

DHAMMA THEORY AS THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

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1. The term “dhamma” is, most central and pivotal, to the Abhidhamma philosophy. As a technical term, it has many meanings:

- (a) In its ontological sense, it means that which exists
- (b) In its epistemological sense, it means that which is true
- (c) In its ethical sense, it means that which is morally good
- (d) In its more general sense, it means the Teachings of the Buddha
- (e) The abstract term “dhammata” means “norm, nature, the way things are.”

2. In Early Buddhist Discourses, the term “dhamma” is used in a general sense to mean things in general, as in the well-known sentence, “Sabbe ‘dhamma’ anatta”, which means, “All things are without self”. In the Abhidhamma, on the other hand, the term came to be used in a more technical sense to mean “all elementary factors” into which “all things” can be finally analyzed.

3. For the Abhidhamma, dhammas are the ultimate, elementary constituents of both mental and material phenomena. They are the building blocks of the world of experience. They are not entities that exist. They are events that occur. They are best understood as psycho-physical events that go to make up our world of experience.

4. The origin of the dhamma theory can be traced to the Early Buddhist Discourses, where we get four modes of analysis, namely,

(a) Five Aggregates (khandha): materiality (rupa), feelings (vedana), perceptions (sanna), constructions (samkhara), and consciousness (vinnana)

(b) Six Basic Elements (dhatu): earth (pathavi), water, (apo), temperature (tejo), air (vayo), space (akasa), and consciousness (vinnana)

© Twelve Cognitive Bases (ayatana): eye-base (cakkhu-ayatana), ear-base (sota-ayatana), nose-base (ghana-ayatana), tongue-base (jivha-ayatana), body-base (kaya-ayatana), and mind-base (mano-ayatana); form-base (rupa-ayatana), sound-base (sadda-ayatana), smell-base (gandha-ayatana), taste-base (rasa-ayatana), tangible-base (photthabbayatana), and mind-objects-base (dhamma-ayatana). Of the twelve cognitive bases, the first six are “internal (ajjhattika), and the next six are “external” (bahira).

(d) Eighteen Cognitive Elements (dhatu): the six internal cognitive bases, the six external cognitive bases, and the six consciousnesses, which result from their contact, viz. eye-consciousness (cakkhu-vinnana),

ear-consciousness (sota-vinnana), nose-consciousness (ghana-vinnana), tongue-consciousness (jivha-vinnana), body-consciousness (kaya-vinnana), and mind-consciousness (mano-vinnana).

5. Each of the four analyses, mentioned above, is further analyzable. That the analysis into five aggregates is further analyzable is shown by the use of the term “aggregate”, which means “group”. Thus, “aggregate of materiality”, means the “group of materiality”. In the Analysis into Six elements, what comes under mentality, is represented only by one element, i.e. consciousness, whereas in the analysis into Five Aggregates the mental aspect is represented by four, namely feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. That the analysis into twelve sense-bases is further analyzable is shown by the next analysis, that into eighteen cognitive elements, because the latter is a further elaboration of the former. This brings us to the last, the analysis into eighteen cognitive elements. This too cannot be regarded as the final, because although consciousness is itemized as six-fold, its concomitants, such as feelings and perceptions, are not separately mentioned. Thus, none of the four analyses is exhaustive.

This is the reason that led to the development of the dhamma theory. For, the dhamma theory is intended as another analysis, which is not further analyzable.

6. This new development, which we call the dhamma theory, is more or less common to all systems of Abhidhamma. It is the final analysis of the world of experience into what are known as dhammas/dhammas. In other words, dhammas are the items that result when the process of analysis is taken to its ultimate limits.

7. Since the analysis into dhammas is the most exhaustive, the previous four modes of analysis, become subsumed under it as four subordinate classifications.

8. In the Theravada Abhidhamma, there are altogether eighty-two dhammas: one is the unconditioned, the dhamma, not brought about by causes and conditions (Nibbana). The other eighty-one dhammas are conditioned, brought about by causes and conditions. The conditioned dhammas are: consciousness (citta), and fifty-two mental factors (cetasika), that is, factors that arise, together with consciousness and, twenty-eight material factors (rupa-dhamma).

