

Bhavaṅga and the Buddhist Psychology of Perception

ONE of the most interesting theories in the whole ethico-psychological system of the Abhidhamma is that of *bhavaṅga*, variously translated as 'sub-conscious life-continuum' and 'sub-liminal consciousness', which forms the basis of the Buddhist psychology of perception. It is a theory which is unique in the history of Indian thought, as being one of the few attempts made by the ancients to explain the phenomenon of consciousness without reference to what the Buddhists might regard as animistic notions such as postulating a 'soul' that takes part in the cognitive process. *Bhavaṅga* is also one of the most 'psychological' of the teachings of the Abhidhamma, in the sense that it is the least mixed up with ethical considerations and the crude physiology that form a good part of the Abhidhamma. And we cannot help being struck by the way it anticipates certain modern ideas such as the conception of consciousness as a flowing stream.

Though to the moderns, the attempt to divide an act of cognition into several stages, and to enumerate various steps may appear arbitrary, we cannot help being impressed by the systematic way in which the Buddhist scholiasts set about to analyse the process. Both in the conception of *bhavaṅga* as well as in the idea of the stream of consciousness, what we see is an application on the subjective side of the Buddhist analysis of objective reality as a constant flux. *Bhavaṅga* seems to be the result of an examination of mental phenomena from the point of view of this dynamic view of life.

Thus, the idea of the stream of becoming (*bhavasota*) is often met with in the Nikāyas. But in this form it is still a philosophical theory used in reference to the objective world. Its application in the psychological sphere appears to have given rise to the idea of *bhavaṅga*. Though the words *bhava* and *bhavasota* appear to the Nikāyas, the occurrence of the word *bhavaṅga* is much later and is confined, in the main, to the Abhidhamma literature.

About the word *bhavaṅga* itself, there seems to be no necessity to reject the traditional exegesis of *bhavaṅga*, as the word itself seems to be peculiar to commentarial Pali, and has been, in all probability, coined by the scholiasts. Mrs. Rhys Davids' attempt¹ to derive it from *bhavan* + *-ga* is far-fetched and untenable. If we may be allowed to play about with etymologies in the same way, we might rather suggest *bhavaṅga* + *-ga* from *gacchati*. This would be more plausible and far more tempting, in view of the Upanishadic *satā sampanno*, and *svam apīto*. The Buddhist equivalent would, therefore, be something

1. "I cannot think it is a compound of *bhava* and *anga*, which yields no sense. I see it rather as an abstract form of what is, I believe, termed a secondary derivative, from *bhavan* + *-ga*."—*The Milinda Questions*, p. 115.

am gato, and the mind during deep sleep would be called *bhavaṅga* mind that goes to *bhava* instead of to *sat*. However tempting such may be, we are on safer ground with the traditional interpretation, in view of the lateness of the word. At any rate, we do not have grounds for rejecting the commentarial etymology in favour of suggestions such as the above, and, as the history of the word is obscure, it would better to be guided by the scholiasts, with whom the tradition of the word is likely to have been preserved throughout the centuries, as we have suggested, the word had not been coined by them in recent

clue to the understanding of the theory of *bhavaṅga* must lie in the psychology of dreams and sleep as expounded in the Abhidhamma. In all Indian thought, the starting-point for the analysis of the individual and his consciousness was the condition of deep sleep. The Sāṅkhya analysis of the reality itself, was, according to the interpretation that Vācaspati gives in his *Tatvakaumudī*, based on an analysis of the individual. And in Vedānta the state of deep, dreamless sleep (*suṣuptāvasthā*) is compared to the original state of the world (*prāgavasthā*). The dreamless condition is regarded as the true state of the soul (*svarūpāvasthā*), and in analogy with this, the Vedāntists regarded the original condition of the world as the 'true nature' (*svarūpa*) of Brahma.² To the psychologists of the Abhidhamma, too, the man in the condition of deep sleep appeared to be the most suitable starting-point: with this reservation, that his consciousness was not cut off from the stream of life, and not with ultimate reality as postulated by other philosophers.

