

SAMATHA & VIPASSANĀ

AS PRESENTED IN

THE THERAVĀDA ABHIDHAMMA

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AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

This short essay will examine whether the position of either experiential empiricism or systematic rationalism is a more accurate description of the Abhidharma, in regards the subject of samatha and vipassanā – calming and insight. These two aspects of samatha and vipassanā form the basic content of Buddhist meditation.

It is considered that the Buddha's teachings in the sutta were based on personal experience, hence empirical. We shall thus begin with a brief synopsis of the presentation of meditation, as samatha and vipassanā according to the sutta method. This shall also touch upon jhana and samādhi.

The Abhidharma is often considered a more rational approach to the Buddha Dhamma. Therefore, following the sutta description, we shall examine the Abhidhamma method, breaking the Abhidhamma itself up into two chronological time periods: Firstly, the seven canonical works of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka proper; secondly, the later commentarial works. This shall include a more detailed analysis of the Visuddhimagga, as a work specifically dealing with this subject.

During this examination of both the sutta and Abhidhamma methods, four key questions and issues to be investigated include:

1. An investigation into what degree the suttic presentation of samatha and vipassanā influences basic Abhidhammic theories and categories. For example, attributing the jhānic factors the status of paramāṭṭha dhamma, sabhāva and / or salakkhaṇa.
2. An investigation of how key Abhidhammic theories influenced the presentation of samatha and vipassanā. For example, the theories of sabhāva, salakkhaṇa, and kkhāṇa.
3. An investigation of any variation or shift of emphasis in the objects of samatha and vipassanā, between the sutta and Abhidhamma methods.
4. An investigation of any variation or shift of emphasis in the actual method and process of the path of meditative development between sutta and Abhidhamma.

From the above four investigations, we shall be able to answer the key question of whether the Abhidhamma is also based on the experiential results of meditative praxis, or whether the method of Abhidhammic rationalism and theory led to a re-presentation of the Buddhist meditative model of samatha and vipassanā.

MENTAL CULTIVATION IN THE SUTTAS

The Āriya Eight-fold Path and the Three Trainings

As aforementioned, we shall take the position that chronologically at least, the Sutta Piṭaka predates the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Broadly speaking, the Sutta Piṭaka covers the entirety of the Buddha's teaching of the Āriya Eight-fold Path, also known as the Middle Way. The Eight-fold Path in turn can be subsumed within the Three Trainings – *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, (ethical virtue, meditative concentration and wise discernment). Let us briefly elucidate each of these in turn.

Sīla – Ethical Virtue

The training in *sīla* consists of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The first two entail the basic five-fold and eight-fold morality practiced by the layman. For the mendicant, the ten-fold novice morality, and full Vinaya code is required, which also incorporates Right Livelihood in the Vinaya sense. We clearly see how this is a basis for the following trainings in the Mahāgosinga Sutta, wherein the practices of being a forest dweller, almsfood eater, and so forth, lead towards virtue, concentration, wisdom, deliverance and knowledge and vision of deliverance.¹ There are a great number of additional references regarding the importance of *sīla* as a condition for the following trainings. The above citation is merely one concise yet full example.

Samādhi – Meditative Concentration

The training in *samādhi* (*sam* + *√dhā* – “place together”) consists of both Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration of the Path, wherein Right Concentration corresponds to *samatha* and *jhana*. The most common method was the practice of mindfulness of the physical body, leading into mindfulness of the breath.² The first includes meditations on physical death – ie. impermanence, and also impurity – in terms of post-mortem physical decay. The second focused on developing mindfulness into *samādhi*, by progressing through the four *jhana* of form. As such, the topic of *jhana* is also central to the forthcoming investigation. Together, mindfulness of the breath and foulness comprise the two “entrances to the deathless”, as taught by the Buddha.³ Additionally, meditation on loving-kindness was an

¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Mahāgosinga Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 309.

² Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Ānāpānasati Sutta” & “Kāyagatāsati Sutta” in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pp. 941-958; Walshe, M: “Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta” in *Dīgha Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 1987).

³ See for example, *Dhammapada*, IV & IX.

important and frequent topic.⁴ We see that in general, any object of thought that was able to develop wholesome states of mind, and eliminate unwholesome states of mind, appears to have been a suitable subject of meditation.⁵ This general principle applies to mindfulness of the breath to counter-act agitation and lack of internal awareness, mindfulness of impurity to counter-act sensuous lust, and loving-kindness to counter-act aggression and hatred. Closely related to samādhi, the term samatha implies the “calming” (√śam) of the mind by “appeasement” (√śam) of mental disturbance, both in terms of removal of unwholesome states, or as the entrance into jhana absorption.

Paññā – Wise Discernment

The training in paññā (√ñā – “knowledge”) consists of both Right View and Right Intention of the Path, of which certain aspects of Right View correspond to vipassanā, or “insight”. Specifically, it refers to understanding of the Four Āriya Truths – dukkha, the origination of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha, (ie. the Āriya Eight-fold Path).⁶ Vipassanā refers to “discerning seeing” (vi + √pas) into the flow of phenomena. Thus, after appeasing the unwholesome states of the mind through samatha, one applies wise discernment as to the nature of the Āriya Truths, and attains knowledge (ñāna) thereof.

Samatha and Vipassanā in the Sutta

The terms samatha and vipassanā are used in many instances throughout the Nikāyas, thus only a brief survey is possible here. Samatha and vipassanā can be taken as a comprehensive totality of the practices of samādhi and paññā, represented by the Path and the other elements of the Thirty Seven Factors of Awakening, and are to be maintained “yoked together” (yuganaddha).⁷ Both individually and separately, they are referred to as the “path(s) leading to the unconditioned”.⁸ This is also shown as a mode of practice wherein wholesome states can be continuously developed.⁹ From their further development, there is the “penetration” (abhisamaya) into the nature of phenomena, which is a requisite for the further progression of paññā, and knowledge and vision (ñāṇa-dassana) regarding those phenomena.¹⁰ Finally, there is a reciprocal relation, wherein samatha and vipassanā are developed

⁴ See “Metta Sutta”, in *Anguttara Nikāya*.

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 221.

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 132~144.

⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Mahāsaḷāyatanika Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 1138.

⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Asaṅkhatasaṃyutta”, in *Samyutta Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2000), pg. 1373~1375.

⁹ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Piṇḍapātapārisuddhi Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 1145.

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Mahāvachchagotta Sutta”, in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), Pg. 600.

Bhikkhu Thanissaro: “Vijja-bhāgiya Sutta”, in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, (www.accesstoinight.org)

by direct knowledge, with the final goal as culmination of “true knowledge and deliverance”.¹¹ Accomplishment can be through dominance and precedence of either, or both in tandem.¹²

From this brief survey of the sutta references to samatha and vipassanā, we have the clear impression that the two are most commonly used together, and seldom found separately in the suttas. This further emphasizes the fact that they are to be “yoked together in tandem” in order to accomplish both their individual and combined functions. That both are necessary for penetration and realization, indicates a kind of synergetic relationship. This is in turn consistent with the key Buddhist notion of dependent co-arising, the result of both combined is beyond the combined results of the two individually.

Summary

The above is a very basic synopsis of one critical aspect of the Buddha’s teachings. In general, samatha and vipassanā refer to samādhi and paññā. More specifically, however, they refer to a state wherein unwholesome mental states have already been appeased – samatha, and the practitioner is seeing (investigating) and penetrating into the nature of things – vipassanā. It is a mutual relationship leading to penetration into full knowledge and deliverance, but is not these results per se.

