

Niyāma: The Buddhist Laws of Nature¹

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1. Introduction

Niyāma, one of the doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, is comprehensively explained in the commentaries literatures. The explanations are different from what is shown in the Pāli canon, the primary source. This indicates the influence of the commentators that could not be neglected. A detailed explanations of these, is significant to study in terms of competency to classify the teachings of Buddha.

Nevertheless, this article aims to demonstrate the evidences both presence in the primary source:- Tipiṭaka and the secondary source:- the commentaries that is to survey the doctrines of “Laws of Nature” by starting with the exploration in the Pāli canon.

2. Niyāma in Tipiṭaka

In the Pāli canon the form “niyāma” is often used interchangeably with the form “niyama”. It has the more causative sense of “inevitability” or “certainty”.² However, there are two canonical uses of niyāma:

The Paccayasutta

Firstly, the Buddha uses niyāma to describe the inevitable working of dependent arising, as appeared in Paccaya Sutta:

*katamo ca bhikkhave, paṭiccasamuppādo. jātipaccayā bhikkhave jarāmaṇaṃ
uppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ tithāva sā dhātu
dhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā idapaccayatā³*

*Whether there is an arising of Tathāgatas or no arising of Tathāgatas, that
element still persists, the stableness of the Dhamma, the fixed course of the
Dhamma (dhamma-niyāmatā), specific conditionality.⁴*

¹ Sanu Mahatthanadull, Ph.D., “Niyāma: The Buddhist Law of Nature”, Selected Works in Buddhist Scriptures, Teaching Document, (IBSC: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014) (Mimeographed).

² Margaret Cone, *A Dictionary of Pali*, vol II, (Bristol: Pali Text Society, 2010), p. 599.

³ S.II. 25.

⁴ S.II. 25.

It can be said that the Buddha simply uses *niyāma* to describe the intrinsic nature of things. The nature of which the fixed course of the Dhamma.

The Uppādāyasutta

Secondly, *niyāma* in another context is appeared in the form of “causal law of nature” same as in the first context, but differs in content. In the Uppādāyasutta, the Exalted One said the three characteristics:⁵

*uppādā vā bhikkhave tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ t̥hitāva sā dhātu dhammat̥hitatā dhammaniyāmatā sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā'ti . . . sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā'ti . . . sabbe dhammā anattā'ti*⁶

Monks, whether there be an appearance or non-appearance of Tathāgata, this causal law of nature⁷, this orderly fixing of things⁸ prevails, namely, All phenomena are impermanent.

About this a Tathāgata is fully enlightened, he fully understands it. So enlightened and understanding he declares, teaches and makes it plain. He shows it forth, he opens it up, explains and makes it clear: this fact that all phenomena are impermanent.

Monks, whether there be an appearance or non-appearance of Tathāgata, this causal law of nature, this orderly fixing of things prevails, namely, All phenomena are misery (Dukkhā).

About this a Tathāgata is fully enlightened. . .

Monks, whether there be an appearance or non-appearance of Tathāgata, this causal law of nature , this orderly fixing of things prevails, namely, All phenomena are not the self (Anattā).

*About this a Tathāgata is fully enlightened. . .*⁹

⁵ The three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) or the Common Characteristics (*sāmañña-lakkhaṇa*) are *Aniccata*-impermanence; *Dukkhatā*-state of suffering; *Anattatā*-soullessness or not self.

⁶ A.I.285.

⁷ *Dhātu-dhammat̥hitatā* = *sabhāva-t̥hitatā*. Comy. Cf. Pts. Of Contr. 387, “that which, as cause, establishes elements as effects.” – look in footnote no.3, **The Book of the Gradual Sayings**, Vol.I (Ones, Twos, Threes), Tr. F.L. Woodward, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2000), p.264.

⁸ *Dhamma-niyāmatā*, “that which, as cause, invariably fixes things in our minds, as effects,” Cf.S.ii, 25 (K.S.ii, 21), where a further term is added, *idappaccayatā*, “the relation of this to that.” - look in footnote no.4, **The Book of the Gradual Sayings**, Vol.I (Ones, Twos, Threes), Tr. F.L. Woodward, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2000), p.264.

⁹ A.I.285.

From the above sutta, the three characteristics are the causal law of nature or the orderly fixing of things that existed before the world and the universe. Howsoever niyāma in this context means dhamma-niyāma which indicated the intrinsic nature of things in three entities as impermanent, misery and not the self.

From the preliminary study, the concept of niyāma which appeared in Tipiṭaka, niyāma expresses the element of the stableness of the Dhamma, the causal law of nature, and the orderly fixing of things. Therewith, the presences of niyāma are in two distinguish contexts; (1) the dependent origination in the Paccayasutta; and (2) the three characteristics in the Uppādāyasutta respectively. Without the classification, niyāma in this context stands for Dhamma-niyāma.

