

4 Some Abhidhammic Developments: The Doctrine of Momentariness and the Consciousness Process in Pāli Literature

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In the development of Buddhist literature, the Abhidhamma reflects the need to organise the scattered teachings of the Buddha and to provide an exposition of the Doctrine with a sense of unity and consistency. The re-elaboration of the early canonical materials aims to present the Buddhist doctrine in light of a new register of language that is supposed to convey the ultimate meaning. Therefore, the Buddhist tradition itself makes distinctions between the method of exposition used by the *suttas*, and that of the Abhidhamma. The latter, indeed, is said to provide teachings in a way that is called *nippariyāya*, namely ‘without *pariyāya*’. The term *pariyāya* indicates an allegorical or parabolic way to put things (*pari-√i*, lit. ‘going around’), and therefore implies a peculiar explanation based on the context, namely *ad hominem*, whereas *nippariyāya* expresses an abstract, general, literal and more ‘universal’ way to present the teachings since it is decontextualised from an audience.¹ These two styles of expositions are often referenced in Pāli commentaries and are used to explain apparent inconsistencies in the scriptures (e.g. As 154, 222). Incidentally, this suggests that the commentarial literature is not totally detached from the Abhidhammic speculations, and so a basic acquaintance with the Abhidhamma’s style and doctrines should be reasonably considered

¹ Concerning *pariyāya* and *nippariyāya*, see Ronkin 2005, 26; Gombrich [1996] 2006, 65; 2009, 9; Heim 2015, 152-3; De Notariis 2022a, 214-15.

a precondition to properly understand the Pāli commentaries, or at least some of their exegeses. Indeed, it would not be possible to understand the *Visuddhimagga's* treatment regarding the *iddhividhā* and *abhiññās* without considering how Pāli literature developed the Abhidhammic doctrine of the consciousness process (*cittavīthi* or *vīthiccitta*) and how it became connected with the doctrine of momentariness (*khaṇavāda*; Sanskrit: *kṣaṇavāda*).² The doctrine of momentariness concerns the idea that phenomena (Sanskrit: *saṃskṛta*, *saṃskāra*, *dharma*), which constitute both the mental and physical world, can come into being and disappear within just one moment (*khaṇa*; Sanskrit: *kṣaṇa*). It does not concern so much the passage of time or the existence of time, but rather the construction of temporal experience (Ronkin 2010, 350). The doctrine of the consciousness process, instead, concerns the process that takes place in the mind when a psychophysical event happens, or, to put it better, how the mind changes according to a predetermined pattern. In this chapter, the two doctrines will be briefly introduced in order to provide some background information that will prove useful when these two doctrines are involved in the commentarial exegeses.

4.1 The Doctrine of Momentariness

On the doctrine of momentariness there are two extensive reference works that are in some ways complementary. The first study is essentially the PhD thesis of Alexander von Rospatt (1995) who predominantly analysed the textual sources of North Buddhist schools, and so he did not provide a full account of how the doctrine took place in Theravāda texts. This gap was filled by the PhD thesis of Wan Doo Kim (1999), recently published as a monograph (= Kim 2023), who analysed the doctrine of momentariness with its origin and development within the Theravāda tradition. The elaboration of a theory concerning the mental activity as a series of consciousness processes could seem, according to mainstream theory, a by-product of the doctrine of momentariness as it was accepted by the Theravāda school. In my opinion, there could be evidence to argue that the relationship between the doctrines of momentariness and consciousness process was more nuanced than hitherto recognised.³

Concerning the doctrine of momentariness, it is possible to find within the *Kathāvatthu* – probably the earliest source that attests a sort of debate about the nature of these moments – an interesting rejection. It rejects the idea that material entities last the same period of time as a mental phenomenon:

“Are all phenomena (*dhamma*) momentary as one mental moment (*ekacittakkhaṇika*)?”

“Yes!”

“[So, do you think that] the great earth, the great ocean, the mount Sineru which is the king of mountains, water, fire, wind, grass, sticks, and a forest tree last (*saṅṭhāti/saṅṭhanti*) a mental unit (*citta*)?”

² In this regard, see De Notariis forthcoming-a.

³ I exposed my reasons in an Appendix in my PhD thesis, which has been revised and published as De Notariis forthcoming-a.

