THE MYSTIQUE OF THE ABHIDHAMMA

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Abstract

The string theorist was having an affair with his lab assistant. One day, there they were, hammer and tongs on the lab bench, when in walks the wife. The string theorist looks up and, without hesitating, says, 'It's not what it seems. I can explain everything.'

1 IN THE BEGINNING ...

I'm gripped by a somewhat peculiar trepidation as I tiptoe into the hallowed portals of the abhidhamma, my feet echoing too loudly in the cavernous austerity. [1] There's an aura of impenetrable mystery, an impression of unscalable heights, unfathomable depths, untraceable mazes. Nevertheless, in this essay I audaciously propose to set forth an entirely new theory pointing to what I believe is a hitherto unappreciated role of the *abhidhamma*. I certainly do not propose to prove anything in this essay, or hardly even to persuade; I would simply like to float my idea down the stream of consciousness.

In order to avoid the pre-emptory dismissal of my thesis I must prepare the soil. So for the bulk of this essay I will be merely repeating, in a rough-hewn way, critiques of certain abhidhamma concepts that have been aired often enough before, and by hands far more worthy than mine. I must therefore beg the reader's indulgence, for my argument will be short on specifics and rather long on generalizations. I propose to examine the abhidhamma take on two of the most fundamental philosophical concepts, being and time.

What better way to start an inquiry into time than with a journey through time itself? Let's board the slow boat of history at a point long before the Buddha. In these hoary days of yore, the broad river of time is dark and treacherous, the charts no more reliable than 16th Century maps of the world; yet enough light shines through to discern some of the main currents. What do we see as we gaze along the river banks? For a long time, just the plants and animals, maybe some primitive tribes, hunting for food, eking out a bare survival. But at some point we see people doing a strange thing – they are taking perfectly good food and throwing it away! Just tossing

[1] This essay is intended in a playfully provocative spirit. I hope it will be read the same way. It is philosophical rather than scholarly, by which I mean I have not bothered to check any references. Unless otherwise specified, I use the term '*abhidhamma*' to refer to the Theravada scholastic tradition in general rather than the Abhidhamma Piṭaka in particular.

it on the ground! What prehistoric Einstein it was who invented agriculture, we will never know. But what a revolution in understanding this must have required! To put in so much work, to sacrifice so much time and food, to know the seasons so well, to understand the generation of plants from seeds, to conceive of oneself able to receive in a far future time the results of work done today – the strides in consciousness that make civilization possible.

If we look more closely at these unique beings, we see them do something even stranger. In the center of their towns, all of them, stands one building taller than the rest. There the people go, perhaps once a week, and give offerings, sacrifice animals, and with disturbing frequency, even other people. Why on earth would they do such a thing, with no apparent benefit at all? Perhaps we should pull our boat over to the bank and ask. The answer: 'We sow the fields for our welfare in this life; but we offer sacrifices to the gods for our welfare in the next.' Seeing the yearly cycle of the birth and death of the grain, one conceives of time, of oneself in time. In a year I will receive the results of work done today. But if I can conceive of myself as existing in one year, it's no great leap to two years, or three. Well, exactly how many?...In the awful silence that must follow that question falls the shadow, the specter of Death. Our Dark Lady of Time – with her left hand she bestows the bounty of grain; but in her right she grips the sickle.

All religions as we know them are attempts to allay the fear of death. So it should come as no surprise that the ideas that religions call upon to do this are directly derived from agriculture. The 'self' is like a 'seed' that survives the death of the body. It may fall upon either good or bad soil – hence the importance of 'cultivating' good 'kamma', which means both 'ethical actions' as well as 'work'. Thus the suttas explain rebirth, using universal imagery in their own way: 'Kamma is the field; cognition is the seed; craving is the moisture.'

There were, of course, many speculations regarding this world beyond. Are we reborn as a turtle? As a human? In a heaven? Once or many times? One idea, a synthesis of agriculture and astrology, was of a countless series of lives coiling like a vast serpent through the ages. Now up to this point, our river of time could have been anywhere, with but minor variations. But if our river flows through northern India, like the long-vanished Sarasvati, we come to the most remarkable sight of all. Not content with just sacrificing some seed to the soil for next year, or even sacrificing animals at the temple for the next life, a small number of people give up all their worldly possessions and take to the wilds. Living on remote mountains, or in thick jungle, they pursue the most bizarre, irrational practices imaginable – torturing their bodies, sitting immobile for hours at a time, fasting. This time our polite inquiry meets with an even stranger answer: 'What's the point in being reborn only to die again? We will not rest until we have achieved nothing less than total deliverance from the cycle of rebirth!' And so a new word enters the religious vocabulary – liberation. Enter the Buddha.

What I would like to do now is to take a brief run through the treatment of time in the early period of the Buddha's life. I would like to answer two questions. How is time treated? And how important is it? I would then like to posit the simple assumption that the conception of time thus revealed should be a prime frame for interpreting the suttas as a whole. Innocuous enough perhaps, but this assumption leads to some

radical conclusions, as we shall see.

According to the suttas, when the Bodhisattva was born he roared out 'This is my last birth! Now there will be no repeated existence!' When mature, the signs of the old man and the dead man prompted the Bodhisattva to go forth, reflecting: 'Why should I, being subject to birth, ageing, death, and defilement, seek what is also subject to birth, aging, death, and defilement? Shouldn't I seek what is not subject to birth, ageing, death, and defilement?' He rejected his early teachers because their system leads 'only to rebirth' in exalted planes. On the night of his enlightenment, he first recollected his past lives; then saw how kamma leads to rebirth; then finally annihilated the defilements leading to his own rebirth. He knew: 'Birth is endedis no returning to this state of existence.' His very first words were: 'Through many births in samsara I wandered, seeking, but not finding the Housebuilder. Painful is birth ever and again!' In the first sermon, his first words defining the spiritual problem were: 'Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering...The cause: 'That craving that generates rebirth...' The solution: 'The ending of that very same craving...'

Up to this point in the Buddha's life at every major event, time is the central issue, and the only description of time is birth, ageing, and death. This is incredible! Surely this must rank as the definitive paradigm for understanding the sutta teachings on time. 'Birth', of course, always means 'rebirth'. There is nothing to be done about the suffering due to one's own birth, ageing, and death in this life, and the Buddha did not waste his breath talking about insoluble problems.

Some may object that there are other teachings whose omission here has slanted the argument. Suffering, for example, is not just birth, ageing, and death. True; but if we look more closely at these teachings we will find that they in fact support my thesis. Take the famous phrase 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering'. On the face of it this is simply describing our everyday sorrows. And it is indeed a marvelous quality of the Dhamma that proper practice leads to unparalleled joy and ease of heart here & now. But the fact that this phrase invariably occurs after 'birth, ageing, and death' suggests that it refers primarily to the sorrows of future lives. The suttas say that the suffering in this life is like a speck of dust, but the suffering in the future is like the mighty Himalayas. This impression is confirmed when we notice that the phrase includes 'pain', which means specifically physical pain. It is well known that even Buddhas are not exempt from the pains of the body, so this must refer exclusively to future lives.

Or take the phrase 'Not to get what one wants is suffering.' If I were a betting man, I would lay strong odds that no-one reading that phrase today would associate it with rebirth. But what do the suttas say? 'For beings subject to birth, though they may wish "Aho! May we not be subject to birth! May birth not come to us!" this cannot be attained by wishing. This is "Not to get what one wants is suffering"...'

Bearing the above in mind, let's take a fresh look at the second and third sermons, not from our perspective as secularized moderns peering through 2500 years of encrusted interpretation, but through the eyes of the original audience. Here we must remember one golden rule – don't psychologize! The audience, the group of five monks, weren't; they couldn't. Psychology hadn't been invented yet. Think: these men had spent years relentlessly savaging their bodies with the most brutal self-torture imaginable. Did they do this in hope of a comfortable and happy exis-

tence in this life? On the contrary, they would have thought such a goal trivial and foolish. Haunted by fear of death, their lives had been obsessively dedicated to utter disregard for this life in a sadly misguided attempt to find salvation in the next. And, no doubt, they conceived this salvation in terms of the survival of some sort of 'self'.

The group of five monks had been with the Bodhisattva for some time previous, so they would be familiar with the outlines of his earlier life as described above. But the only Dhamma teaching they'd heard was the first sermon. There, the description of suffering ends with the words: 'In summary, the five aggregates associated with grasping are suffering.' Note the words 'in summary'; the five aggregates do not introduce any radical new paradigm. The second sermon can therefore be seen as an expansion of that curt phrase; the first commentary.

