

THE ABHIDHAMMA PHILOSOPHY

Its Estimation in the Past  
and its value for the Present

from the book  
ABHIDHAMMA STUDIES:  
Researches in Buddhist Psychology

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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY  
KANDY SRI LANKA

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BuddhaNet Edition 1996

via BuddhaNet by arrangement with the Publisher.

BuddhaNet  
P.O. Box K1020, Haymarket, NSW 2000, AUSTRALIA.

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THE HIGH ESTEEM OF ABHIDHAMMA IN BUDDHIST TRADITION

The Abhidhamma Pitaka, or the Philosophical Collection, forms the third great section of the Buddhist Pali Canon (Tipitaka). 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 important books, the Dhammasangani and the Patthana, 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 there is the fact that the Abhidhamma was, and is, highly esteemed and even venerated in the countries of Theravada Buddhism.

Two examples taken from the chronicles of Ceylon illustrate that high regard for the Abhidhamma. In the 10th century A.C. on the order of king Kassapa V of Ceylon, the whole Abhidhamma Pitaka was inscribed on gold plates, and the first of these books, the Dhammasangani, 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 Ceylon, Vijaya Bahu (11th century), used to study the Dhammasangani in the early morning before he took up his royal duties, and he prepared a translation of it into Sinhalese, 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 text books? And what actual importance do the two basic works of the Abhidhamma in particular, the Dhammasangani and the Patthana, 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 lay-out 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 Theravada tradition the Abhidhamma is the domain proper of the Buddhas (//Buddha-visaya//), and its initial conception in the Master's mind (//manasa desana//), according to the //Atthasalini//, 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 environ of the Bodhi tree that the Abhidhamma was conceived. These seven days were called by the teachers of old 'The Week of the House of Gems (//ratana-ghara-sattaha//)'. '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 systematisation of the whole of reality as far as it is of concern to man's liberation from passion and suffering, and the way thereto; for it deals with actuality from an exclusively ethical and psychological view-point, and with a definite practical purpose.

A very striking and deeply impressive feature of the Abhidhamma is the analysis of the entire realm of consciousness. It is the first time in the history of human thought that this was undertaken so thoroughly and realistically, without admixture of any 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 systematisation  
of the doctrines contained, or implied, in the  
Sutta-Pitaka, the Collection of Discourses. It  
formulates these Sutta-doctrines in strictly  
philosophical (//paramattha//) or truly realistic  
(//yatha-bhuta//) language that as far as possible  
employs terms of a function or process without any of  
the conventional (//vohara//) and unrealistic concepts  
assuming a personality, an agent (as different from the  
act), a soul or a substance.

These remarks about the systematising 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 Nietzsche, himself certainly no  
friend of rigid systematisation: 'Scientific spirit  
rests upon insight into the method'.

For the preeminently practical needs of the Buddhist the  
Abhidhamma fulfils the requirements stated by Bertrand  
Russell 'A complete description of the existing world  
would require not only a catalogue of things, but also a  
mention of all their qualities and relations' ('//Our  
Knowledge of the External World//'). A systematical  
'catalogue of things' together with their qualities, or  
better 'functions', is given in the first book of the  
Abhidhamma, the Dhammasangani, a title that could well  
be rendered by 'A Catalogue (or Compendium) of Things';  
and the relations, or the conditionality, of these  
things are treated in the Patthana.

Some who deem themselves 'strong-minded' have called  
systems 'a refuge of feeble minds'. It is to be admitted  
that the conceptual labels supplied by systems (and also  
in Abhidhamma) have often been misused as a surrogate  
for the true comprehension of a changing, and not at all  
rigid, world. But if cautiously and critically used, it  
is precisely one of the advantages of systematic thought  
that it provides, as it were, 'weapons of defence',  
means of protection, 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, has an  
influence, even on 'strong minds', that tends to be  
either overpowering and fascinating, or confusing,  
intimidating, distracting, even dissolving, unless this  
vast world of plurality (//papanca//) is at least partly  
assimilated by the human mind with the help 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 man's inner and outer world, subordinating

them to his own purpose.

The Abhidhamma system, however, is not concerned with an artificial abstract world of 'objects in themselves'. In so far as it deals with external facts at all, the respective concepts refer to the relation of 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 only becomes amenable to the purposes of man by a methodical approach. This holds true for the system of the Abhidhamma too, in regard to the highest purpose; man's liberation from ignorance and suffering.

#### CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Many thinkers of all times and climes have insisted that a clarification of concepts and terms must be the basis of all realistic and successful thought, action, and, as Kungfutse says, even of government. But as shown by the widespread confusion of ideas throughout the centuries, this has been neglected in nearly all branches of life and thought - a fact responsible for much of man's unhappiness.

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 Dhammasangani is essentially a book of classifications and definitions. In addition, a very elaborate and cautious delimitation of terms is given in the sixth book of Abhidhamma the 'Yamaka', which to our modern taste appears even over-elaborate and over-cautious in that respect.

The Suttas, serving mainly the purpose of offering guidance for the actual daily life of the disciple, are mostly (though not entirely) couched in terms of conventional language (//vohara-vacana//), making reference to persons, their qualities, possessions, etc. In the Abhidhamma, this Sutta terminology is turned into correct functional forms of thought, which accord with the true 'impersonal' and everchanging nature of actuality; and in that strict, or highest, sense (//paramattha//) the main tenets of the Dhamma are explained.

While vague definitions and loosely used terms are like blunt tools unfit to do the work they are meant for, 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 will greatly facilitate the quest for liberating knowledge, and is an indispensable condition of success in that quest.

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 most important contributions to human thought, though still insufficiently known and utilized, is the analysis and classification of consciousness undertaken in the first of the //Dhammasangani//. Here the human mind, so evanescent and elusive, has for the first time been subjected to a comprehensive, thorough and unprejudiced scrutiny, which definitely disposes of the notion that any kind of static unity or underlying substance can be traced in mind. However, the basic ethical lay-out and purpose of this psychology effectively prevents conclusions of ethical materialism or theoretical and practical amoralism being derived from its realistic and unmetaphysical analysis of mind.

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 //Dhammasangani// for the analysis of consciousness is precisely that postulated by the English philosopher and mathematician, A. N. 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' ('Science and the Modern World').

Whitehead's term 'occasion' corresponds to the Abhidhamma concept //samaya// (time, occasion, conjunction of circumstances), which occurs in all principal paragraphs of the //Dhammasangani//, and there denotes the starting point of the analysis. The term receives a detailed and very instructive treatment in the Atthasalini the commentary to the aforementioned work.

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 mind become cognizable only

with the help of a very subtle instrument of mental scrutiny, and that only obtains as a result of 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 (//upekkha-sati-parisuddhi//), will possess the keenness, subtlety and quickness of cognitive response required for such delicate mental microscopy. Without that meditative preparation only the way of inference from comparisons between various complete or fragmentary series of thought moments will be open as a means of research. But this approach too may yield important and reliable results, if cautious and intelligent use is made of one's own introspective results and of the psychological data of meditative experience found in Sutta and Abhidhamma.

In the //Anupada Sutta// (Majjhima Nikaya 111) it is reported that the Venerable Sariputta Thera, after rising from meditative absorption (jhana) was able to analyse the respective jhanic consciousness into its constituent mental factors. This may be regarded as a precursor of the more detailed analysis given in the Dhammasangani.

Let us listen to a voice from Indian antiquity appreciating the difficulty of that analytical work and the greatness of its achievement. We read in the 'Questions of King Milinda'; "A difficult feat indeed was accomplished, O great King, by the Exalted One" -- "Which was that difficult feat, O venerable Nagasena?" - "The Exalted One, O king, has accomplished a difficult task when he analysed a mental process having a single object as consisting of consciousness with its concomitants, as follows: 'This is sense-impression, this is feeling, perception, volition, consciousness.'" - "Give an illustration of it, venerable sir" - "Suppose, O 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 Jamuna, Aciravati etc.?' - "He can hardly know that." - "But a still more difficult task, O king, was accomplished by the Exalted One when he analysed a mental process having a single object, as consisting of consciousness with its concomitants."

The rather terse and abstract form in which the //Dhammasangani// presents its subject matter, the analysis of mind, should not mislead the reader into making him believe that he is confronted with a typical product of late scholastic thought. When, in the course of closer study, he notices the admirable inner consistency of the system, and gradually becomes aware of many of its subtle points and far-reaching implications, he will become 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 to him increasingly improbable that the essence of the Abhidhamma should be the product of a cumbersome process of discursive thinking and artificial

thought-constructions. This impression of the essentially intuitive origin of the Abhidhammic mind-doctrine will also strengthen his conviction that the elements of the //Dhammasangani// and the //Patthana// must be ascribed to the Buddha himself and his early great and holy 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 concerned.