It is worth noting at this point, that those sutta which are considered to have proto-Abhidhamma type formats provide a fair amount of discussion on the issue of samatha and vipassanā. These such suttas include the Vibhangavagga and Saḷāyatana-vagga of the Majjhima Nikāya, in particular the Mahāsaḷāyatana Sutta, Piṇḍapātāpārisuddhi Sutta, and Indriya-bhavana Sutta. However, other Majjhima suttas in this similar analytical vein, such as the Mahāvedalla and Cūḷavedalla, barely touch upon the issue. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, it is again the Saḷāyatana-vagga that provides the largest such coverage, followed by the Maggasamyutta. It is thus apparent that the sutta methods of analysis (vibhanga) of the six senses (saḷāyatana) are important sources for the doctrine of samatha and vipassanā. This also gives us an idea of how samatha and vipassanā were considered by the early collators of the Tipiṭaka.

We shall refer to these in the following section, for comparison. Bhikkhu Sujato’s “Swift Pair of Messengers” and “History of Mindfulness” give excellent accounts of samatha and vipassanā in the sutta context.

¹¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Mahāsaḷāyatana Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 1139.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Maggasamyutta”, in *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2000), pg. 1557-1558.

¹² Bhikkhu Thanissaro: “Yuganaddha Sutta”, in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, (www.accesstoinsight.org)

SAMATHA AND VIPASSANĀ

IN THE CANONICAL ABHIDHAMMA

There are several positions on the status of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka:¹³ The traditional claim is that the Abhidhamma is the direct teaching of the Buddha, as taught to his mother in the heavens, and passed back into the human sphere through the disciple Sāriputta. Other scholars reject this theory, and on strict historical and philological evidence, state that the Abhidhamma is the work of later commentators on the Buddha's word. Such is the opinion of the author. Of the latter, some still maintain that the Abhidhamma is an indispensable means for the understanding of the Sutta Piṭaka – these are the Abhidhammikas proper. The second group considers that the Abhidhamma has, through a general shift in basic methodology, from the empirical to the rationalist, deviated to some degree or another from the suttas, which are the core teachings. Which of the two latter groups is more appropriate shall be ascertained through the following analysis and discussion.

Although the canonical Abhidhamma contains seven texts, we shall focus on those references that have closest relation to the topic. The Dhammasaṅgaṇī and Vibhaṅga contain the essential elements of the Abhidhamma methodology and system, and represent the epitome of dhamma analysis. This, along with the synthesis of the Paṭṭhana, together comprise the two-fold methodology of the Abhidhamma dhammavāda, or “dhamma theory”.¹⁴ These early works are more a matter of systematization and enumeration of the categories of the various dhammas that have already been taught in the suttas, rather than any additional analysis undertaken upon them. As such, the canonical Abhidhamma is a totalistic, though unembellished teaching, based upon such categories as the five khandhas, eighteen dhātus, and so forth, yet going beyond them into more detailed analysis.¹⁵

The Dhammasaṅgaṇī

As the name suggests, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī is involved in the “grouping” and “classification” (vsaṅg) of the various “dhammas”, and is the first text of the

¹³ The reader is invited to reference the following for a more comprehensive background regards this: Bhikkhu Bodhi: *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (BPS, 2000), pp. 1~15.

Bhikkhu Ñānamoli: *The Path of Purification*, (CBEEF, 2006), pp. ix~xviii.

¹⁴ Karunadasa, Y: *The Dhamma Theory*, (BPS, 1996), pp. 1ff.

Bhikkhu Nyanaponika: *Abhidhamma Studies*, (Wisdom, 1998), pp. 19~30.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (BPS, 2006), pp. 3~7.

¹⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi: *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (BPS, 2006), pg. 5~6.

Abhidhamma canon. Regarding samatha and vipassanā, we first see one way in which the Dhammasaṅgaṇī appears to differ from the sutta method of jhana, in the use of a five-fold, rather than four-fold delineation of jhānic dhamma states. Rhys Davids comments on this by noting:

Jhana is usually alluded to in the Piṭakas as the four-fold order. The fivefold division is obtained by the successive, instead of simultaneous, elimination of vitakko and vicāro. According to the Cy., it was optional to the teacher, after the example of the Buddha, to use either at his discretion, adapting himself to the particular mental state of his pupils, or having a view to the effective flow of his discourse. A passage is quoted from the Piṭakas – probably S. iv. 363 or A. i. 299, n. 2 – where samādhi is distinguished as (1) having vitakko and vicāro, (2) having only the latter, (3) having neither.¹⁶

This is a very nice example of the method of these seminal Abhidhamma texts, wherein the final presentation of the subject matter is given in such a way that it can include any of the various presentations given in the suttas, all in highly precise, technical and unembellished terminology. Despite the four-fold versus five-fold difference, the jhānic factors are directly taken from the suttas, and each is given a brief definition.¹⁷

In particular, the first two factors warrant further elucidation. In the process of Abhidhamma classification into unique and specific dhammas, certain aspects of the first two factors are lost. Vitakko here refers to the discursive mind applied to the object of meditation. However, in so defining the term, the meanings of the root (\sqrt{takka}) as rational thought, reasoning, ratiocination, and so forth, are lost. Vicāro as the finer and more subtle companion of vitakko is also influenced by the Abhidhamma definitions, where its implications as deliberation, consideration and procedure (\sqrt{car}) are abandoned for its more subtle aspect as sustained mental activity upon the object. They are now both subsumed in the Abhidhamma as specific jhana factors, and lose these other aspects of their original meanings in the process. (This in turn affects the commentarial descriptions of the ulterior meanings in contexts outside of jhana absorption. This is beyond our scope here, however.) This is a good example of how the sutta presentation has set the categories of the

¹⁶ Rhys Davids, C A F: *Compendium of Phenomena*, (Pali Text Society, 1900), pg. 52, n.1.

(Note her use of “piṭaka” as referring to the suttas, and not encompassing the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.)
Karunadasa, Y: *The Dhamma Theory*, (BPS, 1996), pp. 3-8.

¹⁷ Rhys Davids, C A F: *Compendium of Phenomena*, (Pali Text Society, 1900), pg. 31.

Bhikkhu Nyanaponika: *Abhidhamma Studies*, (Wisdom, 1998), pp. 53-57.

Abhidhamma method, yet the sabhāva and salakkhaṇa methodology of distinct and unique dhammas, that is to say, each dhamma has a distinct and unique rather than multiple or pluralistic definition, has in turn re-cast the meaning of certain sutta terms and narrowed their range.

On another note, there is an example of the Abhidhamma method bringing out a greater range of dhammas, such as the more detailed and complete delineation of the various dhammas involved in samatha. These include passadhi, labhutā, mudutā, kammaññatā, pāguññatā, and ujukatā as qualities of both citta and kāya, six pairs (yugalaka) of dhammas all told.¹⁸ There is some debate on the use of “kāya”, as to whether it implies the physical form, or the body of mental factors.¹⁹ The Dhammasaṅgaṇī glosses citta as viññāna, and kāya as the khandhas of vedanā, saññā and sankhāra, and all the six pairs are subsumed within the sobhana dhammas, further indicating their relation to jhana and samatha. Each of them is described partially in negative terms, ie. the “absence of such-and-such quality”. Although it is implied that there is successive development of all six as the process of samatha, no method for their arising is explicitly stated. Here, Bhikkhu Nyanaponika returns to the suttas for his exposition.²⁰ These dhammas are barely mentioned in the suttas, and may be additions based on the meditative experience of early yogins. This would support the position that the canonical Abhidhamma was based on such meditative experience.²¹ Bhikkhu Nyanaponika makes this connection more explicit through the presence of the paired factors of samatha and vipassanā subsequent to the above.²² Little information beyond that previously mentioned is supplied.