It starts: 'Physical form is not self.' What would this have meant to the group of five? The internal evidence in the suttas suggests that the five aggregates were a pre-Buddhist eschatological scheme, a convenient framework for classifying the various speculations about the 'self' that survives death. The sutta is dismissing one class of eschatological theories: it is not proper to seek salvation from death by identifying with the survival of some physical principle. It gives two reasons. Firstly, physical form leads to affliction. In the future as now, it gets old and dies. Secondly, we cannot command physical form: 'Be like that! Don't be like that!' In the light of the above, this obviously means that we cannot command our physical existence in the next life to be just how we please. The verb here, hoti, is regularly used in eschatological contexts. The sutta repeats the analysis for the remaining aggregates of feeling, recognition, volitional activities, and cognition. Here and below I'll just take physical form as the example.

Next the sutta asks: 'Is physical form permanent or impermanent?' 'Impermanent, bhante.' This is the very first non-specific treatment of time in the suttas. Since the only meaning of time and rise and fall until now has been birth, ageing, and death, it would be perverse to insist on another meaning here. But we can note a slight shift. 'Impermanence' is a more philosophical term, suggesting a move to a more general treatment of time, where birth, ageing, and death become the paradigms for time considered in different contexts.

'Is what is impermanent suffering or pleasure?' 'Suffering, bhante.' Now normally we think of variety and change as stimulating and enjoyable, so this answer might seem a bit odd. But if 'change' means birth, ageing & death, it's no wonder it's suffering.

'In that case is it fit to regard physical form thus: "This is mine, I am this, this is my self"?' 'No, bhante.' So physical form, being impermanent, i.e. subject to ageing & death, is not fit to regard as an immortal soul.

Next, one regards all physical form 'with right understanding in accordance with reality' as not-self: 'past, future, and present' (i.e. past lives, future lives, and the present life) 'internal' (i.e. an internal physical phenomenon regarded as a soul, such as the breath) 'external' (the external soul was a common idea in antiquity – a bird, a tree, or just about anything could be conceived of as one's soul) 'inferior or superior' (i.e. in better or worse planes of rebirth) 'near or far' (perhaps meaning 'on earth or in heaven').

Seeing thus, the 'learned noble disciple' abandons defilements. So far, the only

description of defilements we have met is 'that craving that generates repeated existence.' The phrase 'learned noble disciple' as well as 'right wisdom in accordance with reality' specifically refer to stream entry or higher; this is thus said to be dependent on insight into rebirth. After all this, it should come as no surprise when the sutta expresses the experience of enlightenment again as: 'Birth is ended...'

Let us now look at the third sermon. We shall see a significant development in the treatment of time. This time the Buddha is teaching a different group of yogis, with, however, similar preconceptions. This teaching is phrased in terms of the six senses. The Buddha is now inventing psychology, setting forth his basic analysis of cognitive processes. Here we see, for the first time, a specifically psychological treatment of time. Feeling is said to 'arise dependent on contact', whereas previously, arising and ceasing was exclusively the arising and ceasing of rebirth. The most striking feature of the discourse, however, is that the emphasis is not on technical definition and abstract analysis, but on a stirring, constantly repeated warning : 'All is burning!...With what is it burning? With the fires of greed, anger, and delusion...' This famous triad is obviously just a more detailed analysis of 'that craving that generates rebirth', introduced here to correlate with the triad of feeling. '...With the fires of birth, aging & death...' So the reason the eye, etc., are burning is because attachment to our sensory experience gives rise to defilements which generate rebirth.

Thus the Fire Sermon, drawing on a suggestion latent in the 'impermanence' of the second sermon, shows the connection between the experience of time in the psychological present moment and the eschatological framework which was the original motivation for spiritual practice. This relationship is explored in many ways in the suttas, and all the suttas' psychological teachings should be seen in this light. The Buddha's innovation was not to shift the focus of religious concern from eschatology to psychology, but to 'demetaphysicalize' eschatology, explaining rebirth in rational, empirical terms as being no different in principle from the psychological processes observable in the present moment. So seeing the suttas by standing 'behind' them looking forward we see a very different scenario than if we stand in the 21st Century looking back.

If the main perspective on time in the suttas is eschatological, the main framework for explaining this must be dependent origination. This is the Buddha's explanation for how rebirth happens without a soul, taking the psychological analysis from the third sermon and showing how that fits into the cycle of rebirth. Despite receiving varied treatment in the suttas, this is always the main idea; so the famous twelve links occur countless times with rigorous consistency.

We can trace the treatment of time in the abhidhamma as an evolution from these elements. In the earliest strata of abhidhamma literature, the Sutta Exposition of the Vibhaṅga, we find the same series of twelve links. But the next strata, the Abhidhamma Exposition, introduces many variations by redefining the twelve links in ways never taught by the Buddha. The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma developed similar ideas, and there too they were forced to redefine the factors to make them work. The main purpose seems to further psychologize the teachings by introducing what has in modern times become famous as the 'one lifetime dependent origination'. This is touted as a return to the original psychological teachings of the Buddha, free of the eschatological perspective introduced by later supposed Brahmanical influences. But as we

have seen, the reality is just the opposite. It is the suttas which so strongly emphasize eschatology – I cannot imagine what the Buddha could have done to emphasize it more. The Abhidhamma Pitaka, divorcing the psychological teachings from their original eschatological context, starts to develop a psychology for its own sake. Thus the modern 'one-lifers' are really just taking the abhidhamma program a step further, abolishing the role of rebirth altogether.

It is perhaps worth noting that the atheistic Saṅkhyā school was emerging over the same period as the abhidhamma. This school was described by eminent scholar Heinrich Zimmer in his Philosophies of India thus. 'Their analysis of the micromacrocosm, as well as the whole range of human problems, are presented in terms of a sort of proto-scientific psychological functionalism...a meticulous and sober positivism.' Given the near identity of the philosophical tenets of these two schools – rationalism, dualism, and realism – and the evident influence of such Sankhya conceptions as the 'sabhāva' on the abhidhamma, we may be forgiven for wondering if it is not the Suttas' three life dependent origination, but the Abhidhamma's one life theory which reflects some non-Buddhist influence.

By the time of the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, which is probably later than the sections considered above, time is just treated as 'on that occasion'. The vagueness of this – in a text whose ostensible purpose is precision of definition! – allows for just about any interpretation of time, which was probably the point. Gone is the urgency, gone the inspiration, gone the humanity, gone the relevance. That's all in the past now.

The Dhammasaṅgaṇī is committed to thus impoverishing time due to its universalist agenda. It must provide definitions applicable to any possible mode of experience. But it also purports to be a legitimate exposition of the suttas, which have quite a different agenda. To reconcile the two perspectives the Dhammasaṅgaṇī resorts to a conceptual blunder of astonishing naiveté, collapsing the distinction between an event in the present moment, knowable through direct observation, and a process evolving over time, knowable through inferential understanding of causal principles. For the suttas, the term 'aggregate' denotes an umbrella category for a given class of phenomena. The aggregate of cognition, for example, is defined as 'whatever cognition, past, present, or future...' But the Dhammasaṅgaṇī asks 'What is the aggregate of cognition on that occasion?' This is as nonsensical as asking 'Which dog is the canine species?' The Dhammasaṅgaṇī is so crude a semantic steamroller that it is unable to distinguish between a class and a member of the class. A class is too obviously a concept, and it just wouldn't do to soil the abhidhamma with mere concepts.

In the later abhidhamma, the treatment of time is dominated by a radical new theory, totally unlike anything in the suttas or even the canonical abhidhamma, the theory of moments (*khaṇavāda*). This postulates that time is constituted of a series of discrete, indivisible units, rather like a series of billiard balls lined up on a table. Each unit, or 'moment', is infinitesimally small, such that billions pass by in a lightning-flash. So while the suttas emphasize the length of time, the abhidhamma emphasizes the shortness. This theory shapes the abhidhamma conception of a whole range of central doctrines. Thus impermanence becomes, not simply being subject to birth and death, rise and fall, but the momentary dissolution of phenomena – one dhamma rises and ceases in an instant, leaving no trace of residue in the next. Samadhi becomes, not an exalted, stable coalescence of mind, but a 'momentary samadhi' run-

ning after the fluctuations of phenomena. The path becomes, not a gradual program of spiritual development, but a 'path-moment', gone in a flash. And the mind itself becomes just a series of 'mind-moments'.

Now it is quite possible to take this theory, compare it with the suttas, and refute it point by point. But here I would simply like to point out what an implausible and useless idea it is. Quite obviously, time may be analyzed as finely as we wish, its divisibility determined only by the sharpness of our analytical razor. Any unit of time has a beginning, a middle, and an end. That beginning, too, has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and so on ad infinitum. There is simply no good reason to postulate an ultimate substratum of time to which other strata can be reduced. This idea seems to derive some of its impressiveness from its air of acrid, pessimistic, reductionist severity, which is often mistaken as a sign of really uncompromising wisdom.

The guiding objective for the formulation of the mind-moment theory would seem to be for exactitude of definition. So while the Buddha spoke of the mind 'changing while it stands', the abhidhamma just speaks of 'standing'. It is much easier to define a static entity than a process evolving over time. This is why a butterfly collector wants to have his butterflies dead, with a pin stuck through their heart and a little label underneath, not madly meandering about in the woods. The dead mind. But the Buddha was not a butterfly collector, he was an observer of nature. He wanted us to watch the flight and flitter of the butterfly, to understand how it behaves in its natural environment, and to follow it gently, delicately, quietly until it settles down to rest and be still according to its nature – which he called 'samadhi'.