“No, it should not be said in that way”.⁴

Alexander von Rospatt (1995, 19) suggests that this passage might imply that at that time the Theravādins had not already accepted the momentariness of all phenomena. However, as suggested by Kim (1999, 106 = 2023: 95-6), it seems more likely an indication that mental and material phenomena are not equally short-lived, and thus material entities change more slowly than mental phenomena.

Although it is not stated so clearly, the rapid change of the mind has already been attested within the Pāli *suttas*. Therefore, the Buddha claims that he does not see any phenomenon that changes more quickly than the mind.⁵ Moreover, in the *Assutavatasutta* (S II 94-5) the temporary lasting of the physical body is compared with the rapid change of the mind. The body is seen to last for one year, for two years... for a hundred years,⁶ whereas the mind arises in a way and ceases in another way by day and night, just as a monkey that passes from one branch to another in a forest.⁷ The characteristic of the changeability of the mind complies with the doctrine of momentariness, but *how* it changes is a matter that falls within the scope of the consciousness process. The fact that material and mental phenomena have not the same duration and that mental phenomena are shorter than material ones led to speculation about the duration ratio of a material phenomenon compared to a mental one. As early as the **Mahāvibhāṣā* (II century AD onwards),⁸ it is possible to find a doctrine that claims that in the time of one material phenomenon there are three mental phenomena.⁹ In this case, the ratio of material to mental phenomena would be 1:3. According to Kim (1999, 145 = 2023, 131), the **Mahāvibhāṣā*'s theory of three moments that circulated among ascetics could be an early stage of the theory developed by the Theravādins. Both the *Kathāvatthu* and the **Mahāvibhāṣā* suggest a period in which the theory of momentariness was debated among Buddhist schools. Another school, that of the Vātsīputriya-Sammatīyas, believed that only the mental phenomena were momentary, whereas the material ones (except flames and sounds) were non-momentary (see von Rospatt 1995, 37-9). The accepted ratio of material to mental phenomena in Theravāda's

4 *ekacittakkhaṇikā sabbe dhammā ti? | āmantā. | citte mahāpaṭhavī saṅghāti, mahāsamuddo saṅghāti, Sineru pabbatarājā saṅghāti, āpo saṅghāti, tejo saṅghāti, vāyo saṅghāti, tiṅkaṭṭhavanappatiyo saṅghāti ti? | na h' evaṃ vattabbe - pe - (Kv 620).*

5 *nāhaṃ bhikkhave aññaṃ ekadhammā pi samanupassāmi yaṃ evaṃ lahu-parivattaṃ yathayidaṃ cittaṃ yāvañ c' idaṃ bhikkhave upamā pi na sukara yāva lahu-parivattaṃ cittaṃ ti (A I 10).*

6 *dissatāyaṃ bhikkhave cātumahābhūtiko kāyo ekam pi vassaṃ tiṭṭhamāno dve pi vassāni tiṭṭhamāno [...] vassasatam pi tiṭṭhamāno (S II 94).*

7 *seyyathāpi bhikkhave makkaṭṭo arāññe pavane caramāno sākhaṃ gaṇhati taṃ muñcitvā aññaṃ gaṇhati. evam eva kho bhikkhave yad idaṃ vuccati cittaṃ iti pi mano iti pi viññāṇam iti pi taṃ rattiyā ca divasassa ca aññaṃ eva uppajjati aññaṃ nirujjhati (S II 95).*

8 The dating is only tentative since it is based on the controversial date of the Kuṣāṇa king Kaniṣka. In this regard, see von Rospatt 1995, 25-6, n. 38; Buswell and Jaini 1996, 110-12; Willems, Dessein and Cox 1998, 148-9, 229-39; Kim 1999, 110, n. 266 (= 2023, 99, n. 268).