The Vibhaṅga

The Vibhaṅga appears not to cover the issue of samatha and vipassanā in much depth.²³ It does however, return to the four-fold jhana layout, and also has a different layout of these various jhana factors, including upekkhā and sati, rather than simply an absence of piti and sukha in the fourth jhana.

¹⁸ Rhys Davids, C A F: *Compendium of Phenomena*, (Pali Text Society, 1900), pg. 23-25.

¹⁹ Bhikkhu Nyanaponika: *Abhidhamma Studies*, (Wisdom, 1998), pp. 71-81.

²⁰ Bhikkhu Nyanaponika: *Abhidhamma Studies*, (Wisdom, 1998), pp. 78-80.

²¹ Bhikkhu Nyanaponika: *Abhidhamma Studies*, (Wisdom, 1998), pp. 10-11.

Bhikkhu Ñānamoli: *The Path of Purification*, (CBBEF, 2006), pg. xxx.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (BPS, 2006), pg. 9-15.

²² Bhikkhu Nyanaponika: *Abhidhamma Studies*, (Wisdom, 1998), pp. 81-82.

²³ At first glance, the only seemingly relevant subjects being, “analysis of the enlightenment factors” (*bodhipakkhiya*) in the case of *samatha*, and “analysis of analytic insight” (*paṭisambhidāmagga*) in the case of *vipassanā*. However, the two are not connected or inter-related here, and it’s analysis of analytic insight is really quite a different matter to that insight associated with *samatha*. See:

U Thiṭṭila: *The Book of Analysis*, Translation of the Vibhaṅga, (Pāli Text Society, 2002), pp. 297-307; 387.

The Puggala-Paññati

This text is an enumerated discussion of the various “designations of individuals”, the different personality types, according to different Abhidhamma qualities and categories. As such, it is not confined to the Abhidhamma technique of using only paramattha dhammas to elucidate the teaching. This however, does not influence our study here, and there are several points it raises that are worthy of note.

Regards the carita, or temperament, of the practitioner, we distinctly see how the two aspects of samatha and vipassanā, (meditation and insight respectively), are used in a descriptive manner for three types of individual (emphasis added):

A man who fulfils the moral laws, but incompletely practises **meditation** and the way of **insight**. A man who fulfils the moral laws, completes the practice of **meditation**, but incompletely practises the way of **insight**. A man who fulfils the moral laws, completes the practice of **meditation**, but completely practises the way of **insight**.²⁴

The first and second individuals do not complete the path, whereas only the last does complete it. The fact that there is no mention of an individual who “incompletely practises moral laws and meditation, but fulfils insight”, is a clear statement of the causal relationship between the three, ie. the morality is a prerequisite for meditation and insight. In this sense, samatha and vipassanā are in no way different to the trainings of samādhi and paññā as presented in the suttas. Further information is provided, with regards descriptive types of emancipated individuals:

What sort of person is emancipated in **both ways**? ... Here a person goes on himself experiencing the **eight stages of emancipation**, and having seen them through **insight**, his sinful tendencies are completely destroyed. This sort of person is said to be emancipated in **both ways**.

What sort of person is emancipated by way of **insight**? ... Here a person without experiencing the **eight stages of emancipation** but having perceived them through **insight**, has his sinful tendencies completely destroyed. This sort of person is said to be emancipated by **insight**.²⁵

The first has fulfilled both samatha and vipassanā, the former obviously a requisite of the latter. However, the second individual appears to fulfil vipassanā but not

²⁴ Law, B C: *Human Types*, (Translation of Puggala Paññatti, Pāli Text Society, 1997), pg. 10.

²⁵ Law, B C: *Human Types*, (Pāli Text Society, 1997), pg. 22.

samatha, at least in the sense of the eight stages of emancipation (basically the four rūpa-jhanas and four arūpa-jhanas). We can only conclude from these two passages, that “completion of samatha” does not necessitate the fulfilment of all these eight jhanas, and that some lesser degree – perhaps some or all of the rūpa-jhanas – is sufficient. The question of how much samatha is sufficient to proceed to vipassanā will be touched on again later in the Viśuddhimagga.

SAMATHA AND VIPASSANĀ

IN THE POST-CANONICAL ABHIDHAMMA

It is in the post-canonical Abhidhamma commentaries that we see a development of the above methodology. Not only is the dhammavāda further elaborated,²⁶ through clarification of terms such as sabhāva (individual nature), salakkhaṇa (individual characteristic), paramattha (ultimate dhamma) and paññatti (conceptual dhamma); but new doctrines unseen, yet hinted at, in the suttas and Abhidhamma Piṭaka, are expounded. These new doctrines include khaṇa (indivisible moment), the heart basis (hadaya vatthu), and many terms and divisions of citta and cetasika.²⁷ We shall look into several texts which provide a greater Abhidhamma contribution to the subject at hand, in particular the Viśuddhimagga.

Paṭisambhidāmagga

The Paṭisambhidāmagga reverted to the four-fold jhana system, rather than the five-fold layout of the Dhammasaṅgaṇī. Within this context, samatha and vipassanā appear as the eighth and ninth of thirteen “cleansings” of the mind, in an analysis of twenty-eight steps of ānāpānasati meditation. They are followed by cessation, purification, equanimity and knowledge of the path. The first jhana begins from purification, indicating that samatha and vipassanā are here almost immediately preceding the jhana, where the mind takes “the way for the central sign of calm abiding”, and which is the “single function” of the two united together.²⁸

Vipassanā also appears again as the fourteenth of the “eighteen principle contemplations”, successive insightful contemplations leading to emancipation from bondage. These too are described as corresponding to the last stages of contemplation within the practice of ānāpānasati, as it develops into mindfulness of dhamma, the fourth of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. This in turn leads to knowledge, and finally deliverance.²⁹ These eighteen insights also become a key point of the Viśuddhimagga’s explanation of vipassanā.

We can see from this that the Paṭisambhidāmagga is quite a detailed examination of the topic at hand, yet still very firmly based in the traditional subject of ānāpānasati.

²⁶ Karunadasa, Y: *The Dhamma Theory*, (BPS, 1996), pp. 10ff.

²⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi: *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (BPS, 2006), pp. 13ff.

²⁸ Shatz, G: Unpublished manuscript of the *Ānāpānasati-katthā*, (Translated from the Pāli with reference to PTS English translation by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, and personal correspondence).

²⁹ Shatz, G: Unpublished manuscript of the *Ānāpānasati-katthā*, (Translated from the Pāli with reference to PTS English translation by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, and personal correspondence).

It is somewhat more systematized than the sutta method though, with the thirteen cleansings, and eighteen principle subjects of insight.

