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Abhidhamma Studies

BUDDHIST EXPLORATIONS
OF CONSCIOUSNESS & TIME

Venerable Nyanaponika Thera
Edited and Introduced by Bhikkhu Bodhi

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Editor's Introduction

In his preface to this book Nyanaponika Thera explains that these studies originated while he was engaged in translating into German the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and the *Atthasālinī*, respectively the first book of the Pāli Abhidhamma Piṭaka and its authorized commentary. He translated these works during the trying years of World War II, while residing in the British civilian internment camp at Dehra Dun, in north India (1941–46). Unfortunately, these two translations, made with such keen understanding and appreciation of their subject, remain unpublished. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* appeared only in a very limited cyclostyle edition (Hamburg, 1950), long unavailable. The *Atthasālinī* has been in preparation for the press since the mid-1980s, but it is still uncertain whether it will ever see the light of day.

The investigations stimulated by this translation work, however, have enjoyed a happier fate. Soon after returning to Sri Lanka following the war, Ven. Nyanaponika recorded his reflections on the Abhidhamma in a set of four essays, which became the first version of this book, entitled *Abhidhamma Studies: Researches in Buddhist Psychology*. The manuscript must have been completed by 15 March 1947, the date of the preface, and was published in a series called Island Hermitage Publications (Frewin & Co. Ltd., Colombo, 1949). This imprint emanated from the Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa, a monastic settlement chiefly for Western Buddhist monks founded in 1911 by Ven. Nyanaponika's teacher, Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahāthera (1878–1957). Ven. Nyanatiloka, also from Germany, was the first Theravāda bhikkhu from continental Europe in modern times. Ordained in Burma in 1903, he soon established himself as an authority on the Abhidhamma, and it was from him that Ven. Nyanaponika acquired his deep respect for this abstruse branch of Buddhist learning.

While Island Hermitage Publications came to an early end, its animating spirit was reincarnated in the Buddhist Publication

Society (BPS), which Ven. Nyanaponika established in Kandy in 1958 together with two lay friends. Accordingly, in 1965 a second edition of *Abhidhamma Studies* appeared, published by the BPS. This edition had been stylistically polished (incorporating suggestions written into a copy of the first edition by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli) and included a new first chapter that served to explain the high esteem in which the Theravāda tradition holds the Abhidhamma. A third edition, issued in 1976, contained only minor corrections. For the present edition I have merely reformulated a few awkward sentences in the third edition, reorganized the notes, provided additional references, and supplied a bibliography. The subtitle has also been changed to convey a clearer idea of the book's contents.

Although these essays are largely intelligible on their own and can be read with profit even by those unacquainted with the Abhidhamma texts themselves, they will naturally be most rewarding if they are read with some awareness of the doctrinal and scriptural matrix from which they have emerged. While an introduction like this is certainly not the place for a thorough historical and doctrinal survey of the Abhidhamma, in what follows I will attempt to provide the reader with the information needed to place Ven. Nyanaponika's studies in their wider context. First I will briefly present an overview of the Abhidhamma literature on which he draws; then I will discuss the principal strains of Abhidhamma thought that underlie the essays; and finally, in the light of this background, I will highlight some of the ideas that Ven. Nyanaponika is attempting to convey in this book.

Before proceeding further I must emphasize at the outset that Ven. Nyanaponika's essays are not historical in orientation, and are thus very different in character from the well-known Abhidhamma studies of Erich Frauwallner, which attempt to trace the historical evolution of the Abhidhamma.¹ While he does make a few remarks on the historical authenticity of the Abhidhamma, for the most part he simply accepts the canonical Abhidhamma as a given point of departure and adopts toward this material an approach that is thoroughly philosophical and psychological. Though his focus is very narrow, namely, the first wholesome state of consciousness in

the Consciousness chapter of the *Dhammasaṅgāṇī*, his treatment of this subject branches out into broader issues concerning the Abhidhamma analysis of mind and the bearings this has on the Buddhist spiritual life. The essays do not merely repeat the time-honored fundamentals of the Abhidhamma philosophy, but strike out in a direction that is innovative and boldly exploratory. Despite their strong rootedness in an ancient, minutely analytical corpus of knowledge, they venture into territory virtually untouched by the great Abhidhamma commentators of the past, raising questions and throwing out hypotheses with a depth of insight that is often exhilarating. It is this boldness of intuition, coupled with careful reflection and a capacity for mature judgment, that makes this little book a contemporary gem worthy of a place among the perennial classics of Abhidhamma literature.

THE ABHIDHAMMA LITERATURE

The Abhidhamma is a comprehensive, systematic treatment of the Buddha's teachings that came to prominence in the Buddhist community during the first three centuries after the Master's death. The development of Abhidhamma spanned the broad spectrum of the early Buddhist schools, though the particular tracks that it followed in the course of its evolution differed markedly from one school to another. As each system of Abhidhamma assumed its individual contours, often in opposition to its rivals, the respective school responsible for it added a compilation of Abhidhamma treatises to its collection of authorized texts. In this way the original two canonical collections of the Buddha's Word—the Sutta and Vinaya Piṭakas—came to be augmented by a third collection, the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, thus giving us the familiar Tipiṭaka or "Three Baskets of the Doctrine."

There is some evidence, from the reports of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, that most of the old Indian Buddhist schools, if not all, had their own Abhidhamma Piṭakas. However, with the wholesale destruction of Buddhism in India in the twelfth century, all but three canonical Abhidhammas perished with hardly a trace.

The three exceptions are (1) the Theravāda version, in seven books, recorded in Pāli; (2) the Sarvāstivāda version, also in seven books but completely different from those of the Theravāda; and (3) a work called the *Śāriputra-abhidharma-śāstra*, probably belonging to the Dharmaguptaka school.² The Pāli Abhidhamma had survived because, long before Buddhism disappeared in India, it had been safely transplanted to Sri Lanka; the other two, because they had been brought to China and translated from Sanskrit into Chinese. Though the schools that nurtured these last two Abhidhamma systems vanished long ago, a late exposition of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidhamma system, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, continues to be studied among Tibetan Buddhists and in the Far East. In the Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, the Abhidhamma has always been a subject of vital interest, both among monks and educated lay Buddhists, and forms an essential component in any program of higher Buddhist studies. This is especially the case in Myanmar, which since the fifteenth century has been the heartland of Abhidhamma study in the Theravāda Buddhist world.

The seven treatises of the Pāli Abhidhamma Piṭaka are the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, the *Vibhaṅga*, the *Dhātukathā*, the *Puggalapaññatti*, the *Kathāvatthu*, the *Yamaka*, and the *Paṭṭhāna*. The distinctive features of the Abhidhamma methodology are not equally evident in all these works. In particular, the *Puggalapaññatti* is a detailed typology of persons that is heavily dependent on the Sutta Piṭaka, especially the Aṅguttara Nikāya; the *Kathāvatthu*, a polemical work offering a critical examination of doctrinal views that the Theravādin theorists considered deviations from the true version of the Dhamma. These two works do not exemplify the salient features of the Abhidhamma and may have been included in this Piṭaka merely as a matter of convenience. What is probably the most archaic core of Abhidhamma material—detailed definitions of the basic categories taken from the suttas, such as the aggregates, sense bases, and elements—is preserved in the *Vibhaṅga*. But the two works that best exemplify the mature version of the canonical Abhidhamma system are the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and the *Paṭṭhāna*. As Ven. Nyanaponika repeatedly points out, these two books are complementary and must be viewed

together to obtain an adequate picture of the Abhidhamma methodology as a whole. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* emphasizes the analytical approach, its most notable achievement being the reduction of the complex panorama of experience to distinct mental and material phenomena, which are minutely defined and shown in their various combinations and classifications. The *Paṭṭhāna* advances a synthetic approach to the factors enumerated in the first book. It delineates the conditional relations that hold between the diverse mental and material phenomena disclosed by analysis, binding them together into a dynamic and tightly interwoven whole.