By now I imagine our poor mind-moment must be feeling quite friendless. I should have more good Buddhist compassion and try to see things from the mind-moment's point of view – which is, according to the abhidhammikas, the only point of view from which we see anything. What would a moment of stasis be like? A strange world! One could certainly not see impermanence, any more than one can remember the moment one falls asleep. By definition, ending is the ending of awareness. Everything one could know, for the whole of one's life, would be permanent. From the point of view of a mind-moment, existence would be identical with eternity. And that is a very remarkable conclusion for a theory whose purpose was to explain impermanence.

But the abhidhammikas themselves were unable to formulate a coherent account of this theory. They were left with the task of explaining how the mind works, which was, after all, the main idea. Now, 'mind' (*citta*) in abhidhamma is normally treated as equivalent to 'cognition' (*viññāṇa*). The function of cognition according to the suttas is, sensibly enough, to cognize. But the abhidhamma allocates a bewildering array of other functions to its mind-moments. They are said to 'vibrate', to 'advert', to 'register', even to 'activate' (*javana*, literally 'running'). It is certainly very clever of our mind-moment to be able to 'stand' and 'run' at the same time! One should think that, at the end of a hard moment's 'running' or 'adverting', our poor overworked mind-moment would find it hard to squeeze in a bit of cognizing!

Several, perhaps all, of these supposed functions of the mind-moment, moreover, overlap with functions ascribed by the suttas to 'name' or by the abhidhamma to 'mental factors', that is, the functions assisting cognition rather than cognition itself. Thus adverting = attention, activating = volition, etc. So on the one hand they are supposed to be universal functions assisting cognition, while on the other hand

they are supposed to be functions exercised by certain particular kinds of cognition. The abhidhamma in general seem to not be able to distinguish between cognition and the mental factors. So when it claims to be talking about cognition it's usually talking about these associated factors.

Furthermore, we can see that each of these functions, or indeed any efficient function at all, must be a process involving change over time, contrary to the initial static definition. It is therefore divisible. There is nothing more 'ultimate' about any one level of analysis or another. Our decision to class one spectrum of phenomena together under a particular label is purely conventional. The mind-moment is nothing but a concept – and not a very good one.

Just what is going on here? Why postulate such an odd theory, raising so many pseudo-problems, and so contrary to the suttas, to common sense, and to experience? What is occurring, I suggest, is that the domain of discourse has been shifted from the empirical to the metaphysical. The suttas treat time in a straightforward, pragmatic, empirical terms – birth, ageing, and death, the changing states of the mind, the progressive development of spiritual qualities. The purpose, the sole purpose, is to empower the practitioner to get a handle on this stuff of life, directing attention to the seat of the problem – how our attachments cause suffering, and how to find peace by letting go. But the abhidhamma aims to describe, not just the spiritual problem and its solution, but the totality of existence. Inevitably, the subjective stance of the suttas becomes objectified, and as the focus moves from meditation to study, the concepts in the books become imposed on reality; in fact, they become reality itself. The quest for truth becomes a quest for definition, and reality becomes as neatly departmentalized as a mathematical table. 'Ultimate reality' becomes, not what you are experiencing now, but what you read about in abhidhamma books.

Find this hard to swallow? You might be interested to know that in contemporary abhidhamma circles it is, apparently, the orthodox position that the series of 'mind-moments' can only be directly seen by Buddhas, and perhaps chief disciples. This is, admittedly, challenged by some, who claim it can be seen in meditation. In just the same way, a Christian meditator will claim to see God, or a Hindu to see the universal Self. Seek and ye shall find. The very fact that such a controversy could possibly arise is a sign how far we have drifted from the Buddha's pragmatic empiricism. This is bad enough; but even worse when we realize that the theory in question made its appearance a millennium after the Buddha's time. This, for me, is as good as an admission that the whole thing is mere metaphysical speculation. No wonder the abhidhammikas have been so keen to father the canonical abhidhamma (and sometimes even the commentaries!) on the Buddha himself, despite massive evidence to the contrary.

No aspect of the abhidhamma speaks so eloquently of the dismissal of experience as the treatment of feeling. The abhidhamma says that 'wholesome consciousness' is invariably associated with either pleasure or equanimity. This blatantly contradicts the Mahadhammasamādāna Sutta (M46.16): 'Here, someone in pain and grief abstains from killing living beings....' The theoretical mistake seems to arise from the abhidhamma habit of speaking primarily of the ethical quality of cognition ('wholesome consciousness'), and deriving the ethical quality of an intentional act from its 'association' with a certain kind of cognition.

Taking the cognition to be wholesome, the abhidhammikas seem to have found it uncomfortable to admit that a 'wholesome consciousness' could be painful, or visa versa. But for the suttas it is the intention, not the consciousness, that is wholesome, and so the resulting happiness can be experienced at a later time: 'One holds right view, and experiences pain and grief that have right view as condition. On the dissolution of the body, after death, one is reborn in a happy destination, even in a heavenly realm. This is called the way of undertaking principles that is painful now and ripens in the future as pleasure.'

We need hardly be surprised that the abhidhammikas ignore the suttas; what is more worrying is how they ignore their own experience. We all, including the abhidhammikas too, have experienced suffering some time or other (too often!) while doing good. Yet rather than correct their theory in line with experience, the abhidhammikas chose to sideline experience in deference to their theory. It is all too easy to argue that the 'mind-moments' are flashing by so quickly, we simply can't tell which 'cittas' are wholesome and happy, and which are unwholesome and sad.

A similar point can be made with reference to the abhidhamma's strange analysis of the kinds of feeling associated with the six kinds of sense cognition. Feelings associated with the eye, ear, nose, and tongue are said to be neutral only. This seems to entail that flowers are beautiful and food tasty only because they make you happy. Has no abhidhammika eaten a mango while depressed and still found it tasty? Or smelt sewage while happy and still found it unpleasant? Again, the fact that this doctrine contradicts the suttas (which speak of 'the feeling born of eye-stimulus, whether pleasant, painful, or neutral...') is not as worrying as the fact that it flies in the face of the living experience of the abhidhammikas, every moment of every day. Neither verifiable nor falsifiable, the theory of moments inhabits an epistemological no-man's-land, drifting like a lost albatross over the trackless seas of paradox, seeking but never finding a place to land.

2 ...THERE WAS ...

Let's leave time – for the moment – and have a look at that other great philosophical bogeyman, being. In the suttas, true to the perspective sketched in above, the main meaning of 'existence' (bhava) is 'states of rebirth'. But lest I be considered obsessive, and lest the good reader mistakenly think that the suttas are lacking in psychological depth, I would like to approach being from a psychological perspective, tracing the evolution of the important term nāmarūpa, which literally means 'name & form'. Although my treatment below will be primarily psychological, we should not forget that eschatological contexts are not lacking. Thus the 'fixation' of cognition in name & form gives rise to 'future birth, ageing & death, and the origin of suffering'. Name & form itself is said to be reborn.

In the pre-Buddhist traditions, name & form stood for the phenomenal world, that mirage of multiplicity. 'Form' is the external realm of appearances, of seemings, while 'name' is the inner reflection of what appears through the senses – 'information'. 'Name' represents the victory of intelligence over the primal chaos. The swirling waters of undifferentiated, unformed brute nature are vanquished with the

magic power of name, which organizes and renders intelligible the cosmos, and hence bestows meaning, an understanding of one's place in nature, and the power to manipulate nature – the same power that has ultimately resulted in modern science. Name & form correspond so closely that the ideas, the names, seem to inhere in the forms perceived, granting those who know names a mysterious power over the external world. This stage of understanding is represented in the Indian tradition by the Vedas, the oldest extant Indian literature.

The pre-Buddhist traditions were agreed that liberation is not to be gained through such means, but through the dissolution of name & form in that cosmic ocean of consciousness (*vijñāna*), freed from the limitations of concepts. But the Buddha's insight disclosed that consciousness itself was bound up with name & form in a relationship of needy dependency. For the Buddha, infinite consciousness meant infinite suffering.

The following verses, one from the Upanishads and one from the Sutta Nipāta, illustrate how parallel terms can vividly express quite different ideas when transformed by the magic of metaphor. (In the Sutta Nipāta verse, the term 'name-group' is not a synonym for name & form, but just means 'name'. This verse was spoken to a brahman ascetic who wished to know the fate of one who gained release based on the sphere of nothingness, a formless attainment.)