Vimuttimagga

Modern scholars have concluded that Upatissa, the author of the *Vimuttimagga*, appears to be very aware of the above *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, as he uses some 30 passages which parallel this text, often merely cited as the *Abhidhamma*. It is noted by Kōgen Mizuno that it is related to the *Abhayagirivihāra* sect,³⁰ yet we shall discuss it in the context of the Theravāda, due to its importance within the Śrī Lankan tradition. In particular, this text provides an excellent description of *ānāpānasati*, which, being one of the two “entrances to the deathless” taught by the Buddha, also indicates an approach along sutta models.

Bhikkhu Sona provides a very well reasoned argument in his “The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta”³¹ relating the description of the breath nimitta (sign or image) in the *Vimuttimagga* and *Viśuddhimagga*. The former earlier text provides a passage regarding the development of this sign, as well as distracting mental events that may detract the meditator from the object. These distractions include other visual images which are likened to “smoke, mist, dust, sand or gold”, or various sensations. If the meditator directs their mental attention to these, they will become “confused” and lose the image of the breath, which is purely tactile, and “does not depend on colour or form”. If they “do not cause the arising of [these] other perceptions”, they will attain the subtle sign of the breath, and continue development of *ānāpānasati* meditation.³² Both the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Vimuttimagga* give several similes for the liberated yogin, such as being “like the full moon free from clouds”, “... freed from mist, freed from smoke and dust”, one who “gleams and glows and shines”.³³ Bhikkhu Sona then explains how the *Viśuddhimagga* takes these similes as the actual sign of *ānāpānasati*, rather than similes for the liberated yogin.

³⁰ “(1) that the *Vimuttimagga* (along with the *Dhammapada*, the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* etc.) “probably belonged to the **Abhayagiri** sect and not to the *Mahāvihāra* sect” (*paragraph b* continued from the previous page); (2) that “He (i.e., the Venerable Buddhaghosa Thera) evidently studied the *Vimuttimagga*, which was a manual of the **Abhayagirivihāra** sect” (*paragraph c*); and (3) “That the *Vimuttimagga*, was Upatissa’s work and belonged to the **Abhayagirivihāra** sect is mentioned in the *ḥikā* (sub-commentary, i.e., *Dhammapāla’s Paramatthamañjūsā*) of the *Viśuddhimagga*” (*paragraph c*).” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Government of Ceylon, 1961, *Fascicle A-Aca*), pg. 8.

³¹ Bhikkhu Sona: *The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta*, (www.birken.ca/library/index.html).

³² Rev. Ehara, Soma Thera, & Kheminda Thera: *The Path of Freedom, Vimuttimagga by the Arahant Upatissa*, (Buddhist Publication Society, 1995).

Quoted in: Bhikkhu Sona: *The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta*, (www.birken.ca/library/index.html).

³³ *Paṭisambhidāmagga* III, 182, p.175;

Quoted in Bhikkhu Sona: *The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta*, (www.birken.ca/library/index.html).

The article continues with a discussion of the location of the object of ānāpānasati, and concludes that it is purely physical sensation, located at either the nostrils or mouth (mukha). At this point, there seems to be various commentarial traditions that indicate the “entirety of the body” – as per the Ānāpānasati Sutta and Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, or, as the Viśuddhimagga, not a physical location at all, but rather a mental image.³⁴ We shall examine these two issues of nimitta and physical sensory perception, in the main discussion on the Viśuddhimagga.

The Vimuttimagga, in addition to also using the four-fold jhana layout, also somewhat alters the various jhana factors. For instance, the fourth jhana now includes upekkhā and sati, rather than simply an absence of pīti and sukha. This is in accord with the Vibhaṅga, rather than the Dhammasaṅgaṇī,³⁵ and is echoed by the Viśuddhimagga, which relies heavily on the Vibhaṅga at this point (IV 183~197).³⁶

³⁴ Bhikkhu Sona: *The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta*, (www.birken.ca/library/index.html).

³⁵ Bapat, P V: *Viśuddhimagga and Vimuttimagga, A Comparative Study*, (Calcutta Oriental Press, 1937), pg. xxxii.

³⁶ Bhikkhu Ñānamoli: *The Path of Purification*, (CBBEF, 2006), pp. 171ff.

VIŚUDDHIMAGGA – THE PATH OF PURIFICATION

The Viśuddhimagga is perhaps the most well known of all the post-canonical Abhidhamma literature. Composed by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century CE, it follows the seven stages of purification taught in the Rathavinīta Sutta, which progressively lead the practitioner to “final nibbāna without clinging”.³⁷ It is often stated that it is “probably best regarded as a detailed manual for meditation masters, and as a work of reference”.³⁸ However, others suggest that given the circumstances in which the text was written, ie. as a demonstration of Buddhaghosa’s Theravādin orthodoxy in order to gain support to translate the commentaries into Pāli, the latter position of a reference work seems more apt than the former. If so, it is foremost an exposition on Abhidhamma scholasticism, rather than on meditation praxis.

Taking the Viśuddhimagga as the main focus for this essay, let us investigate the text through its own format, keeping the questions raised in the introduction in mind. The larger section headings refer to the three trainings of sīla, samādhi and paññā. The secondary numbered headings refer to the seven purifications as per the Rathavinīta Sutta. The tertiary headings refer to the chapters of the Viśuddhimagga itself. Our English source text is Bhikkhu Ñānamoli’s translation, entitled *The Path of Purification*, and citations shall use the chapter and paragraph number. For ease of reference to the Pāli, and other editions of the English, the format used is (chapter# paragraph#), eg. (VII 28).³⁹ The author has added **bold font** for emphasis.

³⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Rathavinīta Sutta”, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pg. 240.

³⁸ Bhikkhu Ñānamoli: *The Path of Purification*, (CBBEF, 2006), pg. xxx.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (BPS, 2006), pg. 13.

³⁹ Bhikkhu Ñānamoli: *The Path of Purification*, (Buddha Educational Foundation, 2005).

VIŚUDDHIMAGGA – SĪLA – VIRTUE

1. Purification of Virtue

From the beginning of the text, we see several direct references to samatha and vipassanā as the path to purification. The Description of Virtue states five “paths of purification”, being: 1. by insight alone – vipassanā; 2. by jhana and understanding – jhana / samatha and vipassanā; 3. by kamma, etc.; 4. by virtue, etc. – sīla, and; 5. by the foundations of mindfulness, etc. (the thirty seven factors) (I 6). These are all referenced to the Nikāyas. Of them, it is the foundations of mindfulness alone that is declared as “the only way”, which may indicate that the others are expedient neyyattha teachings. The footnote from the commentary further clarifies the matter with a very important statement on the subject:

The words “insight alone” are meant to exclude, not virtue, etc., but serenity (ie. jhana), which is the opposite number in the pair, serenity and insight. This is for emphasis. But the word “alone” actually excludes only that concentration with distinction [of jhana]; for concentration is classed as both access and absorption (see Ch. IV 32). Taking this stanza as the teaching for one whose vehicle is insight does not imply that there is no concentration; for no insight comes about without momentary concentration. And again, insight should be understood as the three contemplations of impermanence, pain, and not-self: not contemplation of impermanence alone.

(Paramattha- mañjūsā 9-10). (I 6 n3)

We see the idea of “insight alone” again in Purification of View, Chapter XVIII. It makes two clear statements regarding samatha and vipassanā. Firstly, samatha is jhana as access and absorption, which is required for any vipassanā to take place. Secondly, vipassanā is the insight into the three dhamma characteristics, impermanence, suffering and non-self. The vast bulk of the Viśuddhimagga focuses around these two points, as we shall see below, in the preceding sections on concentration – samatha, and understanding – vipassanā.

