THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

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1. Introduction

At the heart of the Abhidhamma philosophy is the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, one of the divisions of the Pāli Canon recognized by Theravāda Buddhism as the authoritative recession of the Buddha’s teachings. This canon was compiled at the third great Buddhist council held in India in the early centuries following the Buddha’s demise. The first, at Rājagaha, convened three months after the Buddha’s Parinibbāna by five hundred senior monks under the leadership of the Elder Mahākassapa; the second, at Vesālī, a hundred years later; and the third, at Pāṭaliputta, two hundred years later. The canon that emerged from these councils, preserved in Middle Indian language now called Pāli, is known as the Tipiṭaka (三藏) the three “baskets” or collections of the teachings. The first collection, the Sutta-piṭaka (經藏) brings together the Buddha’s discourses spoken by him on various occasions during his active ministry of forty-five years. The second collection, the Vinaya-piṭaka (律藏) is the book of discipline, containing the rules of conduct for the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (monks and nuns) and the regulations governing the Saṅgha, the monastic order. And the third collection is the Abhidhamma-piṭaka (論藏) the “basket” of the Buddha’s “higher” or “special” doctrine. (1)

2. The Establishment of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka

Thereafter, it became necessary not only to preserve the Dhamma and the Vinaya by committing them to memory, but also to study and expound them. It was found, in the case of the Dhamma, as embodied in the collection of suttas, that
the form in which the discourses were couched and the contents there of varied largely according to the nature of the audience to whom they were preached. Thus, there are some *suttas* contained more general teachings which were easier to understand. Moreover, the Buddha did not adhere to a particular system in expounding his doctrines; he depended largely on circumstances. Sermons were preached as the time and occasion arose for admonition. Many of the sermons that were remembered and preserved were, therefore fragmentary and often concise.²²

Even before the contents of the *Sutta-piṭaka* had been finalized, the Buddha's disciples were analyzing his teachings with methods similar to those employed later in *Abhidhamma*. These early analyses were often incorporated into *Suttas*. After the *Sutta-piṭaka* had been established and its contents determined, *Abhidhamma* investigations were considered to be a separate branch of literature. *Abhidhamma* studies were later compiled into a collection called the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, which was combined with the *Sutta-piṭaka* and *Vinaya-piṭaka* to make up the "Three Baskets" or *Tipiṭaka* of the early Buddhist canon. The canon was limited to these three baskets or collections. In the *Theravāda* School, the term "Pāli" is used with the meaning of "Scripture" to refer to the *Tipiṭaka*, but not to refer to the commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka*.²³

3. From *Sutta-piṭaka* to *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*

With the increase in the volume of *Abhidhamma* literature, a special division of the canon, an *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, was established. Before this, the canon went through a transitional phase in which material was placed in a "mixed basket" *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* of the canon.²⁴ The *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* (雜藏) was the repository for materials that had been left out of the four Āgamas, (阿含) and thus included both early and later texts. The *Mahāśāsaka* (化地部) *Dharmaguptaka* (法藏部) and *Mahāsaṅghika* (大衆部) were among those schools that included the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* in their canon.

The only extant example of such division of the canon is found in the *Theravāda Tipiṭaka* (上座三藏) where it is called the *Khuddaka-nikāya* (小部経) rather than the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka*. The term "khuddaka" (Skt. *kṣudraka*) means "small" or "mixed"; but the meaning "mixed" is more appropriate. However, a "mixed Āgama"
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(Tsa-a-han ching, or literally, ksudraägama; (雜阿含) cf. Abhidharmakösa-bhäsya (對法俱舍解説p.466) is included in the Chinese canon (T.99 and 101). Since this work corresponds roughly to the Päli Samyutta-nikāya (相應部) and not to the Khuddaka-nikāya, the term “Khuddaka-nikāya” is translated into Chinese for convenience as hsiao-pu or “small section.” The Khuddaka-nikāya is not small, as it is the largest of the five Nikāyas.

Fifteen works are included in the Päli Khuddaka-nikāya. Among them are very old writings such as the Dhammapada法句繋 (Words of the Doctrine), Suttanipāta 終集 (Collections of Suttas), Theragāthā長老偈 (Verses of the Elder Monks), and Therīgāthā長老尼偈 (Verses of the Elder Nuns). Other texts included in the Khuddaka-nikāya were composed at a later date; among these are the Niddesa, 義釈 (Exposition) and the Paṭisambhidāmagga無碍解道 (Path of Discrimination). In both style and content the latter two works are similar to fully developed Abhidhamma literature, and thus represent a literary stage between the Nikāyas and the works of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka. Both texts were compiled around 250 B. C. E., a date that would make them forerunners of Abhidhamma literature.