The Ending of Name & Form

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.8	**Sutta Nipāta 1080**
Yathā nadyas syandamānās samudre	*Accī yathā vātavegena khittā*
Just as rivers flowing into the ocean	Just as a flame tossed by a strong wind
Astam gacchanti nāmarūpe vihāya	*Atthaṁ paleti na upeti saṅkhaṁ*
Go to their end, having dropped name & form	Goes out to the end, and does not enter reckoning
Tathā vidvān nāmarūpād vimuktaḥ	*Evam munī nāmakāyā vimutto*
Thus the realized [sage], freed from name & form	Thus the sage, freed from the name-group
Parātparam puruṣam upaiti divyam	*Atthaṁ paleti na upeti saṅkhaṁ*
Beyond the beyond is that Man he enters, divine.	Goes out to the end, and does not enter reckoning

Let us continue the story of name & form in the specifically Buddhist context of dependent origination. There, name & form is shown to be dependent on cognition. This suggests that 'name' is a term for certain mental functions exclusive of cognition, while 'form' designates physical phenomena. There is a very interesting passage in the Mahā Nidāna Sutta which highlights the root meaning of 'name'. I would therefore consider this to be an early conception of 'name'. The passage is obscure even in Pali and nearly incomprehensible in a literal English translation, so I paraphrase.

'Name' and 'form' are each shown to correlate with a particular kind of 'contact'. Name correlates to 'labeling contact', while form correlates to 'impact contact'. So let us have a look at this 'contact'. In the normal analysis of contact, it is said to be the co-operation of three factors: the external sense object (e.g. 'image'), the internal sense organ (e.g. 'eye'), and the corresponding class of cognition (e.g. 'visual cognition'). In

the case of the five physical senses, then, the 'impact contact' would be the 'impact' of the external sense object on the internal sense organ – light 'hitting' the eye, or sound 'hitting' the ear. In the case of mental cognition, we have the mental objects (dhammas), *mano* (usually rendered 'mind'), and *mano* -cognition.

What then is this *mano*? It's not defined in this context in the suttas, so any explanation remains speculative. In simpler, non-specialized contexts, such as the three doors of action (body, speech, and mind), *mano* is more or less a synonym for 'mind' (*citta*) or 'cognition' (*viññāṇa*). But here, since *mano* is clearly distinguished from *mano*-cognition, it seems to carry a more specialized nuance.

The abhidhammikas invoke their beloved 'mind-moment' here, opining that *mano* refers to certain kinds of mind-moments in the process of cognition, while *mano*-cognition refers to certain others. Specifically, the manodhātu is defined as the 'five-door adverting consciousness' and the 'receiving consciousness' that accepts the five-sense impingement; which is rather odd since the manodhātu is the support for *mano*-cognition, not five-sense cognition. Elsewhere *mano* is inconsistently identified with bhavaṅga, the supposed subliminal 'life continuum consciousness', which is interrupted by 'adverting consciousness' to give rise to a process of active cognition; this despite the fact that the relevant sutta passage clearly states that *mano* must be intact, not cut off, in order for *mano*-cognition to manifest. Furthermore, the suttas make it plain that the 'co-operation' (*saṅgati*, 'coming together') of *mano*, mental objects, and *mano*-cognition constitutes contact. How can separate mind-moments occur simultaneously?

Since in the abhidhamma the simultaneous occurrence of the three factors becomes stretched out into successive occurrence, it would seem only natural to further separate out contact, dignifying it with a real existence of its own, rather than being a mere function. So the abhidhammikas alter the sutta statement that the three are contact (*tiṇṇaṁ saṅgati phasso*) to the three give rise to contact (*tiṇṇaṁ saṅgatiyā phasso*). To sum up. The suttas say: 'Dependent on *mano* and mental objects arises *mano*-cognition . The co-operation of the three is contact.' The abhidhamma explains: 'Dependent on certain kinds of cognition and mental objects arises sense cognition or other kinds of mental cognition. Due to the co-operation of the three is contact.' In all modesty, I think we can do a little better than that.

Mano and mental objects here give rise to cognition, in the same way that name & form gives rise to cognition. And just as the physical sense organs are physical constructs that enable or facilitate the act of physical cognition, so too *mano* would seem to be a mental 'construct' that enables or facilitates the act of mental cognition. I would therefore suggest that it seems to be similar if not identical with 'name' itself. We might therefore render it in this context as 'mentality'. The 'mental objects' would most commonly consist of 'thoughts', etc., which are related to 'name', and also 'mental images', which are part of 'form'.

But we digress. To return to the Mahā Nidāna Sutta, we now have form giving rise to 'impact contact' consisting in the impact of external sense objects on the sense organs, and name, appropriately enough, giving rise to 'labeling contact' consisting in conceptual processing of sense data. I am desperately flailing about here in a probably doomed attempt to avoid making this discussion too technical. There are important qualifications to be made to my discussion both above and below, but I hope

that by simplifying somewhat I can clarify the outlines without distortion. We can see that 'impact contact' deals primarily with receiving data from outside, while 'labeling contact' deals primarily with processing inner, conceptual information. Thus the earlier, mystical understanding of name & form receives a strictly rational, psychological treatment. Name & form are shown to be interdependent. If there were no name, there could be no labeling, i.e. no conceptual processing of sensory experience. If there were no form, there would be no awareness of the world outside. Finally the passage proceeds by way of synthesis to show that both of these processes are essential aspects of 'contact'.

So far I have treated this analysis as general psychology. But the context, and elsewhere too, suggests that it may be applied rather more specifically to the field of infant development. Thus we can see that without sensory stimulus the infant's mind would not develop past an undifferentiated, 'oceanic' subconscious, like a fetus in the womb. And without developing conceptual abilities one could not learn to assimilate and process sensory input in a meaningful and useful form.

But I have omitted the most important aspect of this passage for understanding early Buddhist ontology. Normally in dependent origination, existence is simply described in terms of the existence of the factor itself, as in the famous formula: 'This being, that is...this not being, that is not'. But our present passage speaks, not of the existence of, say, 'name', but of the existence of 'the features, properties, signs, and summaries by which there is a concept of name'. If these 'properties' are absent, no 'labeling contact' regarding 'form' can be 'found'. Conversely, if the 'properties' by which there is a 'concept' of 'form' are absent, no 'impact contact' regarding 'name' can be 'found'.

This demonstrates in a most emphatic and explicit way that the 'properties' by which phenomena are known are, for all Dhamma purposes, equivalent to the phenomena themselves, since they perform the identical function in dependent origination. We cannot distinguish between a thing's properties and the thing itself, since the label we give a 'thing' is just a concept denoting the exercise of certain functions. To say a thing 'exists' is to say it is 'found'. And the very workings of experience, the fundamental structure of information processing, is necessarily dependent on this conceptual apparatus. Without 'labeling', without the properties by which a thing is 'conceptualized', stimulus, and hence the entire perceptual process cannot work. Thus this passage thoroughly demolishes any attempt to wedge a division between 'ultimate reality' and 'conventional reality'. Wisdom does not consist in going past convention to the ultimate substratum, but in understanding how conceptualizing is inherent in the cognitive process itself. Hence the Buddha said that the extent of concepts, language, and labeling is precisely the domain of wisdom; that is, birth, ageing, and death, cognition together with name & form.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, however, reads this passage in just the opposite way. For him, the mention of the 'properties' implies that they are conceptually distinct from the thing in & of itself. But he is surely just reading a later agenda into an earlier teaching. He buttresses his position with reference to the three 'ways' of speech, designation, and language, mentioned a little below in our sutta. Claiming support from the commentaries (although they are not consistent here, always a suspicious sign), he says that 'speech' refers to conceptual description, while the 'way' of speech refers to the

objective referent of speech, i.e. the five aggregates.

Unfortunately, when the identical phrase occurs in the Khandha Saṁyutta, it refers to, not five, but three 'ways' of speech – that is, past tense, future tense, and present tense (remembering that in Pali these tenses often mean past lives, future lives, and the present life). Any statement must be phrased in terms of these modes, and must therefore buy into time, into the course of rebirths. This is especially so in a heavily inflected language like Pali, where the tenses are built into the verb forms; the statement would perhaps lose some of its punch when applied to, say, Chinese or other uninflected languages where tenses may be omitted.

Understanding the difference between 'ultimate' and 'conventional' truth was upheld by later Buddhists as a sign of profound wisdom, a key to penetrating the inner mysteries of the Dhamma. But any specialized field of endeavor – from mechanics to mathematics, from fishing to physics – will develop a technical vocabulary of terms used in narrowly defined and sometimes eccentric ways – a jargon. Dhamma is no different. We just take our jargon a tad too seriously.

Tracing the arbitrary and inconsistent usage of this ontological apartheid in its checkered career through Buddhist history, I can discern only one constant factor – to exalt one's own teachings as 'ultimate' and denigrate others' as 'conventional'. Thus the abhidhamma is 'ultimate' while the suttas are 'conventional'; or the Mahayana suttas are 'ultimate' while the abhidhamma is 'conventional'. It is a standard piece of abhidhamma rhetoric to claim that the entire abhidhamma is phrased in terms of 'ultimate truth'. But this is transparent bluster. There are two whole books, and much material elsewhere in the Abhidhamma Pitaka, that straightforwardly talk of what even the abhidhammikas would consider to be 'conventional' truth. Thus the Kathāvatthu enlightens us with learned discussions on such crucial issues as, say, the smell of the Buddha's excrement. However I allege that every word in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, from '*kusala*' to '*paccayo*', is nothing but convention.