VIŚUDDHIMAGGA – SAMĀDHI – CONCENTRATION

2. Purification of Consciousness

At the opening of the Description of Concentration, we immediately see a statement of the relations between samatha and ease of progress, and vipassanā and swiftness of attainment of direct-knowledge (III 17). This appears to be similar to the Anguttara Nikāya 4.162 and 10.29, yet with the additional emphasis of samatha as the dominant factor for overcoming craving, as opposed to just vipassanā alone.

It continues, detailing aspects of the 40 meditation subjects. They are analyzed and classified as to which bring access and which absorption, the kinds of jhana, their extension or non-extension, suitability of temperament, and so forth. The kinds of jhana include unextended (limited) subjects, and extended (measureless) subjects leading to higher jhanas. The temperaments are sixfold, and reflect the Puggala-paññatti definitions (III 20, 60, 74, 104~109). We see the notions of sabhāva and paññati influencing the description of objects of meditation here:

... space need not be extended since it is the mere removal of the kasina [materiality]; ... only as the disappearance of the kasina [materiality]; if he extends it, nothing further happens. And consciousness need not be extended since it is a state consisting in an individual essence, and it is not possible to extend a state consisting in an individual essence. The disappearance of consciousness need not be extended since it is mere non-existence of consciousness. And the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception as object need not be extended since it too is a state consisting in an individual essence.³⁰ (III 115)

n³⁰: 'It is because **only an abstract (parikappaja) object can be extended**, not any other kind, that he said "it is not possible to extend a state consisting in an individual essence"' (Pm. 110).

In other words, not all objects of meditation are dhammas themselves, and some are merely the absence of dhammas. These are not in turn reified as real existents. Only these parikappaja – conceptualized or fabricated – objects, have a nimitta sign. The text continues along with Bhikkhu Ñānamoli's note:

The rest not be extended because they have no sign. For it is the counterpart sign³¹ that would be extendable, and the object of the recollection of the Buddha, etc., is not a counterpart sign. Consequently there is no need for extension there. This is as to extension and non-extension.

n³¹: The word 'nimitta' in its technical sense is consistently rendered here by the word 'sign', which corresponds very nearly if not exactly to most uses of it. It is sometimes rendered by 'mark' (which over-emphasizes the concrete), and by 'image' (which is not always intended). The three kinds, that is, the 'preliminary-work sign, learning sign, and counterpart sign' do not appear in the Piṭakas. There the use rather suggests association of ideas as, for example, at M.i, 180, M.i, 119, A.i, 4, etc., than the more definitely visualized 'image' in some instances of the 'counter-part sign' described in the following chapters. (III 116)

This implies that although the recollection of the Buddha (Dhamma and Saṅgha) have no counterpart sign, they must have a nimitta sign that enables access concentration. However, the preceding statement declares that only parikappaja objects, ie. non-sabhāva objects, have such a sign. Beyond this, they are non-extendible, and one cannot enter absorption concentration based on them. However, we see a very interesting statement following this:

Twelve (subjects) have states consisting in **individual essences** as object, that is to say, eight of the **ten recollections** – except mindfulness of breathing and the body – the perception of repulsiveness in nutriment, the defining of the elements, base of boundless consciousness, and base of neither perception nor non-perception. (III 117)

This is a direct statement that recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, and so forth, are sabhāva dhammas. In the Abhidhamma sense, sabhāva is a strict definition of paramattha dhamma, yet these objects are not considered as such in the Abhidhamma canon. Are these recollections then sabhāva or parikappaja? Does not accepting the Buddha as a sabhāva amount to some sort of paramattha theory of an ultimate "Buddha essence"? (And likewise the Dhamma and Saṅgha?)

We thus see that Buddhaghosa is obviously using sabhāva in another sense, which though not obviously apparent at this point, shall become clearer later. Moreover, the suttas indicate these recollections as bases for Arahantship (AN 6.26), where the Viśuddhimagga states that they only lead to access samādhi.⁴⁰ Twenty-two subjects have counterpart signs, making them suitable for entering absorption. The eighteen remaining subjects have no counter part sign.

⁴⁰ Bhikkhu Sujato: *Swift Pair of Messengers*, <http://www.bswa.org/modules/mydownloads> pg. 122.

Kasinas

We see a more detailed description of the process of developing the sign among the description of the kasinas. Having constructed the physical kasina, the yogin begins contemplation thereon. The process goes from “apprehending the sign”, “reflecting on the sign”, and “striking the learning sign with the jhana factors”, until the “counterpart sign arises”. The process is described for the earth kasina, though it is basically identical for all ten:

... so he should develop it by **apprehending the sign** (nimitta), keeping his eyes open moderately, as if he were seeing the reflection of his face (mukha-nimitta) on the surface of a looking glass. (IV 28)

The color should not be reviewed. The characteristic should not be given attention. ... attention should be given by **setting the mind on the [name] concept** as the most outstanding mental datum ... That [conceptual state] can be called by any one he likes among the names for earth (paṭhavī), ... (IV 29)

... it comes into focus as he adverts with his eyes shut exactly as it does with his eyes open, then the learning sign is said to have been produced. ... and develop it by reiterated reaction to it and by **striking at it with thought and applied thought**. (IV 30)

As he does so ... and **the counterpart sign arises**. (IV 31)

The three-fold process goes from looking at the object itself, developing a (paññatti) conceptual impression of the object which is the learning sign, and then the purified counterpart sign. This counterpart sign is “born only of perception in one who has obtained concentration, being a mere mode of appearance”. As such, it cannot be predicated as having the “three characteristics” (IV 31), it is not a paramattha dhamma.

At this point, a two-fold division of concentration are introduced, not seen in the suttas. The first is access, the second is absorption, both of which are considered as jhana (IV 32). Entry into these is also described by way of the bhavaṅga life continuum, and the seven khaṇa moments where the mind adverts towards absorption into jhana, which are again Abhidhamma doctrines (IV 33, 74 ff). During this period from access to absorption, the yogin develops, maintains and gives wise attention to the spiritual faculties and factors of awakening (IV 45ff). These include both samādhi and paññā, and tranquillity and investigation of states, as equivalents of samatha and vipassanā, respectively. For the description of absorption jhana proper, the Viśuddhimagga uses the four-fold jhana system of jhanic factors,

indicating the arising of five factors, the abandonment of five factors, and three kinds of goodness (IV 79ff). Of these, Ñānamoli translates “bodily and mental bliss”, which indicates a preference of the physical over the cetasikas, for the term kāya, against the Dhammasaṅgaṇī (see previous). The Vibhaṅga is cited heavily during this section (IV 79, 83~86, 92, 101~103, 109ff). It is only at this point that serenity (samatha) is mentioned, (IV 111) indicating as the Vimuttimagga above, that samatha only begins at jhana.

The text then continues with extension of the sign, and the description of the higher rūpa jhanas. Finally, the five-fold system is briefly appended to the discussion. The other ten kasinas are then covered, with identical process to that for the earth kasina.

