WWW Virtual Library - Sri Lanka

Time and space: The Abhidhamma perspective

The following is the Professor K. N. Jayatilleke Memorial Lecture 2003 by Y. Karunadasa, former director, Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies.

It is necessary to begin this lecture with a brief introduction to the Abhidhamma teaching on the nature of empirical reality, because it is in the context of this teaching that the Abhidhamma theory of time and space assumes its significance. The view of reality as presented in the Abhidhamma stems from a single philosophical principle, which gave direction and shape to the entire project of the Abhidhamma systematization. This principle is the notion that all phenomena of empirical existence are made up of a number of elementary constituents, the ultimate realities behind the manifest phenomena. These elementary constituents, the building blocks of experience, are called dhammas. The dhamma-theory is not merely one principle among others in the body of Abhidhamma philosophy but the base upon which the entire system rests. It would thus be quite fitting to call this theory the cornerstone of the Abhidhamma. But the dhamma-theory was intended from the start to be more than a mere hypothetical scheme. It arose from the need to make sense out of experiences in meditation and was designed as a guide for meditative contemplation and insight. For the Abhidhamma, to see the world correctly is to see - not persons and substances - but bare phenomena (suddha-dhamma) arising and perishing in accordance with their conditions. The task the Abhidhamma specialists set themselves was to specify exactly what these "bare phenomena" are and to show how they relate to other "bare phenomena" to make up our "common sense" picture of the world.

The dhamma-theory was not peculiar to any one school of Buddhism but penetrated all the early schools, stimulating the growth of their different versions of the Abhdhamma. However, there are sound reasons for believing that the Pali Abhidhamma Pitaka contains one of the earliest forms of the dhamma theory, perhaps even the oldest version. This theory did not remain static but evolved over the centuries as Buddhist thinkers sought to draw out the implications of the theory and to respond to problems it posed for the critical intellect. Thus the dhamma theory was repeatedly enriched, first by the Abhidhamma commentaries and then by the later exegetical literature and the medieval compendia of Abhidamma, the so-called "little finger manuals" such as the Abhidhammatthasangaha, which in turn gave rise to their own commentaries and sub-commentaries.

In developing the dhamma-theory the Abhidhamma resorts to two complementary methods: that of analysis (bheda) and that of synthesis (sangaha). The analytical method dominates in the Dhammasangani, which according to tradition is the first book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka; for here we find a complete catalogue of the dhammas, each with a laconic definition. The synthetical method is more characteristic of the Patthana, the last book of the Abhidhmma Pitaka; for here we find an exhaustive catalogue of the conditional relations of the dhammas. The combined use of these two methods shows that, according to the methodological apparatus employed in the Abhidhamma, "a complete description of a thing requires, besides its analysis, also a statement of its relations to certain other things". Analysis shows that the world of experience is resolvable into a plurality of factors; synthesis shows that these factors are not discrete entities existing in themselves but inter-connected and inter—dependent nodes in a complex web of relationships. It is only for the purpose of definition and description that things are artificially dissected. In actuality the world given to experience is a vast network of tightly interwoven relations.

This fact needs emphasis because the Abhidhamma doctrine of dhammas has sometimes been represented as a radical pluralism. Such an interpretation is certainly not admissible. It is mostly modern writings mainly based on the Sarvastivada Abhidharma that have given currency to this incorrect interpretation. "Up to the present time", observes the Venerable Nyanaponika Thera, "it has been a regular occurrence in the history of physics, metaphysics, and psychology that when a whole has been successfully dissolved by analysis, the resultant parts come again to be regarded as little Wholes. This is the kind of process that culminates in radical pluralism. Such a trend did, in fact, surface within certain

schools of Buddhist thought and culminated in the view that the dhammas persist in all three periods of time. But the Pali Abhidamma Pitaka did not succumb to this error of conceiving the dhammas as ultimate unities or discrete entities. In the Pali tradition it is only for the sake of definition and description that each dhamma is postulated as if it were a separate entity; but in reality it is by no means a solitary phenomenon having an existence of its own. This is precisely why the mental and material dhammas are often presented in inter-connected groups. In presenting them thus the danger inherent in narrowly analytical methods has been avoided - the danger, namely of elevating the factors resulting from analysis to the status of genuinely separate entities. Thus if analysis shows that composite things cannot be considered as ultimate unities, synthesis shows that the factors into which the apparently composite things are analysed (ghana-vinibbhoga) are not discrete entities.

If this Abhidhammic view of existence, as seen from its doctrine of dhammas, cannot be interpreted as a radical pluralism, neither can it be interpreted as an out-and-out monism. For what are called dhammas - the component factors of the universe, both within and outside us - are not fractions of an absolute unity but a multiplicity of co-ordinate factors. They are not reducible to, nor do they emerge from, a single reality, which is the fundamental postulate of monistic metaphysics. If they are to be interpreted as phenomena, this should be done with the proviso that they are phenomena with no corresponding noumena, no hidden underlying ground. For they are not manifestations of some mysterious metaphysical substratum, but processes taking place due to the interplay of a multitude of conditions.