Denial of the Division into Substance and Quality (adhara-adheya)

9. A given dhamma does not inhere in another dhamma, as its quality; nor does it serve another, as its substance. The distinction between substance and quality paves the way for the intrusion of the belief in a self or self-entity. In Buddhism’s view, self or self-entity is only a pure product of our imagination. It has no corresponding objective reality.

10. It is with reference to conditions (paccaya) that the relationship between the dhammas is explained. The conditions are not different from the dhammas. The dhammas themselves become the conditions.

11. The Abhidhamma theory of conditionality, recognizes three postulates as axiomatic, either implicitly or, explicitly, namely,

- (a) Nothing can arise without causes
- (b) Nothing can arise from a single cause
- (c) Nothing can arise as a single effect

Accordingly, it is from a number of things, that a number of other things, can arise. When applied to the dhamma theory, this means that a multiplicity of dhammas, gives rise to a multiplicity of other dhammas.

12. Because of this situation, dhammas do not arise as solitary factors in isolation from one another. They always arise in groups or as clusters. They are necessarily co-arising, and position-wise inseparable. However, they are distinguishable from one another. It is this situation that provides the possibility for the development of the dhamma theory.

Methodological Apparatus of the Dhamma Theory

13. The dhamma theory is based on two complementary methods. One is analysis (bheda). The other is synthesis (sangaha).

14. Analysis shows that what we consider as one is divisible into many; what we regard as a unity is a plurality. Synthesis shows that the factors, into which a thing is analyzed, are not independent entities. Rather, they are inter-connected and inter-dependent nodes, in a complex web of relationships.

15. Both analysis and synthesis combine to demonstrate that neither “the one” (unity) nor “the many” (diversity) is a self entity. It is only for the sake of definition and description that each dhamma is postulated as if it were a separate entity. No dhamma has an independent existence of its own. If analysis shows that composite things are not ultimate unities, synthesis shows the factors into which the apparently composite things are analyzed, are not discrete entities.

16. The dhamma theory is not a radical pluralism. Nor is the dhamma theory an out-and-out monism. The dhammas are not fractions of an absolute entity; they are a multiplicity of co-ordinate factors. They are not reducible to, nor do they emerge, from a single reality. In this manner, the dhamma theory keeps itself aloof from monistic metaphysics. If the dhammas are phenomena, they have no corresponding noumena.

17. The dhamma theory, accords well with the Middle Teaching of Early Buddhism, as it keeps itself aloof from the following four extremes

- (a) Absolute Realism (sabbam atthi): everything exists absolutely
- (b) Absolute Nihilism (sabbam natthi): absolutely nothing exists
- © Absolute Monism (sabbam ekattam): everything is reducible to one reality
- (d) Absolute Pluralism (sabbam puthuttam): all are a concatenation of discrete factors, with no interconnection, with no interdependence.

18. If the dhamma theory avoids the above extremes, it means that phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena, without a self-subsisting noumenon, as the ground of their ultimate being.

19. Do the dhammas exhibit a unity, or a plurality? The answer seems to veer towards both alternatives. As the dhammas are distinguishable, one from another, to that extent they exhibit a plurality. As the dhammas are not actually separable, one from another, to that extent, they exhibit a unity. The reason for this situation is the two-fold method adopted by the Abhidhamma. It consists of both analysis (bheda) and synthesis (sangaha). Analysis, when not supplemented by synthesis, leads to pluralism. Synthesis, when not supplemented by analysis, leads to monism. What we find in the Abhidhamma is a combined use of both methods. It results in a philosophical vision which beautifully transcends the dialectical opposition between monism and pluralism.

The Dhamma Theory and the Doctrinal Controversy on Personal-ism (Pudgalavada)

20. About a century after the formulation of the dhamma theory, there arose one important problem: If, as the dhamma theory says only the dhammas exist, how can it explain the position of the person, the individual being, because the dhamma theory leads to the depersonalization of the individual being (puggala). If there is no individual being, how can we explain the concepts such as rebirth, kamma, and moral responsibility? In this context, the question arose: Is the person known in a true and ultimate sense (Saccikattha-paramattha-vasena puggalo upalabbhati).

