

Abhidhamma and the Practice for Liberation

One distinct feature of Myanmar Buddhism is the emphasis that is given here to Abhidhamma. When we, foreigners, meet local monks or nuns it won't be long before they ask us if we are familiar with Abhidhamma, and make an explicit statement of the importance of this knowledge for the practice of meditation. Even abroad, those who are a little bit more familiar with Theravāda will know that Myanmar is a country of Abhidhamma.

But unlike local Buddhists, those who have never really undertaken any closer investigation of the matter prematurely make judgements based on western research into the authenticity of the Abhidhamma part of the Tipiṭaka, and regard it as not just useless, but sometimes even dangerous. Without having tried to familiarize themselves with Abhidhamma even superficially they throw the baby out with the bathwater.

However, luckily not all are like that, and curiosity and thirst for knowledge pushes some of us into studies of the subject matter and allows us to look at the subject matter with the advantage of not having been conditioned to believe every written word as gospel, which is so common among the population of this country.

We come with an open, but critical mind, and always examine the consistency and meaning of whatever we are learning. The absence of the presumption that whatever we read is the actual, direct teaching of the Buddha, and recognition that the texts and the teachings evolved in a certain historical-cultural background, as well as underwent development in time allows us, I believe, to get a more comprehensive picture. And as this picture forms, our appreciation of Abhidhamma, and understanding of its value grows.

This appreciation will manifest sooner in a person who studies it not for a mere intellectual entertainment, but for his development on the path to freedom from suffering. It won't be long before he starts ripening the fruits of the energy invested into Abhidhamma studies. And as the practitioner continues to meditate and study he will come to understand that there is hardly anything in these studies that has no value for the practice of meditation.

I shall elaborate on the last statement taking the content of the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha as a text reflecting, albeit in a very condensed manner, all the Abhidhamma teachings, and I will try to show that every single chapter of the manual is in one way or another related to our practice for the attainment of Nibbāna.

But first, let's ask ourselves a question about the purpose of Abhidhamma. What is the main message, what is the most important insight that we gain from its studies? The short answer to this question is the understanding of non-self, anatta.

In the Pāli exegesis we can see that even at the times when Buddha's teachings are not available people can grasp impermanence and suffering of existence, but the anatta characteristic is a different case. Its understanding gives stronger light, and thus illuminates the reality better, but it takes becoming a Buddha for being able to see it without guidance of a teacher.

In order to see the non-self nature of existence we need to break down the apparent compactness of mind (*nāmaghana*) and matter (*rūpaghana*). And on close inspection we will not fail to see that every chapter of the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha contributes to this purpose.

Let's take the first two chapters, the Compendium of Consciousness (Cittasaṅgahavibhāga), and the Compendium of Mental Factors (Cetasikasaṅgahavibhāga). Beyond a shadow of a doubt these are very important for the understanding of what mind (*nāma*) is, and thus for breaking its compactness.

The third chapter, Compendium of the Miscellaneous (Pakiṇṇakasaṅgahavibhāga) deals with such important topics as roots (*hetu*), feelings (*vedanā*), functions (*kicca*), doors (*dvāra*), bases (*vatthu*), and objects (*ārammaṇa*). Without a firm understanding of the dhammas that cause the mind states to be unwholesome or beautiful, how can we make any progress? Without understanding which minds associate with what kind of roots how can we know which should be developed and which avoided? The Compendium of Roots (Hetusaṅgaha) teaches us exactly this.

The Miscellaneous chapter actually starts with the Compendium of Feeling (Vedanasāṅgaha), and that speaks a lot about the importance of the topic. Feeling is a part of the mind, and without understanding feeling it is virtually impossible to realize Nibbāna. The exit from the rounds of rebirth lies between feeling and craving. If we would try to summarize what we are doing in all the meditation methods that are practiced for the realization of the Four Noble Truths we could say that in all of them we are trying to escape from *samsāra* between the two links of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) – feeling (*vedanā*) and craving (*taṇhā*).

Moreover it is not enough to understand just one kind of feeling: regardless of what some meditation masters may teach, we have to understand all different kinds of them. The study of feelings makes it clear that it is a mental experience. A diligent student will become aware that contrary to explanations found in many popular meditation methods, characteristics of the elements are not feelings, but a material phenomena apprehended by body-consciousness, whereas feeling is only a subjective tone of the experience.

