metaphysical issue we need not address. Here, ‘independent’ carries only the sense in which, for example, my wife is not my opinion of her, no matter how accurate; I cannot give an anniversary gift to my opinion.

<sup>11</sup> The reader should keep in mind that I am proposing interpretations of Nāṇananda’s thesis rather than putting forward my own.

We are left with the abstract claim that concepts obscure reality, estrange us from it, constitute a kind of bondage, and that they propagate and multiply through proliferation, especially along with new sensory input. Liberation then depends on overcoming concepts and their proliferation. The problem with this is that we *necessarily* live in the world in terms of our understanding of it. Without a structure of understanding, which includes concepts drawn from prior experience situating my wife, myself, our home, and the like, I could not respond to her at all. Moreover that structure must be continually expanded to account for new experiences, for example, if we have a child. Similarly, without a structure of understanding, the Buddha could not have maintained the Sangha with different monks fulfilling different roles. He would have had to reappoint Ānanda over and over again as his attendant – except, lacking the *concept* of attendant, he could not even have made the appointment.<sup>12</sup> In other words, concepts often *refer*, however imperfectly, to some independent reality; they are *about* something.

Ñāṇananda, in fact, readily acknowledges that *Arahants* think and utilize concepts – as indeed does *Concept and Reality*. He softens the critique then to say that *Arahants* ‘see through’ concepts: a possible acknowledgement that concepts may refer to independent realities. Concepts should be ‘transcended’ not ‘demolished’, he finally asserts, contradicting much of what he had previously written. At times he resorts to ‘paradox’ for example, that ‘The sage does not entertain any views [even] when he *preaches* “*sammā diṭṭhi*”’ (p. 41) and ‘the paradoxically detached gaze of the contemplative sage as he *looks through* concepts’ (p. 64). This does nothing to clarify the matter, but highlights Ñāṇananda’s recognition of and inability to resolve the problem.

## Concept and Reality

### Concept

We noted above that concepts *refer* to something (real or imagined, etc.). That reference may take the form, among others, of indicating, revealing, and representing, with the same concept able to refer in multiple ways. Concepts having to do with ‘wind’ may function as abstract *representations* which I use in the design of turbines. While sailing, those same concepts *indicate* forces and reveal impending dynamics, orienting me to the actual wind to which I must respond in certain (at least partly pre-conceptualized) ways to avoid capsizing.

It is easy to see that abstract representations may come to *misrepresent* independent realities and one way to make sense of Ñāṇananda’s conflicting attitude toward concepts is to suppose that he wants to say that liberation requires overcoming the estrangement effected by confusing abstract representations for the independent realities to which they may refer. Such confusion would include *uncritical* attachment to concepts as accurately representing reality and responding to events *as if* there were no distance between event and conceptualization of it. This uncritical attachment and *as if* response could be conceived as instances of *taṇhā*, *māna*, and/or *diṭṭhi*, driving also the generation/elaboration of new concepts so as to reify events exclusively in terms of prior reifications – we desire (*taṇhā*) to

<sup>12</sup> The role attendant is an independent reality in that the possibility of someone filling such a role is independent of, in this case, the Buddha’s assigning it to Ānanda.

support prior opinion (*diṭṭhi*) and make self-supporting judgements (*māna*)<sup>13</sup> accordingly.<sup>14</sup> What he calls ‘seeing through’ and ‘transcending’ concepts might then mean encountering reality directly, not without concepts, however, but in terms of, perhaps even guided by, them, but with those concepts always open to correction. That would mean allowing the concepts to indicate and reveal, orienting me toward the reality in such a way that the concept is refreshed, as it were, by the reality, as my concepts of wind dynamics are refined by the act of sailing. In the illustration above, then, the problem is that my characterization of my wife as hypercritical is not open to correction and that I fail to allow myself to be oriented towards and to encounter the actual person. Still, while Ñāṇananda sometimes writes of *attachment* to concepts as a problem, he repeatedly insists that *concepts themselves* are the problem, interposed with arguments of the relative validity of certain concepts that are nevertheless ultimately to be eradicated. On the other hand, again, *Arahants* think and have concepts and concepts are to be seen through and transcended rather than eradicated.