Each of the books of the Abhidhamma has its authorized commentary. Since the commentaries on the last five books are combined into one volume, there are three Abhidhamma commentaries: the *Atthasālinī* (on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*); the *Sammoha-vinodanī* (on the *Vibhaṅga*); and the *Pañcappakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā* (on the other five books). These commentaries are the work of Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the most eminent of the Pāli commentators. Buddhaghosa was an Indian Buddhist monk who came to Sri Lanka in the fifth century C.E. to study the old Sinhalese commentaries (no longer extant) that had been preserved at the Mahāvihāra, the Great Monastery, the seat of Theravāda orthodoxy in Anuradhapura. On the basis of these old commentaries, written in a style of Sinhala that by then may have already been antiquated, he composed new commentaries in the internationally recognized Theravāda language, now known as Pāli. These commentaries, refined in expression and doctrinally coherent, are not original creative works expressing Buddhaghosa's own ideas, but edited and synoptic versions of the old commentaries, which had probably accumulated over several centuries and recorded the diverse opinions of the early generations of doctrinal specialists up to about the second century C.E. If we had direct access to these commentaries we would no doubt be able to trace the gradual evolution of the system of exegesis that finally became crystallized in the works of Buddhaghosa. Unfortunately, however, these old commentaries did not survive the ravages of time.

The Abhidhamma commentaries of Buddhaghosa do considerably more than explicate the difficult terms and statements of the

canonical Abhidhamma texts. In the course of explication they introduce in full measure the reflections, discussions, judgments, and determinations of the ancient masters of the doctrine, which Buddhaghosa must have found in the old commentaries available to him. Thus, out of the beams and rafters of the canonical Abhidhamma, the commentaries construct a comprehensive and philosophically viable edifice that can be used for several purposes: the investigation of experience in the practice of insight meditation; the interpretation of the canonical Abhidhamma; and the interpretation of the other two Piṭakas, the Suttanta and the Vinaya, whose exegesis, at an advanced level, is guided by the principles of the Abhidhamma. Ācariya Buddhaghosa's masterpiece, the *Visuddhimagga*, is in effect a work of "applied Abhidhamma," and chapters 14–17 constitute a concise compendium of Abhidhamma theory as a preparation for insight meditation.

Following the age of the commentaries, Pāli Abhidhamma literature expanded by still another layer with the composition of the *ṭīkā*s, the subcommentaries. Of these, the most important is the three-part *Mūlaṭīkā*, "The Fundamental (or Original) Subcommentary" to the three primary commentaries. This work is attributed to one Ācariya Ānanda, who may have worked in south India in the late fifth or early sixth century. Its purpose is to clarify obscure terms and ideas in the commentaries and also to shed additional light on the canonical texts. This work in turn has an *Anuṭīkā*, a secondary subcommentary, ascribed to Ācariya Dhammapāla, another south Indian.

Once the commentarial literature on the Abhidhamma had grown to gargantuan dimensions, the next stage in the development of Abhidhamma theory was governed by the need to reduce this material to more manageable proportions for easy use by teachers and their students. Thus there arrived the age of the Abhidhamma manuals, which reached its high point with the composition of the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries. This work, ascribed to one Ācariya Anuruddha, occupies only fifty pages in print, yet provides a masterly overview of the whole Abhidhamma, both canonical and commentarial, in an easily

memorizable form. The *Saṅgaha* has become the standard primer for Abhidhamma studies throughout the Theravāda Buddhist world, and in the traditional system of education teachers require their pupils to learn it by heart as the prerequisite for further lessons in the Abhidhamma. Yet, because the manual is so terse and pithy in expression, when read on its own it borders on the cryptic, and to convey any clear meaning it needs paraphrase and explanation. Thus the *Saṅgaha* in its turn has generated a massive commentarial literature, written both in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and this has opened up still new avenues for the elaboration of Abhidhamma theory. In this way the literary history of the Abhidhamma has advanced by a rhythmic alternation of condensed and expansive modes of treatment, the systole and diastole phases in the evolution of Theravāda Buddhist doctrine.

From this quick and superficial overview of the Abhidhamma literature we can see that the fountainhead of the Pāli Abhidhamma system is the Abhidhamma Piṭaka with its seven treatises. But how did this collection of texts come into being? To this question, the Theravāda commentarial tradition and present-day critical scholarship give different answers. Unlike the suttas and the accounts of the monastic rules in the Vinaya, the books of the canonical Abhidhamma do not provide any information about their own origins. The commentaries, however, ascribe these treatises to the Buddha himself. The *Atthasālinī*, which gives the most explicit account, states that the Buddha realized the Abhidhamma at the foot of the Bodhi Tree on the night of his enlightenment and investigated it in detail during the fourth week after the enlightenment, while sitting in deep meditation in a house of gems (*ratanaḡhara*) to the northeast of the Bodhi Tree. Subsequently, during his career as a teacher, he spent one rains retreat in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven, where he taught the Abhidhamma to the devas or gods from ten thousand world systems. Each morning during this period he would descend to the human realm for his one meal of the day, and then he taught the methods or principles (*naya*) of the doctrine that he had covered to his chief disciple Sāriputta, who elaborated them for the benefit of his own pupils.³

Although this account still prevails in conservative monastic circles in the Theravāda world, critical scholarship has been able to determine in broad outline, by comparative study of the various Abhidhamma texts available, the route along which the canonical Abhidhamma evolved. These studies indicate that before it came to constitute a clearly articulated system the Abhidhamma had gradually taken shape over several centuries. The word *abhidhamma* itself appears already in the suttas, but in contexts that indicate that it was a subject discussed by the monks themselves rather than a type of teaching given to them by the Buddha.⁴ Sometimes the word *abhidhamma* is paired with *abhinaya*, and we might suppose that the two terms respectively refer to a specialized, analytical treatment of the doctrine and the monastic discipline. Several suttas suggest that these Abhidhamma discussions proceeded by posing questions and offering replies. If we are correct in assuming that these ancient discussions were one of the seeds of the codified Abhidhamma, then their catechistic framework would explain the prominence of the “interrogation sections” (*pañhāvāra*) in the canonical Abhidhamma treatises.

Another factor that contemporary scholarship regards as a seed for the development of the Abhidhamma was the use of certain master lists to represent the conceptual structure of the Buddha’s teachings. For the sake of easy memorization and as an aid to exposition, the doctrinal specialists in the early Sangha often cast the teachings into outline form. These outlines, which drew upon the numerical sets that the Buddha himself regularly used as the scaffolding for his doctrine, were not mutually exclusive but overlapped and meshed in ways that allowed them to be integrated into master lists that resembled a tree diagram. Such master lists were called *mātikās*, “matrixes,” and skill in their use was sometimes included among the qualifications of an erudite monk.⁵ To be skilled in the *mātikās* it was necessary to know not only the terms and their definitions but also their underlying structures and architectonic arrangement, which revealed the inner logic of the Dhamma. An early phase of Abhidhamma activity must have consisted in the elaboration of these master lists, a task that would have required extensive knowledge of the teachings and a capacity for rigorous, technically precise

thought. The existing Abhidhamma Piṭakas include substantial sections devoted to such elaborations, and beneath them we can hear the echoes of the early discussions in the Sangha that culminated in the first Abhidhamma texts.

While the roots from which the Abhidhamma sprang can be traced back to the early Sangha, perhaps even during the Buddha's lifetime, the different systems clearly assumed their mature expression only after the Buddhist community had split up into distinct schools with their own doctrinal peculiarities. Codified and authorized Abhidhamma texts must have been in circulation by the third century B.C., the time of the Third (exclusively Theravādin) Council, which was held in Pāṭaliputta, the capital of King Aśoka's Mauryan empire. These texts, which would have constituted the original nuclei of the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Abhidhamma Piṭakas, might have continued to evolve for several more centuries. In the first century B.C. the Theravāda Abhidhamma Piṭaka, along with the rest of the Pāli Canon, was formally written down for the first time, at the Ālokavihāra in Sri Lanka. This officially approved recension of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka must mark the terminal point of its development in the Pāli school, though it is conceivable that minor additions were incorporated even afterward.

THE ABHIDHAMMA TEACHING

The Abhidhamma teaching in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, the focus of Ven. Nyanaponika's essays, might be discussed in terms of three interwoven strands of thought: (1) an underlying ontology framed in terms of bare ontological factors called *dhammas*; (2) the use of an "attribute-*mātikā*," a methodical list of contrasting qualities, as a grid for classifying the factors resulting from ontological analysis; and (3) the elaboration of a detailed typology of consciousness as a way of mapping the *dhammas* in relation to the ultimate goal of the Dhamma, the attainment of Nibbāna. The first two strands are shared by the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda systems (though with differences in the details) and might be seen as stemming from the original archaic core of Abhidhamma analysis. The third strand, the

minute analysis of consciousness, seems to be a specific feature of the Pāli Abhidhamma and thus may have evolved only after the two traditions had gone their separate ways.