Foulness

In the discussion on the subject of “foulness”, ie. the ten stages of decay of a corpse, we see further indications of Buddhaghosa’s more flexible use of the usually Abhidhammic terms salakkhaṇa and sabhāva. Towards the foul corpse, the yogin:

... brings to mind that it has an **individual essence**, its own state of being bloated, which is **not common to anything else**, since it was said that he defines it by the fact of its having attained that particular essence. (VI 34ff, 84).

In this sense, neither salakkhaṇa nor sabhāva are exactly synonymous for paramattha, either in the sense of being ultimate, or as being non-reducible. Rather, they are merely the state (-bhāva) of the thing itself (sa-), that is not common to (na sādharmaṇa) anything else. In retrospect, we can see that the previous descriptions of the recollections of Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha and so forth as sabhāva, is also that they have their own characteristic state, which is unique and not common to others. Even this clarification of sabhāva, does not however cover the fact that this statement is in direct contradiction to a previous statement, where the ten subjects of foulness are not considered to have individual essence sabhāva (III 117). There seems to be some leeway in the definition of these terms, and also a little inconsistency.

Recollections

The ten recollections (“sati”, also mindfulness) have been described previously as having sabhāva, yet it is in the recollection of the Dhamma (as the doctrinal teaching), that Bhikkhu Ñānamoli’s notes finally give us a classical definition of dhamma in all its senses (VII n1). This is focussed on the root √dhā, as “to bear [good qualities]”, and sabhāva is mentioned in a sutta citation, along with many others. This is an excellent example of a commonly used multi-valent word that defies the Abhidhamma practice of pinning each dhamma down to a clear-cut definition, even through multiple near-synonyms, that fits for each and every instance of the word.

At the end of recollection of death, again it is indicated that “object states with individual essences, ... do not reach absorption, and are only access” (VIII 40~41), and is supported by the Paṭisambhidāmagga. There is also a note that kasina jhana has a paññatti object, yet in Buddhaghosa’s own commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, there is the suggestion that all other objects contained within the recollections are reduced to the kasinas and foulness, giving them what seems to be a type of irreducible paramattha status, in the sense of their being not further reducible:

... [1] ānāpāna jhana is included in the air kasiṇa; [2a] the development of kāyagatāsati arisen ... with reference to the hair etc., is included in the colour kasiṇas; [2b] the kāyagatāsati produced by virtue of ...the unattractiveness ... of the body, and that of ... [2c] the colours of the nine kinds of corpses in the charnel grounds is included in the ten repulsive things. Thus all the absorptions of consciousness connected with the sphere of refined form have been included here.⁴¹

This notion also appears in the Vimuttimaggā, where it is implied that ānāpānasati is merely the air kasina.⁴² The Viśuddhimaggā explains that kāyagatāsati can be either a subject for vipassanā in the case of the elements, or samatha in the case of repulsiveness (VIII 60). The cemetery contemplations are directly referenced to the insight knowledge called “contemplation of danger”, which is more fully discussed later under the 18 topics of insight (VIII 43). This further implies a pragmatic definition of subjects, rather than one based on their ontological status. It also reflects the Buddha’s emphasis on ānāpānasati, kāyagatāsati and the four establishments of mindfulness as the basis for the paths of both samatha and vipassanā (VIII 163~244), as other subjects are not discussed in this manner. In ānāpānasati, the first three tetrads are samatha and vipassanā, whereas the fourth is purely vipassanā. The yogin remains on the same object, but takes the object through its different aspects accordingly. It appears that it is in the sense of aspect that Buddhaghosa uses the term sabhāva.

Bhikkhu Ñānamoli adds a very informative discussion on sabhāva and paññatti at this point (VIII n 68~71), mainly based on the commentaries to the Puggala Paññatti, and Dhammasaṅgaṇī. It covers the various forms of inter-relations between attha and paññatti, and shows the distinctions between dhamma and sabhāva in the strict Abhidhammic sense.

⁴¹ Bhikkhu Dhammanando: *Dhammasaṅgaṇī Commentary*, (Unpublished manuscript, 2007).

⁴² Rev. Ehara, Soma Thera, & Kheminda Thera: *The Path of Freedom, Vimuttimaggā by the Arahant Upatissa*, (Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), pg. 280 (of draft re-edit file).

Divine Abidings & Immaterial States

In the presentation of the divine abidings, there is little reference to samatha or vipassanā, nor influence to or from Abhidhammic methodology. One point is worthy of note, that the fourth divine abiding of equanimity is related to vipassanā, as therein one is “skilled in apprehending what (in the ultimate sense) non-existent” and “(what is existent in) the ultimate sense” (). This is a clear indication of insight into paramatha and paññatti dhammas, in the strict Abhidhamma sense of the terms.

Each of the divine abidings corresponds to a particular sabhāva dhamma, ie. non-hatred, compassion, joy and equanimity. However, no explanation is given as to how these sabhāvas come to be extended, (IX 103) they are also known as the illimitables, when it is held that only paññatti objects can be extended (III 115, n³⁰).

Content covered in the immaterial states is basically as per that already mentioned previously, ie. infinite space and infinite consciousness are kasinas, and the latter two are the removal of the (kasina) object, and absences or abhāva. The description of “non-attention to perception of variety” is given as referring to a variety of sabhāva (X 20). Yet, only the types of sensual sphere perception are considered as having a variety of sabhāva. One wonders why form and formless states, which still contain several cetasikas such as the jhana factors, do not fall into this category too?

Summary of Vipassanā in the Viśuddhimagga

The preceding treatment of concentration is focused on jhana, wherein samatha occupies the position of access and absorption jhana. In this sense, it is the development of the faculty of samādhi, and also the awakening factor of serenity. During the discussion of the meditation subjects, there is some variance between pragmatic and Abhidhammic use of the term sabhāva (and consequently paññatti). There also appears a little inconsistency regards the sabhāva and extension status of certain subjects. On one hand, subjects that are specific in nature are considered to have sabhāva, on the other hand, there is a tendency to subsume subjects into more irreducible categories. Only ānāpānasati and those subjects associated with the four establishments of mindfulness are explained as covering both samatha and vipassanā aspects. The level of jhana required to enter vipassanā is that of access jhana. This is also interesting in that most of the sutta teachings describe the process of attaining all eight, though it is from the fourth jhana that one develops vipassanā.⁴³ Higher stages being considered somewhat of an excess of samatha.

⁴³ See: Bhikkhu Bodhi: “Mahāsaccaka Sutta”, “Mahā-Assapura”, etc. in *Majjhima Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 2001), pp. 341ff, 368ff; Walshe, M: “Sāmaññaphala Sutta”, in *Dīgha Nikāya*, (Wisdom, 1996), pp. 183ff.

VIŚUDDHIMAGGA – PAÑÑĀ – UNDERSTANDING

The Soil in Which Understanding Grows

Chapters XIV to XVII of the Viśuddhimagga deal with understanding in the sense of Right View. Although related to vipassanā, at this point it is mainly in the sense of the theory behind the five aggregates, twelve bases, eighteen elements, faculties, Four Noble Truths, and dependent origination in both general and twelve-linked format. All these are explained via the traditional Abhidhamma sabhāva doctrine, and here Buddhaghosa seems to use terms such as sabhāva in that sense.