The Paṭisambhidāmagga (Path of Discrimination) contains discussions of the practical applications of many of the topics found in Abhidhamma literature. At the beginning of the text is a list of fifty-five topics that are discussed in the work. These topics are called mātikā, a term characteristically used in Theravāda Abhidhamma texts. The list of mātikā (論母) in the Paṭisambhidāmagga is not as refined or as well organized as those in later Theravāda Abhidhamma texts.

The Niddesa and Paṭisambhidāmagga are found only in the Theravāda canon. No texts representing this transitional phase from Sutta to Abhidhamma are found in extant Sarvāstivādin (說一切有部) literature.

4. Dhamma and Abhidhamma

The term “Dhamma” refers to the Teachings preached by the Buddha. Since the Buddha’s Teachings concerned the facts of human existence, Dhamma can be interpreted as referring to the true nature of human existence. Human existence is made up of constantly changing phenomena and of the basic entities that constitute phenomena. Examples of phenomena existence are the body, the mind, and the external world. For example, within the body are elements such as the vis-
ual, auditory, and gustatory faculties. Since the visual and auditory faculties perform different functions, they have different qualities. The various types of perception and the organs that are the bases of those perceptions are called indriya (根). The body is analyzed into visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile organs. The "tactile organ" refers to the skin, flesh, muscles and other parts of the body without the other four sense organs.

The mind is also analyzed into components such as judgments, memories, and emotions. As for example, a list of defilements (kilesa欲念) might include lust (rāga貪), hatred (dosa, or paṭigha瞋), pride (māna慢), doubt (vicikicchā疑), and wrong views (micchādiṭṭhi邪見). Other mental faculties were also included in such lists. Some pairs of mental faculties or qualities seem to be mutually exclusive. Such pairs include love and dislike, lust and hatred, and good and bad. Consequently, some Abhidhamma thinkers argued that it was unreasonable to believe that all such mental faculties were attributes of a single entity called the mind. Rather, the mind was composed of many mental faculties acting in concert. Mental faculties such as doubt, faith, lust, and hatred were considered to be independent entities, and the activities and changes of the mind were understood in terms of their interactions. The elemental entities of which phenomenal existence was composed were called "dhamma," a usage of this term "dhamma" is used in the Abhidhamma tradition; it often refers to the entities that make up phenomena.

5. God and Soul are not found in the Abhidhamma

Our knowledge of the internal and external worlds is obtained through sensory perception. This world of sense experience is comprehended by mind and matter. Reality, however, is not exhausted by the data of the six sense organs. Ultimate reality transcends the empirical world of relativity. The totality of life is, therefore, fully exhausted by mind, matter and ultimate reality. These precisely define the scope and limit of the subject-matter of the Abhidhamma. The data of sensory perception are either corporeal or psychological. Every datum of corporeality or psychology is found to be an instance of contingent existence. The contingent is that which is subject to change and evolution. All corporeal and psychological data are, therefore, of the nature of phenomena, for the non-contingent numeral
nature said by speculative philosophers to underlie them is not yielded to sensory perception. The fundamental generic term which comprehends all phenomena is dhamma. The Abhidhamma is largely devoted to the discussion of dhamma or phenomena. In so far as the empirical world is concerned, the Abhidhammika is wholly interested in the modal view of reality. In the view of the Abhidhammika, there is nothing in all the data of sensory perception which does not admit of the nature of dhamma, for all phenomena are evanescent, non-substantial and lacking in perfect harmony and consistency. As a result of the application of this test of reality, the discussion of a priori categories such as God and soul are not found in the Abhidhamma.(7)

6. Four Ultimates of the Abhidhamma

This leads to the Abhidhamma definition of what is real in the fundamental sense. This is none other than paramattha (最上義). There are four types of this reality, (8) namely, mind (citta心), co-efficient of mind (cetasika心所), matter (rūpa色) and ultimate reality (nibbāna涅槃). Of these four types the first three are empirical and mundane, while the fourth alone is transcendental. The reality of the first three consists in their capacity for change and evolution. Paramattha means fundamental category. The four types of paramattha are based on a distinct theory of degrees of truth and reality. Although all four types of reality are commonly called paramattha, there is a vital difference in the levels of reality as between the first three and the fourth. The former belong to the realm of empirical reality while the latter belongs to the transcendental realm of the unconditioned absolute. Mind and it's co-efficient and matter, although called paramattha are not unchanging entities enduring and perdurable in character. They have no underlying permanent nature, while the fourth paramattha, namely, ultimate reality, being of a transcendental nature, does not lend itself to verbal predication. The four types of ultimate comprise, according to the Theravāda Abhidhamma, a total of eighty two categories. The mind is one ultimate, the co-efficient of mind divide themselves into fifty two ultimate forms, matter is analyzed into twenty eight distinct forms and reality (nibbāna) constitutes one ultimate from the transcendental point of view.(9)
7. The World led by the Mind