We will now discuss these three strands of Abhidhamma thought more fully.

1. *The Dhamma Theory*. Although Ven. Nyanaponika distinguishes between phenomenology and ontology and assigns the Abhidhamma to the former rather than the latter, he does so on the assumption that ontology involves the quest for “an essence, or ultimate principle, underlying the phenomenal world” (p. 19). If, however, we understand ontology in a wider sense as the philosophical discipline concerned with determining what really exists, with discriminating between the real and the apparent, then we could justly claim that the Abhidhamma is built upon an ontological vision. This vision has been called the *dhamma* theory.⁶ The theory as such is not articulated in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, which rarely makes explicit the premises that underlie its systematizing projects, but comes into prominence only in the later commentarial literature, particularly in the commentaries to the Abhidhamma manuals. Succinctly stated, this theory maintains that the manifold of phenomenal existence is made up of a multiplicity of “thing-events” called *dhammas*, which are the realities that conceptual thought works upon to fabricate the consensual world of everyday reality. But the *dhammas*, though constitutive of experience, are distinctly different from the gross entities resulting from the operations of conceptual thought. Unlike the persisting persons and objects of everyday reality, the *dhammas* are evanescent occurrences, momentary mental and physical happenings brought into being through conditions—with the sole exception of the unconditioned element, Nibbāna, which is the one *dhamma* that is not evanescent or subject to conditions.

The germ of the *dhamma* theory can already be found in the suttas, in the Buddha’s instructions aimed at the development of wisdom (*paññā*). For wisdom or insight to arise, the meditator must learn to suspend the normal constructive, synthesizing activity of the mind responsible for weaving the reams of immediate sensory data into

coherent narrative patterns revolving around persons, entities, and their attributes. Instead, the meditator must adopt a radically phenomenological stance, attending mindfully to each successive occasion of experience exactly as it presents itself in its sheer immediacy. When this technique of “bare attention” is assiduously applied, the familiar world of everyday perception dissolves into a dynamic stream of impersonal phenomena, flashes of actuality arising and perishing with incredible rapidity. It is the thing-events discerned in the stream of immediate experience, the constitutive mental and physical phenomena, that are called *dhammas*, and it is with their characteristics, modes of occurrence, classifications, and relationships that the Abhidhamma is primarily concerned.

To assist the meditator in applying this phenomenological investigation of experience, the Buddha had delineated various conceptual schemes that group these bare phenomena into orderly sets. These sets are governed by different heuristic principles, of which we might distinguish three: the disclosure of the phenomenal field; the causes of bondage and suffering; and the aids to enlightenment.

The *disclosure of the phenomenal field* aims at showing how all the factors of existence function in unison without a substantial self behind them to serve as a permanent subject or directing agent. The conceptual schemes used for this purpose include the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*: material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness); the six internal and external sense bases (*saḷāyatana*: the six sense faculties including mind and their respective objects); and the eighteen elements (*aṭṭhārasa dhātuyo*: the six senses, their objects, and the corresponding types of consciousness).

The *causes of bondage and suffering* are the defilements, the main impediments to spiritual progress, which include such groups as the four taints (*āsava*), the four kinds of clinging (*upādāna*), the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), and the ten fetters (*samyojana*).

The *aids to enlightenment* are the various sets of training factors that make up the Buddhist path to liberation. These are traditionally grouped into seven sets with a total of thirty-seven factors: the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four bases of accomplishment, the five spiritual faculties, the five powers, the

seven factors of enlightenment, and the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

One of the major projects that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka sets for itself is to collect these various schemes into a systematic whole in which each item has a clearly defined position. To fulfill this aim, the architects of the Abhidhamma did not simply pile up lists but attempted to coordinate them, establish correspondences, and display relationships. Through their research into the *dhammas*, the Abhidhamma masters discovered that diverse terms used by the Buddha for the pedagogical purposes of his teaching often represent, at the level of actuality, the same factor functioning in different ways or under different aspects. Thus, for example, “clinging to sensual pleasures” among the four kinds of clinging is identical with the hindrance of sensual desire among the five hindrances; the practice of mindfulness in the four foundations of mindfulness is identical with the faculty of mindfulness among the five faculties and also with the path factor of right mindfulness in the Eightfold Path; the sense base of mind among the six senses is identical with the aggregate of consciousness among the five aggregates, and both comprise the seven consciousness elements among the eighteen elements.

By proceeding thus, the Abhidhamma draws up a fixed list of ontological actualities that it understands to be the differently colored threads that constitute the inconceivably diverse and complex fabric of experience. These ontological actualities are the *dhammas*, which the later Pāli Abhidhamma neatly groups into four classes of ultimates (*paramattha-dhamma*) comprising eighty-two actualities: consciousness (*citta*), which is one reality with eighty-nine or 121 types; fifty-two mental factors (*cetasika*); twenty-eight kinds of material phenomena (*rūpa*); and one unconditioned element, Nibbāna. The various defilements and aids to enlightenment are traced to particular mental factors (with the exception of one “base of accomplishment,” the *citta-iddhipāda*, which is consciousness itself), and a detailed scheme is drawn up to show how the mental factors combine in the acts of consciousness and how the mental side of experience is correlated with the material world.

2. *The Attribute-mātikā*. Having reduced the entire manifold of

experience to a procession of impersonal thing-events, the Abhidhamma sets about to classify them according to a scheme determined by the guiding ideals of the Dhamma. This scheme is embedded in a *mātikā* or master list of contrasting categories. But since the lists of *dhammas* resulting from ontological analysis can also be called *mātikās*, following Frauwallner we might refer to the master list of qualitative categories as an attribute-*mātikā*.

The attribute-*mātikā* is announced at the very beginning of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and serves as a preface to the entire Abhidhamma Piṭaka. It consists of 122 modes of classification proper to the Abhidhamma system, with an additional forty-two taken from the suttas. Of the Abhidhamma modes, twenty-two are triads (*tika*), sets of three terms used to classify the fundamental factors of existence; the other hundred are dyads (*duka*), binary terms used as a basis for categorization. The triads include such sets as states that are wholesome, unwholesome, indeterminate; states associated with pleasant feeling, with painful feeling, with neutral feeling; states that are kamma results, states productive of kamma results, states that are neither; and so forth. The dyads include roots, not roots; having roots, not having roots; conditioned states, unconditioned states; mundane states, supramundane states; and so forth. Within these dyads we also find the various defilements: taints, fetters, knots, floods, bonds, hindrances, misapprehensions, clingings, corruptions. The *mātikā* also includes forty-two dyads taken from the suttas, but these have a different character from the Abhidhamma sets and do not figure elsewhere in the system.

The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* devotes two full chapters to the definition of the *mātikā*, which is done by specifying which *dhammas* are endowed with the attributes included in each triad and dyad. In chapter 3 this is done by way of the classical scheme of categories, such as the five aggregates, and in chapter 4 again by means of a simpler, more concise method of explanation. The same *mātikā* also figures prominently in the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Dhātukathā*, while in the *Paṭṭhāna* it is integrated with the system of conditional relations to generate a vast work of gigantic proportions that enumerates all the conceivable relations between all the items included under the Abhidhamma triads and dyads.

3. *The Typology of Consciousness.* To fill out our picture of the project undertaken in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, and more widely in the Abhidhamma as a whole, we need to bring in another element, in some respects the most important. This is the medium within which the Abhidhamma locates its systematic treatment of experience, namely, consciousness or mind (*citta*). The Abhidhamma is above all an investigation of the possibilities of the mind, and thus its most impressive achievement is the construction of an elaborate map revealing the entire topography of consciousness. Like all maps, the one devised by the Abhidhamma necessarily simplifies the terrain which it depicts, but again like any well-planned map its simplification is intended to serve a practical purpose. In this case the map is drawn up to guide the seeker through the tangle of mental states discerned in meditative experience toward the aim of the Buddha's teaching, liberation from suffering. For this reason the map devised by the Abhidhamma looks very different from a map of the mind that might be drawn up by a Western psychologist as an aid to understanding psychological disorders. The Buddhist map makes no mention of neuroses, complexes, or fixations. Its two poles are bondage and liberation, saṃsāra and Nibbāna, and the specific features it represents are those states of mind that prolong our bondage and misery in saṃsāra, those that are capable of leading to mundane happiness and higher rebirths, and those that lead out from the whole cycle of rebirths to final deliverance in Nibbāna.

