

## ABHIDHAMMA AS PRACTICAL METHOD

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*Abhidhamma* is the third division of the Buddhist *tipitaka* or "canon." The word itself is often translated "higher *dhamma* (teaching)," the texts included under the division being extremely complex, in fact dry-as-dust expositions of what is usually referred to as "Buddhist psychology" or even--more hesitantly--"Buddhist metaphysics." The particle *abhi*, however, has the ordinary sense of "towards" or "concerning," in which case "*abhidhamma*" would mean "about *dhamma(s)*," this "*dhamma*" denoting a basic component of experience, something like the sense-data of twentieth-century epistemology. It makes sense to treat "*abhidhamma*" this way because the texts are exclusively devoted to deriving and analyzing these "basics."<sup>1</sup>

Let us briefly describe what the Basics are. In *Abhidhamma* it might be inappropriate to do this, as the Basics are ultimate units of explanation and cannot themselves be explained in terms of anything more ultimate; the most that can be done with them (apart from experiencing them) is to classify them according to type, the most general groups of Basics being the five *khandas* or collections that constitute the human organism. But it is necessary to say something about the nature of the Basics in order to remove some Western misconceptions that have attached to them. They are not, first of all, anything like the atoms or particles discovered by science which are said to make up the physical fabric of the world. They are like the "logical constructions" of A. J. Ayer's positivism in that any statement about things or persons is in principle "translatable" into a statement about Basics; but there is no meaningful way in which the world is "made of" them.<sup>2</sup> Second, Basics survive for a considerably shorter time than commonsense things or persons do. To use James' phrase, their "specious present" is limited, in the majority of cases,<sup>3</sup> to the duration of a discrete sense-perception (mentation being counted as a sense). The later scholastic notion of the "instantaneousness" of Basics is, however, conspicuous by its absence in the *Abhidhamma* texts.<sup>4</sup> An event occurring within a

"moment" is as insusceptible to observation as the "moment" itself: but the Basics are supposed to be observable.<sup>5</sup> They are both the conditions for experience and the terms in which experience is to be interpreted.

This brings us to Edward Conze's characterization of Basics as "truly real events."<sup>6</sup> The early Buddhists certainly recommended, as part of their program to end human suffering, that people learn to see the world in terms of *dhammas*, which involves learning to experience *dhammas* in the first place. But would they have insisted that such experience was experience of the "truly real"? If the Basics are not constituents of reality, do they at least represent the most correct view of reality possible?

It will be my purpose here to argue that this is not the case, that *Abhidhamma* is not "metaphysics" (every form of which early Buddhism explicitly rejects, as I will show), but that it is just the cognitive aspect of the wider practical method called the Eightfold Path, and makes no claim whatsoever about the "true nature" of the world. It encourages us to experience the world in certain ways, but is uninterested in whether these experiences lead to knowledge or even warranted beliefs. The point is only that they are the experiences that help put an end to suffering on the cognitive level.<sup>7</sup> The Eightfold Path, of course, includes recommendations for conduct, speech and meditation as well as viewpoint and thought, but the two latter are just as much *practical* recommendations as the others: they stand for experience and thinking which have been adjusted to the larger Buddhist program, not to some speculative (or even phenomenological) opinion about "how the world is."

The well-known story of the Buddha's treatment of one of his philosophically-inclined disciples bears repeating.<sup>8</sup> This man, Malunkyaputta, decided the Buddha hadn't said enough about certain metaphysical themes: whether the universe is finite or infinite, the mind/body problem, the immortality of the soul (to put it in our terms) and the like. He had the understandable desire to get the Buddha's *position* on all this: you don't want to follow a holy man who doesn't know the answers to the Big Questions, or doesn't have an opinion. So he demanded of the Buddha that he settle these issues, or Malunkyaputta was going to quit the Order.

The Buddha's response was parabolic, in two senses: it was a parable, and it skirted any direct answer to the queries. The Buddha offered the ridiculous case of a man wounded by a poisoned arrow, who refuses to let the surgeon treat his wound until certain things are settled: Who shot the arrow? What was his caste and village of origin? How tall was he? How old? What kind of wood did he use to make the arrows? What kind of feathers? What color were they? and so on. "Obviously," the Buddha concludes, "the man would die before his questions could be answered." In the same way, he goes on, he himself is like a physician with a diagnosis (the first two of the Four Noble Facts) and a prescription (the last two), and there is just no time to speculate on anything not relevant to the "cure": "I teach suffering, the source of suffering, the fact that suffering can be ended, and the path leading to its end." He says nothing about anything else: not implying he doesn't know, but not implying he does know either. Some theoretical questions, of course, would be relevant to a successful treatment: in the parable, it would be important for the surgeon to know what the poison was, how deep the arrow lay, how much blood the man had lost and the like. But it would not be important, or possible, for the patient to have even these facts explained to him--he would die first. The suggestion is that concern over metaphysical problems has a similar effect on a person's ability to pursue the Buddhist program: as the Buddha repeats to Malunkyaputta, "You would die before you learned the answers."