It was the dynamic aspect that the Abhidhamma wished to emphasise. In the Chāndogya Upanishad, a man in deep sleep is regarded as being one with his inner self, which, to the Vedāntists, was ultimately real: "When a man sleeps, he becomes united with that which is, Somya; he has gone into the self."³ And the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad describes the condition of deep sleep thus: "Embraced by the Highest Self, he knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within."⁴ The Brahma Sūtras, themselves, expressly state that, in the absence of dreams, there is a lapsing into the self.⁵ In passages like these, the man in deep sleep is, in the first instance, regarded as having gone into his self which is *sat*. The Buddhists, therefore, would have felt themselves, felt the necessity of giving a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of sleep according to their philosophy of life. Thus Nāgasena,

Brahma Sūtras II, 1, 9.

Yatraitat puruṣaḥ svapīti nāma satā Somya tadā sampanno bhavati; svam apīto Chand. Up. VI, 8, 1.

Prājñenātmanā sampariṣvaktō na bāhyaṃ kiñcana veda nūntaram—Bṛhad. Up.

Tadabhāvo nādiṣu tacchīterātmani ca (The absence of that, viz., dreams, takes the nādis and in the Self)—*Br. Sut. III, 2, 7.*

in the *Milinda Pañha* (circa 100 A.D.) says, in answer to King Milinda's question, that, when a man is in a state of deep sleep his thought (*citta*) 'entered into *bhavaṅga*.'⁶ This seems to be the earliest occurrence of the word *bhavaṅga* in the Pali writings, but although it appears as a fresh concept it is taken for granted, and no attempt is made to explain it. We can imagine therefore, the same question having been asked earlier, and an explanation framed in answer to the demand, some time before the *Milinda Pañha* itself. Hence Nāgasena advances the theory as though it existed before. But though we cannot say at what time the expression came into being, it seems not unlikely that it was coined by the scholiasts in direct opposition to the Upanishad concept which we saw in the passages quoted above. To the Buddhists, there could be no 'Self' into which a man in deep sleep could lapse. Even if there were such a self, they would object to a static word, such as *ātman*, being applied to it. Hence, to the question as to what happened in deep sleep they replied that thought had gone into *bhavaṅga*. By this they meant that the state of deep sleep was merely an aspect (*aṅga*), the subjective aspect of the universal becoming (*bhava*). Thus, of the Upanishad theory, they accepted only the identity of life with consciousness in the case of a man in deep sleep. And they substituted the conception of 'that which is' (*asau*) by the more dynamic 'that which becomes.'

Once hit upon, the theory of *bhavaṅga* seems to have supplied a long-needed. Hence its application was extended in the commentaries and the Abhidhamma literature to make up for, to a great extent, the aversion of late Buddhism towards the conception of a 'soul.' In the *Milinda Pañha*, *bhavaṅga* is referred to only in respect of the psychology of dreams and sleep. Although many attempts are made by Nāgasena to answer Milinda's uncomfortable questions as to the identity of the individual after survival, the result is not altogether convincing. The theory of a succession of mental states (*dharmasantati*) and the rather self-contradictory conclusion that the surviving person is neither the same nor another (*na ca so na ca añño*) must have been felt, in the last analysis, unsatisfactory.⁷ The scholiasts of a later day evidently found in *bhavaṅga* a more plausible way out of this difficulty. For one thing, it appeared to be the only factor which, according to Nāgasena, continued to function when the body was to all intents and purposes dead, in the condition of deep, dreamless sleep.⁸ And, between this state and that of actual death, the only difference seemed to be that *bhavaṅga* functioned in the living individual. The word had, also, the nec-

6. *Middhasamārūhassa mahārāja cittaṃ bhavaṅgagataṃ hoti—Milinda*, Col. Ed., p. 240.

7. *Evameva kho mahārāja dhammasantati sandahati añño uppajjati añño nirujjati apubbam acarimam viya sandahati tena na ca so na ca añño pacchimi viññāṇasaṅgaṃ gacchati—Milinda*, Col. Ed., p. 33.

