

Psychological Analysis of Language in Theravāda Tradition

**Nāgānanda International
Journal of Humanities &
Social Sciences**

Vol: II , No. 1, 2021, pp. 17-29

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Abstract

Buddhism has mainly been propagated throughout the world over two thousand five hundred years by verbal communication. So, it includes a wealth of information regarding the nature of language and its usage which can be considered as a contribution to the existing knowledge of communication in the modern world. Our attention has mainly been focused on the psychological analysis of language with reference to the development of the abhidhammic concept of paññatti, the Theravada conception of expression. The main sources consulted for this study belong to the Pali traditional grammar and some important points mentioned in the early Buddhist sources have been explained in order to elucidate the background of the evolution of the concept of paññatti. Psychological basis of expression, hearing and comprehension has been clarified with reference to the abhidhammic analysis of paññatti in Theravada tradition.

Keywords: *Psychology, Theravada tradition, language, abhidhammic*

Received : 01 July 2021

Revised : 01 August 2021

Accepted : 03 November 2021

Published : 01 December 2021

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sumanapala Galmangoda.
Psychological Analysis of
Language in Theravada Tradition.
Nāgānanda International Journal
of Humanities and Social
Science.1:2, Pp. 17-29

Introduction

The theory of language in Theravada Buddhism has not been adequately dealt with in connection with the concept of *paññatti* in modern researches. Further, the information available in the vast literature of Pali grammar has not been taken into consideration in the modern research works related to Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, this article introduces a new research area for the future studies in the field of Buddhist communication.

Result and Discussion

Communication occupies an important position in the modern world. It has contributed much for the well-being of people all over the world. But it should be mentioned that it also has influenced the origin of a number of problems in the context of modern society. So, we think that the theory of modern communication should be revived in the context of the ancient knowledge and experience of verbal communication in order to make it more profitable to the modern society. The insights revealed in this article regarding the psychological basis of verbal communication will make a positive contribution towards the revival of the modern understanding of the theory of communication.

Paññatti : Grammatical Analysis

Buddha's teachings have been recorded in several languages and *Pāli* is the medium of the canon of the *Theravāda* tradition. It is a historical fact that the *Pāli* canon has come down to us through an oral tradition extending over several centuries.¹ It was developed into a written form by the first century B.C.² in Sri Lanka. After the Buddha's demise, his disciples understood the importance of the clarity of the medium in regard to the communication of his doctrines. As a result they showed a keen interest in compiling grammar books for the *Pāli* language. Unlike the other languages, *Pāli* has mostly been employed only for the elucidation of Buddha's teachings and to record the history of the order. Therefore, even the grammatical analyses of *Pāli* are mostly influenced by the doctrines of the Buddha. The necessity of writing grammar books has always been emphasised, quoting a passage from the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, which expresses the importance of clarity of sounds and meanings for the progress of the *dhamma*.³

Moreover, almost all the grammatical treatises written in *Pāli* explain their objective as providing a grammar suitable for the Buddha's words (*jinavacana*).⁴ By the term "*jinavacana*" they meant the *Pāli* canon which comprises the teachings of *Sutta*, *Vinaya* and *abhidhamma*.⁵

The traditional grammar books explain the principles of the *Pāli* language through the following:

- i. *Sutta*
- ii. *Vutti*
- iii. *Udāharaṇa*

The term *Sutta* means a very short statement of a principle of grammar which is made mainly for easy remembrance. Detailed explanation of the *Sutta* is called *Vutti*. By the third (*Udāharaṇa*) they give examples which prove the principle and also the relevant exceptions.

All the grammar books explain the alphabet as the first topic⁶ and the *Kaccāyana* which is considered to be the oldest, lays down a principle of characters by following sutta : “*Attho akkharasaññāto*”⁷

This *sutta* is considered to be delivered by the Buddha himself. There is an ancient story recorded in the grammar books which supplies the background for its delivering. Two monks *brahmin* clan called ‘*Yama*’ and ‘*Uppala*’ were practicing meditation near a river bank belonging to repeating the words ‘*khayavaya*’ (vanishing). One of them, seeing a crane catching a fish became confused and started reciting *udakabaka*, (crane in the water,) instead of ‘*khayavaya*’. The other one seeing a piece of cloth on a pot, started to recite words ‘*ghaṭapata*’, “cloth on a pot.” The Buddha seeing their confusion of the relationship between words and meanings, through his divine eye, made them understand the principle that ‘the meaning should be reflected through the characters’ (*attho-akkharasaññāto*). Having heard this principle, they rid themselves of their confusion, understanding the close connection among the words and meanings. On this basis, Ven. *Kaccāyana*, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, composed the *Kaccāyana* grammar starting with the *sutta-attho akkharasaññāto*.⁸