One possible, if only partial, resolution of these contradictions might be derived from the notion of ‘concepts tinged by the proliferating tendency’. That formulation implies that there might be concepts that are not so tinged, and thus, perhaps, that only the tinged concepts are to be eradicated. What does Ñāṇananda mean by this notion? He fails even to define ‘concept’, so we insert here a rough and ready definition<sup>15</sup> as ‘idea’, ‘constituent of thought’; concepts are, if you will, building blocks of thought, units of understanding and interpretation. As such, they are inert, powerless to initiate any kind of ‘proliferation’. A man may have the *concept* of his wife as hypercritical without actually believing that she is. I have the *concepts* of a flat earth and of differential calculus, but of themselves these concepts go nowhere and do nothing; the motive to ridicule or defend the one or to pursue the other comes from elsewhere. If I take time and energy to argue with someone about global warming it is not because I hold the concept (we both *have* the concept) or even that I believe it to be true. It is rather because I believe that it matters, out of concern for our common future, or perhaps only out of a desire to belittle the other and boost my own ego. If I work out the implications of calculus I do so motivated by a love of mathematics – the formulas do not work themselves out. Concepts, on this definition, motivate nothing. Given this, what Ñāṇananda means by a tinged concept, given its motive power, its ‘proliferating tendency’, would have to be one that is combined or associated with something non-conceptual. For example, ‘hypercritical wife’ may *for me* be linked to my own insecurities, say as a defence against taking criticism seriously. More generally, we act, sometimes fatefully, in terms of our interpretation of the world, within the ‘world’ of our concepts; in doing so, we come to have a *stake* in that ‘world’, in those concepts. Opening those concepts to correction and encounter with independent reality then risks the discovery that I may have acted wrongly, perhaps horribly so. The ‘stake’ here provides or motivates the ‘proliferating tendency’ to continually reaffirm that world. Said differently, I live in the world of my interpretations, necessarily understood, at least in part, in terms of and guided by

<sup>13</sup> Loose translation. *Māna*, usually translated ‘conceit’, has to do with measuring as well as pride (s.v. PED). One of its canonical meanings is judging oneself to be better, equal, or lesser than others (Vibh 389–390). The word is also associated with conceiving and imagining. See interesting discussion at Ñāṇamoli 1964, 102, note 18.

<sup>14</sup> Multiple permutations of *taṇha*, *māna*, and *diṭṭhi* are, of course, possible; we need not think of any one as prior.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. ‘Concepts’.

concepts derived from prior experience. To open my concepts too much to correction, especially through direct encounter, is to risk the loss of *my* world, and since this is the world in which *I* live and have my being, it is also to risk the loss of *myself*.<sup>16</sup> This coheres with Nāṇananda's characterization of one's 'recoil' from the possibility that his 'conceptual superstructures regarding the world' might be displaced by 'a void where concepts are no more' (p. 81). That is, the possibility that reality is void of the concepts that constitute or define the world in which I live. The 'tinge', then would be *taṇhā-māna-dīṭṭhi* (or perhaps the *āsavas*) with the associated attitudes of *me* and *mine*. Eliminating/seeing through/transcending concepts would then equate, at least in part, to allowing oneself to be oriented by concepts towards the regions of reality to which they refer in a disclosive way that leaves the concepts open to correction; that in turn would involve weakening and finally eliminating the motive forces that they are 'tinged' with, *taṇhā*, *māna*, and *dīṭṭhi*. Such open concepts we might for convenience term 'transparent concepts' in contradistinction to 'tinged concepts', recalling that the qualifiers have more to do with how the concepts are used than with the concepts per se. That the problem is the tinge rather than the concept itself may be hinted at briefly in presenting the *āsavas* as a fermenting agent that brings about, agglutinates, crystallizes concepts (p. 78); he seems here almost to be describing an infection of which concepts are to be cleansed.