21. Some Buddhists maintained that in addition to the constantly changing dhammas, there should be an unchanging constant factor. This unchanging constant factor is the "person". The majority of the Theravadins argued that only the dhammas are known in a real and ultimate sense and that the person is known only in a consensual sense (sammuti).

22. It is as a result of this doctrinal controversy that the dhammas came to be described as "ultimately real" (paramattha). This does not mean that dhammas are discrete entities existing in their own right. This only means that the dhammas are not further reducible to some kind of underlying substance. This view is consonant with an earlier statement, which says that the dhammas come to be without having been (ahutva sambhonti) and, disappear without any residue (hutva pativenti).

23. The 'person' is amenable to analysis, the 'dhammas' are not amenable to analysis. This brings into focus two levels of reality: the analyzable and the un-analyzable. Analyzability is the mark of the composite and complex things. Non-analyzability is the mark of elementary constituents (dhammas).

The Doctrinal Controversy on Tri-temporal Existence

24. Another doctrinal controversy that the dhamma theory gave rise to, is whether the dhammas, in some kind of way, exist in all the three divisions of time: future, present, past. It was generally accepted that the dhammas exist only in the present. If this were so, how are we to explain Buddhist doctrines which involve not only the present, but also the future and the past. For instance, the past karmic acts can have their effects in the present or in the future. Therefore, it was claimed by some that it is necessary to recognize that the dhammas exist in all the three divisions of time.

25. This new theory called “sabbatthivada” (sarvastivada) makes a distinction between the actual manifestation of the dhammas as phenomena and their ideal being. It assumes that the substance or essence of all dhammas persists in all the three temporal divisions, while their manifestations as phenomena are impermanent and subject to change. As a result of this new development, the dhammas came to be re-defined as “svabhava”, own-nature, own being, intrinsic nature.

26. Although the Theravadins rejected this theory, in their commentarial exegesis we find the term ‘own nature’ (sabhava), used as another expression for dhamma: “Dhammas are so called because they bear their own nature” (attano sabhavam dharenti ti dhamma). This definition seems to show that there is a difference between dhamma and sabhava (own-nature): While the dhamma becomes the bearer, the sabhava (own-nature) becomes what is borne by the dhamma. This difference between the bearer and the borne goes against the Buddhist doctrine anatta, non-self.

27. However, such a conclusion does not arise, if we examine here three kinds of definition, referred to in the commentarial exegesis:

(a) Definition by way of agent (kattu-sadhana): Here, what is defined is considered as an agent (kattu-sadhana), e.g. “consciousness is that which thinks” (cinteti ti cittam).

(b) Definition by way of instrument (karana-sadhana). Here what is defined is considered as as instrument, e. g. “consciousness is that through which one thinks” (cinteti ti etena cittam).

(c) Definition by way of nature (bhava-sadhana), e. g. “consciousness is the mere act of thinking.” (cintana-mattam eva cittam).

28. The first two kind of definition are tentative and provisional. They are not valid from an ultimate point of view, because consciousness is neither an agent nor an instrument. Consciousness is the mere act of thinking. Only the third definition is valid.

29. Considered in this context, the definition of dhamma, as “that which bears its own nature” is a definition by way of agent. There is no duality between the dhamma and own-nature. Both mean the same. It is for the convenience clarifying the meaning that such a definition is resorted to.

30. A dhamma is also defined as that which bears its own characteristic (salakkhana). Here, too, strictly speaking, there is no distinction between the dhamma and its characteristic. Both mean the same. The duality is only a tentative attribution (samaropana). According to the Abhidhamma way of defining things, there is no difference between the characteristic (lakkhana) and what is characterized by it (lakkhiyati).

31. For instance, the definition of earth-element, as that which has the characteristic of solidity (Pathavi-dhatu kakkhalatta-lakkhana), is, strictly speaking, not correct. For it gives the wrong impression that the ‘earth element’ and ‘solidity’ are two different things. The correct definition is, “Solidity itself is the Earth-Element” (kakkhalattam’eva pathavi-dhatu).