8. *Middhasamārūhassa bhavaṅgagatassa sante pi sarīre cittaṃ appavattam hoti—Ibid.*, p. 240.

mic import to distinguish it from the ideas of soul in the Upanishads and the systems of Indian thought. And this import was heightened by the conception of stream (*sota*) from the original *bhavasota*. But the old idea of soul appearing in a new garb seems to have been retained here. Hence the Abhidhamma psychologists did not wish *bhavaṅga* to be understood as a permanent substratum of conscious mental processes. They stated that *bhavaṅga* was 'cut off' (*bhavaṅgupaccheda*) when thought arose. This is a contradiction, particularly in view of the later application of the word, as we shall see. Mrs. Rhys Davids attempts to reconcile this contradiction in her illuminating interpretation of *bhavaṅga* as consciousness in a potential state, and thought-processes as an actualisation of *bhavaṅga*.⁹ It is doubtful if this was exactly what the scholiasts had in mind when they substituted a cutting-off of the stream of *bhavaṅga*, and contrasted it with *vīthimutta* (process-free) with thought (*vīthi-citta*).

The theory, therefore, that was originally put forward as an explanation of a psychological phenomenon, seems to have been in later times invested with a metaphysical connotation. And this becomes further clear from the literal interpretation of the word. The etymology remained the same, but into the word *aṅga* there was forced in the meaning of 'cause' or 'causal factor,' so as to give the whole word *bhavaṅga* the sense of 'that which might call "the principle of individuality." Its original description was of a state of pure consciousness, analogous to the Upanishadic conception, and emphasised so much, although *bhavaṅga* is now being made use of as a part of the Buddhist psychology of perception.

It is also noteworthy that the full explanation of the theory of *bhavaṅga* is given in the *Abhidhammatthasangaha*, in connection with the philosophy of death and rebirth. The passage of a mortal from birth to death and again to rebirth is thus detailed:

To those who have thus got rebirth the same kind of consciousness is retained in rebirth, occupied with the same field of objects, starting straight after the moment of rebirth, goes on, in the absence of any process of death, in unbroken flux like the stream of a river till the uprising of death-consciousness. And this flux of mind, because it is a condition of becoming, is the continuance of the condition of becoming."¹⁰ Here *bhavaṅga* is explained as *bhavasā aṅga*, and the Sinhalese paraphrase of Sāriputta's explanation is given in the *Vibhāvanī Tikā* of Sumangala, both explain *aṅga* as meaning 'cause,' 'factor' or 'function,' and not 'part' or 'portion.'

Milinda Questions, p. 115.

Cf. *Compendium of Philosophy*, by S. Z. Aung, pp. 152-153. The text is: *gahitapaṭisaṅghikānaṃ pana paṭisaṅghinīredhānantarato ppebhūti tamavālarūpāna tadeva cittaṃ yāva cuticittuppadā asati vīthicittuppede bhāṇassa aṅgabhāṇeva santatisankhātam mānasam abhoecchinnaṃ naṭisoto viya pacattati.*

Attributed to the twelfth century, and regarded as being earlier than the commentary of Sumangala who appears to have consulted it.

According to Sāriputta, *bhavaṅga* is the cause of the unbroken continuity (the individual) in various existences.¹² And Sumangala explains it as 'the cause, reason, indispensable condition of our being regarded subjectively continuous; the *sine qua non* of our existence; that without which one cannot subsist or exist.'¹³ Hence we see that the theory of *bhavaṅga* is the result of an attempt to explain the continuity of the individual consciousness during the events of death and rebirth in the round of *saṃsāra*, without reference to a soul.