Next in the chapter on Miscellaneous comes the Compendium of Functions (Kiccasaṅgaha). Studies of different functions exercised by different types of consciousness lead us to breaking down the compactness of function (*kiccaghana*), and enable us to see the complexity of the mental world that to an ordinary person appears quite simple.

The Compendium of Doors (Dvārasāṅgaha) shows the different kinds of doors through which the mental processes initiate, and the Compendium of Bases (Vatthusāṅgaha), the bases for these processes to occur. Together with the Compendium of Objects (Ārammaṇasaṅgaha) they make an absolutely essential field for comprehension that prepares us for the thorough discernment of mental processes.

After getting some level of proficiency in discerning mind and matter at the level of ultimate realities, a meditator has to learn to see their natural flow as it occurs during cognition. We have to understand how mind and matter changes in the process of cognition from moment to moment. And this is explained in detail in the next chapter, the Compendium of the Cognitive Process (Vīthisāṅgahavibhāga).

Discernment of mental processes uncovers the absence of self behind them; it helps us to break down another type of compactness, the compactness of continuity (*santatighana*).

As for the next chapter, the Compendium of the Cognitive Process (Vīthisaṅgahavibhāga) - or a chapter on planes as they often call it in Myanmar - it introduces different classifications of *kamma*, objects that arise at the death-proximate moment, and the processes that occur on the verge of death and at rebirth. Understanding of this subject matter is crucial for a clear seeing of Dependent Origination, without which one cannot realize *Nibbāna* even in a dream.

The next topic that is presented in Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha is that on matter (Rūpasaṅgahavibhāga). It exposes us to the different kinds of materiality, their causes, grouping, and the process of their occurrence. Thus helping us to discern matter internally and externally, to define the phenomena precisely, and to go beyond the compactness of the whole (*samuhaghana*). In fact, without discernment of materiality it is quite impossible to discern mind at the ultimate level because in the world of the five-aggregates consciousness arises depending on a base, and the base is always matter. Without seeing the base we cannot clearly see the mind that depends on it.

The textbook proceeds with the Compendium of Categories (Samuccayasaṅgahavibhāga). Here we meet with the groups of unwholesome (*akusala*), mixed (*missaka*), and the requisites of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya*) – all of them play an important role in our spiritual journey. Understanding the aggregates (*khandha*), sense bases (*āyatana*), elements (*dhātu*), and the Truths (*sacca*) is vital for the practice of insight, so this compendium makes sure we have a grasp over them.

Now the student comes to the next major topic - causality. The Compendium of Conditionality (Paccayasaṅgahavibhāga) casts light on the relationships between different phenomena. Here we find two methods - that of Dependent Origination and that of Conditional Relationships. They clearly show the absence of maker, or doer causing the phenomena to arise, and thus reinforce our understanding of *anatta* characteristic. Most of us will be more familiar with the first one, and may directly apply the mind to discern it, but the second way is as well valid not only as a mere theory, but also as a practice. It opens up to a meditator the whole new perception of the world with all the complexity and beauty of countless interconnections of the occurring phenomena.

With the theoretical knowledge of the above chapters and with the application of that knowledge in practice, we can say that the mediator lays a strong foundation by fulfilling the requirements for the practice of insight on the deepest level possible. He acquires the knowledge of defining mentality and materiality, as well as the knowledge of apprehending the causes, and he is ready to proceed further to the development of insight into the three characteristics, the actual *vipassanā*. The chapter with description of the procedure of meditation culminates the work of Ācariya Anuruddha, and its relevance to the practice of meditation doesn't need elaboration, the title "Compendium of Meditation Subjects" (Kammaṭṭhāṇasaṅgahavibhāga) speaks for itself.

This overview of the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha clearly shows us that every part of the textbook, and thus Abhidhamma in general, is relevant to our practice for the attainment of the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings: the total freedom from all defilements, the highest bliss of liberation from the sufferings we have to undergo in the rounds of rebirths. And this text, even though it gives us an overview of Abhidhamma, in itself is only a drop in

the ocean of Abhidhamma literature, and an inquisitive mind that is ready to keep learning until the last breath will be guaranteed to live with a perception of reality with an awe that no sense pleasure can offer. Moreover, gradually a profound realization of anatta will issue from this very perception, and it will become a strong supporting cause for the experience of the highest truth, *Nibbāna*.

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