

THE STUDY OF THE ABHIDHAMMA: AMONGST THE LAITY IN MYANMAR

Presented at the 1st Conference of ATBU / Abhidhamma

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Introduction

"Myanmar" is widely acknowledged as a *Theravāda* Buddhist country where *Abhidhamma* study is prominent. *Abhidhamma* is studied not only as a rational, comprehensible and applicable way of life but also as an essential guide to the final emancipation. Besides, in Myanmar, *Abhidhamma* study is pursued not only by monks and nuns but also by lay people. It is prescribed as part of the syllabus at various levels, from fundamental to the advanced courses such as *Pathamapyan* courses covering elementary (*pathamange*), intermediate (*pathamalat*) and advanced (*pathamagyi*) levels, *Dhammācariya* level, *Tipiṭakadhara* oral and written examinations, University level and Community level.

The principal objective of this presentation, however, is to highlight *Theravāda Abhidhamma* studies in the grass root level, that is, how the Laity in Myanmar studies this important subject. Research methods mainly applied here is the Cross-sectional methods including interview and questionnaires.

Here, this new research, still in progress, may appear a bit narrow in scope as the data collection is focused only on a few leading *Abhidhamma* Associations in Yangon. However, I hope this paper offers you the same thing in the end.

First, historically speaking, the *Abhidhamma* study by the masses began during the lifetime of Venerable Ñāṇadhaja, better known as Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923). Ledi Sayadaw's aim was to "make the profound *Abhidhamma* teachings accessible to everyone"².

Ledi Sayadaw made the first move to compile the "*Paramattha saṅkhepa*" (*Paramattha saṅkhip* in Myanmar) which is the "abridgement of the Ultimate realities", written in Myanmar traditional verse form. He finished the work in the year 1903. Subsequently, "*Saṅkhepa* Association" was formed and reports highlighted that it had around 400,000 members and that examinations were also held³.

Later on, many *Abhidhamma* scholars, monastic and laity, compiled fundamental *Abhidhamma* texts in the forms of tabulation, formula and symbols, which are simple yet comprehensive that *Abhidhamma* subject became easily comprehensible to many.

Among the academic scholars, 'Mūla Paṭṭhāna Sayadaw Venerable Nārada' (1898-1981), an eminent scholar, translated two *Abhidhamma* texts: 'Discourse on Elements' (*Dhātukathā*)⁴ and 'Conditional Relations' (*Paṭṭhāna*)⁵. Moreover, Sayadaw made endeavour to simplify the profound *Abhidhamma* texts such as 'Yamaka', 'Paṭṭhāna' and 'Dhātukathā' by means of diagrams and performed as the Patron of 'Abhidhamma Propagation Association' where he had imparted *Abhidhamma* knowledge for 30 years.

For learners of *Abhidhamma*, commentaries and sub-commentaries compiled by Venerable Sayadaw Ashin Janakābhivamsa, celebrated as 'Taung Myo Sayadaw' also serve as the essential guides. Apart from these Sayadaws are late Venerable Sayadaw U Setṭhila⁶, Dr. Revatadhamma, Dr.

¹ Presented at The International Conference of All Theravāda Buddhist Universities held at The International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University, Yangon, & at Woodlands Hotel, Popa Mountain Resort, Bagan, Myanmar, 9-12th March 2007

² The Treatise on "*Paramatthasaṅkhepa*"

³ Ibid.

⁴ Published by Pāḷi Text Society, London in 1962

⁵ Published by Pāḷi Text Society, London in 1969.

⁶ Translated 'Vibhaṅga' (The Book of Analysis), published by the London Text Society (PTS) in 1969. Sayadaw also conducted *Abhidhamma* lectures in *Abhidhamma* Department at Yangon University.

Sīlānandābhivamsa who also brought *Abhidhamma* into light around the world. Not only the Venerable monks but some senior nuns like Daw Vijjesī⁷ and Daw Ñaṇesī⁸ too compiled *Abhidhamma* books with diagrams for the convenience of the learners.

Moreover, in the propagation of *Abhidhamma* teachings especially among laity, the involvement of lay *Abhidhamma* scholars plays a vital role. To cite some of the native famous scholars - U Shwe Zan Aung⁹, U Pe Maung Tin¹⁰, *Medhāvī* Saya Hsaing¹¹, U Hla Maung¹², U Kyaw¹³, *Mahāsaddhammajotikadhaja* U Kyaw Htut, U Kyaw Lwin, Lecturer U Thein Aung¹⁴, U Mya Thaung (*Dhammabyūhā*)¹⁵, Hsu htoo pan Saya Han, Dr. Mehm Tin Mon, Daw Khin Nwe Han Kyi, Daw Khin Hla Tin¹⁶ etc. who not only conduct *Abhidhamma* courses for laity but also compile the *Abhidhamma* books.

