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ABHIDHARMA

Collett Cox, University of Washington

In the centuries after the death of the Buddha, with the advent of settled monastic communities, there emerged new forms of religious praxis and modes of transmitting and interpreting the teaching. In this more organized setting, Buddhist practitioners began to reexamine received traditions and to develop new methods of organization that would make explicit their underlying significance and facilitate their faithful transmission. Although begun as a pragmatic method of elaborating the received teachings, this scholastic enterprise soon led to new doctrinal and textual developments and became the focus of a new form of scholarly monastic life. The products of this scholarship became revered tradition in their own right, eventually eclipsing the dialogues of the Buddha and of his disciples as the arbiter of the true teaching and determining both the exegetical method and the salient issues that became the focus of later Indian Buddhist doctrinal investigations.

Abhidharma, its meaning and origins

This scholastic enterprise was called *abhidharma* (Pāli: *abhidhamma*), a multivalent term used to refer to the new techniques of doctrinal interpretation, to the body of texts that this interpretation yielded, and finally to the crucial discriminating insight that was honed through doctrinal interpretation and employed in religious praxis. Traditional sources offer two explanations for the term *abhidharma*: “with regard to (*abhi*) the teaching (dharma)” or the “highest or further (*abhi*) teaching (dharma).” The subject of *abhidharma* analysis was, of course, the teaching (dharma) as embodied in the dialogues of the Buddha and his disciples. However, *abhidharma* did not merely restate or recapitulate the teaching of the sūtras, but reorganized their content and explicated their implicit meaning through commentary. In *abhidharma*, the specific content of the various individual sūtras was abstracted and reconstituted in accordance with new analytical criteria, thereby allowing one to discern their true message. This true message, as set down in *abhidharma* texts, consists of the discrimination of the various events and components (*dharma*) that combine to form all of experience. This discrimination in turn enables one to distinguish those defiling factors that ensnare one in the process of REBIRTH from those liberating factors that lead to enlightenment. And finally, when the defiling and liberating factors are clearly distinguished, the proper PATH of practice becomes clear. Hence, *abhidharma* was no mere scholastic commentary, but rather soteriological exegesis that was essential for the effective practice of the path.

Traditional sources do not offer a uniform account of the origins of the *abhidharma* method or of the *abhidharma* corpus of texts. Several traditional accounts attribute the composition of *abhidharma* texts to a first council supposedly held immediately after the death of the Buddha, at which his teachings were arranged and orally recited in three sections: the dialogues (sūtra); the disciplinary monastic codes (VINAYA); and the taxonomic lists of factors (*mātrkā* or *abhidharma*). Implicitly, therefore, these traditional

sources attribute authorship of the *abhidharma* to the Buddha himself. This question of the authorship and, by implication, the authenticity and authority of the *abhidharma* continued to be a controversial issue within subsequent, independent *abhidharma* treatises. Although many MAINSTREAM BUDDHIST SCHOOLS accepted the authority of *abhidharma* texts and included them within their canons as the word of the Buddha, several schools rejected the authority of *abhidharma* and claimed that *abhidharma* treatises were composed by fallible, human teachers.

Independent *abhidharma* treatises were composed over a period of at least seven hundred years (ca. third or second centuries B.C.E. to fifth century C.E.). The appearance and eventual proliferation of these independent *abhidharma* treatises coincides with the emergence of separate schools within the early Buddhist community. Doctrinal differences among various groups, which were, in part, the natural result of differing lineages of textual transmission, were refined in scholastic debates and amplified by the composition of independent *abhidharma* exegetical works. Scholarly opinion on the sources for the genre of independent *abhidharma* treatises is divided between two hypotheses, each of which finds support in structural characteristics of *abhidharma* texts. The first hypothesis emphasizes the practice of formulating matrices or taxonomic lists (*mātrkā*) of all topics found in the traditional teaching, which are then arranged according to both numeric and qualitative criteria. The second hypothesis stresses the doctrinal discussions (*dharmakathā*) in catechetical style that attempt to clarify complex or obscure points of doctrine. These two structural characteristics suggest a typical process by which independent *abhidharma* treatises were composed: A matrix outline served to record or possibly direct discussions in which points of doctrine were then elaborated through a pedagogical question and answer technique.