The Buddha asserts the supremacy of the mind in the direction and determination of life. The world is led by the mind (citta nīyati loko). This truth leads to the recognition that the proper study of man is his own mind. If the realization of the truth is possible only through the development and purification of the mind, it then follows that the proper understanding of its nature and function must necessarily precedes any serious and successful attempt at such purification and development. Since the Abhidhamma teaches the path to the realization of truth, the study of the mind has been given the foremost attention and consideration throughout its discussion of reality. The content of the Abhidhamma is thus predominantly psychological. Herein we have the first serious attempt in the history of human thought to place the study of psychology on a scientific footing. It is a system of descriptive and critical psychology which "psychologies" without the aid of a metaphysical psyche. It claims only to describe and analyze psychological situations as they actually occur. The value of the Abhidhamma in this regard lies in the fact that it gives us an insight into the mainsprings of psychological life in the individual.\(^{10}\)

The thorough going psychological analyses of the Abhidhammikas reflect the heights to which the science of the mind had attained among the Buddhists at a very date in the history of intellectual progress. The classical Abhidhamma term for the mind is citta. It has other synonyms such as mano, viññāna and ceto. The mind is no abstraction. It is participate in formation. Given the necessary conditions, there is origination of consciousness of one sort or another. Hence the mind is always a specific instance consisting of particular characteristics.

8. Mind as a Sense-door

The mind itself considered as a sense-door is surrounded by five other external sense-doors, the eye, nose, tongue, and body. Perception is described and explained on the basis of the stimuli which impinge on the one or the other of the sense organs. Sensory contact comes about as a result of the coming together of a sense organ and its corresponding object. This sensory contact then leads to the birth of sensations of one sort or another (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory,
tactile and, in the case of the mind, the sixth sense organ, conceptual), which in their turn generate situations which are pleasant, unpleasant or hedonistically neutral. Pleasant sensations conduce to the growth of craving which makes one attach oneself to objects of one sort or another. This attachment provides the motive impulse which keeps a-going the stream of becoming, which is nothing other than the continuity of life in all its manifestations.\(^{(11)}\)

9. Psychological change of human conduct

The *Abhidhamma* deals in detail with the process of perception. According to the *Theravāda* analysis, this is marked by seventeen distinct stages of cognitive and conceptual activity. From the stage of bare awareness up to the point when there is an indelible registration of the cognized object, there are seventeen thought-moments involved. According to this theory it would appear that one moment of physical change is co-extensive and co-eval with seventeen moments of psychological change. Hence, the *Abhidhamma* says that the mind changes sixteen times as fast as matter. The co-efficient of mind are the various no cognitive elements and the *Theravāda* lists them as amounting to a total of fifty-two. These are separately listed, probably on account of their importance for the psychology of human conduct.\(^{(12)}\)

10. Analyses of the reality in the Theravāda's Visuddhimagga and Sarvāstivāda's Abhidharmakośa

The *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, which analyses all reality into seventy-five ultimate dhammas, adds to the analyses of the *Theravāda* in many important ways. Their extensive classifications are summarized in the *Abhidharmakośa* and the commentaries thereon, just as those of the *Theravāda* are summarized in the *Visuddhimagga* and other commentaries on the books of the canonical *Abhidhamma*.

The analysis of matter in the *Abhidhamma* is significant especially in view of the modern scientific researches into the subject. Matter, according to the *Abhidhamma*, is considered as a function and the *Theravāda* enumerates as many as twenty-eight forms of it.
Perhaps the most important single contribution of the *Abhidhamma* to the history of thought is its fully developed and thoroughly comprehensive theory of causality and relativity. Being a thoroughly consistent attempt at explaining the dependent origination so all phenomena, it is, in its widest empirical sense, a gigantic theory of cosmic dynamics. The most voluminous work of the *Theravāda Abhidhamma*, namely, the *Paṭṭhāna*, is wholly devoted to the consideration of this theory from the point of view of its application to the facts of sensory perception.\(^{13}\)

11. Conclusion

The *Abhidhamma* deals at length with the mechanics of mind control and with the techniques of psychic development of the mind. The primary aim here is to indicate the path to the realization of wisdom or *paññā*. The *Abhidhamma* concludes with the discussion of the ultimate reality of *Nibbāna*. The latter is more frequently defined in ethical terms and more rarely as the unconditioned Absolute which transcends all antinomies. Through out this discussion the *Abhidhamma* avoids the subtler metaphysics of the later Buddhist Absolute Idealists.

Reference:


(3) In Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, Chap.3, V.96, p.87, and chap.14, V.71, p.381, the term “Pāli” and “Āṭṭhakathā” (commentary) are mentioned together, indicating that Pāli was used to refer to the *Tipiṭaka*. The word “Pāli” thus has the meaning of both the Pāli language and scripture.


(5) Kogen Mizuno: “Pali seiten seiritsu shijo ni okeru Mugegedo oyobi gishaku no chii.”

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(7) G. P. Malalasekera (Ed.): Encyclopaedia of Buddhism. Govt. press of Ceylon, Colombo 1961, p.44.