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 the early Samkhya, we find that apart from single great intuitions, they teem with mythological ritualistic terms, and with abstract speculative concepts. Against that background the realistic sober and scientific spirit of Abhidhamma psychology (or its nucleus extant in the Sutta period) must have stood out very strongly. To those who could appreciate the import of that contrast, it will have sufficed to instil that high esteem and admiration for the Abhidhamma of which we have spoken.

But even if compared with most of the later psychological teachings of the East or the West, the distance from Abhidhamma psychology 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, mind.

#### THE ANATTA-DOCTRINE

It is on this very doctrine of Non-self (//anatta//) that all Abhidhamma thought converges and this is where it culminates. The elaborate and thorough treatment of Anatta is also the most important //practical// contribution of the Abhidhamma to the progress of the Buddha's disciple towards liberation. The Abhidhamma provides him with ample material for his meditations in the field of insight (//vipassana//), concerning Impermanence and Impersonality, and this material has been analysed down to the subtlest point and is couched in strictly philosophical language.

There will certainly be many to whom the degree of analytical details found in the Suttas will be quite enough for them to understand Anatta, and sufficient for their use 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, in general, are satisfied with the expositions in the Suttas, may sometimes wish to

investigate more closely a particular point that has roused their interest or presents difficulties. To them too the Abhidhamma will prove helpful.

Besides helping such individual cases, the Abhidhamma will in general render valuable aid in the slow and difficult change of thought and outlook from the view-point of 'self' to that of 'non-self'. Having once 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 Anatta will not effect great changes in that situation. The only remedy is for bad or wrong habits of action, speech and thinking 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 Anatta, is 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 //Matika//, 'Schedule', of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, provide ample material for such 'fluency exercises' of right thinking. Familiarity with the application of the 'impersonal' view-point 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 revelation of, or union with, a godhead; or it is taken for a manifestation of man's 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 temptation is very great, indeed, to connect it in some way or other with a deity or some other eternal principle. The overwhelming impact of such meditative experience on the mind will produce a strong feeling of certainty 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, while, in fact, they are only superimposed on the latter.



The analytical method of the Abhidhamma gives immunity against such deceptive interpretations. In the //Dhammasangani// the consciousness of meditative absorption (//jhana//) 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 do not, therefore, warrant at all any assumption of a divine manifestation or an eternal Self. It has already been mentioned how the Venerable Sariputta 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 meditative absorption by an analytical retrospection (//paccavekkhana//) on the mental states just experienced, comprehending them by Insight (//vipassana//) as impersonal, evanescent, and therefore not to be adhered to.

By so doing, three main defilements of the mind (//kilesa//) are effectively warded off, which otherwise may easily arise along with the overwhelming impact of meditative experience on the mind:

- 1) Craving (//tanha//) for these experiences, clinging to them and longing for them for their own sake (//jhana-nikanti//, 'indulgence in Jhana');
- 2) the False View (//ditthi//) that these meditative experiences imply a self or a deity;
- 3) the Conceit (//mana//) that may arise through having attained these exalted states.

These remarks refer to the division of Buddhist meditation called Development of Tranquillity (//samatha-bhavana//), aiming at the attainment of Jhana.

Turning now to the Development of Insight (//vipassana-bhavana//), the classificatory terms of the Abhidhamma Schedule (//matika//), as explained in the //Dhammasangani//, 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 Schedule a limited subject of Insight can easily be connected with the entire world of actuality, and will thereby gain in significance. Such a particular subject of Insight may either be deliberately chosen from the traditional subjects of meditation (//kammattana//) or may consist in some incidental occurrence in life. The latter again may be either some deeply stirring inner or outer experience or it may be quite an ordinary happening of every-day life taken as an object of Right Mindfulness and Clear Comprehension (//sati-sampajanna//), as is often reported of meditating monks of old. The impulse to deep religious commotion (//samvega//) or the stimulation for Insight

derived from such incidental events may be easier retained, utilized and extended to general, universal significance, if that event can be referred at once to one of the triads or dyads of Abhidhammic terms, which comprise the entire actuality. 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, that liberating Insight of which 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.' - Aryadeva (Catuhsataka, v.191).