Regardless of which hypothesis more accurately represents the origin of independent *abhidharma* treatises, this dual exegetical method reflects a persistent tendency in the Buddhist tradition, from the earliest period onward, toward analytical presentation through taxonomic categories and toward discursive elaboration through catechesis. The need to memorize the teaching obviously promoted the use of categorizing lists as a mnemonic device, and certain sūtras describe this taxonomic method as a way of encapsulating the essentials of the teaching and averting dissension. Other sūtras proceed much like oral commentaries, in which a brief doctrinal statement by the Buddha is analyzed in full through a process of interrogation and exposition. Both of these methods, amply attested in the sūtra collection, were successively expanded in subsequent independent scholastic treatises, some of which were not included within the sectarian, canonical *abhidharma* collections. For example, the collection of miscellaneous texts (*khuddakapiṭaka*) of the canon of the THERAVĀDA school includes two texts utilizing these methods that were not recognized to be canonical “*abhidharma*” texts. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Path of Discrimination*) contains brief discussions of doctrinal points structured according to a topical list (*mātikā*), and the *Niddesa* (*Exposition*) consists of commentary on the early verse collection, the *Suttanipāta*. In fact, a clear-cut point of origin for the *abhidharma* as an independent section of the textual canon only reflects the perspective of the later tradition that designates, after a long forgotten evolution, certain texts as “*abhidharma*” in contrast to sūtras or other possibly earlier expository works that share similar characteristics.

Abhidharma texts

Traditional accounts of early Indian Buddhist schools suggest that while certain schools may have shared some textual collections, many transmitted their own independent *abhidharma* treatises. XUANZANG (ca. 600–664 C.E.), the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited India in the seventh century C.E., is reported to have collected numerous texts of as many as seven mainstream Buddhist schools. These almost certainly included canonical *abhidharma* texts representing various schools. However, only two complete canonical collections, representing the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools, and several texts of undetermined sectarian affiliation are preserved. Even though each of the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* collections contains seven texts, the individual texts of the two collections cannot be neatly identified with one another. However, a close examination of certain texts from each collection and a comparison with other extant *abhidharma* materials reveals similarities in the underlying taxonomic lists, in exegetical structure, and in the topics discussed. These similarities suggest either contact among the groups who composed and transmitted these texts, or a common ground of doctrinal exegesis and even textual material predating the emergence of the separate schools.

The Theravāda canonical *abhidharma* collection, the only one extant in an Indian language (Pāli), contains seven texts:

1. *Vibhaṅga* (*Analysis*);
2. *Puggalapaññatti* (*Designation of Persons*);
3. *Dhātukathā* (*Discussion of Elements*);
4. *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* (*Enumeration of Factors*);
5. *Yamaka* (*Pairs*);
6. *Paṭṭhāna* (*Foundational Conditions*); and
7. *Kathāvatthu* (*Points of Discussion*).

The Sarvāstivāda canonical *abhidharma* collection, also including seven texts, is extant only in Chinese translation:

1. *Saṅgītiparyāya* (*Discourse on the Saṅgīti*);
2. *Dharmaskandha* (*Aggregation of Factors*);
3. *Prajñāptiśāstra* (*Treatise on Designations*);
4. *Dhātukāya* (*Collection on the Elements*);
5. *Vijñānakāya* (*Collection on Perceptual Consciousness*);
6. *Prakaraṇapāda* (*Exposition*); and
7. *Jñānaprasthāna* (*Foundations of Knowledge*).

Certain other early *abhidharma* texts extant in Chinese translation probably represent the *abhidharma* canonical texts of yet other schools: for example, the **Sāriputrābhidharmaśāstra* (T. 1548), which may have been affiliated with a Vibhajyavāda school, or the **Sammaṭṭyaśāstra* (T. 1649) affiliated by its title with the Sammaṭṭiya school, associated with the Vātsīputrīyas.