In thus evolving a view of existence that cannot be interpreted in either monistic or pluralistic terms, the Abhidhamma accords with the "middle doctrine" of early Buddhism. This doctrine avoids the eternalistic view of existence, which maintains that everything exists absolutely (sabbam atthi) as well as the opposite nihilistic view, which maintains that absolutely nothing exists (sabbam natthi. It also avoids, on the one hand, the monistic view that everything is reducible to a common ground, some sort of self-substance (sabbam ekattam) and, on the other, the opposite pluralistic view that the whole of existence is resolvable into a concatenation of discrete entities (sabbam puthuttam). Transcending these two pairs of extremist views, the middle doctrine explains that phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena without a selfsubsisting noumenon that serves as the ground of their being.

The inter-connection and inter-dependence of these dhammas are not explained on the basis of the dichotomy between substance and quality. Consequently, a given dhamma does not inhere in another as its quality, nor does it serve another as its substance. The socalled substance is only a figment of our imagination. The distinction between substance and quality is denied because such a distinction leaves the door open for the intrusion of the doctrine of a substantial self (attavada) with all that it entails. Hence it is with reference to causes and conditions that the inter-connection of the dhammas should be understood. The conditions are not different from the dhammas, for it is the dhammas themselves that constitute the conditions. How each dhamma serves as a condition (paccaya) for the origination of another (paccayuppanna) is explained on the basis of the system of conditioned genesis (paccayakara-naya). This system, which consists of twenty-four conditions, aims at demonstrating the inter-dependence and dependent origination (paticca-samuppada) of all dhammas in respect of both their temporal sequence and spatial concomitance. In this connection four postulates are recognized as axiomatic, either implicitly or explicitly. The first is that it is not empirically possible to identify an absolute original cause of the "dhammic" process.

Such a metaphysical conception is not in accord with Buddhism’s empirical doctrine of causality, the purpose of which is not to explain how the world began but to describe the uninterrupted continuity of the samsaric process whose absolute beginning is not conceivable. The second is that nothing arises without the appropriate conditions necessary for its origination. This rules out the theory of fortuitous origination (adhicasamuppanna). The third is that nothing arises from a single cause. This rules out theories of a single cause (ekakaranavada). This means the rejection of all monistic theories, which seek to explain the origin of the world from a single cause, whether this single cause is conceived as a personal God or an impersonal Godhead. The fourth postulate is that nothing arises as a single effect. Thus on the basis of a single cause or a plurality of causes, a single effect does not arise. The rejection of these four theories means that, according to Abhidhamma, from a plurality of conditions a plurality of effects takes place. Applied to the dhamma-theory, this means that a multiplicity of dhammas brings about a multiplicity of other dhammas.

A dhamma in the sense of an elementary constituent is often defined as that which has its own-nature or

own-being (sabhava, sakabhava). This has two implications. one is that it represents a specific fact, mental or material, which is not shared by the other dhammas. Hence own-nature is also defined as the characteristic, which is peculiar to a dhamma (avenika-sabhava). The other implication is that since a dhamma has its own nature, its existence is not dependent on the operation of the mind as a conceptual construct. It is not a product of mental interpretation and as such it is an existent having objective reality. The definition of dhamma as that which bears its own-nature is said to be provisional, because such a definition creates the false impression that the dhamma is different from its own-nature, when in actual fact both mean the same thing." This insistence on their non-duality is to prevent the intrusion of the distinction between substance and quality into what otherwise is a unique element of existence. A dhamma is also defined as that which has its own-characteristic (salakkhana, saka-lakkhana). However, this definition should not be understood to mean that the characteristic is different from what is characterized thereby. Thus, for instance, the definition of the earth-element (pathavi dhatu) as that which has the characteristic of solidity-cum extension (pathavi dhatu kakkhalatta-lakkhana) should be rephrased to mean that solidity-cum-extension is itself the earth-element (kakkhalattam eva pathavi dhatu). What all this goes to show, is that the so-called dhamma is a discrete fact, a unitary element of existence, free from complexity and devoid of the distinction between substance and quality.

If the dhammas represent the final factors into which the whole of existence is analysed, one question that naturally arises here is whether they exhibit a unity or a plurality. The answer seems to veer towards both alternatives although it appears paradoxical to say so. In so far as the dhammas are distinguishable, one from another, to that extent they exhibit plurality. In so far as they are not actually separable, one from another, to that extent they exhibit unity. The reason for this situation is the methodological apparatus employed by the Abhidhammikas in explaining the nature of empirical existence. As mentioned earlier, this 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 one finds in the Abhidhamma is a combined use of both methods. This results in a philosophical vision, which beautifully transcends the dialectical opposition between monism and pluralism.