In delineating its typology of consciousness the Abhidhamma extends to both the microscopic and macroscopic levels the concern with the functioning of mind already so evident in the Sutta Piṭaka. In the suttas the Buddha declares that mind is the forerunner of all things and the chief determinant of human destiny, and he holds up the challenge of self-knowledge and mental self-mastery as the heart of his liberative discipline. In the suttas, however, concern with theoretical investigation is subordinated to the pragmatic aims of the training, and thus the analysis and description of mental states remains fairly simple. In the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, where theoretical concerns are given free rein, the analysis and classification of consciousness is pursued relentlessly in a quest for systematic completeness.

The schematization of consciousness is undertaken as a way of fleshing out the first triad of the *mātikā*, and thus the primary distinctions drawn between mental states are framed in terms of ethical quality: into the wholesome, the unwholesome, and the indeterminate. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* shows that the entire domain of consciousness in all its diversity is bound into an orderly cosmos by two overarching laws: first, the mundane moral law of kamma and its fruit, which links mundane wholesome and unwholesome states of consciousness to their respective results, the fruits of kamma, the latter included in the class of indeterminate consciousness. The second is the liberative or transcendent law by which certain wholesome states of consciousness—the supramundane paths—produce their own results, the four fruits of liberation, culminating in the attainment of Nibbāna.

The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* first takes up wholesome consciousness (*kusala-citta*) and distinguishes it into four planes: (1) sense sphere, (2) form sphere (i.e., the consciousness of the four or five mundane jhānas), (3) formless sphere (i.e., the consciousness of the four formless meditations), and (4) supramundane (i.e., the consciousness of the four noble paths, which become twentyfold when correlated with the five supramundane jhānas). Second, unwholesome consciousness (*akusala-citta*) is analyzed into twelve types, as determined by the unwholesome roots from which they spring, that is, as rooted in greed, or in hatred, or in bare delusion. Third, kammically indeterminate consciousness (*abyākata-citta*) is considered, states of mind that are neither wholesome nor unwholesome. This is first bifurcated into resultant consciousness (*vipāka-citta*) and functional consciousness (*kiriya-citta*), which in turn are each used as headings for classifying their subordinate types. In this way the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* builds up a typology of 121 acts of consciousness (*citt'uppāda*), each of which is a complex whole made up of consciousness itself, *citta*, the bare knowing of an object, functioning in correlation with various mental constituents, the *cetasikas*, which perform more specific tasks in the act of cognition.

The analysis of each type of consciousness proceeds by asking what states are present on an occasion when such a state of consciousness

has arisen, and this provides the opportunity for minutely dissecting that state of consciousness into its components. The constituents of the conscious occasion are enumerated, not in the abstract (as is done in the later Abhidhamma manuals) but as members of fixed sets generally selected from the suttas. The first set consists of five bare cognitive elements present on any occasion of cognition: sense-contact, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. Following this, various other sets are introduced, and their components are defined by fixed formulas.

The following chapter of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* undertakes, in a similar way, a detailed analysis of material phenomena, which are all comprised under the heading of states that are kammically indeterminate (*abyākata*: neither wholesome nor unwholesome). Since Ven. Nyanaponika barely touches on the Abhidhamma treatment of material phenomena, we need not pursue this discussion further.

THE PRESENT BOOK

Chronologically and structurally, the essays that make up *Abhidhamma Studies* unfold from chapters 3 and 4, which deal with the first type of wholesome consciousness analyzed in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*. Although this section forms only a fraction of the treatise, it offers the key to the entire first chapter, the Analysis of Consciousness, and thus an investigation of its terms and methodology has major significance for an understanding of the Abhidhamma system as a whole. Chapter 3 presents the Pāli text and an English translation of the opening paragraph on the first type of wholesome consciousness; Chapter 4, a detailed investigation of its meaning and implications. Chapter 5 reverts to the opening formula for the first state of wholesome consciousness, which establishes time as an essential dimension of conscious experience. Taking up a verse in the *Atthasālinī* as his point of departure, Ven. Nyanaponika explores a number of signposts that the Abhidhamma holds out for understanding the relationship between time and consciousness.

Chapter 2 was added to balance the emphasis on analysis that predominates in the last three chapters of the book. Under the title

“The Twofold Method of Abhidhamma Philosophy” Ven. Nyanaponika cautions us that a complete perspective on the Abhidhamma requires us to take account, not only of the analytical treatment of experience so conspicuous in the first three Abhidhamma treatises, but also of the synthetical approach that predominates in the last treatise, the *Paṭṭhāna*, wherein all the terms resulting from analysis are connected to one another by a vast network of conditional relations. Chapter 1 was written last, and was added to the book only in the second edition. Its purpose is to defend the Abhidhamma against common criticisms, both ancient and modern, and to establish its legitimacy as an authentic Buddhist enterprise that can make important contributions to Buddhist theory and practice.

Viewed in its wider context, *Abhidhamma Studies* is both an emphatic affirmation of the high value that Buddhist tradition ascribes to the Abhidhamma and a trenchant attempt to break through the shackles that have tended to stultify traditional Abhidhamma study. Ven. Nyanaponika already sounds this radical note in his preface, when he declares that the Abhidhamma is “meant for inquiring and searching spirits who are not satisfied by monotonously and uncritically repeating ready-made terms.” Reading behind these lines we can obtain some picture of what Abhidhamma study has too often become in Theravādin scholastic circles: an exercise in blindly absorbing by rote a hallowed body of knowledge and passing it on to others with only scant concern for its deeper relevance to the spiritual life. For Ven. Nyanaponika, the Abhidhamma, like Buddhism as a whole, is a living dynamic organism, and his underlying purpose in this book is to breathe new life into this sometimes moribund creature.

Throughout his essays Ven. Nyanaponika repeatedly cautions us against another, closely related tendency in traditional Abhidhamma studies: that of allowing Abhidhamma learning to degenerate into a dry and barren intellectual exercise. He holds that the study of Abhidhamma and the practice of meditation must proceed hand in hand. The study of Abhidhamma, at least by way of its fundamental principles, helps to correct misinterpretations of meditative experience

and also, in relation to insight meditation, lays bare the phenomena that must be discerned and comprehended in the course of contemplation. Meditation, in turn, brings the Abhidhamma to life and translates its abstract conceptual schemes into living experience. The Abhidhamma itself, he holds, has immense significance for a correct understanding of the Dhamma, for it spells out, with striking thoroughness and precision, the two mutually reinforcing intuitions that lie at the very heart of the Buddha's enlightenment: the principle of *anattā* or non-self, and the principle of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, the dependent origination of all phenomena of existence.

If I had to single out one strain in Ven. Nyanaponika's thought as his major contribution to our understanding of the Abhidhamma philosophy, I would choose his emphasis on the inherent dynamism of the original Theravāda version of the Abhidhamma. It is especially necessary to stress this point because the treatment of the Abhidhamma that has come down to us in the medieval manuals can convey the impression that the Abhidhamma is a rigid, static, even myopic system that would reduce the profound, mind-transforming Dhamma of enlightenment to a portfolio of orderly charts. For Ven. Nyanaponika, the ancient canonical Abhidhamma is as vital and dynamic as the reality it is intended to depict, vibrant with intuitions that cannot easily be captured in numerical lists and tables. The key he offers us for restoring to this system its original dynamism is a recognition of the essentially temporal dimension of experience. Temporality is intrinsic to the description of conscious states throughout the *Dhammasaṅgani*, but it is easy to overlook its importance when the subtle complexities of the system are subordinated to a concern for schematic representation, as occurs in the later literature. For Ven. Nyanaponika it is only by attending to the time factor that we can rediscover, in the Abhidhamma, the depth and breadth of primary experience and the dignity and decisive potency of the present moment.⁷

To recover this element of dynamic temporality, Ven. Nyanaponika points us away from the systematic manuals of the medieval period back toward the canonical texts themselves, the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. This does not mean that he slightes the manuals

or disparages their contribution. He recognizes that these works serve a valuable purpose by compressing and organizing into a compact, digestible format a vast mass of material that might otherwise intimidate and overwhelm a novice student of the subject. What he maintains, however, is that familiarity with the manuals is not sufficient. Illuminating and fruitful lines of thought lie hidden in the original texts, and it is only by unearthing these through deep inquiry and careful reflection that the riches of the Abhidhamma can be extracted and made available, not to Buddhist studies alone but to all contemporary attempts to understand the nature of human experience.

