

THE ABHIDHAMMA ANALYSIS OF MIND

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1. The Abhidhamma analysis of mind is a continuation and a further development of the early Buddhist analysis of mind. On the nature of mind early Buddhism recognizes three basic principles:

(a) Dependent arising of consciousness: “Apart from conditions, there is no arising of consciousness”. (Annatra paccaya natthi vinnanassa sambhavo). Consciousness always springs up on a duality:

“What is that duality? It is (in the case of eye-consciousness, for example) eye, the visual organ, which is impermanent, changing, and becoming-other and visible objects, which are impermanent, changing, and becoming-other. Such is the transient, fugitive duality of eye and visible objects, which is impermanent, changing, and becoming-other. Eye-consciousness too is impermanent. For how could eye-consciousness, arisen by depending on impermanent conditions, be permanent?” (Samyuttanikaya, PTS, III 67-68.)

(b) Consciousness does not exist as an isolated phenomenon. It always exists in immediate conjunction with the other four aggregates into which the living being is analyzed, namely, the corporeal, feelings, perceptions, and volitional formations. Hence the Buddha says: “Monks, though someone might say: ‘apart from corporeality, apart from feelings, apart from perceptions, apart from volitional formations, I will make known the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and rebirth, its growth, increase, and expansion – that is impossible”. (Samyuttanikaya, PTS, III 53.)

© The reciprocal dependence of consciousness (vinnana), on the one hand and mentality-materiality (nama-rupa), on the other: Here mentality denotes five mental factors, namely, feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), volition (cetana), sensory contact (phassa), and attention (manasikara). The idea behind this situation is that as “knowing or awareness of an object”, consciousness cannot arise as a solitary phenomenon. It must be simultaneously accompanied at least by five mental factors that perform more specialized tasks in the act of cognition. “Materiality” in the compound, “mentality-materiality”, denotes the organic matter that enters into the composition of a living being, as for example, the physical sense-organs.

2. These three basic principles of early Buddhist psychology show that there is no mental substance. There is no “thing-in-itself”, or an “entity having its own-nature”, beneath or behind the mental phenomena into which the mental continuum is analyzed. Strictly speaking, consciousness is neither that which cognizes (agent), nor that through which cognition takes place (instrument), but is only the process of cognizing an object. Consciousness is not an entity that exists, but an event that occurs, an occurrence due to appropriate conditions. It is an activity, yet an activity without an actor behind it. The point being emphasized is that there is no conscious subject behind consciousness. Consciousness is in no way a self or an extension of a self-substance. Hence the Buddha says:

“It would be better, monks, for the uninstructed world-ling to take as self this body composed of the four great material elements rather than the mind. But that which is called ‘mind’ and ‘mentality’ and ‘consciousness’ arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night. Just as a monkey grabs hold of one branch, lets that go and grabs another, so too what is called mind arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night.” (Connected Discourses of the Buddha, Samyuttanikaya, tr.Bhikkhu Bodhi)

3. Three terms are often used in the Buddhist Discourses to mean what we understand by mind. These are “citta”, “mano”, and “vinnana”. Very often they are used as near-synonyms, as overlapping or complimentary. Thus we have: “This is ‘citta’, this is ‘mano’, ‘this is ‘vinnana’. ” And also “what is called ‘citta’, ‘mano’, and ‘vinnana”. It is only by examining their contextual usage that we can understand the minor differences of nuance.

4. Of the three terms, ‘vinnana’ seems to occur in an elementary sense to mean basic awareness. Thus in the well-known statement, “depending on the eye and the visible, arises visual consciousness”, the expression “visual consciousness” seems to mean “mere seeing”. It is some sort of “anoetic sentience”, through which the sense-datum is experienced in its bare immediacy. This usage of ‘vinnana’ in this elementary sense should explain why, unlike ‘citta’ and ‘mano’, ‘vinnana’ is not ethically qualified as morally wholesome or morally unwholesome. There is also no evidence to suggest that, in contrast to ‘citta’ and ‘mano’, ‘vinnana’ is something to be developed and cultivated. The term ‘mano’ often occurs to mean ‘mind’ when it functions as a sense-faculty. When used in this sense, ‘mano’ is either called mind-base (manayatana), or mind-element (mano-dhatu). The term ‘citta’ often occurs to mean consciousness in general. Sometimes it is used to mean consciousness and sometimes to mean consciousness together with its mental factors. It is in this twofold sense that ‘citta’ (consciousness), occurs in the Abhidhamma. When it occurs in the first sense, the term is used in the singular. When it occurs in the second sense, the term is used either in the singular or in the plural. For there can be many kinds of consciousness in the second sense, depending on the mental factors with which they come into combination. On the other hand, as noted by the Pali Text Society Dictionary, ‘vinnana’ and ‘mano’ do not occur in the Buddhist Discourses in their plural forms. When it comes to mental culture, ‘citta’ is the term often used. It is ‘citta’ that should be cultivated, developed, and elevated to its highest level of perfection.