Consequently, the appearance of lay *Abhidhamma* scholars brings advantages for the Community as the *Abhidhamma* becomes easily accessible to them because the majority feels more relaxed and comfortable in dealing the subject amongst themselves. Lay teachers use less *Pāli* terms and give simple explanations based on the experiences of everyday life that these can be put into practice. Having found out that this profound *Abhidhamma* is within the range of their understanding and that it not only guides the way of life but also leads to the final deliverance, they are enchanted with *Abhidhamma* study. In this way, *Abhidhamma* study starts to hold its strong position amongst lay people in Myanmar.

Herein, I would like to explicate why *Abhidhamma* is paid so much attention and held in high esteem in Myanmar.

Abhidhamma Piṭaka is the "An Exposition on the essence of *Suttanta Piṭaka*" because one who has knowledge of *Abhidhamma* can explicitly comprehend what is expounded in *Suttanta*. For instance, the essence of all the Buddhas' teachings expounded in *Suttanta*, can be summarized as:

"Not to do evil; to do good; and to purify one's mind"

In accordance with this admonition, in order to avoid evil and to cultivate good, we should be able to differentiate good from evil. In *Abhidhamma*, the characteristics, feeling and consequences of these concepts are categorized in minute details. When we come to understand their nature and result, we would try to avoid evil, just as we avoid taking something poisonous which brings harm to us. Moreover, the nature of mind, the associated mental phenomena which either purify or defile the mind are explicated and analyzed in minute details. In this way, *Abhidhamma* can be analogous to a guide to purify the mind. Thus, through the application of *Abhidhamma* knowledge to our daily life, we can live in accordance with the instructions of the *Buddhas*.

Furthermore, in *Suttanta*, the aggregates (*khandha*) are only classified into fivefold whereas *Abhidhamma* analyzes the five aggregates in terms of mentality and materiality, their natures, how they arise and harmoniously perform their functions, are explicated in much more detail. Understanding the nature and function of mind and matter provides assistance not only for the clear comprehension of *Suttanta* but also for *Vipassanā* practice because higher attainment of knowledge is absolutely impossible

⁷ The author of 'Illustrated Abhidhamma' and 'Illustrated Dhammapada'

⁸ The author of 'New Method to Abhidhamma'.

⁹ The author of the 'Compendium of Philosophy', published by the PTS, London in 1910

¹⁰ Translator of 'The Expositor', (*Aīhasālīnī*) first published by PTS, London in 1920

¹¹ Translated 'Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīkā', published in 1955 by Religious Affairs Department as prescribed text' for *Abhidhamma* exams; performed as the Second patron of 'Abhidhamma Propagation Association'.

¹² Former Director-General of Religious Affairs; "Member of the State Council" and famous Lecturer on *Abhidhammatthasaṅgha* at 'Abhidhamma Propagation Association'.

¹³ Former President of 'Abhidhamma Propagation Association' conducted *Abhidhamma* lectures and also compiled 'Handbooks' for learners with tabulations.

¹⁴ Compiled 'Primary Abhidhamma' for the University students.

¹⁵ Former lecturer and the secretary of *Maṅgalabyūhā* Association; and also the founder of "*Dhammabyūhā Dhamma* journal".

¹⁶ Started to teach in 1980 at *Maṅgalabyūhā* as the assistant teacher of her father U Mya Thaung and founded *Dhammabyūhā sāsana māmaka* organization in 1989 ; now the in charge of conducting classes in Yangon and occasionally in other towns around Myanmar; and awarded 'Mahāsaddhammajotikadhaja' title in 2006.

without such understanding. In fact, *Abhidhamma* pinpoints to us what we are, the world around us and how to live peacefully and beneficially. These are a few instances that highlight how *Abhidhamma* knowledge is essential for the better understanding of the Buddha's teachings and why it is held in high regards.

In this regard, I would very much like to report the outcomes of my progressive research on how lay people are enchanted with *Abhidhamma* study. The data collection presented here is organized by interviews and questionnaires with learners from home and abroad. It is very interesting to learn that the majority of students pinpointed "mind (*citta*) and mental states (*cetasika*)" as their favourite topic whereas the minority mentioned different preferences, for instance, the thought process, *Paṭṭhāna*, *Kammaṭṭhāna*, etc. Here are some extracts of the survey.

Some of them say:

"Only when one understands the nature of mind and matter, can one eradicate the wrong view of 'soul or self'. Theoretical knowledge of the aggregates when verified with meditation practice brings about clear comprehension of the essence of *Dhamma*. *Abhidhamma* is suitable everywhere, useful at any time, and true for everyone".