It had always been one of Nyanaponika Thera's deepest wishes to resume the methodical exploration of the Abhidhamma, which he had broken off after completing the essays contained in the present volume. His life's circumstances and own inner needs, however, did not permit this. During the early 1950s an increased concern with his own spiritual development led him to pursue more vigorously the practice of meditation, which bore fruit in his popular book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. In the mid-1950s he had to attend on his ailing teacher, Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahāthera, and to meet certain commitments regarding literary work in German, which included the revision and editing of his teacher's German translation of the complete *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Then in 1958 the Buddhist Publication Society was born, which he conscientiously served as president and editor of until his retirement in the 1980s, by which time his sight had deteriorated too far to allow any further literary work.

Nevertheless, in this small volume Ven. Nyanaponika has left us one of the most original, profound, and stimulating contributions in English toward the understanding of this ancient yet so contemporary system of philosophical psychology. It is to be hoped that these studies will in some way serve to fulfill the hope the author expressed in his preface, that they will "show modern independent thinkers new vistas and open new avenues of thought," thereby vindicating the eternal and fundamental truths made known by the Buddha.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

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Preface

These studies originated when the author was engaged in translating into German the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (“Compendium of Phenomena”) and its commentary, the *Atthasālinī*. These two books are the starting point and the main subject of the following pages that, in part, may serve as a kind of fragmentary subcommentary to them.

The content of these studies is rather varied: they include philosophical and psychological investigations, references to the practical application of the teachings concerned, pointers to neglected or unnoticed aspects of the Abhidhamma, textual research, etc. This variety of contents serves to show that wherever we dig deep enough into that inexhaustible mine, the Abhidhamma literature, we shall meet with valuable contributions to the theoretical understanding and practical realization of Buddhist doctrine. So the main purpose of these pages is to stimulate further research in the field of Abhidhamma to a much wider and deeper extent than was possible in this modest attempt.

There is no reason why the Abhidhamma philosophy of the Southern or Theravāda tradition should stagnate today or why its further development should not be resumed. In fact, through many centuries there has been a living growth of Abhidhamma thought, and even in our own days there are original contributions to it from Burma, for example, by that remarkable monk-philosopher, the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw. There are a vast number of subjects in the canonical and commentarial Abhidhamma literature that deserve and require closer investigation and new presentation in the language of our time. There are many lines of thought, only briefly sketched in Abhidhamma tradition, that merit detailed treatment in connection with parallel tendencies in modern thought. Finally, in some important subjects of Abhidhamma doctrine we must deplore the partial loss of ancient tradition, a fact that is clearly indicated by the appearance of technical terms nowhere explained.

Here a careful and conscientious restoration in conformity with the spirit of the Theravāda tradition is required unless we would relegate those parts of the Abhidhamma to the status of venerable but fragmentary museum pieces.

Abhidhamma is meant for inquiring and searching spirits who are not satisfied by monotonously and uncritically repeating ready-made terms, even if these are Abhidhamma terms. Abhidhamma is for imaginative minds who are able to fill in, as it were, the columns of the tabulations, for which the canonical Abhidhamma books have furnished the concise headings. The Abhidhamma is not for those timid souls who are not content that a philosophical thought should not actually contradict Buddhist tradition, but demand that it must be expressly, even literally, supported by canonical or commentarial authority. Such an attitude is contrary to the letter and the spirit of the Buddha-Dhamma. It would mean that the Abhidhamma philosophy must remain within the limits of whatever has been preserved of the traditional exegetical literature and hence will cease to be a living and growing organism. This would certainly be deplorable for many reasons.

We are convinced that the Abhidhamma, if suitably presented, could also enrich modern non-Buddhist thought, in philosophy as well as psychology. To state parallels with modern Western thought or the historical precedence of Buddhist versions is not so important in itself. It is more important that the Buddhist way of presenting and solving the respective problems should show modern independent thinkers new vistas and open new avenues of thought, which in turn might revive Buddhist philosophy in the East. We are convinced that from such a philosophical exchange there would arise a glorious vindication of those eternal and fundamental truths, at once simple and profound, that the greatest genius of humankind, the Buddha, proclaimed.

Nyanaponika Thera

I

The Abhidhamma Philosophy Its Estimation in the Past, Its Value for the Present

THE HIGH ESTEEM FOR ABHIDHAMMA IN BUDDHIST TRADITION

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka, or the Philosophical Collection, forms the third great section of the Buddhist Pāli Canon (Tīpiṭaka). In its most characteristic parts it is a system of classifications, analytical enumerations, and definitions, with no discursive treatment of the subject matter. In particular its two most important books, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and the *Paṭṭhāna*, have the appearance of huge collections of systematically arranged tabulations, accompanied by definitions of the terms used in the tables. This, one would expect, is a type of literature scarcely likely to gain much popular appreciation. Yet the fact remains that the Abhidhamma has always been highly esteemed and even venerated in the countries of Theravāda Buddhism.

Two examples taken from the chronicles of Sri Lanka illustrate this high regard for the Abhidhamma. In the tenth century C.E., on the order of King Kassapa V, the whole Abhidhamma Piṭaka was inscribed on gold plates, and the first of these books, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, was set with jewels. When the work was completed, the precious manuscripts were taken in a huge procession to a beautiful monastery and deposited there. Another king of Lanka, Vijayabāhu (eleventh century), used to study the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* in the early morning before he took up his royal duties, and he prepared a translation of it into Sinhala, which however has not been preserved.

What were the reasons for such an extraordinary esteem for

material that appears at first glance to consist of no more than dry and unattractive textbooks? And what actual importance do the two basic works of the Abhidhamma in particular, the *Dhammasaṅgani* and the *Paṭṭhāna*, still have today? These are the questions that we shall attempt to answer here.

In considering the reasons for this high esteem and regard for the Abhidhamma, we may leave aside any manifestation of faith, more or less unquestioning, that evokes in the devotee a certain awe owing to the very abstruseness and bulk of these books. That apart, we may find a first explanation in the immediate impression on susceptible minds that they are faced here by a gigantic edifice of penetrative insight, which in its foundations and its layout cannot well be ascribed to a lesser mind than that of a Buddha; and this first impression will find growing confirmation in the gradual process of comprehending these teachings.

According to the Theravāda tradition the Abhidhamma is the domain proper of the Buddhas (*buddhavisaya*), and its initial conception in the Master's mind (*manasā desanā*) is traced to the time immediately after the Great Enlightenment. It was in the fourth of the seven weeks spent by the Master in the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree that the Abhidhamma was conceived.⁸ These seven days were called by the teachers of old "the Week of the House of Gems" (*ratanaghara-sattāha*). "The House of Gems" is indeed a very befitting expression for the crystal-clear edifice of Abhidhamma thought in which the Buddha dwelt during that period.

THE ABHIDHAMMA AS SYSTEM AND METHOD

Those who have an eye for the ingenious and the significant in the architecture of great edifices of thought will probably be impressed first by the Abhidhamma's structural qualities, its wide compass, its inner consistency, and its far-reaching implications. The Abhidhamma offers an impressive systematization of the whole of reality as far as it is of concern to the final goal of the Buddha's teaching—liberation from craving and suffering; for it deals with actuality from an exclusively ethical and psychological viewpoint and with a definite practical purpose.

A strikingly impressive feature of the Abhidhamma is its analysis of the entire realm of consciousness. The Abhidhamma is the first historical attempt to map the possibilities of the human mind in a thorough and realistic way, without admixture of metaphysics and mythology. This system provides a method by which the enormous welter of facts included or implied in it can be subordinated to, and be utilized by, the *liberating* function of knowledge, which in the Buddha's teaching is the essential task and the greatest value of true understanding. This organizing and mustering of knowledge for such a purpose cannot fail to appeal to the practical thinker.

The Abhidhamma may also be regarded as a systematization of the doctrines contained, or implicit, in the Sutta Piṭaka, the Collection of Discourses. It formulates these doctrines in strictly philosophical (*paramattha*) or truly realistic (*yathābhūta*) language that as far as possible employs terms descriptive of functions and processes without any of the conventional (*vohāra*) and unrealistic concepts that assume a personality, an agent (as different from the act), a soul, or a substance.