6. It is against this background that we need to understand the Abhidhamma analysis of mind. The commentarial exegesis defines consciousness in three different ways:

(a) By way of agent (kattu-sadhana): e.g. “Consciousness is that which cognizes an object”. It is of course true that there are other conditions, such as immediate contiguity (samanantara) and foundation (nissaya) for the genesis of consciousness. But importance is given to the object in order refute the widely prevalent wrong notion that consciousness can arise without an object (niralambana-vada).

(b) By way of instrument (karana-sadhana): e.g. “Consciousness is that through which the concomitant mental factors cognize the object”. In this definition while consciousness become the instrument, the concomitant mental factors become the agent.

© By way of occurrence (bhava-sadhana): e.g. “Consciousness is the mere act of cognizing the object”.

7. It is only the third definition that is valid from an ultimate point of view (nippariyayato), because consciousness is neither that which cognizes (agent), nor that through which cognition takes place (instrument), but the mere process of cognizing an object (cintana-mattam eva cittam).

8. As a basic factor of actuality (dhamma), consciousness is the mere occurrence due to conditions. It is not an entity but an activity, an activity without an actor behind it. What is emphasized is that there is no conscious subject behind consciousness.

9. Another defining device adopted in the commentarial exegesis in defining consciousness, or any other ultimate existent (dhamma), is to specify: (a) its characteristic (lakkhana), i.e. the own-characteristic that sets it apart from other existents, (b) its function (rasa), the task it performs, (c) how it manifests (paccupatthana), and (d) its proximate cause (padatthana). In the case of consciousness, its characteristic is the cognizing of an object. Its function is to serve as a forerunner of the mental factors, which necessarily arise together with it. It manifests as a continuity of a dependently arising process (sandhana). Its proximate cause is mentality-materiality, the mental factors and corporeal phenomena without which consciousness cannot arise as a solitary phenomenon.

10. The Abhidhamma analysis of mind begins by dissecting the continuous stream of consciousness (vinnana-sota) into a number of cognitive acts. Each cognitive act is, in turn, analyzed into two component parts. One is bare consciousness, called ‘citta’ and the other is a constellation of mental factors, called ‘cetasikas’

11. The conception of a cognitive act in this manner can be traced to the early Buddhist analysis of the individual being into five aggregates. While ‘citta’ corresponds to the aggregate of consciousness, the ‘cetasikas’ represent the other three mental aggregates.

12. ‘Citta’ as the ‘knowing’ or ‘awareness’ of an object is counted as one, while ‘cetasikas’, which function as its concomitant mental factors are 52 in number.

13. Their position in relation to the 12 ‘ayatana’ or sense-bases is as follows: While ‘citta’ corresponds to ‘manayatana’, the ‘cetasikas’ come under ‘dhammayatana’, sphere of mental objects. This shows that ‘cetasikas’ are directly apprehended by ‘citta’ without the immediate agency of any of the physical sense-bases. Since ‘manayatana’ is internal and ‘dhammayatana’ is external, this shows that the principle of externality of one element in relation to another, is recognized in the mental sphere as well. For, in the ‘ayatana’ division while ‘citta’ becomes the subjective part, the ‘cetasikas’ become the objective part. This distinction does not correspond to the modern distinction between the subjective and the objective. This is because of the Buddhist denial of a self-entity as the agent of experience

14. The position of ‘citta’ and ‘cetasikas’ in relation to the 18 ‘dhatu’ or elements of cognition is as follows: ‘citta’ is represented by seven items, viz. mind (mano) and the six kinds of consciousness based on the five physical sense organs and the mind. Among the seven items, the first is the mental organ as bare consciousness. The next five refer to this same mind when it is based on the five physical sense

organs, viz. eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, and body consciousness. The sixth is mind-consciousness, i.e. consciousness having non-sensuous objects. This shows that mind (*mano-dhatu*) performs two functions. The first is its function as that which cognizes non-sensuous objects. The second is its function as that which organizes and integrates the individual experiences of the physical sense organs. "While each separate sense is active in its own sphere, the mind is the resort of them all".