The other said:

"Science studies are based on materiality, they cannot analyze *Kamma* and its results. *Abhidhamma* can analyze all the natures of the natural world, *Kamma* and its results, the rounds of existence, and can also bring the welfare for the world".

Another one puts it this way:

"We come to know how to control the mental states (*cetasika*) which manipulate the mind. Practice based on *Abhidhamma* knowledge produces peaceful mind as immediate effect".

Those are the remarkable opinions of the *Abhidhamma* learners. Now, I would like to draw your attention to the *Abhidhamma* examinations held annually by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Examinations

The survey reported that Ministry of Religious Affairs started to organize the *Abhidhamma* examinations (ordinary level) for laity in 1952 and extended to the *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinī-ṭīkā* examinations (honorary level) in 1955. And in the year 1957, the authority could arrange examinations for *Visuddhimagga* as well¹⁷. These examinations are held annually in the last week-end of December.

As a rule, candidates are eligible to join the examinations on the honorary level and the *Visuddhimagga* exams only after they have passed the ordinary level in the *Abhidhamma*. These exams are mainly intended for laity but nuns are also allowed to sit for them.

Each exam constitutes three levels - from level 1 to 3. Candidates can attempt any level or all the three in a year. If they have not passed all the three levels, they are allowed to make endeavor for any level at their choice. When candidates have passed all three levels, they are conferred certificates from the Ministry of Religious Affairs with the signature of the Minister.

It is customary among the laity in Myanmar that after attending fundamental *Abhidhamma* courses, they join either honorary level *Abhidhamma* courses or *Visuddhimagga* courses. Based on the *Abhidhamma* knowledge of the ordinary and honorary levels, learners usually proceed to *Visuddhimagga* study which primarily deals with practical methods for the attainment of ultimate peace. In reality, *Abhidhamma* and *Visuddhimagga* studies are interrelated to each other as practice based on theoretical knowledge brings about fruitful results.

Herein, let me provide the statistics on the figure of the candidates, examination centers, etc. of those examinations held in the whole country by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the year 2005¹⁸.

(1) In the ordinary level *Abhidhamma* exams held in 124 centres, out of 13600 candidates, 10143 candidates have passed, so 74.58% were successful.

¹⁷ Announcement on *Abhidhamma* and *Visuddhimagga* Examinations, Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2006.

¹⁸ Data collection by Examination Department, Ministry of Religious Affairs

(2) In the Honorary level exams held in 92 centres, 2696 candidates out of 3203 have passed, thus 84.17% have passed.

(3) In the *Visuddhimagga* exams held in 63 centres, 947 candidates out of 1547 have passed, that is, 75.12% were successful.

Thus, of all the three exams, 13786 candidates passed and 75.12% is reported to have successful.

After the exams and their results have been reported, a brief sketch of the course outlines will be presented here.

Course outline

1. *Abhidhamma* (Ordinary level)

Prescribed text- *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* (Myanmar translation)

Level 1- Chapter on *Citta, Cetasika, Pakiṇṇaka*;

Level 2- Chapter on *Vīthi, Vīthimutta, Rūpa*;

Level 3- Chapter on *Samuccaya, Paccaya, Kammatṭhāna*.

2. *Abhidhamma* (Honorary level)

Prescribed text- *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinī ṭīkā* (Myanmar translation)

Note: The classification of all the three levels is the same.

3. *Visuddhimagga*

Prescribed text- *Visuddhimagga* (Myanmar translation)

Level 1- *Sīlaniddesa* to *Anussati kammatṭhānaniddesa*;

Level 2- *Brahmavihāraniddesa* to *Indriyaniddesa*;

Level 3- *Paññābhūminiddesa* to *Paññābhāvanānisamsaniddesa*.

It is learnt that in those exams, the examinees are not to be asked Pāli verses and word for word translation (*attha yojana*) but only illustrations (*sarūpa*) and understanding of the subject.

In order that laity has easy access to the *Abhidhamma* examinations, they mainly have to rely on the *Abhidhamma* courses run by religious organizations. The role of non-governmental Buddhist organizations dedicating solely to the promotion of the understanding of *Abhidhamma* is the most significant factor.

To cite a few of them in Yangon area: Under the Ministry of Religious Affairs is the *Abhidhamma* courses at Kaba Aye Campus, conducted by Venerable Sayadaws led by U Vāyamasāra¹⁹; few well-known non-governmental Buddhist organizations such as The *Abhidhamma* Propagation Association²⁰; Y.M.B.A. *Abhidhamma* Association²¹; *Maṅgalābyūhā*²²; *Dhammabyūhā Sāsana māmaka* Organization²³, etc.