Consensual reality and conceptual constructs

What emerges from this Abhidhamma doctrine of dhammas is a critical realism, one which (unlike idealism) recognizes the distinctness of the world from the experiencing subject yet also distinguishes between those types of entities that truly exist independently of the cognitive act and those that owe their being to the act of cognition itself. How does this doctrine interpret the "common sense" view of the world, a kind of naive realism in the sense that it tends to recognize entities more or less corresponding to all linguistic terms? In other words, what relation is there between the dhammas, the ultimate elements of existence, and the objects of common sense realism? What degree of reality, if any, could be bestowed on the latter?

It is in their answers to these questions that the Abhidhammikas formulated a theory relating to consensual reality (sammuti) and conceptual constructs (pannatti). This may be understood as an attempt to explain the common sense view of reality while retaining dhamma realism as the Abhidhamma view of reality. According to this theory, "the entities of our everyday frame of reference possess merely a consensual reality derivative upon the foundational stratum of the dhammas". For instance, the validity of the term "table" is based, not on an objective existent corresponding to the term, but on mental interpretation superimposed on a congeries of material dhammas when they are organized in a particular manner. Although a table is not a separate reality distinct from the material dhammas that enter into its composition, nevertheless the table is said to exist because in common parlance it is accepted as a separate reality. Thus all objects of common sense realism are conceptual consstructs (pannatti) with no corresponding objective counterparts.

Thus; the Abhidharnma theory of reality demands that we make a clear distinction between dhammas, that is, those types of entities that possess ontological ultimacy on the one hand, and pannattis, that is, those entities that exist only as conceptual constructs, on the other. A dhamma is a truly existent thing (sabhava-siddha), whereas a pannatti is a thing merely conceptualized (parikappa-siddha). The former is an existent verifiable by its own distinctive intrinsic characteristic, but the latter, being a product of the mind’s synthetic function, exists only by virtue of thought. It is a mental construct superimposed on things and hence possesses no objective counterpart.

Concept of time (Kala pannatti)

It is in the light of the distinction made between the dhammas as entities having objective reality on the one hand and pannattis as mental constructs, on the other, that we have to understand the Abhidhamma theory of time and space. On the subject of time the books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka are relatively silent. However, the fact that time is not elevated to the status of a conditioned or unconditioned dhamma shows that it has not been considered as existing in a real and ultimate sense. This is in contrast to the substantialist schools of Indian philosophy, where time is recognized as an eternal, all pervading substance, the existence of which is inferred from facts of consecution and simultaneity between phenomena. It is in the post-canonical commentarial literature that the Buddhist idea of time gets more clearly articulated.

The commentary to the Dhammasangani says that time is an avijjamana-pannatti, which means that it is a conceptual construct with no corresponding objective reality, a concept based on the continuous elemental flow. It is the dhammas, the ultimate constituents of empirical existence, which arise and perish in continual succession, that serve as a basis for our construction of the notion of time. only the dhammas are real (paramattha, saccikattha); time is a conceptual construct, a product of the interpretative function of our mind (kappana-siddha). Therefore, unlike the dhammas, time has no own-nature (sabhavato avijjamana).

That there is no time without reference to events and that, therefore, time is always determined by events, is aptly summarized by the following statement which we find expressed in the same commentary: "Chronological time denoted by reference to this or that event is only a conventional expression" (Tam tam upadaya pannatto kalo voharamattako). Thus different times means not different parts of one and the same time but times determined by different events. As the commentary elaborates on this: "Time is only a concept derived from this or that phenomenon, such as (a) states expressed in such phrases as 'temporal (aspect) of mind', 'temporal (aspect) of matter'; (b) the phenomenal occurrence expressed by such phrases as 'the past' and 'the future'; (c) the phenomenal succession in an organism expressed by 'the time of seedgermination' and 'the time of sprouting'; (d) the characteristic marks of phenomena expressed by 'the time of genesis' and 'the time of decay'; (e) the functions of phenomena expressed by 'the time of feeling' and 'the time of cognizing'; (f) functions of living beings expressed by 'the time of bathing' and 'the time of drinking'; (g) the modes of posture expressed by 'the time of going' and 'the time of stopping'; (h) the revolution of the moon, sun, etc., expressed by 'morning, evening, day, and night'; or (i) the grouping of days and nights, etc. into periods expressed by 'half-month', 'month'".