3. Purification of View

Defining Mentality-Materiality

Following the precise definitions of the various dhammas above, Purification of View begins with a division of practitioners into those whose “vehicle is serenity” (XVIII 3), and those whose “vehicle is pure insight” (XVIII 5). The former uses the jhana factors as the objective basis for vipassanā leading into materiality; whereas the latter uses the physical elements as the objective basis leading into the cetasikas (presumably with at least access jhana, though this is not explicitly stated). Thus mentality-materiality is covered by both vehicles, albeit in reverse order. The chapter ends with two complementary doctrines: firstly, that there is no living being apart from mentality-materiality (XVIII 24); secondly, the interdependence of mentality and materiality (XVIII 32). Although not specifically stated as insight, we can see that these are the doctrines of non-self and dependent origination, the Abhidhamma methods of analysis and synthesis respectively.⁴⁴

4. Purification by Overcoming Doubt

Chapter XIX is a further exposition on dependent origination, refuting wrong views with regards origination, such as creationism, etc. In particular, it elucidates the principles of kamma and kamma result. It provides little information regards the topics of jhana, samatha and vipassanā in the Abhidhamma context however.

5. Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is and What Is Not Path

By the fifth purification in Chapter XX, we see vipassanā as the main theme. Much of the material is drawn from the Paṭisambhidāmagga. There are three kinds of full

⁴⁴ Karunadasa, Y: *The Dhamma Theory*, (BPS, 1996), pp. 7ff.

understanding, as the known, as investigating, and as full understanding (XX 3ff). The former involves “observing the specific characteristics” (salakkhana) of dhammas, and contains seven contemplations – impermanence, suffering, not self, and so forth – that are the first seven of the following eighteen principle insights. One applies these seven aspects to 24 groups of dharmas, most of which are themselves comprehensive categories of all dhammas, rather than contemplation of a single system which contains all dhammas. This would also indicate that by using different grouping systems to contemplate dhammas, not only is the dhamma itself important, but its relation to others is also so. This would be like examining all the books in a library, first by subject, then by author, then by date of publication, etc. The books are the same in each examination, but the method of grouping is different. The whole process is quite lengthy and involved, yet extremely systematic. It does not seem to use the notion of dhammas and their classification as an ultimately irreducible system however. During this process of contemplation, the faculties of insight are to be strengthened in a manner similar to that for samatha and jhana.

The 18 Principle Insights

The eighteen principle insights continue from the seven contemplations above. It is not entirely clear as to why the former is not subsumed within the latter, and the text gives few clues as to its doctrinal sources, apart from the Paṭisambhidāmagga. That is to say, it does not appear that the seven is discussed independently in one text, and then the eighteen elsewhere. The additional eleven include the triple gateway to liberation – the signless, the desireless, and voidness. The final insight is abandoning, and release from bondage (XX 90ff). During the exposition of non-self, “owing to his discovery of the non-existence of fall at the instant of rise, and the non-existence of rise at the instant of fall”, (XX 103) indicates kkhāṇa theory influencing not only the understanding of impermanence, but also of non-self. The eighteen are individually discussed in detail in XXII 113ff.

The Imperfections of Insight

For beginners in insight, there are ten obstacles that may arise. They are all pragmatic in nature, and cases of mistaking experiences along the path to be the goal itself. These experiences are signs of progress, for one who does not develop insight will not encounter them. The names of the ten are derived from the suttas and equated with specific dhammas. It is not the imperfections themselves, but rather attachment to them, that constitutes an imperfection.

6. Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Way

The Eight Knowledges and Conformity as the Ninth

Cultivation of these eighteen insights culminates in eight knowledges, with

“knowledge in conformity with truth” as the ninth. These nine knowledges are insight, and some more or less mutually correspond, eg. the eighth includes the triple gateway to liberation – the signless, the desireless, voidness. These are said to be related to the faculty of faith for the former, and wisdom for the two latter (XXI 66ff n^{31, 34}).

This then leads into the seven kinds of noble persons (XXI 74ff), a type of analysis similar to the Puggala Paññatti. This is partly based on the way in which individuals attain and develop the “moments” of the Āriya path. Different individuals have unique propensities towards insight through the three characteristics of existence, which in turn influences which of the 18 insights predominates (XXI 83ff).

In response to several theories as to the differences amongst the various types of factors in the noble path, the text states that “it is only this preliminary insight and insight to leading to emergence that should be understood to govern it in their doctrine” (XXI 111). There are three possibilities:

According to governance by insight, [1] the path arisen in a bare-insight (dry-insight) worker, and [2] the path arisen in one who possesses a jhana attainment but who has not made the jhana the basis for insight, and [3] the path made to arise by comprehending unrelated formations after using the first jhana as the basis for insight, are paths for the first jhana only. (XXI 112).

The number of factors in the path is then related to the factors (cetasikas) in the particular jhana from which one arose vipassanā from samatha. The jhana factors are the objects of insight. This is again related back to the “difficulty” or “ease” of progress, seen at the opening of the text. The Visuddhimagga thus allows for attainment by “dry insight”, albeit slow and difficult progress in that case.

There are interesting comments on the validity of the “signless path”, which is considered inadmissible by the Abhidhamma, but admissible by the Suttanta method. Apparently the Abhidhamma do not accept that a signless path could be cultivated or taken as an object of insight. Their rational method states that paññā requires an object, and the object must have a characteristic sign to apprehend, and discern. This seems to imply to distinct methodologies, and neither is given explicit precedence over the other.

Sutta References

The chapter is finished with a range of sutta references supporting its presentation, from the Dīgha, Majjhima and Saṃyutta Nikāyas. Last, but not least of these, is the Rathavinīta Sutta, whose seven purifications form the structure of the Visuddhimagga.

Each reference is only a short point, and there is no sutta text which supports the above layout in its entirety (XXI 135). This reveals an approach that is keen to show its conformity to the suttas, by carefully taking all the relevant details, and representing them together in a complete and systematic procedure of development.

7. Purification by Knowledge and Vision

Change of Lineage Knowledge & The Paths

The attainments of the fruits of the path are all expressed in terms of “fruition consciousness” of that stage, as the yogin proceeds through the various insights (XXII 1ff). This is a methodology uniquely Abhidhammic in formulation and expression, not found in the suttas. Bhikkhu Sujato points out that:

The commentarial notion that these seven stages are completed by the stream-enterer, and that the higher path attainments go around again, each time repeating the sequence of vipassanā knowledges, (XXII 22ff) finds no support in the suttas and contradicts the basic texts and similes, which speak of a one-way, step by step progression.⁴⁵

This also reflects that the seven-fold purification of the Rathavināta Sutta is not elsewhere found within the Sutta Piṭaka.

37 States Partaking of Enlightenment

The states associated with the paths however, are explicitly referenced to the suttas, in particular the thirty-seven factors as explained in the [Mahā-]Satipatthāna and other suttas of the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikāyas (XXII 1ff). When these states are fulfilled, one “emerges from” (escapes) the defilements, and there is coupling of the powers of samatha and vipassanā. It is explained how:

At the time of developing the eight mundane attainments the serenity power is in excess, while at the time of developing the contemplation of impermanence, etc., the insight power is in excess. But at the noble path moment they occur coupled together in the sense that neither one exceeds the other. (XXII 46)

It is only at this point that the yogin can effectively abandon the various fetters once and for all (XXII 47ff). A description of the various categories of the defilements is given, in a similar way to the Dhammasaṅgaṇī. It is indicated which defilements are

⁴⁵ Bhikkhu Sujato: *Swift Pair of Messengers*, <http://www.bswa.org/modules/mydownloads> pp. 83ff.

eliminated by which of the knowledges.