This medical analogy is far from uncommon in the first Buddhist texts.<sup>9</sup> Again and again it is stressed that all the elements of the Eightfold Path, including the abstrusities of the *Abhidhamma*, are of the nature of prescriptions or directions to people interested in following the program, no more and no less. The program's goal, corresponding to the "cure," is the snuffing (*Nibbana*) of the three "fires" which consume humanity in suffering--greed, aversion, and delusion. The sections of the Path titled "appropriate viewpoint" and "appropriate thinking" are thus designed to adjust one's perception and thought away from attachment to the pleasant, revulsion from the unpleasant and bewilderment by the neutral.<sup>10</sup> How this works out in the concrete is examined

exhaustively in the *Abhidhamma*. Notice, however, that nothing is being said about the Buddhist standpoint's corresponding to "reality." The very question of "reality" or truth is one of those questions which distract from the Path and indeed make following it impossible. The word "*samma*" which precedes the stages of the Path and is ordinarily translated "right" or "correct" would better be expressed by "appropriate," as I have done. Each stage names the behavior *appropriate* for carrying out the program to end suffering. In general the principle is to hold to the "middle," but this should not be understood as advocacy of moderation (a la Aristotle or even Epicurus--hardly "Buddhist" thinkers!) but as centered, balanced behavior. The word meaning "suffering" in Buddhism has the wider and more original meaning of "imbalance"--it was used for a wobbly cartwheel, one not centered correctly on its axle. The sources of imbalance are greed, aversion and delusion: these throw us off-center and into obsessive, fragmented states. Mere correctness in one's "metaphysics" can therefore be evidence of unhealthy obsession--the passionate "quest for truth" that is the bedfellow of so much fanaticism--rather than an asset to one's mental stability. What is appropriate to the program is to perceive and think in such a way that greed, aversion and delusion fail to arise. Whether this is the "correct" way by some non-pragmatic standard (i.e., some standard external to the program) is not a question the practicing Buddhist would care much about.

That the *Abhidhamma* is not a treatise on "how things are" but a technique for viewing the world in a way appropriate to the Buddhist Program is borne out by the fact that the cognitive aspects of the Path cannot be disconnected from the other, more obviously "pragmatic" aspects. Seeing and thinking in terms of *dhammas* facilitates and in turn is facilitated by the method of experiential culture ("meditation") one employs, the extent to which one is helpful or harmful to other living beings and the way one earns a living. The *directions* for reaching the *dhammic* standpoint are given in the *suttas* dealing with "mindfulness" (*sati*) and insight (*vipassana*); the *explanation* of this standpoint is given in the *Abhidhamma* texts.<sup>11</sup>

A simple example will hopefully afford some idea of what is involved. If you eat too much chocolate you get sick, and if

you keep it up you rot your teeth. This doesn't keep people from eating too much chocolate. If, however, you had trained yourself not to do things that lead to pain or imbalance, you'd never be in the situation of eating too much chocolate in the first place. *Abhidhamma* is just a component of this kind of training. Let's take the experience of eating a hunk of chocolate and analyze it first in the unreflective, non-Buddhist way and then in terms of *Abhidhamma*. (Since I am quite far from being a practitioner of *Abhidhamma*, the best I can do is give you a rough account.) There's a piece of chocolate here. I love chocolate. It looks and smells delicious. I take a bite and I just can't stop. I gobble down the whole bar.

Now the first thing to notice about the *dhammic* account is that the two crucial components of the unreflective version, I and the piece of chocolate, are absent. The way we go about this is to note what's happening in each of the five *khandas* or groups of *dhammas* involved. These groups are *form, awareness, sensation, perception*, and the whole area we might call *impulse*. So, in order: there is a brown rectangular color patch with a smooth texture to the touch, and sense-organs capable of contacting this object; there is the awareness of sense-contact, of activity (moving the hand, arm, lips, teeth and throat), and of sensations preceding, coinciding with and following on this contact and activity; there are pleasant sensations arising from sight, smell and taste; there is the name "candy bar" attached to a hypothetical object of these senses and the name "self" attached to their hypothetical subject, both names connected to various memories, anticipations and assumptions; and finally there are such things as the desire to prolong or repeat the pleasant sensations, feelings of satisfaction and/or guilt, the separate decisions to initiate the different movements and so on. Seeing the experience in the first way, an inevitable logical connection appears to exist between enjoying something and wanting more of it; seeing it in the second way, no such connection appears. The second way is hence more useful for overcoming greed. *This is the only important difference between the two interpretations.* To ask which one is "more correct" or "closer to reality" would be to miss the point of the exercise.