15. Although the mental factors (*cetasikas*) are external to consciousness (*citta*), their relationship is one of invariable concomitance. Bare consciousness can never arise as a solitary phenomenon, in its true separate condition. It necessarily arises together with its mental factors. Nor can the mental factors arise unless in conjunction with the arising of consciousness. Consciousness and mental factors share the following characteristics (a) co-nascence (*sahajata*), concomitance (*sahagata*), and conjoined-ness (*samsattha*). This means that they arise together, remain together, cease together, and thus exhibit a harmonious unity.

16. In this context, the commentarial exegesis mentions four characteristics common to both consciousness and mental factors: First is simultaneous origination (*ekuppada*). The second is simultaneous cessation (*eka-nirodha*). The third is that they have a common object of attention (*ekarammana*). In the case of eye-consciousness, for instance, the visible functions as an object common to both. The fourth is that they have a common physical base (*eka-vatthuka*). In the case of eye-consciousness, for instance, both consciousness and mental factors arise with eye as their common physical base.

17. Both consciousness and mental factors show how a multiplicity of mental states combines to produce a single unit of cognition. What we call an instance of cognition is not a substantial unity. It is a complex of multiple mental states, each representing a separate function and all combining towards the cognition of the object. Consciousness is not some kind of mental substance, where mental factors function as its qualities. As basic factors of psychological experience, they are all co-ordinate. They are neither derivable from one another, nor reducible to a common ground. Their relationship depends entirely on the principles of conditionality.

18. A single unit of cognition is not an isolated event. It has a past as well as a future, as it becomes a conditioned and conditioning state in relation to the preceding and succeeding cognitive acts. Here we find four aspects of conditionality. The first is proximity (*anantara*), and the second is contiguity (*samanantara*). Both refer to the same kind of relationship. What both mean is that the immediately preceding mental states cease, before the immediately succeeding mental states arise. Between the preceding and the succeeding mental states there is no gap. The other two conditions are called absence-condition (*natthi-paccaya*) and disappearance condition (*vigata-paccaya*). The first means that the absence of the preceding provides the opportunity for the presence of the succeeding. The second means that the disappearance of the preceding provides the opportunity for the appearance of the succeeding.

19 Cognitive acts, unlike material clusters or minimal units of matter, do not arise in spatial juxtaposition. They necessarily arise in linear sequence. What we find here is temporal sequence, not spatial concomitance. Matter is defined as that which is extended in three-dimensional space. The same situation is not true of mind. Mental events (dhammas) have no spatial location of genesis (uppatti-desa), although it is possible to speak of the physical sense-organs and their objects as their places of origin (sanjati-desa).

20. At a given moment there can be only one cognitive act. What is more, the present cognitive act cannot cognize itself. It is just like the same sword cannot cut itself, or the same finger-tip cannot touch itself. This amounts to the rejection of what is called 'tannanata', i.e. the idea that the same consciousness has knowledge of itself.

Physical Bases of Consciousness:

21. Consciousness divides itself into six types according to the respective cognitive faculties, namely, eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. The first five cognitive faculties are physical while the sixth is mental. These are also called 'doors' (dvara), because they serve as channels through which consciousness and mental factors gain access to the object. Although the six cognitive faculties are called doors, the first five differ from the sixth, which is mind. For, while the first five serve as the physical bases (vatthu) of the five kinds of consciousness named after them, obviously the mind cannot serve as a physical base of the mind-consciousness. This means that door (dvara) is not the same as base (vatthu). While a door is an avenue through which consciousness and its mental factors gain access to the object, a base is a physical support for consciousness and its mental factors.