9 T1545.27.0787c22-0788a9 translated by von Rospatt (1995, 35-6, n. 61). This passage discusses the refutation of a doctrine attributed to some ascetics (*samaṇa*; Sanskrit: *śramaṇa*; Chinese: *shāmén* 沙門), who believed that during the time of a material phenomenon, three mental phenomena rise and pass away. This theory is presented in two typologies: 1) the theory of mixed origination; 2) the theory of succession. These theories were analysed in Kim 1999, 124-7 (= 2023, 112-15).

early post-canonical texts is either 1:16 or 1:17; the latter is the one adopted by the later Abhidhamma manuals such as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* of Anuruddha. A different duration of material and mental phenomena is also a good expedient adopted by Theravādins to avoid a representational theory of perception (*sākāra-jñāna-vāda*), namely the theory that claims that existing things are perceived indirectly in a particular form (*ākāra*). Therefore, being on the side of a non-representational theory (*nirākāra-jñāna-vāda*), the Theravādins believed in the existence of a direct perception of existing things without any mediating form (*ākāra*). This is possible, allowing the material *dharmas* to last long enough for the mind to know them. A different strategy was adopted by the Sarvāstivādins, who, claiming that a past momentary material *dharma* still exists, allowed a present mental moment to know the materiality.¹⁰

4.2 The Doctrine of the Consciousness Process

The doctrine of the consciousness process concerns the mind flow patterns according to specific psychophysical events. The basic assumption is that the mind will follow a specific pattern of stages according to some stimuli and thus there is a sort of natural order (cf. *citta-niyāma* in As 274), an unvarying sequence of predetermined mental states conforming to a certain situation. As highlighted by Lance Cousins (1981), the first signals of this doctrine are already present in some Abhidhammic works, such as the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and *Paṭṭhāna*, whereas more detailed and comprehensive presentations occur in the Pāli commentaries and late Abhidhamma manuals. These accounts have some important variations that would allow some speculation regarding the development of such a doctrine. However, for the sake of this study concerning the exegeses on the extraordinary capacities, it is important to pay attention to the systematic and concise exposition of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, which is, in principle, quite close to some *Visuddhimagga*'s exegeses on the *iddhividhā* and *abhiññās*, which will be later analysed.

In developing a doctrine concerning the consciousness process, Buddhists, to some extent, also elaborated an epistemological doctrine, given that the paradigmatic process is the sensory perception. In particular, the texts use the sensory process of seeing as a model, presenting a schema that is supposed to be roughly the same for the other physical senses. The process in its shortest and among the oldest accounts (e.g. Sv I 194) counts up to seven stages: *bhavaṅga* 'life-continuum', *āvajjana* 'adverting', *dassana* 'seeing', *sampañicchana* 'receiving', *santīraṇa* 'investigating', *votthapana* 'determining', and *javana* 'impulsion'. In a more developed classification (**Vimuttimaggā*, T1648.32.0449b06-08) we find an additional stage: *tadārammaṇa* 'registration'. Moreover, later accounts even emphasise that the stages are believed to last for one or more moments and the entire mental process endures sixteen (e.g. *Vism* 614) or seventeen (e.g. *Abhidh-s*

¹⁰ I am grateful to Rupert Gethin, who pointed out to me the connection of the doctrine of momentariness with more general arguments among Indian schools of philosophy about what we exactly perceive. The terms *sākāra-jñāna-vāda* and *nirākāra-jñāna-vāda* are not emic to the Theravāda tradition but can be described, in the words of Kellner and McClintock (2014, 430), as 'doxographical labels'. These are, indeed, terms typical of some later Buddhist, and more generally Indian, philosophical speculations.

18) moments, which are tantamount to one moment of materiality, and thus a moment of materiality endures enough to be grasped by the mind. In order to understand in a practical way what happens during these stages, we shall consider the Buddhist simile of the mango fruit. The simile occurs in an old version without *tadārammaṇa* at As 270-1, and in a more developed version including *tadārammaṇa* at Abhidh-s-mhṭ 110-11. Here, the latter is translated as follows:

A certain man, it seems, was sleeping at the foot of a mango tree in fruit with his head covered. When a mango fruit fell near him, he was woken by the sound. He removed the cloth from his head, opened his eyes, and saw it [i.e. the fruit]; he took it, squeezed it, smelled it, [then] knowing its ripe condition, ate it, swallowed what was in his mouth together with the saliva (*semha*),¹¹ and then he went back to sleep right there.