Accordingly the Pali commentaries speak of a "plurality of times" (samaya-nanatta), and in the same context, of a plurality of causal confluences as well. A causal confluence is the completeness of conditions (paccaya-samaggi) necessary for the occurrence of an event. All causal confluences, in the final analysis, mean the causal confluences of the dhammas, the ultimate elementary constituents into which existence is analysed. Therefore in the final analysis all our notions of time are due to the dhammas that alone possess ontological ultimacy. Apart from the dhammas, there is no discrete entity called time (na hi tabbinimmutto anno koci kalo nama atthi). In consonance with this stance, the Pali commentaries maintain that it is in relation to the mental and material dhammas that all temporal distinctions should be understood.

The question is raised whether any reference to temporal distinctions of past, present, and future implies the recognition of time as a dhamma, that is, as a real existent. (Addha namayam dhammo eva apanno ti?.) The reply given is that there is no such dhamma called time because all temporal distinctions are, in the final analysis, distinctions pertaining to dhammas themselves (dhammassa pana avatthabhedo).25 Although time does not exist in its own nature (sabhavena avijjamanopi), yet it is possible to speak of dhammas and compound things as belonging to the three divisions of time by considering time as a receptacle (adhikarana) or as a support (adhara) for their serial occurrence.26 Thus from the point of view of the Abhidhamma doctrine of momentariness, past means the dhammas which have ceased after having gone through the three moments of origination, existence, and dissolution (tayo khane patva niruddha); future means the dhammas which have not yet arrived at the three moments (tayo khane asampatta); and present means the dhammas that pass through the three moments (tayo khane sampatta, khanattaya-pariyapanna).27

Thus what is regarded as present in the ultimate sense is the momentary present (khanapaccuppanna) that consists of the three phases of a single mind-moment. obviously this kind of time is not actually perceptible. Therefore in order to account for perceptible time, the Pali commentaries speak of two other ways of defining the present. One is in terms of a series or continuum of moments (santati) and is called continuous present (santai-paccuppanna).28 On the definition of continuous or serial present the

commentary to the Dhammasangani records two opinions. According to the Majjhimabhanakas, the residers of the Majjhimanikaya, continuous or serial present has to be understood as illustrated by the following examples: When a person after having sat in darkness goes to the light, material objects do not become manifest to him all at once. The time that requires for the material objects to become manifest is equal to one or two continua. Similarly when a person after having walked in the light enters a room, the time that takes place until the objects become manifest should be understood as one or two continua. When a person, standing afar, sees the bodily movements of people washing clothes or of those who beat drums and ring bells, he does not hear at once the sound they make. The time that passes until he hears the sound is equal to one or two continua.29 On the other hand, the Sam— yuttabhanakas, the reciters of the Samyauttanikaya speak of two kinds of continua, one is material (rupa-santari) and the other is mental (arupa-santati).30 "The material continuity is when the ripples of the water stepped into by one crossing to the bank have not settled down, or when, area a journey the heat of the body has not subsided, or when to one coming out of the glare into a room the gloom is not yet dispelled, or when after being occupied with religious exercise in a room, one looks out of the window during the day and the quivering of the eyes has not subsided." 31 A mental continuum is equal to two or three cognitive processes (Javana-withi), each lasting sixteen mind-moments.32 Two or three cognitive processes, as Venerable Nyanaponika Thera observes, appears too brief a time-interval "to ascribe actual perceptibility", while " the earlier examples imply a duration too long to convey the idea of "present".33 However, as he further observes, "still we must suppose that the second division, the ‘serial present’ is intended to refer to the actual experience of a "now".34 The third way of defining the present is with reference to the present life-term (addha-paccuppanna. While the third way of defining the present is found in the Pali suttas (suttanta-pariyaya), the other two are found only in the Abhidhamma (abhidhamma-niddesa.35

That time is determined by events is also shown by the mutual relationship between time and consciousness, as we find this expressed in the following quotation from the same commentary.

Samaye niddisi cittarn cittena samayam muni

Niyametvana dipetum dhamme tattha pabhedato.36

We give below Venerable Nyanaponika Thera’s English translation:

By time the Sage described the mind

And by the mind described the time,

In order to show, by such definition,

The phenomena there arranged in classes.37

Now, in the psychology of the Abhidhamma a distinction is made between consciousness (citta), on the one hand, and its concomitants called mental factors (cetasika), on the other. Their relationship is one of invariable concomitance in the sense that when consciousness arises together with it arise the mental factors as well. Their simultaneous origination is sought to be shown by a schematic sentence in the Dhamasangani, where its first part begins with the words: "fat a time when" (yasmim samaye) and the second part,.with the words: "fat that [same] time" (tasmim samaye). The first part identifies the kind of consciousness that it intends to describe and the second part enumerates the kind of mental factors that arise together with that consciousness.38 Through this arrangement the time that consciousness takes to occur gets defined by the time that takes for the temporary combination of the mental factors. As Venerable Nyanaponika Thera says, ‘the duration of that mind-defining time period is circumscribed by the simultaneity of the mental factors enumerated in the second part of the sentence ... In other words, a state of consciousness lasts as long as the combination of its single [mental] factors. This represents the limitation of consciousness by time. Its description too is possible by reference to time, namely to the temporary simultaneity of the single [= mental] factors".39