Another fact that the grammarians emphasize is the necessity of the knowledge of *Pāli* for the realization of *nibbāna*. Because of the knowledge of the characters one can understand the canon as well as its commentaries.⁹ Through this knowledge one fulfils the practise of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* (morality, concentration, and wisdom) which are the three main steps of the Buddhist path of deliverance. By this way the knowledge of language causes the three levels of attainments of the Order namely:

- i. *pariyatti* - learning the sacred texts
- ii. *paṭipatti* - the practice and
- iii. *paṭivedha* - realization of *nibbāna*.

The meanings, both mundane and supra-mundane, are expressed and understood through the characters or sounds which combine together in the form of words and sentences. If the nature of characters such as aspirated and non-aspirated is changed the meaning varies-e.g. *satta*-being, *sattha*-weapon. Therefore, the skillfulness in the letters is essential in understanding the Buddha’s word.¹⁰ The one who is not well versed in grammar will also not be clever in the doctrine (*dhamma* and *vinaya*). As a result, he will be unable to follow the path correctly and will be subjected to suffering in existences again and again.¹¹ It should be remembered here that the attainment of *catuṣṭāṅgī* (four analytic insights) also has a close relationship with language and grammar. One of the conditions relevant to attainment of the four insights is to have a knowledge of hundred languages or dialects. Among the four *paṭisambhidās* (*attha*, *dhamma*, *nirutti*, *paṭibhāna*) *nirutti* is closely connected with the knowledge of grammar.¹² This fact is emphasised even by the grammarians.¹³

Because of the above reasons the Buddhist scholars have paid special attention to the following areas of language and have composed a number of books elucidating them throughout the history of the Order:

- i. writing
- ii. expression
- iii. hearing and
- iv. comprehension.

As pointed out by Ven. Buddhadatta,¹⁴ the number of *Pāli* grammars written in Sri Lanka and Burma exceeds fifty-three. Counted with their ancillary works written up to the fifteenth century, their number is more than two thousand.

Paññatti and Pāli Grammar

Most of the *Pāli* traditional grammars treat *paññatti* as an important and essential topic for their explanations of sounds and meanings.¹⁵ Here it is worthwhile to look at the reasons which caused their emphasis on *paññatti*.

According to traditional explanations *paññatti* entails Philological and psychological analysis of sounds and meanings of language. Even in a descriptive grammar, a prominent place is given to the sounds and meanings as they represent the two main divisions of a given language. Therefore, the grammarians who composed philological treatises depending on a Buddhist background, naturally tend to analyse *paññatti* as a preface for their discussion.

In the *Pāli* traditional grammar *paññatti* is always connected with the concept of '*liṅgatha*'. As a technical term '*liṅgatha*' means the fundamental meaning of a noun. More correctly, it is the meaning of a noun before its declension in the noun-cases such as accusative and dative. The fundamental meaning of a noun is expressed through the nominative case. In the other cases its meaning is changed to some extent. Following examples of the noun '*nara*' will clarify the fact:

Nominative	- <i>naro</i> – <i>the man</i> – <i>narā</i> - <i>the men</i>
Dative	- <i>narassa</i> – <i>to the man</i> – <i>narānaṃ</i> - <i>to the men</i>
Ablative	- <i>naramhā</i> - <i>from the man</i> – <i>narehi</i> – <i>from the men</i>

The fundamental unit of a given noun (*liṅga*) could be explained as a meaningful noun which is free from case endings, prefixes, suffixes etc. This is taken as the basis of the nouns before their declension in the cases.¹⁶ e.g. *purisa*, *mālā*, *citta*.¹⁷ The meanings of these fundamental units of the nouns (*liṅga*) are called '*liṅgatha*'.

'*Liṅgatha*' is also called '*upādāpaññatti*'. According to *Abhidhamma*, *paññatti* is divided into two main groups.