In the absence of historical evidence for the accurate dating of the extant *abhidharma* treatises, scholars have tentatively proposed relative chronologies based primarily upon internal formal criteria that presuppose a growing complexity of structural organization and of exegetical method. It is assumed that *abhidharma* texts of the earliest period bear the closest similarities to the *sūtras*, and are often structured as commentaries on entire *sūtras* or on *sūtra* sections arranged according to taxonomic lists. The *Vibhaṅga* and *Puggalapaññatti* of the Theravādins and the *Saṅgītiparyāya* and *Dharmaskandha* of the Sarvāstivādins exemplify these characteristics. The next set of *abhidharma* texts exhibits emancipation from the confines of commentary upon individual *sūtras*, by adopting a more abstract stance that subsumes doctrinal material from a variety of sources under an abstract analytical framework of often newly created categories. This middle period would include the five remaining canonical texts within the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* canonical collections. The catechetical style of commentarial exegesis, evident even in the earliest *abhidharma* texts, becomes more structured and formulaic in texts of the middle period. The final products in this process of abstraction are the truly independent treatises that display marked creativity in technical terminology and doctrinal elaboration. Some of the texts, in particular the *Kathāvatthu* of the Theravādins and the *Vijñānakāya* of the Sarvāstivādins, display an awareness of differences in doctrinal interpretation and factional alignments, although they do not adopt the developed polemical stance typical of many subsequent *abhidharma* works.

The composition of *abhidharma* treatises did not end with the canonical collections, but continued with commentaries on previous *abhidharma* works and with independent summary digests or exegetical manuals. Within the Theravāda tradition, several fifth-century C.E. commentators compiled new works based upon earlier commentaries dating from the first several centuries C.E. They also composed independent summaries of *abhidhamma* analysis, prominent among which are the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) by BUDDHAGHOSA and the *Abhidhammāvatāra* (*Introduction to Abhidhamma*) by Buddhadatta. The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* (*Collection of Abhidhamma Matters*) composed by Anuruddha in the twelfth century C.E. became thereafter the most frequently used summary of *abhidhamma* teaching within the Theravāda tradition.

The first five centuries C.E. were also a creative period of efflorescence for the *abhidharma* of the Sarvāstivādins. In texts of this period, summary exposition combines with exhaustive doctrinal analysis and polemical debate. The teaching is reorganized in accordance with an abstract and more logical structure, which is then interwoven with the earlier taxonomic lists. Preeminent among these texts for both their breadth and their influence upon later scholastic compositions are the voluminous, doctrinal compendia, called *vibhāṣā*, which are represented by three different recensions extant in Chinese translation, the last and best known of which is called the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (*Great Exegesis*). Composed over several centuries from the second century C.E. onward, these ostensibly simple commentaries on an earlier canonical *abhidharma* text, the *Jñānaprasthāna*, exhaustively enumerate the positions of contending groups on each doctrinal point, often explicitly attributing these views to specific schools or masters. Instead of arguing for a single, orthodox viewpoint, the *vibhāṣā* compendia display an encyclopedic intention that is often content with comprehensiveness in cataloguing the full spectrum of differing sectarian positions. The *vibhāṣā* compendia are repositories of several centuries of scholastic activity representing multiple branches of the Sarvāstivāda school, which was spread throughout greater northwestern India. However, they came

to be particularly associated by tradition with the Sarvāstivādins of Kashmir who, thereby, acquired the appellation, Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika.

Three other texts composed during the same period that are associated with the northwestern region of Gandhāra display a markedly different structure and purpose: the **Abhidharmahr̥dayaśāstra* (*Heart of Abhidharma*) by Dharmaśreṣṭhin; the **Abhidharmahr̥dayaśāstra* (*Heart of Abhidharma*) by Upāsānta; and the **Miśrakābhidharmahr̥dayaśāstra* (*Heart of Abhidharma with Miscellaneous Additions*) by Dharmatrāta. Composed in verse with an accompanying prose auto-commentary, these texts function as summary digests of all aspects of the teaching presented according to a logical and nonrepetitive structure. In contrast to the earlier numerically guided taxonomic lists well-suited as mnemonic aids, these texts adopt a new method of organization, attempting to subsume the prior taxonomic lists and all discussion of specific doctrinal points under general topical sections. This new organizational structure was to become paradigmatic for the texts of the final period of Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma*.