The commentators interpret "fat a time when" of the Dhammasangani as ‘fat a moment when", where the term moment (khana) is used in its technical sense to mean the briefest temporal unit.40 In the context of this commentarial interpretation, the moment as the briefest temporal unit becomes definable as the duration of a state of consciousness, which, as we have seen, is equal to the time taken for the temporary simultaneity of the mental factors. Thus while a state of consciousness determines the measure of the

moment as the briefest time unit, the moment in turn determines the time during which a state of consciousness or the temporary simultaneity of the mental factors occurs. Thus we have the equation: moment as the briefest unit of time is equal to the occurrence of a state of consciousness, which in turn is equal to the simultaneous occurrence of the concomitant mental factors.

CONCEPT OF SPACE (AKASA PANNATTI)

If time is, thus, a conceptual construct, what about space? What is the position assigned to it in the Theravada Abhidhamma? There is clear textual evidence to show that from the very beginning Buddhism dissociated itself from the view expressed in many schools of Indian thought that what is called akasa (space, ether) is a subtle and ethereal plenum, which pervades the universe. This is precisely why in the Samkhya, Vedanta, Nyaya Vaisesika and in the medical tradition as represented by Caraka and Susruta, akasa is elevated to the level of a mahabhuta or elemental substance. It is therefore defined as a non-corporeal substance devoid of tactility (sparsa) and characterized by ubiquity (vibhu), absolute continuity and infinite magnitude.41 That Buddhism rejected this theory of absolute space is shown by the fact that in none of the Buddhist texts is akasa elevated to the level of a mahabhuta. For Buddhism, as for Jainism, mahabhuta means only the four primary elements of matter, namely, pathavi (solidity and extension), apo (viscidity and cohesion), tejo (temperature of cold and heat), and vayo (distension and mobility). It is of course true that in the early Buddhist discourses akasa is enumerated immediately after, and apparently as co-ordinate with, the four mahabhatas.42 But this does not mean that akasa is the fifth mahabhuta, just as much as virznana (consciousness), which, too, is sometimes enumerated after the five items in question, is not the sixth mahabhuta What this clearly suggests is that from the very beginning Buddhism did not subscribe to an absolute and realistic view of space.

This early Buddhist view of space gets further articulated in the Abhidhamma of the Theravadins. It is of course true that a number of statements both in the canonical and exegetical texts of the Abhidhamma seem to suggest a realistic view of space, that is, the recognition of space as something objectively real. Thus, for instance, matter is defined as that which is extended in space, the principle of spatial extension being represented by the earth-element.43 This means that space serves as a kind of receptacle for the existence of matter. Again, space is said to function as the principle of delimitation (pariccheda), delimiting the boundaries of each rupa-kaldpa, that is, the smallest unit of matter and thus physically separating it from the other rupa-kalapas.44 On an empirically observable level, its function as the principle of delimitation is to delimit and separate material objects so that we can perceive them as distinct and separate entities. These several roles assigned to space could suggest that as explained in the Abhidhamma space is something objectively real. However, if space is so described, this kind of description, as the commentaries say, is made "for the convenience of grasping the meaning"-(sukhagahanattham), and, therefore, it is not valid in an ultimate sense (nippariyaiyena).45 This will. become clear if we examine here the nature of space in the context of the dhamma theory.

If time is not elevated to the level of a dhamma, in the case of space the situation is somewhat different. For we find an item called akasa-dhatu (space-element) listed in the Dhammasnngani of the Abhidhamma Pitaka as an upada- rupa, i.e. a material dhamma dependent on the four primary elements of matter. As to why it is so postulated, some say that since space is "necessary for the movement of matter, it can well be placed under secondary matter". 46 If this were the reason for its inclusion in matter, then it ought to have been given a position at least on par with the primary elements, rather than being recognized as dependent on, and, therefore, secondary to them. The several examples cited to illustrate the kind of space that is meant here clearly show that the reference is not to."bare geometric extension" but to the void region that delimits and separates material objects.47 In other words, what the Abhidhamma means by akasa-dhatu is bounded or delimited space. Hence the commentaries define it as having the characteristic (lakkhana) of delimitating material objects and the function (rasa) of showing their boundaries. And while it is manifested (paccupatthana) as the confines of matter, it has as its proximate cause (padatthana) the separated material objects.48 And it is because of the material objects separated by the space-element that we can say, "this is above, this is below, this is across".49 These different aspects of the space-element come into focus by its description as pariccheda-rupa, i.e. the material phenomenon of delimitation. The principle of delimitation signifies not only that which delimits (paricchindati) but also that which is delimited (paricchijjati) 50. The implication is that since the space-element means bounded space, it sets limits to and is itself limited by the environing material phenomena. This should explain why it is listed as a secondary material phenomenon dependent on the primary elements. Since our idea of the void is due to the environing matter, and since all matter, from the point of view of the elemental analysis, depends on the primary elements, the space-element, too, can be said to

depend on them.