- i. ***atthapaññatti*** - conceptual and real meanings
- ii. ***nāmapaññatti*** - sounds, words, sentences.

Of them ‘*atthapaññatti*’ is called ‘*upādāpaññatti*’ because the nouns are always based on meanings. Thus the following are synonymous as far as their usage in the *paññatti* is concerned in comparison with the grammatical analysis of ‘*liṅgattha*’. *Liṅgattha* = *atthapaññatti*, *upādāpaññatti*, *tajjāpaññatti*, *paññāpiyattā paññatti*, *vacanīya*.

The two kinds of meanings, conceptual and real belong to the *upādāpaññatti* or *liṅgattha*. *ghaṭa*-pot, *paṭa*-cloth etc. are called conceptual meanings and *kakkhala* *lakkhāṇā paṭhavidhātu*- hardness of the element of earth etc. which are the characteristics of real *dhammas* are called real meanings.¹⁸ In other words, *liṅgattha* is two-fold as follows:

- i. *sammuti-attha* or *vohārattha*-conceptual or conventional meanings
- ii. *paramattha-attha*- meanings of the real *dhammas*.

The objects of our senses which appear as wholes are really the various combinations of fundamental elements of existence. Depending upon these various appearances the concepts such as *ghaṭa*-pot, *paṭa*-cloth, *ratha*-chariot are constructed in our minds. These are called *sammuti-attha* or *vohārattha*. The hardness of earth element (*pathavidhātu*), Viscosity of water element (*āpodhātu*), clarity of fire element (*tejodhātu*), inflation of air element (*vāyodhātu*) etc. which are the characteristics of *dhammas* symbolised by the respective words are called *paramattha-attha*.¹⁹

A grammatical analysis of a language should consist of the explanations of expression, writing, hearing and comprehension. In this case articulation of sound and its physical and psychological basis should also be explained. In traditional grammars we find the descriptions relating to the origin of sounds and psychological background for their origination. On the other hand in such a grammar the psychological process and the task of comprehending in relation to the hearing of sounds should also be explained. In these analyses the grammarians seem to follow closely the *abhidhammic* explanations of *paññatti*. As the theory of *paññatti* is related to the two kinds of meanings (conventional and real), the grammarians also pay their attention to the two levels of truth (*sammutisacca* and *paramatthasacca*).

Now it is clear that the *abhidhammic* theory of *paññatti* is closely related to the *Pāli* traditional grammar.

Sounds and meanings

The foregoing discussion justifies that the grammatical explanations of sounds and meanings should be introduced as a grammatical analysis of *paññatti*.

In the traditional grammar, the terms *vaṇṇa*, *akkhara* and *sadda* are used as synonyms for sounds. In the *abhidhammic* analysis of *paññatti*, the terms *nāmapaññatti*, *vācaka*, *abhidhāna* and *paññāpanato paññatti* have been used for sounds. It is the opinion of the grammarians as well as the ancient Buddhist scholars that the meanings conveyed through the sounds are five-fold:

1. *saṅkhāra* - all things produced by causes and conditions
2. *vikāra* - deformity
3. *lakkhaṇa* - characteristics
4. *nibbana* - extinction of defilements
5. *pañatti* - concepts²⁰

The units of sound which express the meanings related to the above five areas are called ‘*akkhara*’ (letters). When these *akkharas* are shown in written forms, various symbols are used. In the *Pāli* language there are forty-one *akkharas*.²¹ These are called *akkhara* because of several reasons:

1. Everything becomes extinct by use again and again. But the *akkharas* never become extinct though they have been used thousands of times to express meanings. Etymologically the term *akkhara* is defined as *na-kharanti* do not vanish.²²
2. Unlike nouns *akkharas* have no synonyms. Because of this reason *akkharas* possess a kind of uniqueness. They do not move or represent other *akkharas*. For example the noun ‘*nara*’ is represented by ‘*manussa*’. But the letter ‘*a*’ cannot be represented by any other letter. Thus the definition ‘*na kharanti na calanti*’ is given to the term ‘*akkhara*’.²³
3. Buddhism emphasizes the impermanence of every thing that exists.²⁴ If so, the *akkharas* cannot be explained as eternal or not vanishing. It is interesting that the grammarians explain the term *akkhara* as “not vanishing” (*na kharanti*) in a manner which is related to the *abhidhammic* philosophy. It is directly connected with the *abhidhammic* theory of *dhamma*.²⁵