Of these Associations 'The *Abhidhamma* Propagation Association' is significant because apart from the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and the *Visuddhamagga* classes, it also conducts *Abhidhamma* classes on some *Abhidhamma* treaties such as the *Mātikā* (part of *Dhammasaṅgāṇī*); the *Dhātukathā*; the *Yamaka* and the *Paṭṭhāna* classes and organizes the examinations including both oral, that is, recitation from memory and written examinations for laity, nuns and monks. But the curriculums are partly different depending on the

¹⁹ Started in 1992 and Sayadaw is also conducting the *Abhidhamma* courses at *Maṅgalābyūhā*

²⁰ Established on 5th May, 1946 with the aims to propagate *Abhidhamma* knowledge to lay people who are not easily accessible to deep *Abhidhamma* Doctrines as Monks and Nuns.

²¹ Established in 1906, *Abhidhamma* classes started on 3rd June, 1967.

²² Established on 21st August, 75; started *Abhidhamma* courses on 22nd September, 1979.

²³ Established in 1989.

status and so are the titles conferred²⁴ to successful candidates. Classes are usually opened on weekend for the convenience of the laity and examinations are annually held in September. Recently in January 2007, this association organized an applied *Abhidhamma* course every Sunday, using English media, conducted by the Rector Sayadaw of ITBMU. Reports mentions that it has been breaking the record as from 200 to 300 students are attending regularly.

Amongst other associations mentioned above, some, for instance the *Maṅgalābyūhā* and the *Dhammabyūhā*, also conduct regular *Abhidhamma* classes including ordinary level; honorary level and *Visuddhimagga* classes from May to December. Their teaching techniques are also updated, by using medias like projectors and visual aids; some teachers use 'Mid-term assessment forms' and thus can survey the understanding and interest of the students. They also arrange tutorials; assignments and other preparations for the government exams. These organizations are renowned and successful because of their teaching methods and qualified teachers, mostly lay people.

For instance, *Abhidhamma* Propagation Association and *Maṅgalābyūhā* have around 20 teachers *Dhammabyūhā* has 30 teachers, majority are women. In Myanmar, the majority of women devote most of their time to religious activities more than man do. In *Dhammabyūhā* organization, they assign two types of teachers:- the first teachers are mainly responsible for explanations and illustrations whereas the assistant teacher is for recitation of the formula²⁵. First, they are assigned as assistant teachers, and as they get more experience and become skillful, they are promoted as the first teachers. In this way, they encourage and promote the role of women teachers.

These religious organizations also perform other religious activities such as Buddhist cultural courses for children, the *Paritta* course, the *Paṭṭhāna* course; celebrating special full-moon days; and social activities such as blood donation, donation to the poor and needy, etc. The children with basic knowledge of the Buddha's teachings become cultured and well-mannered ones as they are also introduced meditation practice. In brief, from such courses also, interest in the *Abhidhamma* is enhanced. So these basic cultural courses serve as stepping stones to higher learning like *Abhidhamma*.

The key concept that *Abhidhamma* is accepted and interested by laity is the application of the subject. *Abhidhamma* guides them their way of life and the path to walk upon so that it would be beneficial here and hereafter. They can improve themselves in various ways which can be reflected from their impacts.

Some students remark:

"*Abhidhamma* can guide us to the correct path; my sensitive and aggressive nature becomes calmer than before; followers of any faith should know *Abhidhamma*".

Some have become considered:

"*Abhidhamma* has always developed my understanding of *Dhamma* and has always inspired to goal for positive results. And I am always grateful to its clear realistic explanations that have changed the whole perspective of my life".

Others describe their experience like this:

"*Abhidhamma* is like a mirror as it can see everything objectively; and also like a formula which can analyze mental and physical processes".

Conclusion

All these descriptions reflect that the *Abhidhamma* is an essential tool that unveils the true nature of ourselves and the world around us. This is the Ultimate truth the Buddha had expounded to us. The more

²⁴ (i) *Abhidhamma Agga Visāradhañāṇa* for monks (the Excellent and competent *Abhidhamma* scholar);

(ii) *Abhidhammika Vipulañāṇinī* for nuns (the Scholar and Promoter of *Abhidhamma*) and

(iii) *Abhidhammika Kalyānañāṇadhaja* for lay people (the *Abhidhamma* scholar of pure knowledge holder).

For the candidates who gets distinction in recitation, the "*Visiṭṭha*" (the special order) and distinction for written

exam, "*Ukkaṭṭha*" (the highest order) is added.

²⁵ Formula here represents the enumeration of the phenomena, for instance, the twelve categories of unwholesome consciousness (*akusala citta*) in *Pāli* and translation.

wide-spread the *Abhidhamma* teachings become, the more peaceful the world will become. Thus, to create the peaceful psychological atmosphere, each and every one is obligatory to establish inner peace which is possible through the application of the *Abhidhamma* knowledge.

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