In the Sarvastivada Abhidarma, too, we find its counterpart, also referred to as akasadhatu, but in this system its inclusion in matter is due to another reason: The spaceelement is either light (aloka) or darkness (tamas) and therefore it is included in the objective sense-field of the visible (rupayatana).51 In contrast, the Theravadins include it in the objective field of mental objects (dhamma, vatana), which means that it is not visible but can be cognized only as an object of mind-consciousness.52 We find this view defended in a Kathavatthu controversy as well. In response to the view held by some Buddhist schools that space is visible because one can see the interval-between two trees or two posts or the space in a keyhole or in a window, the Theravadins' reply is that in the case of an interval between two trees, for instance, what one actually sees with his eyes is only the colour of the two trees and that the interval as such is known only by the mind as an object of mind-consciousness.53

Besides the space referred to above, the Sarvastivadins recognize another kind of space which is called akasa and not akasa-dhatu. It is defined not as space bound by matter but as that which provides room for the movement of matter (yatra rupasya gatih).54 It is omni-present (sarvagata) and eternal (nitya). Its nature is non-obstruction (anavarana- svabhava). That is to say, it does not obstruct (avrnoti) matter, which freely exists therein; nor is it obstructed (avryate) by matter, for it cannot be dislodged by the latter. However, space is not the mere absence of obstruction (anavarana-bhava-matra), but something passively really In view of these characteristics, in the Sarvastivada Abhidharma, space is elevated to the level of an unconditioned dharma and in this sense it is on a par with pratisamkhya and apratisamkhya-nirodha. Thus what the Sarvastivadins call unconditioned space is the space considered as absolutely real and as serving as a receptacle for the existence and movement of material phenomena.

What could be considered as the Theravada counterpart of this kind of space is found only in one Theravada work, namely the Milindapanha. Here we find space defined as follows: In no way can it be grasped (sabbaso agayha); it inspires terror (santasaniya); it is infinite (ananta), boundless (appamana) and immeasurable (appameyya). It does not cling to anything (alagga), is not attached to anything (asatta), rests on nothing (appatittha) and is not obstructed by anything (apalibuddha). 56 Elsewhere in the same work we are told that two things in this world are not born of karma (akammaja), or of causes (ahetuja), or of season (anutuja), namely Nibbana and space.57 However, what is important to remember here is that although the Milindapanha describes space in such a way as to fall in line with its counterpart in the Sarvastivada Abhidharma, it carefully avoids the use of the term "unconditioned" (asankhata) in describing it: This is a very sign)ficant departure from its Sarvastivada version. What could have prompted the Milindapanha to take this stance is that such a description would elevate space to a level on par with Nibbana.

However, what is important to remember here is that the kind of space described in the Milindapanha is not the same as the space-element listed in the Dhammasangani. For the latter means not space in the sense of "bare geometric extension" but spaces bounded by matter. What can be considered as a parallel to the Milindapanha space is found in the Kathavatthu of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. For here too space is described more in terms of that which provides room for the existence and movement of material phenomena. However, unlike in the Milindapanha it is not described as infinite and eternal, but as something neither conditioned nor unconditioned. 58 The commentary observes that if space is so described, this means that it is a pannatti, i.e., a nominal dhamma or a conceptual construct with no objective counterpart.59

Thus in the Theravada Abhidhamma as well we find two kinds of space. What led to this idea can be traced to the early Buddhist discourses themselves. Here space is sometimes described as referring to cavities, apertures and interstices. This is what the suttas mean by akasa-dhatu (space-element), when it is counted as one of the six elements (dhatu) into which the empiric individuality is analysed.60 And when the Sangiti Sutta of the Dighanikaya refers to a material phenomenon that is neither visible (anidassana) nor impingent (appatigha), 61 it is very likely that the reference is to this space element. And it is this same space-element that we find in the Abhidhamma list of secondary material phenomena (upada-rupa) as the principle of material delimitation (pariccheda- rupa). Sometimes we find in the Pali suttas space described not as void region but as the ultimate basis, a sort of fulcrum or receptacle for the existence of the physical world. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, for instance, the Buddha is represented as saying: "This great earth, O Ananda, rests on water, water on air, and air on space".62 And in the Rahulovada Sutta it is said that space for its part does not rest on anything (akaso na kattha ci patitthito).63 In point of fact, the Milindapanha cites this same statement in its reference to space as described there.64 Equally significant

is an observation found in the Abhidharmakosavyakhya of Acarya Yasomitra. It says that when the Vaibhasikas (Sarvastivadins) argue that space is real they base this argument on a sutra-passage where the Buddha declares to a Brahmin that the earth rests on the circle of water, the circle of water on air, air on space and that space for its part does not rest on anything, does not cling to anything.65