Probably the composers of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka would agree with me. The Puggala Paññatti ('The Concept of the Person') lists six concepts, the concepts of aggregates, sense media, elements, truths, faculties, and persons. The Puggala Paññatti itself obviously deals with the sixth kind of concept, and the rest of the Abhidhamma Pitaka deals with the remaining concepts. Thus, in harmony with the suttas and the rest of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, there is no attempt to sanctify the aggregates, etc., with a privileged ontological status above the 'person'.

The later abhidhammikas, drawing on the subtle epistemology of the Sautrāntikas, proposed that conventional truth is known through inference (*anvaya*, *anumāna*), while ultimate truth is known through direct perception (*paccakkha*). Ultimate truth is then said to constitute the objects of *vipassanā*, while the objects of *samatha* are mere conventional truth. I have argued elsewhere at length that *samatha* and *vipassanā* are not distinguished in the suttas by their objects, but by their characteristic emphasis on either peace or understanding. But I do not need to resort to the subtleties of dialectic to refute this theory. For we need only glance at the way 'direct knowledge' (*dhamme ñāṇaṁ*) and 'inferential knowledge' (*anvaye ñāṇaṁ*) are treated in the Nidāna Saṁyutta to see that they are both aspects of vipassanā. Direct knowledge understands the present; inferential knowledge understands the past and future.

In the Mahā Nidāna Sutta passage, name and form are also called the 'name group'

and the 'form group', implying that each consists of a number of factors. Elsewhere in the suttas they are indeed defined, not synthetically as above, but analytically. Name is feeling, perception, attention, contact, and volition. Form is the four great physical properties and derived form. The connection between name and its original meaning is growing weaker. It is now an umbrella term for a class of mental functions, only some of which are directly associated with conceptualizing. One factor which is, however, associated with conceptualizing is 'perception'. This is the associative aspect of consciousness. 'Perception' (*saññā*) relates to 'cognition' (*viññāṇa*) as 'connotation' relates to 'denotation'. The suttas treat it as a key aspect of concept formation. In everyday usage it can mean 'contract', 'agreement'. In this sense, perception (*saññā*) approaches the meaning of convention (*sammuti*). The two are etymologically parallel. Noteworthy by its absence from name is 'thought' (*vitakka*), which is not an essential factor for consciousness. Elsewhere the factors constituting name are said to precede thought. So it seems that despite the terms 'name' and 'labeling', name deals with very fundamental, pre-linguistic proto-conceptual processes.

By the time of the abhidhamma, name has drifted even further from its basic meaning. Now name becomes an umbrella for all mental phenomena, including cognition, which as we saw above was specifically excluded in the suttas. This is justified by relying on a spurious connection with the verb 'to bend', and asserting that cognition 'bends' towards its objects – a highly athletic accomplishment for our agile mind-moment! Thus 'name & form' becomes translated as 'mind and body', the 'ultimate reality', and wisdom is the ability to mince these into very small bits. Which rather misses the point. A skilled surgeon is not one who can hack their patient into shreds, but one who can delicately remove just the diseased tissue.

Let's compare analytic treatment in the suttas and abhidhamma. Consider the famous chariot simile. Just as when the parts come together the word 'chariot' is used, so too when the five aggregates are present the word 'self' is used. There's no implication that the parts are in any way more 'ultimate' than the chariot as a whole. The parts are themselves just constructs that may be further analyzed. Nor is there any implication that there would be any benefit in reducing the chariot to 'ultimate' parts and defining every element, even if this was possible. The purpose of the analysis is simply to show that the word 'chariot' is a convention, not to prove that there is something else which is not a convention. By postulating an ontologically privileged ultimate strata of being, one is committing the very error the original simile was designed to dispel. There are sutta passages where the Buddha, notably when discussing self-theories, emphasizes that he is just speaking conventionally. Modern translators often supply a helpful note informing us that this is a reference to the 'two levels of truth', ultimate and conventional; but the passages say nothing of 'ultimate truth'!

Another aspect of the chariot simile is that it is not reductionist – none of the parts of a chariot performs the functions of the whole. We can't divide one big chariot into two small chariots. Rather, the function of a chariot, its 'driveability', is a property that emerges from the harmonious co-operation of the various parts. But the abhidhamma posits an ultra-crude reductionism, beyond anything dreamt of by science. Each *kalapa* – the ultimate unit of matter, compared by modern abhidhammikas with such concepts as the 'atom' or the 'electron', has its own color, taste, smell,

and nutriment. Instead of 'taste' being a complex phenomenon involving chemical, physiological, and psychological factors, it's just a big pile of little tastes. Perhaps the physicists may have some opinion as to the flavor of sub-atomic particles. This kind of analysis just carries ideas over from the 'big' world into the 'small' world and pats itself on the back for being so clever. So too the self (*attā*) is just a big pile of 'self-existents' (*sabhāva*).

This kind of analysis is reminiscent of Jain animism, which sees all existence as composed of atoms (*paramāṇu*), which they call 'persons' (*pudgala*). These are elemental souls (*jīva*, lives), possessed of color, odor, and taste. The souls of earth, etc., are tiny, undeveloped, and can only be perceived when vast amounts of them accumulate in one place. The souls of humans are merely an advanced version. The simple animistic theories of the early Jaina Sutras, whose concepts probably pre-date the Buddha, became developed by their commentaries in abstruse and baffling detail. In fact, the elements of earth, water, etc., were commonly worshipped as gods in ancient times. This throws doubt on the claim that the Buddha demonstrated not-self simply by showing that what we call a 'person' is no more than a conglomerate of elements, since those listening would have regarded the elements themselves as selves or souls. Again, we cannot argue that what we normally think of as a self is merely the five aggregates; for it is precisely the five aggregates that are identified with the self: 'Physical form is self, feeling is self...'. Dividing things up further just multiplies selves. Horror of horrors!

With this redefinition of name & form that came to prevail in the abhidhamma, we seem to be moving towards a reification of the treatment of phenomena, that is, treating them as entities rather than events. This impression is reinforced when we see how the abhidhamma handles the crucial task of definition, supposedly its forte. We have seen that the suttas typically define a noun with a verb; for example, 'cognition' = 'cognizes'. This kind of definition is exactly parallel with the ambiguity between waves and particles in quantum physics. It implies that a 'thing' and an 'event' are in some sense equivalent; or, more generally , that 'being' and 'time' are different modes of describing the same reality. Another way of putting this is that 'being' and 'time', since they are concepts, are incapable of fully apprehending the richness of experience. We may provisionally denote an aspect of experience in terms of 'being' with a noun, or of 'time' with a verb; but the reality of experience is always something else, something more. Flexibly employing the two approaches will prove more authentic than commitment to a hard and fast division between the two.

But the abhidhamma is, of course, thus committed, postulating a rigid, mechanistic, absolute 'time' made up of a row of bricks of 'being'. So the abhidhamma, ignoring the subtleties of the suttas, defines cognition by merely listing a series of synonyms.[2]

The reifying tendency takes full flight in later abhidhamma literature. Here the key term is '*dhamma*'. We have seen that for the suttas, *dhamma* refers exclusively to the empirical phenomena of experience – the Buddha expressly declared that all he teaches is suffering and the end of suffering. But the abhidhamma makes an ap-

[2]This includes the minor poetic terms *paṇḍara*, *mānasa*, and *hadaya*, but omits the important technical term *ceto*. Again, despite mentioning pedantic variations on *mano*, some of which don't appear in the suttas, it omits the important *manodhātu*.

parently innocuous shift – dhammas become *defined* by their '*sabhāva*', their 'intrinsic essence', or 'own-nature', or 'self-existent'. The commentaries do sometimes make use of the manner of defining a noun in terms of a verb. But they carefully say that this is a mere contingent usage; the ultimate mode of definition is to define a phenomenon (*dhamma*) by its intrinsic essence (*sabhāva*). The *sabhāva* is really the same as the *dhamma*, we're told, but the distinction must be made for the purpose of definition. Say what? Why on earth is it any easier to define a *sabhāva* than to define a *dhamma*?

At this point the trusting and slightly overawed novice student – like your present author in his starry-eyed youth – nods sagely in assumed comprehension and then proceeds to forget this strangely inexplicable comment as they are snowed under by a sea of detail. The doctrine of *sabhāvas* has been subjected to withering criticism since its inception, yet it saunters along quite merrily, blithely ignoring its own silliness. The true purpose of the *sabhāva* doctrine, I allege, is to shift the domain of discourse behind another metaphysical curtain. The real action, the 'ultimate reality', is going on backstage.