In this context, the time of sleeping is like the time of *bhavaṅga*. The time when the fruit falls down is like the time when the object strikes the sensitivity [of the physical senses]. The time of awaking through the sound is like the time of adverting (*āvajjana*). The time when he sees after having opened his eyes is like the time of the activity of the eye-consciousness (*cakkhuviññāṇa*). The time of taking [the fruit] is like the time of receiving (*sampaṭicchana*). The time of squeezing is like the time of investigating (*santīraṇa*). The time of smelling is like the time of determining (*voṭṭhapana*). The time of eating is like the time of impulsion (*javana*). The time of swallowing what is in the mouth together with the saliva is like the time of registration (*tadārammaṇa*). The time of going back to sleep is like the time of going back to the *bhavaṅga*.¹²

The simile illustrates the process. The state of sleeping parallels the inactive mode of the consciousness known as *bhavaṅga*, but when an object enters into the field of perception (i.e. when a fruit falls) the man awakes, interrupting the previous inactive stage; an action which parallels the stage of *āvajjana* ('adverting'). Then, the action of seeing ('*dassana*'), which is performed by the *cakkhuviññāṇa* ('eye's consciousness'), occurs and it is like the man that sees the fallen fruit. The process is not yet completed. Three stages occur, *sampaṭicchana* ('receiving'), *santīraṇa* ('investigating'), *voṭṭhapana* ('determining') and are like taking, squeezing and smelling the fruit: three actions that help the man to know that the fruit is ripe (and then ready to be eaten). The man eats the fruit, and this is like the stage of *javana* ('impulsion') in which there is actual enjoyment of the object. Thereafter, the

11 Since *semha* literally means 'phlegm', I understand it in this context as 'saliva', meaning the phlegm located in the throat, just as in Wujastyk 2008, 220.

12 *eko kira puriso phalitambarukhamūle sasisaṃ pārupitvā niddāyanto āsanne patitassa ekassa ambaphalassa saddena pabujjhivā, sīsato vatthaṃ apānetvā, cakkhuṃ ummīletvā, divvā, ca taṃ gahetvā, madditvā, upasiṅghitvā, pakkabhāvaṃ ṇatvā, paribhuñjitvā, mukhagataṃ saha semhena ajjhoharivā, puna tathā' eva niddāyati. tatha purisassa niddāyanakālo viya bhavaṅgakālo. phalassa patitakālo viya ārammaṇassa pasādagaṭṭhanakālo. tassa saddena pabujjhanakālo viya āvajjanakālo. ummīletvā olokitaṅgakālo viya cakkhuviññāṇappavattikālo. gahitakālo viya sampaṭicchanaṅgakālo. maddanaṅgakālo viya santīraṇakālo. upasiṅghanaṅgakālo viya voṭṭhapanakālo. paribhogakālo viya javanaṅgakālo. mukhagataṃ saha semhena ajjhoharanaṅgakālo viya tadārammaṇakālo. puna niddāyanakālo viya puna bhavaṅgakālo (Abhidh-s-mhṭ 110-11).*

man swallows the last morsels together with the saliva before going back to sleep; these actions are like the last stage, viz. *tadārammaṇa* ('registration'), which precedes the act of going back to the inactive mode of *bhavaṅga*. In the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, the process that involves the five senses is called the 'five-door process' (*pañcadvāravīthi*) and the only stage that can change is the arising of the eye's consciousness (*cakkhuvīññāṇa*) that performs the function of seeing (*dassana*), which can be substituted with the ear's consciousness that performs the function of hearing and so on. The process that involves the mental sense is referred to in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* as the 'mind-door process' (*manodvāravīthi*). In its full length, namely, in the case of manifestation of a clear (*vibhūta*) object in the range of mind-perception, this process occurs in the following manner:

But if a clear object comes in the field of perception in the mind-door, then [occurs] vibration of *bhavaṅga* (*bhavaṅgacalana*), adverting to the mind-door (*manodvārāvajjana*), and at the end of the *javanas* two registration (*tadārammaṇa*) resultants occur, then there is the relapse into *bhavaṅga*.¹³

The steps designated by the passage are: *bhavaṅgacalana* → *manodvārāvajjana* → *javana* → *tadārammaṇa*. It is worth noting that this passage, compared to the previous account, is shorter and so there is a direct transition from the stage of adverting (*āvajjana*) to the *javana* stage.¹⁴

A particular application of the mind-door process (*manodvāravīthi*) is the explanation of what happens during the attainment of the *jhāna* state:

But during the occurrence of the *javanas* in the absorption (*appanā*), there is no distinction between clear and unclear [object], in the same way [there is not] the arising of the registration (*tadārammaṇa*). In this context, one out of the eight *javanas* of the sense sphere connected with the knowledge arises and ceases four or three times in the succession of 'preparatory work' (*parikamma*), 'access' (*upacāra*), 'conformity' (*anuloma*), 'change of lineage' (*gotrabhu*) and, immediately following, whatever *javana* among the twenty-six *javanas*, which are sublime or supramundane, in the fourth or fifth [moment] depending on the circumstances, descends upon the process of absorption according with the application [of the mind]. Thereafter, at the end of the absorption, there is the relapse into *bhavaṅga*.¹⁵

¹³ *manodvāre pana yadi vibhūtam ārammaṇaṃ āpātham āgacchati, tato paraṃ bhavaṅgacalana-manodvārāvajjana-javanāvasāne tadārammaṇapākāni pavattanti. tato paraṃ bhavaṅgapāto* (Abhidh-s 19).

¹⁴ Furthermore, to put it more precisely, in the five-door process (*pañcadvāravīthi*) the action of adverting is performed by the *kiriyaṃanodhātu*, whereas in the mind-door process (*manodvāravīthi*) the action of adverting to the mind-door is performed by the (*ahetuka*-) *kiriyaṃanoviññādhātu*, which performs the function of determining (*voṭṭhapana*) in the five-door process. Evidence to the two different *dhātus* involved in the processes occurs in Vism 458. In this regard, see also Gethin 1994, 17, n. 19. A reference to the *kiriyaṃanoviññādhātu* performing the function of determining (*voṭṭhapana*) in the five-door process occurs in Vism 21.

¹⁵ *appanājavānavāre pana vibhūtāvibhūtabhedo natthi. tathā tadārammaṇuppādo ca. tattha hi ñāṇasampayutta-kāmāvacarajavanānam aṭṭhannaṃ aññatarasmiṃ parikkammopacārānulo-ma-gotrābhūnāmena catukkhattum tikkhattum eva vā yathākkamaṃ uppajjitvā niruddhe tadanantaram eva yathārahaṃ catutthaṃ pañcamaṃ vā chabbīsati mahaggata-lokuttara-javanesu yathābhinihāravasesa yaṃkiñci javanaṃ appanāvīthim otarati. tato paraṃ appanāvasāne bhavaṅgapāto va hoti* (Abhidh-s 19).

I mentioned this particular application of the consciousness process within the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* since there is also an interesting account in the *Visuddhimagga* (that will be analysed later at § 7.4.4) and the terminology involved is connected with that used in the explanation of extraordinary capacities. Indeed, we will see how the attainment of the extraordinary capacities resembles the action of entering in the state of *jhāna*.

4.3 Conclusive Remarks

Reviewing the doctrine of momentariness and the doctrine of the consciousness process is also a way to deal, in a broader sense, with the Abhidhamma. These two doctrines involve the world of the infinitely small, the first concerning the temporal existence of phenomena, and the latter concerning the necessary and irreducible mental stages in some processes (especially the act of knowing through a physical or mental sense). As it may be noted, the language involved is rather technical. This means, for example, that a reference to this technical terminology in an exegetical text would recall a wide range of metaphysical ideas, theories and doctrines. In particular, the use of the consciousness process in the explanation of an extraordinary perception can help to better understand the difference between this perception and a normal or ordinary one from the point of view of the Buddhist metaphysics. Conversely, its oversight can easily lead to a misrepresentation of the real message conveyed in the text. Let us consider, for example, how Bradley Clough understood the stage of adverting to the mind door (*manodvārāvajjana*) in the commentarial exegesis of the *dibbasotadhātu*:

In this state, one resolves, ‘divine ear element will now arise.’ Taking any sound as its object, another yogic power called ‘mind-door adverting’ (*mano-dvāra-ajjanam* [sic., *mano-dvāra-āvajjana*]) arises. (Clough 2012, 87; square brackets mine)

As we know from the expositions of the consciousness process, the *manodvārāvajjana* is not, strictly speaking, a yogic power since it also occurs in the ordinary mental process, namely when a mental object enters the range of perception of the mind-door. What is potentially interesting is that a mind-door process (*manodvārāvīthi*) is involved, that is to say, the act of hearing is purely mental.¹⁶ Therefore, a proper understanding of some Abhidhammic doctrines seems necessary for a proper understanding of the commentarial exegesis. Now, we shall finally contextualise the Pāli commentaries among the Buddhist literature and their importance for the study of the extraordinary capacities.

¹⁶ This topic will be analysed in § 9.4.