The rough outline of an *Abhidhammic* account just given

had suggestive similarities to G. E. Moore's description of what it is like to see an envelope, or H. H. Price's description of seeing a tomato: and I said at the outset that *dhammas* and the "sense-data" these men pointed to were much the same. Where they differ, I am arguing, is in the motive for introducing them. Where Moore and his colleagues were interested in producing a correct theory of perception, the authors of the *Abhidhamma* were not, only in detailing a method for adjusting the cognitive life to the Buddhist program. Roderick Firth, in his devastating 1949 article "Sense-Data and the Percept Theory," critiques the sense-datum position from the point of view that what we ordinarily perceive are "ostensible physical objects clothed in sensuous qualities."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Firth does not deny that there are sense-data or that we perceive them, just that we perceive them in the first instance or as a matter of course. Sense-data appear to us only in deranged states as a rule, but there might be reasons why we might want to experience them voluntarily (Firth mentions an artist looking at his canvas in terms of color arrangement), and we can do this by carrying out a *perceptual reduction* of the ostensible physical objects in our sensory field. Firth describes perceptual reduction as a highly artificial learned operation; his conclusion is, then, that if such a technique is required to perceive sense-data, we do not normally perceive them.

It seems to me there is much in Firth's article for an early Buddhist to agree with. In the first place, it is the *khanda* of perception which is responsible for presenting us with the "ostensible physical objects" of our experience (in our example, the hunk of chocolate), so the Buddhist would admit that this is how we ordinarily perceive things, though he would add that perception is intrinsically bound up with desire and with the notion of an isolated subject who possesses desire. In the second place, though, and most importantly, he would agree that the process by which one arrives at *dhammas* is deliberate, artificial and learned. "Perceptual reduction" he would see as a limited form of *Abhidhamma*: both are practical techniques adopted to reach certain ends, and neither tells us anything about the way we acquire knowledge or about "what is the case." Knowledge for the Buddhist is Enlightenment, and this is got more by unlearning habitual thought-constructions than by the

accumulation of facts.

It is my belief that the central "schools" of Buddhism, with the exception of the Sarvastivada but including Zen, all subscribe to this pragmatic interpretation of the *Abhidhamma*. There are no categorical imperatives in Buddhism but only hypothetical ones, so not even the most complex and abstract "philosophies" produced by Buddhists demand our simple assent, but only recommend that we assent *provided* we are attracted to Buddhism, which means we are willing to take the steps necessary to do away with suffering.<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henceforth capitalized. "Basics" or "fundamentals" seems to be the best word to capture the various meanings of "*dhamma*," which comes from a root *dhr*, to uphold, serve as foundation.

<sup>2</sup>A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2d ed. (New York: Dover, 1946), 63-64, 123-24.

<sup>3</sup>The unconditioned Basics, *Nibbana* and perhaps empty space, being the exceptions, as they are timeless.

<sup>4</sup>See David J. Kaulpahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), 36-37, 100-107.

<sup>5</sup>Whitehead encountered similar problems with his "actual occasions," which occur too quickly to be experienced and yet are presented as the units of experience. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 103, 158.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 93.

<sup>7</sup>"Suffering" is the commonplace rendering of *dukkha*, which technically means any sort of "imbalance" or "off-centeredness," but it will do for a study of this length and

topic.

<sup>8</sup>It is found in *Majjhima-nikaya* no. 63.

<sup>9</sup>See Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1959), 17.

<sup>10</sup>See the "Fire Sermon," *Samyutta-nikaya* xxxv, 28.

<sup>11</sup>Despite his insistence on the reality of *dhammas* Conze admits that ". . . they are not 'ultimates' in the sense that abstract analysis would necessarily lead to them. They are 'ultimates' to the analysis bent on salvation by the Buddhist method of meditation, and respecting, in faith, the conventions of that method." *Buddhist Thought in India*, 96n.

<sup>12</sup>This article appeared in *Mind* 58 (October 1949): 434-65; and 59 (January 1950): 35-56.

<sup>13</sup>The Pali Text Society publishes the only full English translation of the *Abhidhamma*. A concise presentation of the classical Theravadin version is vol. 2 of Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification*, 2d ed., trans. Nanamoli (Boulder: Shambala, 1976).