#### KNOWLEDGE OF ABHIDHAMMA, A REQUIREMENT FOR THE PREACHER AND TEACHER OF DHAMMA

The preceding pages will have shown the importance of the Abhidhamma for clarity of thought, for correct understanding of actuality, and for individual inner progress. Yet as far as those are concerned whose life is devoted exclusively to the realisation of Deliverance, a knowledge of the Abhidhamma, at least in the sense of the seven books so called, might well be regarded as optional. But it is different for those who wish to teach and explain the Dhamma to others. Here a familiarity with the Abhidhamma is deemed quite indispensable by the Theravada tradition. We read in the //Atthasalini//: '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 karma and karmic results or the various factors found when analysing 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: systematisation of the huge amount of doctrinal material contained in the Sutta Pitaka; education in orderly and methodical thinking; clarification of terms; proficiency in, and habituation to, the application of the view-point of ultimate truth (//paramattha//) to various subjects of thought and situations of life; mastery of doctrinal detail.

#### THE EVALUATION OF ABHIDHAMMA AND THE QUESTION OF ITS AUTHENTICITY

Even in olden days opinions about the Abhidhamma Pitaka moved between the extremes of unquestioning veneration and entire repudiation. Very early there were doubts about the authenticity of the Abhidhamma Pitaka as genuine Buddha word. The early sect of the Sautrantikas regarded, as their name indicates, only Sutta and Vinaya as canonical, but not the Abhidhamma.

It may have been a follower of that sect who is

introduced in the //Atthasalini// as criticising the Abhidhamma lecture of a monk thus: '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 //Atthasalini// continues: 'He who excludes the Abhidhamma (from the Buddha-Word) damages the Conqueror's Wheel of Dhamma (//jina-cakkam paharam deti//). He excludes thereby the Omniscience of the Tathagata and impoverishes the grounds of the Master's Knowledge of Self-confidence' (//vesarajja-nana// 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 Theravada against those who deny the authenticity of the Abhidhamma, are as follows:

1) The Buddha has to be regarded as the first Abhidhammika, because, according to the //Atthasalini//, 'he had already penetrated the Abhidhamma when sitting under the tree of Enlightenment.'

2) 'The Abhidhamma, the ultimate doctrine, is the domain of the omniscient Buddhas only, not the domain of others' (Asl). 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 excellency, or any other possession of his, and showing oneself in public with it. And why? Because they obviously belong to and are befitting for a king (Asl).

Even to non-Buddhists who do not regard the Buddha as an omniscient Enlightened One, but recognize him as a great and profound thinker it should appear improbable that the Buddha 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 world-wide horizons of that gigantic system, and the inexhaustible impulses to thought which it offers - in view of all this it seems much more probable that at least the basic teachings of Abhidhamma derive from that highest intuition that the Buddha calls //Samma-sambodhi//, Perfect Enlightenment. It appears therefore a quite credible as well as a reasonable and cautious statement when the old Theravada tradition ascribes the fundamental intuitions and the framework of the Abhidhamma (not more than that) to the Buddha 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 very much to be said about it with any definiteness.

Theravada tradition holds that the Buddha preached the Abhidhamma first to the assembled gods of the Tavatimsa heaven, headed by his mother. After that, having returned to earth again, he conveyed the bare method to the Arahant Sariputta. Whatever one may think about this tradition, whether, as the devout Eastern Buddhist does, one regards it as a historical account, or whether one takes it as a significant legend, one fact emerges fairly clearly from it; the originators of this very early tradition did not assume the Abhidhamma texts to have been expounded by the Buddha to human beings in the same way and as literally as the Sutta texts. If one wishes to give a psychological interpretation to that traditional account, one might say that the sojourn in the world of gods may refer to periods of intense contemplation transcending the reaches of an earth-bound mentality; and that from the heights of that contemplation its fundamental teachings were brought back to the world of normal human consciousness and handed over to philosophically gifted disciples like the Venerable Sariputta.

In a comparative evaluation of Abhidhamma and Sutta texts, the fact is often overlooked - which, however, has been repeatedly stressed by the Venerable Nyanatiloka-Mahathera - that the Sutta Pitaka too contains a considerable amount of pure Abhidhamma. This comprises all those numerous Suttas and passages where ultimate (//paramattha//) terms are used, expressing the impersonal (//anatta//) or functional way of thinking, for example, when dealing with the khandhas, dhatus, ayatanas, etc.