It is this latter kind of space that came to be elevated in the Milindapanha almost to the level of an unconditioned dhamma. And it is also this same space that the Kathavatthu describes as neither conditioned nor unconditioned, and this, as the commentary says, means that it is a conceptual construct. In the commentaries it is sometimes introduced as infinite space (anantakasa) and boundless space (ajatakasa).66 Both terms highlight its difference from the space-element in the sense of bounded space. The use of these two terms does not mean that space is regarded as something real and absolute. The use of another term, empty space (tucchakasa) does, in fact, highlight its true nature.67 For as noted earlier, for the Pali commentaries space in the sense of "bare geometric extension" is a mere conceptual construct. (pannatti-matta).

The reference to two kinds of space could be considered as looking at the same phenomenon from two different angles. The first, which is always introduced by the compound word, akasa-dhatu (space-element) means space as void region or as that which delimits material phenomena. The second which is introduced by the simple term, akasa (space) means space as providing room for the existence and movement of matter. It may then be asked why the former is described as conditioned (sankhata) and the latter as neither conditioned nor unconditioned (= pannatti or conceptual construct). The reason for this is that although the former is presented as one of the secondary material phenomena (upada-rupa), it is not considered as an entity distinct from the other material phenomena. It is the method followed in the Dhammasangani that in recognizing certain characteristics and modalities connected with real rupa-dhammas (elements of matter), those characteristics and modalities themselves are presented as separate and co-ordinate rupa- dhammas. It is only a pedagogic device adopted to avoid the distinction between substance and quality entering into the list of rupa-dhammas. The Pali commentators were fully aware of this situation. This should explain why in the commentaries the space-element of the Dhammasangani came to be included in a category called anipphanna-rupa. What is included in this category is, strictly speaking, not a dhamma, because it has no own-nature (sabhava). Nor is it of the nature of rupa in the sense of matter, because it does not answer to its definition.68 If the items included in the category of anipphanna-rupa continue to be presented as rupa-dhammas, this, as the commentators say, is done only as a matter of convention (rulhiya).69

What all this amounts to is that in the ultimate sense (nippariyayena), the space-element (akasa-dhatu) is not different from space akasa). Both are conceptual constructs with no corresponding objective reality. This reminds us of the Sautranntika school of Buddhism where space is defined as "the mere absence of the ‘substance’ that has the characteristic of resistance or impenetrability" (sapratighadravyabhavamatra).70 Since matter is defined as that which has the characteristic of resistance or impenetrability, the above definition can be rephrased to mean that space is the mere absence of matter. This definition is intended to show that space is not something positively real but a conceptual construct having only derivative and pragmatic validity (prajnapti-sat). The addition of the word, mere (matra) is to emphasize the fact that non-existence of matter does not mean the existence of anything other than matter. Space is not the opposite of matter but the mere absence of matter.

TIME AND SPACE AS PANNATTIS

The inclusion of time and space in the category of pannattis in other words means that they are not dhammas. The dhammas, as we have already noted, are the entities that have ontological ultimacy. Hence they are often described as paramattha, that is, that which exists in a real and ultimate sense. The description of dhammas as paramattha means not only their objective existence (paramatthato vijjamanata) but also their cognizability in an ultimate sense (paramatthato upalabbhamanata).71 Thus from an ontological point of view, if the dhammas represent the final limits into which the analysis of empirical existence can be pushed, from an epistemological point of view they represent the objects of higher knowledge. The pannattis, on the other hand, signify those entities that have no objective counterparts and therefore which owe their being to mind’s synthetic function (kappaana). Therefore the two terms, paramattha and pannatti, could be understood as indicating two levels of reality as well: The first refers to those entities that truly exist independently of the cognitive act and the second, to those entities that owe their being to the act of cognition itself. These two categories are said to be mutually exclusive and together they provide a rational explanation for the totality of our internal and external

experience. Hence it is categorically stated that apart from pannatti and paramattha a third category does not obtain (tatiya koti na vijjati).72 In consonance with this situation pannatti is also defined as "that which is other than the dhammas" (tato avasesa), or as "that which remains after the mental and material dhammas" (namarupa-vinimmutta).73.