The characteristics of arising and vanishing are applicable only to the *dhammas* which are conditioned by causes²⁶ Their limits, phases etc. are not accepted as real *dhammas*.²⁷ The common characteristics (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*) and own nature (*sabhāvalakkhaṇa*-hardness of *paṭhavindhātu* etc.) can be applied only to the real *dhammas*. It was pointed out that *akkhara* comes under the category of *pañatti*. *Pañattis* are not real *dhammas* according to the theory of *dhamma*. As the *akkharas* are not really conditioned *dhammas*, the characteristics, such as impermanence are not applicable to them.²⁸

To justify this, the grammarians quote the following statement of the Buddha:

Nāmagottaṃ na jīrati’ (name and clan do not disappear).²⁹ Thus the traditional grammarians hold the opinion that the *akkharas* are so called because they do not perish. Grammatical analysis of *akkhara* does not end here. The whole process of their origination under five headings (*thāna, karaṇa, payatana, suti, kāla*-place, instrumentality, attempt, hearing and time) and the divisions such as aspirated, no-aspirated are discussed in detail.³⁰

Now it is worthwhile to direct our discussion towards the analysis of meaning and its relationship with sounds. It was said that ‘*attha*’ means the two kinds of meaning (conventional and real) comprehended through the sounds. Categories of meanings such as *ghaṭṭa*, *paṭṭa* which depend on conventional usages are called *sammuti-attha*, and five aggregates (*rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra*, *viññāṇa*) and *nibbāna*³¹ belong to *paramattha-attha*³² Some grammarians classify the meanings into three groups as follows:

i. *lokiya-attha* : meanings which are mundane

The *dhammas* (phenomena) with defilements related to the three spheres (*kāma*-sensual, *rupa*-form, and *arupa*-formless) belong to this category. They have many divisions such as *khandha*-aggregates, *āyatana*-bases, *dhātu*-elements³³

ii. *lokuttara-attha* : meanings which are supra-mundane

To this belong the following *dhammas* which are free from defilements: Four paths (*sotāpatti*, *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi*, *arahatta*) and their results and *nibbāna*.

iii. *voḥāra-attha* - conventional meanings.

The conventional meanings are those which represent the various combinations, phases and limits of the real *dhammas*.³⁴ A single meaning may represent several nouns. eg. The meaning ‘king of gods’ is expressed by the nouns. *sakka*, *purindada*, *devarāja*, *vajirapāṇi*, *sujampati*, *sahassakkha*, *mahinda*, *vajirāvudha*.³⁵ Due to various reasons a particular meaning is conveyed through many nouns. Hence the definition of the term *Paññatti* fits in well to the above explanation.

‘*Paññatti* is so called because it makes the hearer’s mind pleasant in various ways and conveys meanings to improve his intelligence.’³⁶

The next problem the grammarians tried to solve is whether the meaning is conveyed through a single letter (sound) or a collection of letters. As the words comprise of several letters in many cases, no one can say that meaning is conveyed through a single letter. If so, the other letters in that particular word become redundant. On the other hand we do not experience the meanings coming out of each and every letter separately. Thus the saying “the meaning is conveyed through single letters’ becomes invalid. Again we notice that the letters disappear one by one when the words are spoken. Letters do not exist as a whole at the same time. So we cannot say that the meaning is conveyed through a collection of letters. And it is also not valid to say that the meaning is conveyed through any other way, either.³⁷ This is the problem that the grammarians had to solve in regard to sounds and meanings and in solving it they sought help in the *abhidhammic* analysis of *paññatti*. It is interesting, before we go to the solution, to have a look at the simile given by the grammarians to clarify the above problem.