The Four Functions

At the moment of penetration into the Āriya Truths, there is the simultaneous manifestation of four functions, namely that penetration into each Truth is the penetration of all four (XXII 92ff). They are each explained separately and jointly, followed by their relation to the 18 principle insights, as above (XXII 104ff). In this way, the Truths are realized, and one becomes an Āriya (XXIII 1~15).

Attainment of Cessation

Although outside the scope of samatha and vipassanā as the path, the two are used in the explanation of who is able to attain the attainment of cessation. In brief, both samatha and vipassanā are necessary, in that one must be both an Āriya (which pre-supposes vipassanā) and have developed the eight jhanic liberations (samatha). (XXIII 16ff)

Summary of Vipassanā in the Viśuddhimagga

Based upon jhana to at least access absorption, the yogin applies insight. Here, strict Abhidhamma definitions of the various khandhas, etc. are required. This is because the various dhammas are all to be analyzed and understood as they are, in their sabhāva, through the characteristics of conditioned existence. This is further broken down into the eighteen principle insights, having overcome misapprehension of certain imperfections, and which culminate in nine knowledges. At this point, samatha and vipassanā are balanced and yoked together. Entry into the Āriya paths and fruits is given in kkaṇa moments, only distinguished by which factors are predominant in the case of individual practitioners. A considerable amount is defined in terms that are not found in the suttas, though references to the suttas are given where possible, and they are not contradicted. The Abhidhamma method seems more suitable for vipassanā than samatha / jhana.

CONCLUSIONS

Four Key Questions

The author admits that the topic of this essay is very broad, and that the investigation has not been sufficiently comprehensive or exhaustive. As such, any conclusions are tentative, and await further examination. Be that as it may, let us conclude by attempting some informed answers to the four questions posed in the introduction to this essay:

1. Sutta as Foundation of the Abhidhamma

Obviously, the key features such as the jhanas, contemplation of the characteristics of conditioned existence, and the yoking of samatha and vipassanā, have all remained intact. They form the foundation and pillars of the system. In the canonical Abhidhamma, core methods such as ānāpānasati and kāyagatāsati were elucidated in great detail, and the systematic methods of suttas further expanded upon. The post-canonical works based themselves on the canonical more than the suttas, leading to gradually discrepancies.

2. Abhidhamma Theory Influence on the Meditative Model

Certain Abhidhamma methods did influence the model. The Dhammavāda meant that the various factors of jhana were somewhat narrowly defined, unique definitions for unique sabhāva dhammas. The layout of the various dhammas originally conformed to sets established for pragmatic reasons, eg. The seven factors of awakening. They were expanded into forms that could accommodate all possibilities of doctrinal exposition, eg. The use of five rather than four jhana factors. Definitions of sabhāva and paññatti (parikappaja) caused some difficulty in explaining the status of certain subjects of samatha. On one hand, the Abhidhamma model indicated a paññatti status for objects such as the recollections; on the other hand, experience showed that taking these as objects led to results inconsistent with what the theory indicated, eg. In attainment of both jhana and the Paths. The theory of kkhaṇa moments was used to explain not only momentary jhana as samatha and as a basis for the impermanence and non-self of dhammas in vipassanā, but also served to explain the entrance into absorption and attainment of the paths and fruits. This was not seen in the suttas, but does not contradict any sutta teachings either. The eighteen principle insights and nine knowledges showed a stricter Abhidhamma methodology. They represent a system derived from several suttas, albeit joined together into a sometimes repetitive over-arching process of developing insight. Overall, the presentation of samatha and vipassanā reflected the doctrinal positions of the Theravāda that were initially developed in other contexts, and thus not fully integrated with the practice of meditation.

3. Objects of Samatha and Vipassanā

As the dhammavāda indicated that objects of cognition could be either sabhāva or asabhāva / paññatti, this profoundly influenced what could actually serve as an object of meditative development. A category was added, that of “extension”, to describe those topics that were extended out indefinitely, eg. The divine abidings, or several of the formless meditations. Sabhāva dhammas could not be extended, unlike the paññatti conceptualized dhammas which could. Furthermore, there was the tendency to subsume meditation subjects into the basic kasinas, which represented a kind of reductionism a la paramattha dhammas. It was these and the jhana factors themselves that were the objects of insight, as non-sabhāva dhammas are not characterised by impermanence, etc. In the suttas it appears that there were many topics that could lead to the Path, whereas the Abhidhamma restricted this to quite a degree, mainly due to the dhammavāda. This also shows how in the suttas, both neyyattha and nīttāttha doctrines were both equally able to lead to the goal, whereas the Abhidhamma here tends to stratify the two.

4. Abhidhamma Variation of Meditative Method and Process

Initially, both samatha and vipassanā were required, in terms of samādhi and paññā. Though ultimately they must be balanced to some degree, the predominance of one or the other depended upon the individual. The Abhidhamma tended to de-emphasize samatha, indicating that access jhana was sufficient for vipassanā, contrary to the sutta indications which often take the fourth jhana as the entry point. Many contemporary systems advocate pure vipassanā, without need for samatha at all. These points of view have not been without criticism by scholars. This is well summarized by Bhikkhu Sujato when he compares the teachings of mindfulness in two schools, and states that the later Theravāda tended towards vipassanā, in contra-distinction to the samatha approach of the original suttas which dealt with such topics.⁴⁶

Abhidhamma as Empirical or Rational Meditation Model?

Finally, regards the question of the Abhidhamma meditative model of samatha and vipassanā, as an empirical-experiential or purely rational and logical method. It appears that the early Abhidhamma was a rational treatment and classification of the experienced results of meditation. Later Abhidhamma theories were mainly formed in other contexts outside of the subject of meditation, to defend positions regarding key Buddhist doctrines such as impermanence, non-self, and so forth. It was only

⁴⁶ Bhikkhu Sujato: *History of Mindfulness*, <http://www.bswa.org/modules/mydownloads> pg. 171.

retrospectively that these concepts were incorporated into later Abhidhamma explanations of jhana, samatha and vipassanā.

For samatha such an approach appears somewhat unnecessary, because they were ontological models being applied to a pragmatic activity, detailing what happened rather than how to make it happen. To much discursive thought regards the subject, would detract from its practice. In the context of samatha, therefore, specialist Abhidhamma terms were used in a looser sense to accommodate this.

For vipassanā however, the Abhidhamma ontological models were very helpful. These models provided detailed systematic schemes for the investigation and understanding of the dhammas. These schemes were influenced by the various rational Abhidhamma theories, themselves not apparently empirically verifiable, or, if verifiable, of secondary consequence to the realization of the Path. This is seen in that these theories were used to view dhammas, rather than the intuitive knowledge derived from cultivation of samatha and / or vipassanā.

Buddhist practice is not experiential in the sense of merely taking as fact ones interpretations of experience, meditative or otherwise. Rather, it depends on key concepts to act as guides in understanding what is experienced, such that the practitioner can be safely guided along the path towards the goal. The Abhidhamma model of meditation, vipassanā in particular, provides an excellent mirror with which to consider one's own state of progress, and the successive path.

Secondary to the topic at hand, the author tentatively proposes that there may be two main threads of the Abhidhamma tradition regarding jhana, tending towards the Vibhaṅga and Dhammasaṅgaṇī respectively. The Viśuddhimagga tends towards the former, via the Paṭisambhidāmagga.

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