Some sophisticated modern abhidhammikas, however, deny that the abhidhamma falls into substantialist conceptions. Mind moments, they say, are 'acts' or 'events' of consciousness. They are 'knowing', not that which knows'. Great; we agree as to the fundamental conception of consciousness. The question is whether we feel this conception dominates the abhidhamma or not. Here I feel that these scholars, implicitly accepting the criticism, are subconsciously adjusting the abhidhamma to escape its force. Since the abhidhamma is (of course!) phrased entirely in terms of ultimate truth, we should expect that the treatment of consciousness as a function will be entirely plain and explicit throughout. But no – the abhidhamma constantly speaks of mind-moments as entities performing functions, as accompanying mental factors, or as possessing ethical qualities, not simply as the cognizance of these things. One could argue that this is just for linguistic convenience. But idiomaticness is not a relevant criterion in abhidhamma language. If mind is spoken of as an entity, it must be an entity. If elsewhere this is denied, this simply adds incoherence to error. Please note that these are not trivial or pedantic criticisms, but go to the heart of what abhidhamma means. The very idea of ultimate truth is misguided and must inevitably lead to the grasping of the word, the expression, as Truth itself. Here's a classic example of hardcore ontological realism from a modern abhidhammika.

> [*Rūpa paramatthas*] 'are also subject to change, yet the distinctive characteristics [*sabhāva*] of these *rūpas* are identically the same whether they are found in a vessel or a vase. They preserve their identity in whatever combination they are found – hence the commentarial interpretation of parama as "immutable" or "real". "*Attha*" exactly corresponds to the English multi-significant term "thing".' [3]

Let's take an overview of the two main books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī and the Paṭṭhāna. The first is chiefly concerned with the analysis and categorization of dhammas, while the second concerns itself with synthesis,

[3] Narada, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*

relentlessly cataloguing all the possible relations of phenomena. This is sometimes called the analytic/synthetic method, a label apparently designed to defend the abhidhamma against the charge that it is obsessed with dualistic analysis.

I would like to take the liberty of comparing this procedure with that of God in Genesis. First we make a mould of clay (= *rūpa*, defined as 'without mind'). Then we take the breath of God (= *nāma*, defined as 'without matter'). Then we inject one into the other. Thus mind-body dualism – that hydra-headed specter which has haunted the corridors of thought for thousands of years – takes root in Buddhism. We are left with the Frankensteinian problem of explaining how two utterly different kinds of entity end up co-inhabiting the same monstrous conglomerate – the ghost in the machine.

This task is the burden of the Paṭṭhāna, a book whose labyrinthine mazes are ideally suited to masking the fact that it is a spurious solution to a pseudo-problem. The Paṭṭhāna, the most revered – and therefore least read – of all abhidhamma books, is said to present 24 modes of conditional relationships. It does nothing of the sort. Most of the much-vaunted 'modes of conditional relations' are merely lists of *dhammas* that act as condition for other *dhammas*. The text says little about causality as such; in fact this work excels all other products of the human mind in its combination of verbosity of form with vacuity of content. Remarkably, it is less intellectually stimulating and less readable than a telephone book. The Paṭṭhāna attempts to glue the mind and the body back together again with its 'dissociation condition', a term which perfectly encapsulates the strange world of mind-body dualism: things are connected by being disconnected. I can certainly confirm that if I think about this stuff too much, I end up in a very dissociated condition!

I feel that this implicit dualism of late Buddhism has had a subtle but important impact in the sometime failure of modern Buddhists to understand or to explain the Buddhist response to scientific critiques of religious concepts, most importantly life after death. The eschatological theories of most religions are explicitly dualistic. The soul and the body are two different things. At death the body is abandoned and the soul lives forever. This idea has been stubbornly lodged in the heart of Western thought since God did mouth-to-mouth on Adam.

Only in the 19th Century did some radical German scientists, fed up with the wooly-mindednss and unverifiability of metaphysical thought, do away with the soul altogether and decide to deal only with observable physical elements and forces. They wrote a manifesto to this effect and signed it, like pirates, in their own blood. It is crucial to see that this is a reaction to soul/body dualism, rejecting the soul and affirming the body. One of those young scientists went on to compose the theory of thermodynamics, whose key idea – 'for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction' – was specifically formulated to exclude the possibility of metaphysical intervention. The world is a closed system. There are no gaps through which the divine hand can reach in and intervene. Effectively this affirms that the soul and the body are the same.

This is, of course, one of the metaphysical positions which the Buddha famously declined to take a stand on: 'The soul is one thing, the body another', and 'The soul and the body are the same'. The Buddha escaped this problem by refusing to enter the arena. He rejected as useless the very assumptions underlying the formulation of the

question. It is like answering the question 'Do you beat your wife often?' So a Buddhist can point out that when the scientists define the physical world as a closed system, the mind is already there, making theories, devising assumptions, taking measurements, implicit in all scientific activity. We are therefore quite happy to agree with the scientists that no metaphysical entity can intervene or survive physical death. What takes rebirth is just this very same mind. So Buddhism, early Buddhism that is, easily escapes the general theoretical critiques by science of metaphysical theories. Specific Buddhist ideas, however, are still obviously subject to empirical testing by scientific means.

But the abhidhammikas, committed to their dualistic metaphysics, are unable to straightforwardly escape scientific critiques of metaphysical eschatology. Instead, they seem to feel that by making their psychology reductionist and mechanical enough they can avoid the problem, not realizing they are just making a reductionist and mechanical metaphysics. They say that when the series of conscious moments is cut off at death a new consciousness arises immediately, with no intermediary state, as the 're-linking consciousness' at the conception of a new individual. This view, derived from the Kathāvatthu, is obviously trying to distinguish the Buddhist notion of rebirth from the Brahmanical, which does posit a 'self' passing through an intermediate existence between births. Unfortunately for the abhidhammikas, there are a number of sutta passages that clearly accept an intermediate existence of some kind.

This again points up the abhidhammic misconception of 'not-self'. When a person dies, whether they go straight to another body, or pass through an intermediate state, (or hang around to scare the relatives and nibble the dainties at the funeral!) has nothing to do with whether they are a metaphysical entity or a conditioned process. The point is that this intermediate existence is impermanent and fed by craving. If I were a self theorist I would have no problem, taking advantage of the rich imaginative license afforded by metaphysical speculation, in postulating a 'self' in the last moment of consciousness that disappears and reappears with no interval as the 'self' underlying the new individual. In fact, I would have no problem in accepting the entire abhidhammic psychology and simply saying that there's a self underlying each of the mind moments. You might think such a theory absurd. I agree; but I think all metaphysical theories absurd. But they were the norm in ancient times, and I fear the abhidhammikas were just following the flock with their 'self-existent' underlying each of the dhammas.

The suttas refuse to countenance dualistic assumptions and so the problem does not arise. First they point to the flow of phenomena as they actually occur in experience, then draw attention to the crucial aspects by way of analysis and/or synthesis. The suttas, despite being misrepresented by abhidhamma-influenced translators, speak not of the 'mind and body', but of the 'body together with its consciousness'. Each of the various physical and mental aspects or qualities contribute their own special function to that great whorl of relationship we call 'experience'.

The doctrine of sabhāvas has been accused of destroying dependent origination. If a thing is 'self-existent', what need for conditions? If it is conditioned, what need for a 'self-existent'? The suttas typically speak of reality not as 'existent' (*bhāva*), but as 'become' (*bhūta*), what has been conditionally produced. These are certainly not equivalent. Nibbana is the 'not-become' (*abhūta*), but, according to the abhidhamma,

it is 'self-existent' (*sabhāva*). The theory of sabhāvas thus posits an essential ontological similarity between Nibbana and *saṁsāra*. Hence the *sabhāvic* conception of Nibbana must fall prey to the most important of all arguments against God, a 'Ground of Being', or any other attempt to conceive the summum bonum in terms of an existing metaphysical absolute: the argument from evil.

Is '*sabhāvatā*', 'self-existingness', part of the first noble truth, that is, suffering? If it is, then Nibbana, since it partakes of *sabhāvatā*, must also partake of suffering. But if *sabhāvatā* is not suffering, what is it doing in the Dhamma? Surely it is but a metaphysical abstraction of no use in solving our spiritual problems. An obvious response to this argument is to contend that, while *sabhāvatā* in and of itself does not partake of suffering, still certain *sabhāvadhammas* are part of suffering, i.e. the five aggregates, while certain *sabhāvadhammas* are not part of suffering, i.e. Nibbana. But in this case too we must see that the doctrine of *sabhāvas* is unable to draw any relevant conceptual distinction between such radically different principles as true happiness and real suffering; how then can this doctrine help us to move from pain to peace?

So this metaphysical conception of 'being' in terms of sabhava is the culprit for the near-universal misconception of Nibbana as a kind of metaphysical Absolute, Ground of Being, Cosmic Consciousness, or 'Infinite Clear Light Non-dual Diamond Voidness'. In early Buddhist terms these ideas would translate as 'Absolute Suffering', 'Ground of Suffering', 'Cosmic Suffering', and 'Infinite Clear Light Non-dual Diamond Suffering'.