3. Commentarial Works on the Fivefold Niyāmas

From the Buddhist standpoint, everything in this world functions under such natural laws. Commentaries categorize niyāma into five distinctive kinds. The first four laws are essentially included in the fifth or dhammic law. The dhammic law can be analytically both conditional and non-conditional: the former is subject to change and cannot be controlled. Despite both conditional and non-conditional laws are non-self.

Let us now examine the commentarial works upon which these interpretations of the niyāmas depend. The fivefold niyāmas is discussed in two main Pāli commentaries, namely; the Sumaṅgalavilāsinī and The Aṭṭhasālinī.

The Sumaṅgalavilāsinī and The Aṭṭhasālinī¹⁰

In The Sumaṅgalavilāsinī and the Aṭṭhasālinī, the commentary attributed to Buddhaghosa on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the first book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka stated about the fivefold order of the cosmos:- Germinal, Caloric, Moral, Natural-phenomenal, Psychical:

Bīja-niyāma:

Of these, the Germinal order [reveals] a giving of this and that similar modes of fruition to this or that seed, as in the gram's top shoots sprouting to the north, the southern creeper growing round a tree from the right, the sunflower's facing the sun, the Māluva creeper growing towards a tree, the holes occurring in the top of the coconut.¹¹

Utu-niyāma:

The Caloric order is the simultaneous blossoming, fructifying and sprouting of such and such trees at such and such seasons.¹²

¹⁰ Buddhaghosa, **The Expositor (Atthasālinī)**, Vol. II., tr. Maung Tin, (London: The Oxford University Press, 1921), pp. 360-362., see also in the Sumaṅgalavilāsinī (Dīghanikāya Aṭṭhakathā), DA.II.432.

¹¹ DhsA.272.

¹² DhsA.272.

Kamma-niyāma:

*Thrice-conditioned kamma gives thrice-conditioned, twice-conditioned, unconditioned result; twice-conditioned kamma gives twice-conditioned, unconditioned result, not thrice-conditioned result – this giving of suitable results by various kmmas is the Moral Order.*¹³

Dhamma-niyāma:

*Bodhisats taking conception, being born of a mother, their final enlightenment, as Tathāgata turning the wheel of Dhamma, the surrender of life and uter passing away:- the world-earthquake at each is of the Dhamma-Order.*¹⁴

Citta-niyāma:

*And when an object strikes the sentient organism there is no doer or instigator to say, “Be thou adverting,” etc. From the time the object strikes the sentient organism; each according to its own nature adverting by the five doors agitates the life-continuum, visual cognition accomplishes the function of receiving, the resultant mind-cognition-element that of examining, the inoperative mind-cognition-element that of determining, apperception enjoys the taste of the object:- all this is understood as the Psychical Order.*¹⁵

Among the numerical scriptures of commentarial works, the most concise discussion was found in *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, in a discussion of the meaning of *dhammatā* in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*.¹⁶ And a similar discussion is also found in the *Aṭṭhasālinī*, in the context of a discussion of the *abhidhamma* theory of perception.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that there appear to be only a couple more references to the five-fold *niyāma* in the entire Pāli commentarial literature.

In these texts the fivefold *niyama* was introduced into commentarial discussions not to illustrate that the universe was intrinsically ethical but as a list that demonstrated the universal scope of *paṭicca-samuppāda*. The original purpose of expounding fivefold *niyama* was neither to promote or to demote the law of karma, but to show the scope of natural law as an alternative to the claims of theism.

4. Conclusion

In the *Tiṭṭhaka*, it is evidence that the Lord Buddha intrinsically propounded *Niyāma* as meaningful as the law of nature. Despite the commentaries divided *niyāma*, the natural laws, into five kinds; (1) **Utu-niyāma** (physical laws): laws concerning human beings' external environment, e.g., laws governing temperature, weather and seasons. (2) **Bija-niyāma** (genetic laws): laws concerning reproduction, including heredity. (3) **Citta-niyāma** (psychic laws): laws concerning mental activities. (4) **Kamma-niyāma** (karmic laws): laws concerning intention and human behaviour, i.e., the law of actions

¹³ DhsA.274.

¹⁴ DhsA.274.

¹⁵ DhsA.274.

¹⁶ DA. II.432.

¹⁷ And much the same discussion is put in verse in the *Abhidhammāvatāra*, a summary of *abhidhamma* by *Buddhaghosa*'s contemporary, *Buddhadatta*, *Abhidh-av.* 54.

(kamma) and their results. **(5) Dhamma-niyāma**: general laws of nature, especially those of cause and effect; laws concerning the interrelationship of all things.

The historical expositions of the doctrine of niyāma, that can be traced either in the Pāli canon or commentaries are all dissimilar. Thus if the Buddhists are able to recognize the source of these differences with the intelligence. The teachings of the Buddha would not be misguided.

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