These remarks about the systematizing import of the Abhidhamma may perhaps create the impression in the reader that the Abhidhamma is no more than "a mere method with only a formalistic function." Leaving aside the fact that this is not so, as we shall see later, let us first quote, against this somewhat belittling attitude, a word of Friedrich Nietzsche, himself certainly no friend of rigid systematization: "Scientific spirit rests upon insight into the method."

For the preeminently practical needs of the Buddhist the Abhidhamma fulfills the requirements stated by Bertrand Russell: "A complete description of the existing world would require not only a catalogue of the things, but also a mention of all their qualities and relations."⁹ A systematic "catalogue of things" together with their qualities, or better "functions," is given in the first book of the Abhidhamma, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, a title that could well be rendered "A Catalogue (or Compendium) of Things"; and the relations, or the conditionality, of these things are treated in the *Paṭṭhāna*.

Some who consider themselves "strong-minded" have called systems "a refuge of feeble minds." While it must be admitted that the conceptual labels supplied by systems (including the Abhidhamma)

have often been misused as a surrogate for correct comprehension of reality, this does not mean that the fault lies in systematic thought itself. The fault lies, rather, in the attitude with which a system is developed and the use to which it is put. If systematic thought is cautiously and critically applied, it can fulfill a valuable function, providing “weapons of defense” against the overwhelming assault of innumerable internal and external impressions on the human mind. This unceasing influx of impressions, by sheer weight of number and diversity alone, can be either overpowering and fascinating or else confusing, intimidating, distracting, even dissolving. The only means by which the human mind can assimilate this vast world of plurality (*papañca*), at least partly, is with the aid of systematic and methodical thought. But systems may also be “aggressive weapons” when wielded by a mind that through its power of understanding tries to control and master the numerous experiences, actions, and reactions occurring in our inner and outer world, subordinating them to its own purposes.

The Abhidhamma system, however, is not concerned with an artificial, abstract world of “objects in themselves.” Insofar as it deals with external facts at all, the respective concepts relate those “external facts” to the bondage or liberation of the human mind; or they are terms auxiliary to the tasks of the understanding and mental training connected with the work of liberation.

The basically dynamic character of the Abhidhamma system, and of the concepts it employs, goes far in preventing both rigidity and any artificial simplification of a complex and ever-changing world—the faults that those inimical to them find in all “systems.”

System and method bring order, coherence, and meaning into what often appears to be a world of isolated facts, which becomes amenable to our purposes only by a methodical approach. This holds true for the system of the Abhidhamma, too, in regard to the highest purpose: mind’s liberation from ignorance and suffering.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Many thinkers of all times and cultures have insisted that a clarification of concepts and terms is a necessary basis for realistic and

effective thought and action; indeed, Confucius says it is even a condition for proper governance. But throughout history the widespread confusion of ideas that has steered human destiny shows that such conceptual clarification has been neglected in nearly all branches of life and thought—a fact responsible for much misery and destruction.

It is another evidence of the scientific spirit of the Abhidhamma that the definition of its terms and of their range of application occupies a very prominent place. In particular, the *Dhammasaṅgani* is essentially a book of classifications and definitions, while the sixth book of the Abhidhamma, the *Yamaka*, develops a very elaborate and cautious delimitation of terms that might appear even too labored and elaborate for our sensibility.

Since the suttas principally serve as a source of guidance for the actual daily life of the disciple, they are generally expressed in terms of conventional language (*vohāra-vacana*), making reference to persons and personal attributes. In the Abhidhamma, however, this sutta terminology is replaced by a more philosophically precise terminology, which accords with the egoless or “impersonal” and ever-changing nature of actuality. The Abhidhamma texts use this terminology, true in the strict or “highest sense” (*paramattha*), to explain in detail the main tenets of the Dhamma.

While vague definitions and loosely used terms are like blunt tools unfit to do the work they are meant for, and while concepts based on wrong notions will necessarily beg the question to be scrutinized and will thus prejudice the issue, the use of appropriate and carefully tempered conceptual tools is an indispensable condition for success in the quest for liberating knowledge. Hence the fact that Abhidhamma literature is a rich source of exact terminology is a feature not to be underestimated.

ANALYSIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the Abhidhamma’s chief contributions to human thought is, as we have already intimated, the analysis and classification of consciousness, a project undertaken in the first part of the *Dhammasaṅgani*. Here, for the first time in history, the human

mind, so evanescent and elusive, has been subjected to a comprehensive, thorough, and unprejudiced scrutiny. The approach taken is one of a rigorous phenomenology that disposes of the notion that any kind of static unity or underlying substance can be traced in the mind. However, the basic ethical layout and soteriological purpose of this psychology effectively prevents its realistic, unmetaphysical analysis of the mind from implying conclusions of ethical materialism or theoretical and practical amoralism.

The method of investigation applied in the Abhidhamma is *inductive*, being based exclusively on an unprejudiced and subtle introspective observation of mental processes. The procedure used in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* for the analysis of consciousness is precisely that postulated by Whitehead: “It is impossible to over-emphasize the point that the key to the process of induction, as used either in science or in our ordinary life, is to be found in the right understanding of the immediate occasion of knowledge in its full concreteness.... In any occasion of cognition, that which is known is an actual occasion of experience, as diversified by reference to a realm of entities which transcend that immediate occasion in that they have analogous or different connections with other occasions of experience.”¹⁰

Whitehead’s term “occasion” corresponds to the Abhidhammic concept *samaya* (time, occasion, conjunction of circumstances), which occurs in all principal paragraphs of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, and there denotes the starting point of the analysis. The term receives a detailed and very instructive treatment in its commentary, the *Atthasālinī*.

The Buddha succeeded in reducing this “immediate occasion” of an act of cognition to a single moment of consciousness, which, however, in its subtlety and evanescence cannot be observed, directly and separately, by a mind untrained in introspective meditation. Just as the minute living beings in the microcosm of a drop of water become visible only through a microscope, so too the exceedingly short-lived processes in the world of the mind become cognizable only with the help of a very subtle instrument of mental scrutiny—a mind sharpened by methodical meditative training. None but the kind of introspective mindfulness or attention (*sati*) that has

acquired, in meditative absorption, a high degree of inner equipoise, purity, and firmness (*upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhi*), will possess the keenness, subtlety, and speed of cognitive response required for such delicate mental microscopy. Without such meditative preparation the only means of research open to the investigator will be inference from comparisons between various complete or fragmentary series of thought-moments. But if cautious and intelligent use is made of one's own introspective observations and of the treatment of meditative experience found in the suttas and Abhidhamma, even this approach, though far from infallible, may well lead to important and reliable conclusions.

The *Anupada Sutta* (MN No. 111) reports that the Venerable Sāriputta, after rising from meditative absorption (*jhāna*), was able to analyze each meditative attainment into its constituent mental factors. This may be regarded as a precursor of the more detailed analysis given in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*.

The *Milindapañha* ("The Questions of King Milinda"), too, with fitting similes, emphasizes the difficulty of analyzing the mental process and the greatness of the Buddha's achievement in making such an analysis:

"A difficult feat indeed was accomplished, great king, by the Exalted One."

"Which is that difficult feat, Venerable Nāgasena?"

"The Exalted One, great king, has accomplished a difficult task when he analyzed a mental process having a single object, as consisting of consciousness with its concomitants, as follows: 'This is sense-contact, this is feeling, perception, volition, consciousness.'"

"Give an illustration of it, venerable sir."

"Suppose, great king, a man has gone to the sea by boat and takes with the hollow of his hand a little sea water and tastes it. Will this man know, 'This is water from the Ganges, this is water from such other rivers as the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, etc.?'"

"He can hardly know that."

“But a still more difficult task, great king, was accomplished by the Exalted One when he analyzed a mental process having a single object, as consisting of consciousness with its concomitants.”¹¹

The rather terse and abstract form in which the *Dhammasaṅgani* presents its analysis of the mind should not mislead us into supposing that it is a product of late scholastic thought. When, in the course of closer study, we notice the admirable inner consistency of the system, and gradually become aware of many of its subtle conceptions and far-reaching implications, we will be convinced that at least the fundamental outlines and the key notes of Abhidhamma psychology must be the result of a profound intuition gained through direct and penetrative introspection. It will appear increasingly unlikely that the essential framework of the Abhidhamma could be the product of a cumbersome process of discursive thinking and artificial thought construction. This impression of the essentially intuitive origin of the Abhidhamma’s mind-doctrine will also strengthen our conviction that the basic structural principles of the *Dhammasaṅgani* and the *Paṭṭhāna* must be ascribed to the Buddha himself and his great disciples. What is called “scholastic thought”—which has its merit in its own sphere and does not deserve wholesale condemnation—may have had its share later in formulating, elaborating, and codifying the teachings originally sprung from intuitive insight.