This final period in the development of Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* treatises includes texts that are the products of single authors and that adopt a polemical style of exposition displaying a fully developed sectarian self-consciousness. They also employ increasingly sophisticated methods of argumentation in order to establish the position of their own school and to refute at length the views of others. Despite this polemical approach, they nonetheless purport to serve as wellorganized expository treatises or pedagogical digests for the entirety of Buddhist teaching. The *Abhidharmakośa* (*Treasury of Abhidharma*), including both verses (*kārikā*) and an auto-commentary (*bhāṣya*), by VASUBANDHU became the most important text from this period, central to the subsequent traditions of *abhidharma* studies in Tibet and East Asia. Adopting both the verse-commentary structure and the topical organization of the **Abhidharmahr̥daya*, the *Abhidharmakośa* presents a detailed account of Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* teaching with frequent criticism of Sarva īstivāda positions in its auto-commentary. The *Abhidharmakośa* provoked a response from certain Kashmiri Sarvāstivāda masters who attempted to refute non-Sarvāstivāda views presented in Vasubandhu's work and to reestablish their own interpretation of orthodox Kashmiri Sarvāstivāda positions. These works, the **Nyāyānusāraśāstra* (*Conformance to Correct Principle*) and **Abhidharmasamayapradīpikā* (*Illumination of the Collection of Abhidharma*) by Saṅghabhadra and the *Abhidharmadīpa* (*Illumination of Abhidharma*) by an unknown author who refers to himself as the *Dīpaka īra* (author of the *Dīpa*) were the final works of the Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* tradition that have survived.

Abhidharma exegesis

Abhidharma exegesis evolved over a long period as both the agent and the product of a nascent and then increasingly disparate Buddhist sectarian self-consciousness. Given the voluminous nature of even the surviving literature that provides a record of this long doctrinal history, any outline of *abhidharma* method must be content with sketching the most general contours and touching on a few representative examples. Nonetheless, scanning the history of *abhidharma*, one discerns a general course of development that in the end resulted in a complex interpretative edifice radically different from the sūtras upon which it was believed to be based.

In its earliest stage, that is, as elaborative commentary, *abhidharma* was guided by the intention simply to clarify the content of the sūtras. Taxonomic lists were used as a mnemonic device facilitating oral preservation and transmission; catechetical investigation was employed in a teaching environment of oral commentary guided by the pedagogical technique of question and answer. Over time, the taxonomic lists grew in complexity as the simpler lists presented in the sūtra teachings were combined in new ways, and additional categories of qualitative analysis were created to specify modes of interaction among discrete aspects of the sūtra teaching. The initially terse catechetical investigation was expanded with discursive exposition and new methods of interpretation and argumentation, which were demanded by an increasingly polemical environment. These developments coincided with a move from oral to written methods of textual transmission and with the challenge presented by other Buddhist and non-Buddhist groups. In its final stage, *abhidharma* texts became complex philosophical treatises employing sophisticated methods of argumentation, whose purpose was the analysis and elaboration of doctrinal issues for their own sake. The very sūtras from which *abhidharma* arose were now subordinated as mere statements in need of analysis that only the *abhidharma* could provide. No longer serving as the starting point for *abhidharma* exegesis, the sūtras were invoked only as a supplemental authority to buttress independent reasoned investigations or to corroborate doctrinal points actually far removed from their scriptural antecedents.

Abstract analysis, which is the guiding principle of *abhidharma* exegesis, also became the salient characteristic of its doctrinal interpretation. The analytical tendency, evident in lists present even in the sūtras, expanded in *abhidharma* to encompass all of experience. In very simple terms, *abhidharma* attempts an exhaustive and systematic accounting of every possible type of experience in terms of its ultimate constituents. *Abhidharma* views experience with a critical analytical eye, breaking down the gross objects of ordinary perception into their constituent factors or dharmas and clarifying the causal interaction among these discrete factors. This analysis was not, however, motivated by simple abstract interest, but rather by a soteriological purpose at the very core of Buddhist religious praxis. Analysis determines the requisite factors of which each event consists, distinguishing those factors that lead to suffering and rebirth from those that contribute to their termination. This very process of analysis was identified with the insight that functions in religious praxis to cut off ensnaring factors and to cultivate those leading to liberation.