Though he says nothing about being open to correction and to the possibility of being referred to reality by concepts, I suggest that Nāṇananda had something of the sort in mind by 'transparent' concepts<sup>17</sup> and that if he had made the distinction explicit he may have affirmed that it is the 'tinge', not the concept, that is to be eradicated. If he understands *maññanā* as thinking in egoistic terms, a possibility noted above, that would lend some support to our suggestion here. However, he did not make the distinction explicit and thus alternates confusedly between these (at least) two notions, making any interpretation of his meaning only tentative.

He does clearly distinguish wisdom on the one hand from concepts, conceptual thought, and sense experience on the other. Wisdom would seem to refer to a direct apprehension of reality, as opposed to the estrangement from it associated with concepts. When we ask, however, whether or not wisdom is non-conceptual we run into all the problems we have been discussing: obviously wisdom would eschew tinged concepts, but it might well, it seems, employ transparent ones (e.g. in understanding the three characteristics, the Four Truths/Realities, etc.). Moreover, wisdom may well have some relation to being open to correction. For example an *Arahant* in all his or her wisdom may well hold false concepts of geography beyond India, but would hold those concepts open for correction. Again, however, any interpretation of Nāṇananda's meaning to this level of detail must remain tentative.

## Reality

In the 'Introduction' to the Revised Edition Nāṇananda writes, 'It must be emphasized that this work does not subscribe to the dichotomy between concept and reality as envisaged by modern philosophers' (2012, vii). Yet the work as a whole seems to posit just such a

<sup>16</sup> Again, I am proposing a framework within which the given thesis may be understood, not making psychological or metaphysical claims.

<sup>17</sup> C.f. page 64: 'For the Arahant, however, all concepts have become transparent.' Of course we cannot be sure what he means by 'transparent' here.

dichotomy, or even a trichotomy: the *subject* is estranged from *reality* by *concepts*. To claim that concepts estrange the subject from reality implies that concepts are *not* reality, thus that there is a dichotomy between them. The following sentence, ‘The Buddha’s Middle Path steers clear of such extreme notions in its recognition of the Relative Validity and the Pragmatic Value of concepts’, would seem to presuppose the denied dichotomy. Perhaps he simply means that the subject need not *absolutely* reject concepts in favour of reality, or that concepts are not *necessarily* antithetical to reality.<sup>18</sup> This, together with the condemnation late in the book of those ‘wiseacres’ who would demolish all concepts (p. 89) would seem calculated to caution the reader that much of the body of the work is only an approximation of what he really means.

But what does he mean by ‘reality’? His concept would seem to include at least what we meant above by ‘independent reality’, but the term is nowhere defined and rarely occurs. Often the word is used in a way that would seem to mean the ‘existence of entities’ for example, on page 32, it is said that the ‘reality’ of an agent behind sense experience is typically taken as a ‘fact’. One of a very few indications clearly relevant to the title, though the word isn’t used, is, ‘The tangled maze [of concepts] with its apparent objectivity entices the worldling’ (p. 7). Reality, perhaps, would be that from which one is enticed. The only statements that use the word in a way that is clearly that of the title are: ‘The chimerical and elusive nature of sense data is such that as soon as one thinks in terms of them, one is estranged from reality’ (p. 30) and ‘No sooner does one clutch at these [sense] data with “*maññanā*” (imaginings) than they slip into unreality’ (p. 30). Reality would then be that from which thinking in terms of sense data estranges one, thus probably not ‘sense data’ or the world revealed by them. Indeed, when he writes, ‘the world is what our senses present it to us to be’ (p. 81), he evidently does not mean reality, continuing that one might rather ‘transcend empirical consciousness and see objectively by *paññā*’ that the world is ‘void’ of concepts (p. 81), presumably meaning see ‘reality’. He also writes that *papañca* obscures the ‘true state of affairs’ and perhaps by ‘reality’ he intends something along the line of ‘the way things really are’ rather than ‘existing entities’. That could mean the ordinary objective world reported by the senses – only not *as* reported by them. In that case, and recalling the distinction between tinged and transparent concepts, we might say that he does not subscribe to a concept–reality dichotomy in the sense that he claims no necessary conflict between the way things really are and transparent concepts (but would reality then be void only of tinged concepts?). I suspect that he intends something of the sort but he gives no concrete indication how we might access this ‘reality’. ‘Experience is the ultimate criterion of truth’, he writes (p. 81, cf. 21), but what kind of experience is possible, having rejected empirical and conceptual experience as *papañca*? The suggestion of “*stopping-short*”, at the level of sense-data without being led astray by them’, such that one ‘no longer thinks in terms of them’, and transcends the ‘superstitions’ of grammar (p. 29) would seem a descent into naive phenomenalism and a return to a blanket rejection of concepts, thus reinstating the dichotomy. Knowing ‘objectively by *paññā*’ and the like remain empty abstractions. ‘Reality’ remains undefined.