If we turn from the Abhidhamma to the highest contemporary achievements of non-Buddhist Indian thought in the field of mind and “soul,” i.e., the early Upanishads and Sāṃkhya, we would find that apart from single great intuitions, they teem with concepts derived from mythology, ritual, and abstract speculation. In comparison the realistic, sober, and scientific spirit of the Abhidhamma psychology (as well as its nucleus found in the suttas) stands out very strongly. For those who could appreciate the significance of this contrast, the Abhidhamma would have inspired especially high esteem and admiration. But even if the Abhidhamma psychology is compared with later psychological teachings of the East and the West, its distance from almost all of them remains fundamentally the same; for only the

Buddha's teaching on mind keeps entirely free from the notions of self, ego, soul, or any other permanent entity in or behind the mind.

THE DOCTRINE OF NON-SELF

It is on this very doctrine of non-self, or *anattā*, that all Abhidhamma thought converges, and this is where it culminates. The elaborate and thorough treatment of *anattā* is also the most important *practical* contribution that the Abhidhamma makes to the progress of the Buddhist disciple toward liberation. The Abhidhamma provides ample material for meditation in the field of insight (*vipassanā*) concerning impermanence and selflessness, and this material has been analyzed down to the subtlest point and is couched in strictly philosophical language.

There will certainly be many for whom the degree of analytical detail found in the Sutta Piṭaka will be enough to understand *anattā*, and to serve as a guideline in meditative practice. But there are also minds that require repeated and varied demonstration and illustration of a truth before they are entirely satisfied and convinced. There are also others who wish to push their analysis to the greatest detail possible and to extend it to the very smallest unit accessible, in order to make quite sure that even the realm of the infinitesimal, of the material and psychical "atoms," does not hide any self or abiding substance. To such minds the Abhidhamma will be of great value. But also those who are generally satisfied with the expositions in the suttas may sometimes wish to investigate more closely a particular point that has roused their interest or that presents difficulties. To them too the Abhidhamma will prove helpful.

Besides helping such individual cases, study of the Abhidhamma will more broadly assist in the slow, difficult change of outlook from the viewpoint of "self" to that of "non-self." Once one has grasped intellectually the doctrine of non-self, one can certainly succeed in applying it to theoretical and practical issues if only one remembers it in time and deliberately directs one's thoughts and volitions accordingly. But except for such deliberate directing of thought, which in most cases will be relatively rare, the mind will continue to

move in the old-accustomed ruts of “I” and “mine,” “self” and “substance,” which are deeply ingrained in our daily language and our modes of thinking; and our actions too will still continue to be frequently governed by our ancient egocentric impulses. An occasional intellectual assent to the true outlook of *anattā* will not effect great changes in that situation. The only remedy is for bad or wrong habits of action, speech, and thought to be gradually replaced by good and correct habits until the latter become as spontaneous as the former are now. It is therefore necessary that right thinking, that is, thinking in terms of *anattā*, be made the subject of regular and systematic mental training until the power of wrong habits of thought is reduced and finally broken. The Abhidhamma in general, and in particular the various triads and dyads of terms as listed in the *mātikā*, the “matrix” of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, provide ample material for such “fluency exercises” of right thinking. Familiarity with the application of the “impersonal” viewpoint of the Abhidhamma and with the terminology by which it is expressed will exercise a considerable formative influence on the mind.

ABHIDHAMMA AND MEDITATION

A fertile soil for the origin and persistence of beliefs and ideas about a self, soul, God, or any other form of an absolute entity, is *misinterpreted meditative experience* occurring in devotional rapture or mystical trance. Such experience is generally interpreted by the mystic or theologian as the revelation of a God, or union with some divine principle, or the manifestation of our true and eternal self. Such interpretations are conceived and accepted all the more readily since such meditative experience so greatly transcends the average level of consciousness that the contemplative is readily tempted to connect it with a deity or some other eternal principle. The overwhelming impact of such meditative experience on the mind will produce a strong conviction of its reality and superiority; and this strong feeling of assurance will be extended to the theological or speculative interpretation too. In that way these interpretations will obtain a strong hold on the mind; for they are imagined to correspond with actual, irrefutable experience,

when in fact they are only superimpositions on the latter.

The analytical method of the Abhidhamma gives immunity against such deceptive interpretations. In the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* the consciousness of *jhāna*, meditative absorption, is subjected to the same sober analysis as the ordinary states of mind. It is shown that meditative consciousness, too, is a transitory combination of impermanent, conditioned, and impersonal mental factors, which differ from their counterparts accompanying ordinary consciousness only in their greater intensity and purity. They thus do not warrant any assumption of a divine manifestation or an eternal self. It has already been mentioned how the Venerable Sāriputta undertook such an analysis of his meditative experience.

It is characteristic of the spirit of the Buddha's Teaching that the disciple is always advised to follow up his or her meditative absorption by an analytical retrospection (*paccavekkhaṇā*) on the mental states just experienced, comprehending them by insight (*vipassanā*) as impersonal and evanescent, and therefore not to be adhered to. By so doing, three main mental defilements (*kilesa*) are effectively warded off, which otherwise may easily arise as a consequence of the overwhelming impact that the meditative experience might make on the mind: (1) craving (*tanhā*) for these experiences, clinging to them, and longing for them for their own sake (*jhāna-nikanti*, "indulgence in jhāna"); (2) the false view (*diṭṭhi*) that these meditative experiences imply a self or a deity; and (3) the conceit (*māna*) that may arise through having attained these exalted states.

These remarks refer to the division of Buddhist meditation called "development of tranquillity" (*samatha-bhāvanā*), aiming at the attainment of jhāna. Turning now to the "development of insight" (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*), the classificatory terms of the Abhidhamma *mātikā*, as explained in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, etc., provide numerous possibilities for including in them the various particular subjects of insight. By such reference to the triads or dyads of terms in the *mātikā* a limited subject of insight can easily be connected with the entire world of actuality, thereby enriching its significance. Such a particular subject of insight may either be deliberately chosen from the traditional subjects of meditation or

may consist in some incidental occurrence in life. The latter again may be either some deeply stirring inner or outer experience or even a quite ordinary happening of everyday life taken as an object of right mindfulness and clear comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*), as is often reported of meditating monks and nuns of old. If that event can at once be referred to one of the triads or dyads of Abhidhammic terms, which comprise the whole of actuality, the impulses it sets off can be more effectively channeled toward deep religious commotion (*samvega*) and insight. Thus a single act of penetrative understanding starting from a limited object may acquire such intensity, width, and depth as to either lead to, or effectively prepare for, liberating insight. This accords with what a great Buddhist thinker has said: “The understanding of one single thing means the understanding of all; the voidness of one single thing is the voidness of all.”¹²

ABHIDHAMMA AND THE DHAMMA TEACHER

We have seen how important a study of the Abhidhamma can be for clarity of thought, for correct understanding, and for personal spiritual development. Yet, while a detailed knowledge of Abhidhamma philosophy might well be optional for those devoted exclusively to meditation, it is different for those who wish to teach and explain the Dhamma to others. Here the Theravāda tradition considers familiarity with the Abhidhamma, even in its details, an indispensable qualification. We read (*Asl* 29): “Only monks who are proficient in Abhidhamma can be regarded as ‘preachers of Dhamma’ (*dhammakathika*). Others, even if they actually engage in preaching, cannot truly be so called. When giving a doctrinal exposition, they may, for instance, mix up the various kinds of kamma and kammic results or the various factors found when analyzing body and mind. But those proficient in Abhidhamma do not make such mistakes.”

Features that make the Abhidhamma so important for teachers of the Dhamma are especially these: its systematic organization of the doctrinal material contained in the Sutta Piṭaka; its use of orderly and methodical thinking; its precise definitions of technical terms and

delimitation of their referents; its treatment of various subjects and life situations from the viewpoint of ultimate truth (*paramattha*); its mastery of doctrinal detail.