It is very true that the suttas emphatically affirm the reality of Nibbana; but reality in the suttas is in no sense and no way conceived in metaphysical terms. Such ideas are not merely incompatible with the suttas, but totally incommensurable; the Buddha had nothing to say when questioned on metaphysical issues. So when the suttas say, for example, 'There is anger in me', they speak of a simple empirical reality, with no underlying metaphysical implications. Similarly, when they say 'There is the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade, the unconditioned...' they speak of what is 'to be realized', with no underlying metaphysical implications. They affirm the reality of cessation. Nibbana exists in the same sense that unicorns, hobbits, God, the soul, mind-moments, or *sabhāvas* do not exist. It is not a fantasy, not an illusion, not a speculation, but is the ending of fantasy, of illusion, and of speculation.

The concept of *sabhāva*, then, clearly posits a sphere of 'being' divorced from conditions – and this is just what I mean by 'metaphysics'. It is a shadow world, a twilight zone where abstract definitions parade as 'ultimate reality', and phenomena come neatly labeled with their own name-tag – in Pali, of course.

Perhaps, gentle reader, you think I'm going over the top. I wish, I really do. But let us peruse the hallowed pages of the Visuddhimagga, the Bible of the abhidhammikas. That revered icon, in one of its more flamboyant flourishes of absurdity, actually insists that Pali is the 'root language of all languages', the 'self-existent language', hard-wired into the circuitry of reality. [4] It is a sterling testament to the Visuddhimagga's faith in its own conceptual apparatus that it is willing to follow the implications of the sabhāva theory through to their logical conclusion, no matter how ludicrous.

In this they may have been influenced by contemporary Brahmanical theories.

[4] Visuddhimagga 14.25

For example, the Mīmaṁsās regarded the language of the Vedas as an emanation of Being into sound, and so when reciting Vedic mantras one was communing with patterns woven into the fabric of the cosmos, thus explaining the undoubted efficacy of the mantras. Similar ideas permeate Buddhist culture today. It reminds me of a statement by Tertullian, one of the fathers of the Catholic church – 'It is believable because it's absurd...It is certain because it's impossible'. Do we perhaps begin to see how a meditation system consisting in a labeling technique has managed to convince the world that it is a short-cut to 'ultimate reality'?

The fallacy of the theory of *sabhāvas*, just as with the theory of moments, lies in reading the connotations of our terms for reality into reality itself; that is, in assuming that reality reflects its conceptual description. Let me illustrate this by going back to Genesis. From our perspective, it's almost impossible to read that story without metaphorizing it, as I did above – did you notice? We automatically assume that the breath of God is a metaphor for an immaterial soul. But look again; nothing suggests such a metaphor.

The primitive tribespeople who wrote the story were yet to develop such sophisticated, abstract notions as an immaterial soul. They simply noticed that when a person is breathing they're alive and when they stop breathing they die. The conception of an immaterial soul developed gradually, in a series of successively more refined stages. But even the most refined conceptions of a self still embody characteristics of the simple notion from which they derive. As the breath is light, so the soul is light; as the breath is sensitive, so the soul is sensitive; as the breath is bound up with life and departs at death, so too the soul. Notice, too, that the basic mistake is not displaced by the refinement of the theory, but replicates itself, like a virus that becomes even deadlier as it evolves to outsmart the ever stronger antibiotics that are thrown at it. There simply are no distinct entities of 'breath' and 'body' which have to be somehow glued together. So too there is no distinct entity of 'soul' apart from the empirical reality of consciousness.

In just the same way, as the word 'contact' is independent from the word 'feeling', we assume that the *sabhāva* of contact is independent from the sabhāva of feeling. Just as the word 'mind' stays constant in time, we find the abhidhammikas asserting that the *sabhāvas* do not change over the three periods of time. [5] Just as the word 'dhamma' appears to exist objectively on the page, so they assume that the *sabhāvas* exist objectively in reality. And just as the theists, assuming that the word 'I' refers to an objectively existing entity, form a doctrine of self, so too the abhidhammikas, assuming that the word '*dhamma*' refers to an objectively existing entity, form a theory of *sabhāvas* (self-existents).

This is why the ancients unequivocally declared that the doctrine of *sabhāvas* amounts to nothing but a hidden doctrine of self. This position is quite explicit in the Hindu tradition; the Bhagavad-Gita says: 'The essential nature (*sabhāva*) is called the Self'. [6] This is just the same psychological process described in the Mahā Nidāna Sutta. We cannot distinguish between reality and our concepts of reality, because

[5] *Na hi kālabhedena dhammānaṁ sabhāvabhedo atthi.* ('Not by the division of time is there a division of the intrinsic essence of the dhammas'. Abhidhammatthasaṅgahavibhāvinīṭīkā, pg. 122. Quoted in Sumanapala *An Introduction to Theravada Abhidhamma*, pg. 94.

[6] Bhagavad-Gita 8.3

our conceptual apparatus shapes the reality of experience – and this is the only reality we know. The only 'ultimate reality' beyond concepts is Nibbana – the ending of consciousness, the ending of time, the ending of being.

3 ...THE WORD.

With the foundations of being and time unceremoniously dismantled, the gleaming stainless-steel architectonics of the abhidhamma collapse inwards with a groan like the World Trade Center, or like the Titanic rent asunder on the cruel ice of dialectic. Perhaps it would be best to depart from the disaster area for a time, lest we be accused of being philosophical terrorists lingering to gloat at the scene of the crime. We could do with some light relief. Let me tell you a story.

Picture this, if you will. A time long ago, a place far away. A simple village, where the chickens squawk and the palm trees sway. There's a young lady who's recently been blessed with her first child. Tirelessly she dotes on him, cleans him, and feeds him. She loves nothing better than to sit rocking her darling as the evening settles cool and slow over the bustle of the day's activities.

But of a sudden the young baby is stricken with some nameless affliction. Daily he weakens; until one day, as his mother cradles him to her breast, he breaths his last sad, quiet breath. His mother is distraught, driven wild with grief and confusion. But her husband can offer no solace. Her mother and father, her brothers and sisters, her friends and relatives – they're all at a loss.

Finally someone suggests she go to the temple. She's never been before, never been interested. But now the grand pagoda looms above her as she mounts the steps. She dares the threshold, then pauses as her eyes adjust to the dim, smoky, candlelit interior. She creeps nervously in, bows at the altar, then approaches the priest. He sits, eyes half-closed as he mumbles some ancient *mantra*. The place is filled with mysterious ancient texts and exotic objects. She takes her place beneath his seat and asks her question.

'Venerable sir.'

'Yes, my child?'

'Venerable sir, what happens when we die?'

He looks kindly down at her and smiles. 'Death, my child, is no mystery. Let me explain. When you see something, it is not you who sees. There is a little man, the size of a thumb, who lives in your chest. He is the one who sees. When you hear something, it is the little man who hears. When the little man lifts up his arm, you lift up your arm. It is the little man who thinks, who speaks, who feels. When you die, the little man who is your self does not die. He flies out of your mouth to live up in the sky forever with all the other little men. So there's no need to be afraid of death.'

As she listens with growing comprehension her eyes fill with tears of joy. Gratefully she thanks the priest for clearing up her confusion, makes him an offering, bows, and leaves, her worries all gone.

" Yes, the details of the story are a tongue-in-cheek invention. But the theory is not. The little man the size of a thumb appears in ancient Brahmanic theories of the self. Similar ideas, differing wildly in details but the same in essence, have been quite

literally believed in by the vast majority of people all through history, as they still are today.

There are two striking features of such ideas. The first is that they're so ludicrous – badly, sadly, madly wrong. They are, in fact, utterly meaningless, mere empty words floating with no referent. The second feature is that they are philosophically useless – they explain nothing. Saying that a little man inside my chest is the one who sees tells me precisely nothing about the act of seeing. What it does, as I do not tire of repeating, is shift the domain of discussion from the empirical world into metaphysics. It creates a world of shadow-puppets divorced from nature, following different principles all its own.

Now a little empirical investigation is all that's needed to disclose the non-existence of the little man. When this happens our priest must either develop a more abstract theory or lose a follower. So the theory dodges up a flight of abstraction, hiding behind ever more sophisticated curtains of mystification. It's not really a little man, but a subtle body that's like a little man. And then it becomes, not really a subtle body, but a life-force; but then, not a physical life-force, but an immaterial essence of life. Until eventually the soul becomes a node in the cosmic flux of being, or some other such nonsense. As long as the priest keeps the theory abstract enough that the followers do not really understand it – which is usually not so hard – the system works very well.

And that is the most startling thing of all. It really does work. Our grieving devotee gets what she wants – she's happy. This must surely rank as one of the most outstanding, incredible, if somewhat embarrassing, features of human history – that so many have believed in something so silly for so long. The whole superstructure of our human culture is founded on millennia of error. And often, of course, it is the massiveness of the superstructure that conveys the impression that the foundations must be rock solid.