Since time and space are two pannattis, they are definable as two asabhava-dhammas as well,74 that is, as two entities devoid of own-nature. Since sabhava or own-nature is not different from the dhamma, from the perspective of this definition what is qualified as asabhava amounts to an abhava, a non-existent in the ultimate sense. Hence the three salient characteristics of empirical reality, namely origination (uppada), existence (thiti), and dissolution (bhanga) are not applicable to time and space. For these three characteristics can be predicated only of those things which properly answer to the Abhidhammic definition of empirical reality.75 Again, unlike the real existents (= dhammas) they are not brought about by conditions (paccayatthitika).76 For this selfsame reason, both time and space can also be defined as aparinipphanna, that is, not positively produced. Aparinipphannata or positive production is true of only those things, which have their own individual essence (avenika-sabhava).77 As the Abhidhamma Mulatika says, "only a dhamma that is an individual essence, with a definite beginning and a definite end in time, produced by conditions, and marked by the three salient characteristics of the conditioned existence, is positively produced".78 As two pannattis, another important characteristic of time and space is that they cannot be described either as sankhata (conditioned) or as asankhata (unconditioned), for to be so described they do not possess their own-nature.79 Since the two terms, sankhata and asankhata, represent the totality of conditioned and unconditioned existence, the description of time and space as neither conditioned nor unconditioned is another way of referring to their nonexistence as real and ultimate existents.

Again, unlike the dhammas, time and space as pannattis are not delimited by rise and fall (udayabbaya-paricchnina).80 Such a situation is true only of dhammas, because they come into being having been not (ahutva sambhonti) and cease to exist after having been (hutva pativenti).81 In contrast, time and space have no individual essence to be manifested in the three instants of arising (uppada)' presence (thiti), and dissolution (bhanga).82 Thus, since they have no existence marked by the three instantaneous phases - the nascent, static, and cessant - temporal distinctions as past, present, and future do not apply to them. As such, both time and space are also described as kala-vimutta, that is, free from time.83 Here "free from time" means that the three temporal distinctions as past, present, and future do not apply to them. That space is free from time is understandable. But how are we to understand that time is free from time, that is, free from the three temporal distinctions? The answer to this question is that, according to the Abhidhamma, what we call the three temporal distinctions are not three phases of an absolute time but three conceptual constructs which we superimpose on the incessant flow of the dhammas. Past means the dhammas that have ceased to exist, present means the dhammas that exist, and future means the dhammas that are yet to originate.

The Abhidhamma distinguishes two kinds of pannatti. one is called nama-pannatti. It refers to names, words, signs, or symbols through which things, real or unreal, are designated: "It is the mere mode of recognizing (sannakaramatta) by way of this or that word whose sign)ficance is determined by worldly convention"84 It is created by worldly consent (loka-sanketa-nimmita) and established by worldly usage (lokavoharena siddha)85. The other, called attha-pannatti, refers to ideas, notions, or concepts corresponding to the names, words, signs, or symbols. It is produced by the interpretative function of the mind (kappana) and is based on the various forms or appearances presented by the real elements (dhammas) when they are in particular situations or positions (avattha-visesa) .86 Both nama-pannatti and attha-pa`n`natti thus have a psychological origin and as such both are devoid of objective reality.

N`E0ma-pannatti is often defined as that which makes known (pann`E0panato pannatti) and attha-pannatti as that which is made known (pa'n'n`E0piyatt`E0 pannatti).87 The former is an instance of agency-definiton (kattu-sadhanad and the latter of object-definition (kammasadhana). What both attempt to show is that nama-pannatti which makes attha- pannatti known, and attha-pannatti which is made known by nama-pannatti, are mutually interdependent and therefore logically inseparable. This explains the significance of another definition, which states that nama-pannatti is the term's relationship with the ideas (saddassa atthehi sambandho) and that attha-pannatti is the idea's relationship with the terms (atthassa saddehi sambandho).88 These two pairs of definition show that the two processes of conceptualization and verbalization through the symbolic medium of language are but two separate aspects of the same phenomenon. It is for the convenience of definition that what really amounts to a single phenomenon is treated from two different angles, which represent two ways of looking at the same

thing. The difference is established by defining the same word, pannatti, in two different ways. When it is defined as subject it is nama- pannatti - the concept as name. When it is defined as object it is attha-pannatti - the concept as meaning. If the former is that which expresses (vacaka), the latter is that which is expressible (vacaniya).89 In this same sense, if the former is abhidhana or designation, the latter is abhidheya or that which is designated90. Since attha-pannatti stands for the process of conceptualization it represents more the subjective and dynamic aspect, and since nama-pannatti stands for the process of verbalization it represents more.the objective and static aspect. For the assignment of a term to what is constructed in thought - in other words - its expression through the symbolic medium of language - invests it with some kind of relative permanence and objectivity. It is, so to say, crystallized into an entity.

Since time and space are two instances of pannatti, the foregoing observations on the two kinds of painnatti apply to them equally.