Abhidharma analysis focused on refining these lists of factors and on investigating the problems that arise in using them to explain experience. Simple enumerations of factors found in the earlier sūtras include the lists of five aggregates (*skandha*), twelve sense-spheres (*āyatana*), and eighteen elements (*dhātu*) that were used to describe animate beings, or the lists of practices and qualities that were to be incorporated into the set of thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment, whose cultivation results in the attainment of enlightenment. These earlier analytical lists were preserved in *abhidharma* treatises and integrated into comprehensive and complex intersecting classifications that aimed to clarify both the unique identity of each factor and all possible modes of conditioning interaction among them. The *abhidharma* treatises of various schools proposed differing lists of factors containing as many as seventy-five, eighty-one, or one hundred discrete categories. For example, the Sarvāstivādins adopted a system of seventy-five basic categories of factors distinguished according to their intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), which

were then grouped in five distinct classes. The first four classes (material form [*rūpa*]—eleven; mind [*citta*]—one; mental factors [*caitta*]—forty-six; and factors dissociated from material form and mind [*cittaviprayuktasaṃskāra*]—fourteen) comprise all conditioned factors (*saṃskṛta*), that is, factors that participate in causal interaction and are subject to arising and passing away. The fifth class comprises three unconditioned factors (*asaṃskṛta*), which neither arise nor pass away.

Through *abhidharma* analysis, all experiential events were explained as arising from the interaction of a certain number of these factors. Particular occurrences of individual factors were further characterized in accordance with additional specific criteria or sets of qualities including their moral quality as virtuous, unvirtuous, or indeterminate, their locus of occurrence as connected to the realm of desire, the realm of form, the formless realm, or not connected to any realm, their connection to animate experience as characteristic of SENTIENT BEINGS or not, and their conditioning efficacy as resulting from certain types of causes or leading to certain types of effects. To give an example, a particular instance of a mental factor, such as conception (*saṃjñā*), can be virtuous in moral quality, characteristic of sentient beings, connected to the realm of desire, and so on. In other circumstance, another occurrence of the same factor of conception, while still characteristic of sentient beings, can be unvirtuous and connected to the realm of form. Although the specific character of each instance of conception differs as virtuous, or unvirtuous, and so on, all such instances, regardless of their particular qualities, share the same intrinsic nature as conception and can, therefore, be placed within the same fundamental category. Thus, the taxonomic schema of seventy-five factors represents seventy-five categories of intrinsic nature, each of which occurs phenomenally or experientially in innumerable instances. Through this disciplined exercise of exhaustive analysis in terms of constituent factors, experience can be seen as it actually is, the factors causing further suffering can be discarded, and those contributing toward liberation can be isolated and cultivated.

This exhaustive *abhidharma* analysis of experience occasioned a number of doctrinal controversies that served to demarcate different schools. Many of these controversies were directed by fundamental disagreements that could be termed ontological, specifically concerning the way in which the different factors constituting experience exist and the dynamics of their interaction or conditioning. Such ontological concerns motivated the early lists of factors in the sūtras, which were used to support the fundamental Buddhist teaching of no-self (anātman) by demonstrating that no perduring, unchanging, independent self (ātman) could be found. In *abhidharma* treatises the focus of ontological concern shifted from gross objects, such as the self, to the factors or dharmas of which these objects were understood to consist.

Perhaps the most distinctive ontology was proposed by the Sarvāstivādins, “those who claim *sarvam asti*,” or “everything exists.” Beginning from the fundamental Buddhist teaching of ANITYA (IMPERMANENCE), they suggested that the constituent factors of experience exist as discrete and real entities, arising and passing away within the span of a single moment. But such a view of experience as an array of strictly momentary factors would seem to make continuity and indeed any conditioning interaction among the discrete factors impossible. Factors of one moment, whose existence is limited to that moment, could never condition the arising of subsequent factors that do not yet exist; and factors of the subsequent moment must then arise without a cause since their prior causes no longer exist. To safeguard both the Buddhist teaching of impermanence and