One also frequently hears the question asked whether 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 Pitaka many different methods of practice, many 'gates' to the understanding of the same four Truths and to the final goal, Nibbana, are shown. Not all of them are 'necessary' or suitable in their entirety for all individual disciples, who will make their personal choice among these various methods of approach according to circumstances, inclination and growing maturity. The same holds true for the Abhidhamma both as a whole and in its single aspects and teachings.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND A WARNING

Taking a middle path between overrating or underrating the Abhidhamma, we may say: The Abhidhammic parts of the Sutta, namely the teachings given there in ultimate (//paramattha//) terms, are certainly indispensable for the understanding and practice of the Dhamma; and the additional explanations of these teachings given in the Abhidhamma proper may prove very helpful, and in some cases even necessary, for both these purposes. As to the

codified Abhidhamma Pitaka, familiarity with all its details is certainly not a general necessity; but if it is studied and knowledge of it is applied in the way briefly indicated in these pages, this will surely richly enhance a true understanding of actuality and aid the work of liberation. Also, if suitably presented, the Abhidhamma can provide for philosophical minds a stimulating approach to the Dhamma that will prove helpful to them provided they take care to compensate it adequately with the practical aspects of the Dhamma. Such an approach to the Dhamma should certainly not be blocked by the wholesale disparagement of Abhidhamma study sometimes found nowadays among Buddhists of the West, and even of the East. Dangers of one-sided emphasis and development lurk not only in the Abhidhamma but also in other ways of approach to the Dhamma, and they cannot be entirely avoided until a very high level of harmonious integration of mental qualities has been attained (cf. the 'Balance of the Five Spiritual Faculties'; //indriya-samata//).

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 very easily lead to dogmatic and superstitious belief in words, for example, to the opinion that one really knows something about an object of cognition if one tacks a conceptual label on to it. The study of the Abhidhamma should therefore not be allowed to degenerate to a mere collecting, counting and arranging of such conceptual labels. In that way, Abhidhamma study (but, of course, not the Abhidhamma itself) would become just one more among the many existing intellectual 'play-things' which serve as an escape from facing stark reality, or as a 'respectable excuse' with which to try and evade hard work for one's own inner progress towards liberation, for which purpose alone the Abhidhamma is meant. A merely abstract and conceptual approach to the Abhidhamma may also lead to that kind of intellectual pride which often goes together with specialised knowledge.

If these pitfalls are avoided, there is a good chance that the Abhidhamma may again become a living force which stimulates thought and aids the meditative endeavour for the mind's liberation. To achieve that, it is necessary, however, that the Abhidhamma teachings, which are extremely condensed in parts, are not merely accepted and transmitted verbally, but that they are carefully examined and contemplated in their philosophical and practical implications. This again requires the devotion of searching and imaginative minds; and 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 Pitaka.

As to the relation of the teachings of the Abhidhamma to those of the Sutta Pitaka, two very apt comparisons given in a conversation by the late Venerable Pelene Vajiranana, Maha-Nayakathera of Vajirarama, Colombo, may

be added, in conclusion:

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. Again, 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, namely craving rooted in ignorance, and the suffering caused by it.

\* \* \* \* \*

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Through study of Abhidhamma, we gain precise insight into how our mind functions and subsequently are able to comprehend in a methodical way why we behaved in many circumstances as strangely and inexplicable as we sometimes were. Abhidhamma philosophy, from the standpoint of ultimate realities (paramatthas), exists on account of their own intrinsic natures (sabhāva) are the dhammas that explain the ultimate, irreducible components of existence. Whereas in the Pāli Abhidhamma, the Five Aggregates are dissected and analysed in considerable detail by way of triads and dyads, consciousness, the co-adjunct mental concomitants, corporeal phenomena, and conditions.

1. Abhidharma: its origins and texts. The early history of Buddhism in India is remarkably little known and the attempt to construct a consistent chronology of that history still engrosses the minds of contemporary scholars. In sum, the Abhidharma/Abhidhamma texts are by and large compositions contemporary with the formative period in the history of the early Buddhist schools, providing the means by which one group could define itself and defend its position against the divergent interpretations and criticisms of other parties.