## Conclusions

<sup>18</sup> Knowing which philosophers he is disagreeing with would help to clarify the meaning.

We have arrived at a plausible, if necessarily tentative, understanding of what Ñāṇananda intended as the thesis of *Concept and Reality*. Briefly:

Concepts as such and in general have a prominent role in obscuring and barring encounters with reality, and they function in a self-reinforcing cycle of proliferating misunderstanding and bondage to *samsāra*. That role and the cycle are driven by the ‘tinge’ of *taṇhā-māna-ditṭhi*; if that tinge is eradicated concepts may become disclosive and self-corrective, ‘transparent’ rather than obscuring and hindering.

Ñāṇananda’s translations of *papañca* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* are not accepted by all scholars (see p. 4 above) and I have shown that neither can the overall theses be accepted uncritically. Nevertheless, I believe that the thesis has some basis in lived human reality and that it provides a promising direction for understanding the *Nikāyas*. The task now would be to ask how well the thesis as understood coheres with the *Nikāyas* and the Theravāda tradition. That would require first rounding out the thesis with a detailed definition of ‘concept’ including its referential functions and an adequate indication of what is meant by ‘reality’. Whether or not the rounded out thesis could be construed as directly *implied* by the *Nikāyas*, it may yet be *consistent* with them and the question asked whether the thesis makes sense of otherwise difficult passages in a mutually coherent way. That in turn could lead to adjustments in a hermeneutical dialectic in which interpretations of the material show themselves as ‘flawed’ (e.g. contradictory), leading to alterations in the framework and ‘better’ (e.g. more coherent) interpretations.

I have taken it for the sake of exposition that Ñāṇananda assumes the existence of what I have called independent reality. He might mean rather that concepts deceive us into believing in an independent reality that does not, in fact, exist. That, however leaves us wondering what the *Arahant* ‘sees’ through transparent concepts. I leave it to others to pursue that possibility.

Much of the problem here may derive from an evident lack of philosophical sophistication and possibly a lack of facility with the English language. As expressed, I suggest that the thesis is excessively cognitive. At one point, for example, he defines the *ditṭhi* characterizing all non-enlightened beings as, ‘dogmatic adherence to the concept of an ego as a theoretical formulation’ (p. 11). I very much doubt that very many non-enlightened beings harbour such an adherence; certainly the *Nikāyas* say nothing of the sort. Such statements give the impression that Ñāṇananda believes that enlightenment is a purely intellectual operation. I doubt that he actually believes so. Yet both living reflection and the *Nikāyas* suggest something resembling Ñāṇananda’s ‘vicious cycle’, and bringing the thesis down to a more fundamental level of human existence than the concepts that we think (or simply constructing possible concrete examples from ordinary life) may yield a more coherent understanding. It is possible that Ñāṇananda himself was reaching for something more fundamental, but did not find the means of expressing it.

## Abbreviations

References are to Pali Text Society editions

D *Dīgha Nikāya*

M	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
PED	Pali Text Society <i>Pali-English Dictionary</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>

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