22. If the first five types of consciousness have their respective physical bases, is there a physical base for mind and mind-consciousness as well? If mind has a physical base, what exactly is the relation between the two? Since Buddhism as a religion gives a pre-eminent place to mind, this becomes a delicate problem to be resolved. Because if mind is assigned a physical base, how is it possible to avoid mind being determined by matter?

23. Some Buddhist schools maintain that mind does not have a physical base. In their opinion, the immediately preceding consciousness functions as a base for the immediately succeeding consciousness. The Theravadins too maintain that the immediately preceding consciousness serves as a condition for the immediately succeeding consciousness. This conditional relationship is called immediate contiguity (anantara) or, one of linear sequence (samanantara). However, the Theravadins do not consider that the immediately preceding consciousness is the base of the immediately succeeding consciousness.

24. For the Theravadins the base of mind and mind-consciousness is physical and not mental. This conclusion seems to be closer to the Buddhist Discourses, where consciousness and mentality-materiality are described as reciprocally dependent. While Consciousness depends on mentality-materiality, at the same time, mentality-materiality depends on consciousness.

25. The first-ever allusion within the Theravada tradition to the physical base of mind and mind-consciousness is found in the Patthanappakarana, the Abhidhamma treatise on Conditional Relations. It specifically mentions that eye is a condition by way of base (nissaya-paccaya) for eye-consciousness (cakkhu-vinnana). Likewise, the ear, nose, tongue, and body are base-conditions for the four kinds of corresponding consciousnesses. But when it comes to the base-condition for mind and mind-consciousness, the language becomes less specific:

“That materiality based on which the mind-element and the mind-consciousness-element occur, that materiality is a condition by way of base for the mind-element and mind-consciousness-element and the mental phenomena associated with them” (Tika-Patthana 4)

26. Here the physical base of mind and mind-consciousness is not specifically mentioned. It is alluded to in a circuitous way: “that materiality on which mental activity depends”. As Mrs. Rhys David observes, the term is “guarded”. But we cannot agree with her when she further observes that “the evasion is quite marked”. What we find here is not evasion, but caution, a case of leaving the matter open. One reason why the Patthana took this position could be that the physical seat of mental activity was thought to be very complex, and therefore, it is not limited to one particular part of the physical body.

27. We find a similar idea attributed to the Mahasamghikas, according to whom consciousness penetrates the entire physical body, and depending on its object it can contract or expand.

28. In the post-canonical commentarial exegesis, the unspecified physical seat of mental activity is identified as ‘the heart-base’ (hadaya-vatthu).

29. What is called ‘heart-base’ is not completely identical with the heart as such. It is somewhat like the physical sense-organs, but unlike the physical sense-organs, it is not elevated to the level of a ‘faculty’ (indriya). According to Buddhist Psychology, a ‘faculty’ is that which exercises dominating influence on the mental or material phenomena associated with it. Thus, the ‘eye’ is called a faculty, because its relative strength or weakness influences the consciousness that depends on it.

30. The non-recognition of the ‘heart-base’ as a ‘faculty’ means that mental activities are not controlled and determined by it, although they depend on it as their physical base. On the other hand, the mind that depends on the ‘heart-base’ is recognized as a ‘faculty’ (manindriya). Through this device, the pre-eminence of the mind is maintained, although it depends on something physical. Their relationship is compared to a blind man and a cripple who wanted go on a journey. The blind man made the cripple climb on his shoulders and made the journey following the instructions given by the cripple. The cripple who can see is like the mind; the blind man who can walk is like the physical base of the mind.

31. In recognizing the heart as the seat of mental activity, the commentarial exegesis has followed an ancient Indian tradition recorded in religious literature and in the medical tradition, as for example, Caraka and Susruta. As noted by Mrs. Rhys Davids, the term ‘hadaya’ (heart) finds a place in the Buddhist popular psychology, in the sense of ‘inmost’, ‘inwardness’ and also ‘thorough’. Thus we have ‘hadaya-sukha’ (inward happiness), ‘hadayangama’ (going deep into the bosom of the heart),

‘dhammassa hadaya’ (the heart of the doctrine). In the Abhidhamma Pitaka, ‘hadaya’ is sometimes used as synonymous with mind (mano) and mind-consciousness (mano-vinnana).