- i. Though the spokes, rims, shafts etc. do not make the task of moving, when those parts are put together as a wheel they are capable of moving. Likewise though the individual letters do not convey the meaning, a combination is capable of conveying it.
- ii. The above solution is not acceptable as it is against the theory that “if a single unit of something is incapable of producing a particular result, a collection of them also would not be able to produce it. A single unit of sand as well as a collection of them do not produce oil.’
- iii. On one hand the first solution can be considered as valid. According to the Buddha’s teachings the causes are capable of producing the relevant results when the real conditions are present. A cause which does not produce a result owing to the lack of other relevant conditions cannot be considered as a non-cause because it is capable of producing that result when the required conditions are present. Likewise, a letter which has no meaning without the other letters cannot be considered as meaningless. For example, one is not counted as an unskillful person owing to the fact that one is unable to bear a litter which should be borne by a number of people. He is really unskillful if he is unable to bear it when the others are present.
- iv. This third argument is also not acceptable because in the case of a litter all the people are present at the same time but in the case of hearing, the sounds or letters disappear one by one when they are heard. When we hear the letter ‘*ṇa*’ of the term ‘*vaṇṇa*’ the former letter ‘*va*’ has disappeared.³⁸
- v. Now it is clear that the problem of sound and meanings has become more complex. In order to solve this, ne traditional grammarians have adopted the theory of *paññatti*. When a fire-brand is rotated it seems like a circle of fire though in reality there is none. After the arising of thousands of thoughts in relation to the appearances and disappearances of the fire-brand there arises a thought taking together all shapes of the fire-brand as its object and then the fire-brand appears as a circle. The reason for this is the speedy appearances and disappearances of the consciousness.³⁹

The sounds are called ‘*nāma*’ (nam-to bend) because of two reasons :

- i. the nouns seem to bend towards the meanings
- ii. the meaning seems to bend towards the nouns.

The grammarians are of the opinion that only the former one is applicable to the Buddha’s teachings because the meanings are more important than the nouns as far as the Buddhist philosophy is concerned.⁴⁰

Expression and Hearing

Expression:

Articulating sounds through the vocal organs and the related psychological process has been explained by the grammarians depending solely on such *abhidhammic* explanations.

There arises a thought of expression in the mind of the person who thinks to express something. At the same time, that thought causes the arising of the collection of eight material elements (*pathavi, āpo, tejo, vāyo, vaṇṇa, gandha, rasu, ojā*, elements of extension, cohesion, heat, motion, colours odour, taste and nutriment)⁴¹ in one of the six places of the origination of sounds (*kaṇṭha*-throat *tālu*-palate, *muddha*-cerebrum, *danta*-teeth, *oṭṭha*-lips, *nāsikā*-nose). Again as a result of the former experience or *karma*, there the very same collection of eight material elements in some place. Then owing to the motion arises of the element of *vavo*) the two elements of earth (*paṭhavi*) produced psychologically and karmatically, strike together. Because this striking, sounds are produced in one of the six places of origination of sounds. The sounds are named according to the places of their origination as *kaṅṅhaja, tāluja* etc.⁴²

The above process of articulating sounds can be explained under six steps as follows:

- i. thinking
- ii. physical reaction to the psychological action
- iii. physical reaction caused by the former experience or *karma*
- iv. motion (*vāyu*-air)
- v. striking (*paṭhavi*-solidity)
- vi. origination of sounds

The above six steps clearly show that the *Theravāda* conception of the origination of vocal sounds which is founded on a psychological basis.

It is a clear fact that the articulation is preceded by a thinking process. The arising of eight material elements can be regarded as a stimulation of the place of articulation caused by thinking. According to *abhidhamma* there arise seven thoughts (mental concomitants-*cetasika*) with each and every consciousness.⁴³ The first one of them is *phassa* (contact) It means the contact between senses and their respective objects. This is a very subtle process unlike the striking two material things. It is compared to an arising of saliva when we see the others eating sour fruits.⁴⁴

Stimulation of the places of articulation caused by thinking can also be considered as a similar process. The material elements produced by kamma or former experience are nothing but the same places of articulation of the body. According to *abhidhamma* one of the main causes for the origin of physical body is *kamma* or former experience.⁴⁵

Thus we can understand the difference of two sets of the same material elements caused by thinking and *kamma*. In the process of articulation motion connects with the air-element. The air-stream that comes from lungs is pressed through the mouth and the nose in order to express sounds and the grammarians explain this as motion connected with the air-element. The next step *phassa* or contact is also caused by the air-element. In articulation, three places of the tongue (*jivhagga*, *jivhopagga*, *jivhāmajjha*-the end, near the end and the middle of the tongue)⁴⁶ are pressed to the places of articulation. These are called *karaṇaṭṭhāna*.⁴⁷ When the *karaṇa-ṭṭhānas* are pressed to the places of articulation the air-stream goes through them and as a result sounds are produced. The grammarians explain the above process as the task of motion by air-element and the task of contact by the earth-element. Now we can decide that grammarians have tried to explain the process of expression or articulation on a theoretical and scientific basis.