the conditioning process that is essential to account for ordinary experience, the Sarvāstivādins suggested a novel reinterpretation of existence. Each factor, they claimed, is characterized by both an intrinsic nature, which exists unchanged in the past, present, and future, and an activity or causal efficacy, which arises and passes away due to the influence of conditions within the span of the present moment. Only those factors that are defined by both intrinsic nature and the possibility of activity exist as real entities (*dravya*); the composite objects of ordinary experience that lack intrinsic nature exist only as mental constructs or provisional designations (*prajñapti*). This model, the Sarvāstivādins claimed, preserves the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, since each factor's activity arises and passes away, and yet also explains continuity and the process of conditioning, since factors exist as intrinsic nature in the past, present, and future. Such past (or future) existent factors can then, through various special types of causal efficacy, serve as conditions in the arising of subsequent factors. The Sarvāstivāda ontological model became the subject of heated debate and was rejected by other schools (e.g., the Theravāda and the Dārśāntika) who claimed that factors exist only in the present, and not in the past and future. According to the Dārśāntikas, intrinsic nature cannot be distinguished from a factor's activity. Instead, a factor's very existence is its activity, and experience is nothing other than an uninterrupted conditioning process. The fragmentation of this conditioning process into discrete factors possessed of individual intrinsic nature and unique efficacy is nothing but a mental fabrication.

These ontological investigations generated complex theories of conditioning and intricate typologies of causes and conditions. There is evidence for several rival classifications of individual causes and conditions, each of which accounts for a specific mode of conditioning interaction among specific categories of factors: For example, the Theravādins proposed a set of twenty-four conditions; the Sarvāstivādins, two separate sets of four conditions and six causes. Besides establishing different typologies of causes and conditions, the schools also disagreed on the causal modality exercised by these specific types. The Sarvāstivādins acknowledged that certain of these causes and conditions arise prior to their effects, while others, which exert a supportive conditioning efficacy, arise simultaneously with their effects. The Dārśāntikas, however, allowed only successive causation; a cause must always precede its effect. In these debates about causality, the nature of animate or personal conditioning—that is, efficacious action, or KARMA—and the theory of dependent origination intended to account for animate conditioning were, naturally, central issues because of their fundamental role in all Buddhist teaching and practice.

The investigation of these doctrinal controversies, which came to occupy an ever greater position in later *abhidharma* treatises, required the development of more formal methods of argumentation that employed both supporting scriptural citations and reasoned investigations. In the earliest examples of such arguments, reasoned investigations did not yet possess the power of independent proof and were considered valid only in conjunction with supportive scriptural citations. This reliance upon scriptural citations spurred the development of a systematic HERMENEUTICS that would mediate conflicting positions by judging the authenticity and authority of corroborating scriptural passages and determining the correct mode of their interpretation. In general, the interpretative principles applied were inclusive and harmonizing; any statement deemed in conformity with the teaching of the Buddha or with his enlightenment experience was accepted as genuine. Hierarchies were created that incorporated

divergent scriptural passages by valuing them differently. And finally, contradictory passages in the sūtras or within *abhidharma* texts were said to represent the variant perspectives from which the Buddhist teaching could be presented. Notable for its parallel with later Buddhist ontology and epistemology was the hermeneutic technique whereby certain passages or texts were judged to have explicit meaning (*nīṭārtha*) expressing absolute truth or reality, while others were judged to have implicit meaning (*neyārtha*) expressing mere conventional truth. And for the *abhidharma* texts, the sūtras were merely implicit and in need of further interpretation that could be provided only by the explicit *abhidharma* treatises. In *abhidharma* texts of the later period, reasoned investigations were deemed sufficient, and the supporting scriptural references became decontextualized commonplaces, cited simply to validate the use of key terms in an *abhidharma* context. Reasoned investigations began to be appraised by independent non-scriptural criteria, such as internal consistency, and the absence of logical faults, such as fallacious causal justification. The doctrinal analysis and methods of argumentation developed within *abhidharma* treatises defined the course for later Indian Buddhist scholasticism, which refined and expanded its *abhidharma* heritage through the addition of new doctrinal perspectives, increasingly sophisticated techniques of argument, and a wider context of both intra and extra-Buddhist debate.

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