But if we refer back to our story, we can see that the success of the priest's advice has nothing to do with the correctness of his theory, and everything to do with the creation of the faith in authority. This is really the key. Virtually all of the externals of religion can be attributed to this imperative – the costumes, the buildings, the initiations, the rituals. They are specifically designed to defy reason, to defy sense, to create the overwhelming belief in another reality – not seeable, touchable, or reasonable, but far more real than the empirical world of humdrum birth, ageing, and death. Surely, thinks the devotee, here must be one who knows! Surely this Holy Being, so learned, so sagely, so remote, must see more deeply than we! But alas, on reflection we must admit that this impression of authority is sheer illusion – external form has no relation to depth of wisdom.

The most potent tool in perpetuating this illusion is archaic authorization. This is why religions are so conservative. Take Catholicism, for example. Despite centuries of railing against paganism, of witch burnings, of inquisitions and anathemas, virtually every aspect of Catholic ritual and dogma can be traced directly to pagan religions dating centuries before Christ. One of the key forms of archaic authorization is the reliance on ancient texts – the older and obscurer the better.

So we find that, just as the Catholics claim that the Bible is the very Word of God, though the Bible itself makes no such claim, so too the abhidhammikas claim that

the Abhidhamma Pitaka is the very Word of the Buddha, though the texts themselves make no such claim. In order to maintain the unquestionable authority of the texts, it is highly desirable to monopolize the study in the hands of the priests. The Catholics used to burn any Bibles that had been translated into the vernacular, and burn at the stake anyone outside the priesthood who studied or taught the Bible. According to ancient Hindu texts, if one of the menial caste were to listen deliberately to a Vedic mantra, his ears are to be filled with lead; if he recites it, his tongue is to be cut out: and if he should memorize it, his body must be cut in half. No messing about. A gentler solution might be simply to make the texts so unbearably tedious that few are willing to commit the lifetime's work necessary to master them.

I've now done with my work of ground-preparation. Little in my essay up to this point has been original. I've merely borrowed bits of ideas from here and there to lend my thesis some semblance of plausibility. My method has been to insinuate rather than to prove. If you've stuck with my argument up to now and have some inkling of what I'm going to say, perhaps you might think 'He couldn't! He wouldn't!' But, dear reader, you're wrong. I can, and I will.

I suggest that the abhidhamma is most profitably considered, not as a psychology or as a philosophy, but as a mystical cult. Its complexity arises, not from the inherent difficulty of the subject matter, but from the need to create an impression of unimpeachable authority. Its specialists, the abhidhammikas, are the High Priests of Buddhism. They play, aloof in their lofty Castle of Thought, the ultimate Glass Bead Game. Their role is not to realize the Dhamma, but to mediate between the devotees and the Plane of Ultimate Reality. The *sabhāva* of the abhidhamma is its soul, the moment its eternity. Its texts are magical incantations. Abhidhamma passages are, in fact, used virtually solely for this purpose in contemporary Thailand, recited at funeral rituals by monks who don't know their meaning for laypeople who don't care.

The texts, those seven 'valleys of dry bones', are designed for neither study nor practice, but to stand, mute and inscrutable monuments, awesome as pyramids in the desert. The chief soteriological value of the abhidhamma lies not in leading to the abandoning of craving, nor even in theoretical clarity, but in the naïve faith of the multitude that someone, at least, has the Absolute well in hand. Its theories result, not from direct insight into the Dhamma, but from the same cat-and-mouse chase of abstraction-critique-higher abstraction that has given rise to God and the soul. Its unreal, artificial air of divorce from reality is no unfortunate consequence of our own poor insight, but is its essence, the very impression it was designed to create.

One misconception I wish to guard against here. This was not, and is not, a deliberate fraud perpetrated by an unscrupulous clergy on a duped public. The abhidhammikas, by and large, are perfectly sincere – they really believe in what they do. And, as I have mentioned, the psychological benefits are indisputable. I would suggest, absurd though it may seem, that the whole great adventure of the abhidhamma, that 'magic lantern of chimeras', is a fantastic projection from what some call the 'collective unconscious', a public manifestation of the need for belief in a Higher Reality.

To substantiate the essentially religious purpose of the abhidhamma, we need look no further than the myth of the origin of abhidhamma, which is expounded over many pages at the beginning of the abhidhamma commentary, and is still taught as sober history by many a pious preacher. During his seventh rains retreat – a signifi-

cant number – the Buddha ascended to Tāvatiṁsa heaven to preach the abhidhamma to the deities. He wished, for some suitably obscure reason, to teach the entire Abhidhamma Pitaka in one uninterrupted session, and humans cannot sit still for three months. The heavenly setting is a convenient way to both exalt the abhidhamma as well as to explain away the embarrassing fact that the early suttas and vinaya know nothing of the abhidhamma as such, although the word does occur a few times meaning just 'advanced teachings'. (A very similar device was adopted by the Mahayana – perhaps this is where the Theravada got the idea.) At meal time, the Buddha created a mind-made body to continue the exposition while he went for alms. He would meet Venerable Sariputta and give him the summarized method. He thus completed the seven books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka in three months.

This is certainly a remarkable testament to his ability to speak very fast. There are, according to the commentaries, 404 948 533 248 questions in the Paṭṭhāna alone. That makes about 52 000 questions per second for three months. Someone should tell the Guinness Book of World Records! [7] Think what this means: the implicate structure of the Paṭṭhāna, supposed to represent the quintessence of the Dhamma, has never and will never be rendered explicit in any form, neither by chanting, by printing, by reading, and certainly not by understanding.

The tradition tells us that when the Buddha descended from Tāvatiṁsa he created a crystal promenade in the sky where he paraded back and forth emitting streams of fire and water from his body. This tacky exhibitionism is entirely out of keeping with the Buddha's disdain for gratuitous magic displays, which he said were like 'a harlot flashing her private parts'. The whole fantastic legend is an eloquent testament to the degree of gullibility needed to swallow the abhidhamma.

But the most interesting thing about this myth, for me, is that the Buddha goes to Tāvatiṁsa specifically to teach his mother, who, you will remember, died seven days after the Buddha was born. Why so? Briefly, seven has the general meaning in mythology, derived from the lunar cycles, of the 'entire cycle of being'. This meaning is prominent, say, in the seven days of Biblical creation. It also features often in the legends surrounding the Buddha's birth and enlightenment, where it should always be read with the same meaning. The same meaning also applies, no doubt, in the seven books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Mythologically, the number seven emphasizes the all-embracing nature of the abhidhamma, gathering the whole of being to its breast, and invoking the security of long association with familiar archetypes.

The Buddha's mother was called Māyā, which means 'magic'. Māyā is one of the ancient names of the Indian incarnation of the universal Mother Goddess. It is interesting that although the scholastics, being of a rather dryly literal inclination, make little if anything of the Goddess connection, Her signs permeate Buddhist iconography from the start. The Buddha was regularly represented by a pair of footprints, a lotus seat, a tree, or a stupa, all classic symbols of the ancient Indian Goddess. Māyā is most familiar in Indian thought as the emerging of the play of the world from the dreaming of the underlying source of being, symbolized as Brahman or Vishnu. This school of thought, ironically called 'non-dualism', cannot escape positing a fundamental distinction between the underlying essence and the surface manifestation,

[7] I am indebted to Bhikkhu Varado for this delicious titbit.

try as they may to insist they are one and the same.

But in Buddhism, Māyā, the embodiment of the illusion of being, dies to prepare the way for the vision of truth. Thus Māyā was the Buddha's first and greatest teacher. She, the maker, sacrificed her life for her son. Her death was no mere coincidence, but is a law of nature, a symbolic necessity, the great paradigm for separation from the beloved, for the ultimate futility of birth. Is it possible to see Māyā's death as symbolizing the death of the endeavor to distinguish between substance and appearance? The death of the compulsive need to use spiritual discourse to create an unfalsifiable illusion of understanding by talking only of what lies behind the metaphysical curtain? Would it then be going too far to see the resurrection of Māyā in the legend of the teaching of the abhidhamma as a symbolic resurrection of that very same illusion, the erection of a mystical barrier between experience and ultimate reality, and the removal of the search for spiritual truth from the everyday experience of everybody to the privileged domain of the elite?

Oh, I know there are a thousand and one perfectly good reasons why my theory fails. And yet...I would never even pretend that such an impressionistic sketch can even approach adequacy in explaining such a complex, ancient, and diverse school of thought. But still...Perhaps you may feel that my theory – and my flippancy of expression! – dishonors the regal dignity of the Higher Teachings. But that, I'm afraid, is just the point. I wish to puncture the pretensions of the abhidhamma, to steal its aura of inviolability. The true Dhamma shines on, brilliant as a diamond and just as tough. Whatever is good and true in the abhidhamma will stand the test. When abhidhamma is removed from the class on 'What the Buddha Taught' and placed in the class on 'The Evolution of Buddhism Through the Ages' we will at last be able to assess it on its true merits.