THE EVALUATION AND AUTHENTICITY OF ABHIDHAMMA

Even in the ancient past opinions about the Abhidhamma Piṭaka ranged between the extremes of unquestioning veneration and wholesale rejection. Very soon after the Abhidhamma became ascendant, there were teachers who questioned the claim that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka could be regarded as the genuine word of the Buddha. The early sect of the Sautrāntikas, as their name indicates, regarded only the Sutta and Vinaya Piṭakas as canonical but not the Abhidhamma.

It may have been a follower of that sect who is depicted criticizing the Abhidhamma lecture of a monk thus (*Asl* 28):

“You have quoted, O preacher, a long sutta that seems to girdle Mount Meru. What is the name of it?”

“It is an Abhidhamma sutta.”

“But why did you quote an Abhidhamma sutta? Is it not befitting to cite a sutta that has been proclaimed by the Buddha?”

“And by whom do you think the Abhidhamma was proclaimed?”

“It was not proclaimed by the Buddha.”

Thereupon that monk is severely rebuked by the preacher, and after that the text continues (*Asl* 29):

One who excludes the Abhidhamma (from the Buddha-Word) damages the Conqueror’s Wheel of Dhamma (*jinacakkam pahāram deti*). He excludes thereby the omniscience of the Tathāgata and impoverishes the grounds of the Master’s knowledge of self-confidence (*vesārajja-ñāna*, to which omniscience belongs); he deceives an audience anxious to learn; he obstructs (progress to) the noble paths

of holiness; he makes all the eighteen causes of discord appear at once. By so doing he deserves the disciplinary punishment of temporary segregation, or the reproof of the assembly of monks.

This very severe attitude seems somewhat extreme, but it may be explained as a defensive reaction against sectarian tendencies at that period.

The main arguments of Theravāda against those who deny the authenticity of the Abhidhamma are stated in the *Atthasālinī* as follows:

1. The Buddha has to be regarded as the first Ābhidhammika, because, “he had already penetrated the Abhidhamma when sitting under the Bodhi Tree” (*Asl* 17).

2. “The Abhidhamma, the ultimate doctrine, is the domain of omniscient Buddhas only, not the domain of others.... These profound teachings are unmistakably the property of an enlightened being, a Buddha. To deny this is as senseless as stealing the horse of a World Ruler, unique in its excellence, or any other possession of his, and showing oneself in public with it. And why? Because they obviously belong to and befit a king” (*Asl* 29–30).

Even to non-Buddhists, who do not regard the Buddha as an omniscient one but simply as a great and profound thinker, it would seem improbable that he would have remained unaware of the philosophical and psychological implications of his teachings, even if he did not speak of them at the very start and to all his followers. Considering the undeniable profundity of the Abhidhamma, the worldwide horizons of that gigantic system, and the inexhaustible impulses to thought that it offers—in view of all this it seems much more probable that at least the basic teachings of the Abhidhamma derive from that highest intuition that the Buddha calls *sammā sambodhi*, perfect enlightenment. It appears therefore quite plausible when the old Theravāda tradition ascribes the framework and fundamental intuitions of the Abhidhamma—and no more than that—to the Master himself. A quite different question, of course, is the origin of the codified Abhidhamma literature as we have it at present. But this problem cannot be dealt with

here, and in any case the sources and facts at our disposal do not allow definite conclusions to be drawn.

The Theravāda tradition holds that the Buddha first preached the Abhidhamma in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven to the gods who had assembled from ten thousand world systems.¹³ The preaching continued for the three-month period of the rains retreat. Each day, when he returned to the human world for his meal, he conveyed the bare method to the elder Sāriputta. Whatever one may think about this tradition—whether, like the devout Asian Buddhist, one regards it as a historical account, or whether one takes it as a significant legend—one fact emerges from it fairly clearly: the originators of this very early tradition did not think the Abhidhamma texts had been literally expounded by the Buddha to human beings in the same way that he expounded the suttas. If one wishes to give a psychological interpretation to the traditional account, one might say that the sojourn in the world of the gods refers to periods of intense contemplation transcending the reaches of an earthbound mentality; and that from the heights of such contemplation the Master brought the fundamental teachings back to the world of normal human consciousness and transmitted them to philosophically gifted disciples like Sāriputta.

In a comparative evaluation of the Abhidhamma and the suttas, the fact is often overlooked—which, however, has been repeatedly stressed by the Venerable Nyanatiloka Mahāthera—that the Sutta Piṭaka too contains a considerable amount of pure Abhidhamma. This comprises all those numerous texts expounded from the ultimate standpoint (*paramattha*), which make use of strict philosophical terminology and explain experience in terms of selfless, conditioned processes; for example, those suttas dealing with the five aggregates, the eighteen elements, and the twelve sense bases (*khandha*, *dhātu*, *āyatana*).

One also frequently hears the question asked whether a knowledge of the Abhidhamma is necessary for a full understanding of the Dhamma or for final liberation. In this general form, the question is not quite adequately put. Even in the Sutta Piṭaka many different approaches and methods of practice are offered as “gates” to the understanding of the same Four Noble Truths. Not all of them are “necessary” for reaching the final goal, Nibbāna, nor are all suitable

in their entirety for every individual disciple. Rather, the Buddha taught a variety of approaches and left it to the disciples to make their personal choices among them, according to their personal circumstances, inclination, and level of maturity.

The same holds true for the Abhidhamma both as a whole and in its single aspects and teachings. Perhaps the best explanation of the relationship between the Abhidhamma and the suttas is a pair of similes given in a conversation by the Venerable Pēlēne Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera, the founding prelate of the Vajirārāma Monastery in Colombo: “The Abhidhamma is like a powerful magnifying glass, but the understanding gained from the suttas is the eye itself, which performs the act of seeing. Or the Abhidhamma is like a medicine container with a label giving an exact analysis of the medicine; but the knowledge gained from the suttas is the medicine itself, which alone is able to cure the illness and its symptoms.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND A WARNING

Taking a middle path between overrating or underrating the Abhidhamma, we might say: The teachings in the Sutta Piṭaka with an Abhidhamma flavor—that is, those given in precise philosophical terminology—are certainly indispensable for the understanding and practice of the Dhamma; and the elaboration of these teachings in the Abhidhamma proper may prove very helpful, and in some cases even necessary, for both understanding and practice. As to the codified Abhidhamma Piṭaka, familiarity with all its details is certainly not compulsory; but if it is studied and applied in the way briefly indicated in these pages, this will surely nurture a true understanding of actuality and aid the work of practice aimed at liberation. Also, if suitably presented, the Abhidhamma can provide those with a philosophical bent a stimulating approach to the Dhamma that could prove fruitful, provided they take care to balance intellectual understanding with actual practice. Such an approach to the Dhamma should certainly not be blocked by the wholesale disparagement of Abhidhamma study sometimes found nowadays among Buddhists in the West, and even in Asia. Dangers of one-sided

emphasis and development lurk not only in the Abhidhamma but also in other approaches to the Dhamma, and they cannot be entirely avoided until a very high level of harmonious integration of the spiritual faculties has been attained.

To be sure, without an earnest attempt to apply the Abhidhamma teachings in such ways as intimated above, they may easily become a rigid system of lifeless concepts. Like other philosophical systems, the Abhidhamma can lead to a dogmatic and superstitious belief in words, for example, to the opinion that one really knows something about a subject if one is skilled in navigating its conceptual system. The study of the Abhidhamma should therefore not be allowed to degenerate into a mere collecting, counting, and arranging of such conceptual labels. This would make of Abhidhamma study—though, of course, not of the Abhidhamma itself—just one more among the many intellectual “playthings” that serve as an escape from facing reality, or as a “respectable excuse” with which to evade the hard inner work needed for liberation. A merely abstract and conceptual approach to the Abhidhamma may also lead to that kind of intellectual pride that often goes together with specialized knowledge.

If these pitfalls are avoided, there is a good chance that the Abhidhamma may again become a living force that stimulates thought and aids the meditative endeavor for the mind’s liberation, the purpose for which the Abhidhamma is really meant. To achieve this, however, the Abhidhamma teachings must be not merely accepted and transmitted verbally but carefully examined and contemplated in their philosophical and practical implications. These teachings are often extremely condensed, and on many points of interest even the classical commentaries are silent. Thus to work out their implications will require the devoted effort of searching and imaginative minds. As they will have to work on neglected and difficult ground, they should not lack the courage to make initial mistakes, which can be rectified by discussion and constant reference to the teachings of the Sutta Piṭaka.