Hearing:

As in the case of expression, the details of the process of hearing in the grammar are compatible with those of the *abbidhamma*. The following quotation will prove the fact:

“In the mind of the person who hears a word like ‘*vaṇṇa*’ (letter), there arise two *javanas* (apperceptions) as present and past regarding each sound of that word. Then arises one *javana* regarding the whole collection of sounds. After this there arises another *javana* regarding *namapaññatti* (nominal concept) or the noun. Thus the *namapaññatti* becomes clear only after the *javana*-process to which the whole set of sounds becomes the object. After this meaning is understood.”⁴⁸ In order to understand the above quotation we should pay our attention to some other facts explained in the *abhidhamma*. The sound (*sadda*) which is the object of the ear is a real phenomenon (*dhamma*).⁴⁹ Noun or *namapanñatti* belongs to the category of concepts and therefore it is not a real *dhamma*.

As in the collection of many threads there arises the concept of cloth in our minds, in the same way numerous *namapatinattis* are produced in our minds depending on various combinations of sounds.⁵⁰ Thus the nouns in reality are mental productions and they are *paññattis*. When the *paññatti* becomes an object of mind-door (*manodvīra*),⁵¹ after several thought moments there arise seven *javanas*.⁵²

The aboveprocess of hearing can also be explained under several steps

- i. hearing of sounds
- ii. assimilation of the memories of sounds past and present in the mind and their identification
- iii. understanding of the words which are the various combinations of sounds
- iv. understanding the relationship among the words and meanings.

In the process of hearing the first task is to identify the sounds. Depending on the former experience the present sounds are understood. Next to it there occurs the

understanding of various combinations of sounds or words (*vacana*). The final result of this process of hearing is to understand the meanings related to those words. Thus it is clear that the words as well as their meanings which we understand through communication are merely mental productions and they are not real. Hence the *ābhidhammikas* grouped them (*paññatti* or concepts) under two headings:

- i. *nāmapaññatti* - concepts related with sounds
- iii. *atthapaññatti* - concepts related with meanings.

Sounds are mental productions based on the space and air in our bodies.⁵³ According to *Theravāda* tradition sound is not a divine and unperishable element as is accepted in the Hindu tradition.⁵⁴

As a whole what the *Theravādins* try to say is that the process of hearing, expression and comprehension is a natural process caused by mental and physical reactions. We conceptualize meanings depending on various combinations of sounds as we guess the existence of fire depending on smoke.⁵⁵

End Notes:

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6. *Kaccāyana, Māharūpasiddhi, Bālāvatāra, Moggallāyana, Saddanīti*
7. *Kaccāyanavannanā*, p. 8.
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11. *Moggallāyanapañcīkā*, ed. D. Dharmananda, p. 4.
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17. *Saddanīti*, p. 563.

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20. *Saddanīti*, p. 532.
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27. *Abhidharmārthasaṅgrahasannaya*, ed. Pannamolitissa, p. 158.
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29. *Rupaṃ jīratī maccānaṃ - nāmagottam na jīratī*
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33. Karunadasa, Y., *ibid*.
34. *Mahārūpasiddhī*, pp. 13,14.
35. *Saddanīti*, p. 342.
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38. *ibid*.
39. *ibid*, *Mukhamattadīpanī (Kaccāyanaṭṭhā)*, pp. 11,12.
40. *Buddhippasādanī*, p. 8
41. Cpd., pp. 154-157.
42. *Buddhippasādanī*, p. 16, *Saddanīti*, p. 1.
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44. ABHVT., p. 27.
45. Cpd., p. 165.
46. *Mahārūpasiddhī*, p. 2.
47. *ibid*.
48. *Buddhippasādanī*, p. 15
49. Cpd., pp. 198-201.
50. op. cit. introduction, pp. 3-6.

51. *ibid*, pp. 198-201.
52. *ibid*.
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