That this was the Abhidhamma way of explaining continued personality without postulating a transmigrating entity, becomes further clear from a consideration of the philosophy of death and rebirth. Ledi Sadaw, a contemporary exponent of the Abhidhamma in Burma, explains *bhavaṅga* as 'the function of being, by reason of which the passive side of existence (*uppatti-bhava*) continuously exists so long as the *janakakamma* of the past which caused that existence, lasts.'¹⁴ We are further told by the Abhidhamma philosophers that when a man dies, there is presented to his dying consciousness either his past reproductive action (*janaka-kamma*) which is about to effect his rebirth, or a symbol of it, or a presentiment of his destiny in the next existence, some time before actual death-consciousness (*cuti-eitta*) sets in. Any of these three presentations, respectively termed *kamma*, *kamma-nimitta* and *gati-nimitta*, are regarded as being the object of the rebirth-consciousness in the next existence.¹⁵ Consciousness has been defined in the Abhidhamma as the relationship between subject and object. And birth (*paṭisandhi*, lit. joining up) and death (*cuti*) are looked upon as artificial dividing points in the flux of existence. Hence, there is a subject-object relationship between the subjective side of the individual who is being reborn and his last thought at the point of death in the previous existence.

Hence is the continuity of the individual established without postulating a soul. So the *Atthasālinī*, after detailing the cognitive process, almost triumphantly remarks that there is no 'doer' or 'one who causes to do' but that the process goes on of itself.¹⁶

It would be necessary here to set forth briefly the Buddhist psychology of perception, for a fuller understanding of the theory of *bhavaṅga*. For our purposes we must strip the Abhidhamma of its ethical accretions and consider only the psychological aspect. Perception in general is regarded as an attuning of the mind to the constant flux of external reality. The ultimate un-

12. *Ē ē kāmabhavādibheda-vū upatti-bhavayā-gē avicchinna-pravṛttiyāta kāraṇabhāvanāyān.*

13. *Compendium*, p. 266.

14. *loc. cit.*

15. *Paṭisandhi-cutī-saṅkhātā dvāravimuttānam ālambanam ca yebhuyyena bhavaṅga-chaddāvāragahitam . . . kamma-kammanimitta-gatinimitta-sammataṃ—Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha*, Chap. III.

16. *Atthasālinī*, Colombo Ed., Ratanasāra, 1916, p. 252.

measurement of time has been fixed by the Buddhists as the duration of a thought-instant (*cittakkhaṇa*) which, according to Ledi Sadaw,¹⁷ has been computed as between a billionth and two billionth part of the time taken in the snapping of one's finger or the wink of one's eye. And with this as a standard, the Buddhists have arrived at the figure of seventeen moments constituting the duration of material phenomena.¹⁸ However this figure has been arrived at, it was necessary that each act of cognition, when computed this way, should be of equal duration. The cognitive processes (*vithicitta*) are detailed in the *Visuddhi Magga*,¹⁹ and elsewhere in the commentaries. But the *Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha* gives us a clear and concise statement.²⁰ The processes on occasion of sensory perception are known as *pañcadvāravāṭhī* (five-door process), and the processes of reflection or representative cognition are styled *manodvāravāṭhī* (mind-door process).²¹ The process of visual cognition (*cakkhudvāravāṭhī*), for example, would be as follows: When a visible object enters the focus of vision, at the moment of its existence, it would have no effect on the percipient (1). There is a vibration of the stream of *bhavaṅga* (*bhavaṅga-calana*)²² for a few moments, and a consequent interruption of the flow (2, 3). There is no *bhavaṅga* any more, and, instead, there begins a conscious process, the first of which is the moment of adverting or *āvajjana* (4). In the subsequent moments there follow, in succession, the visual impression (*cakkhu-viññāṇa*), recipient consciousness (*sampattiicchana*, 6), investigating consciousness (*vitthabbana*, 7), determining consciousness (*veṭṭhabbana*, 8), seven moments of perception (*javana* 15),²³ and finally two moments of retention or register-consciousness (*tadārammaṇa*, 17). This completes the seventeen moments, after that *bhavaṅga* begins to flow again until it is interrupted by a stimulus.²⁴

The above process is essentially the same whether in presentative cognition or in representative cognition. Representative cognition or reflection occurs

17. *Compendium*, p. 126, footnote.

18. *Sattarasacittakkhaṇāni rūpadhammānam āyu—Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha*, Chap. IV.

19. *Visuddhimagga*, Chap. XIV, *Viññāṇakkhandha*. P.T.S. Ed., p. 457 ff.

20. Chap. IV, *Vithisaṅgaha*.

21. The senses are technically termed 'doors' (*dvāra*) in the Abhidhamma. The mind is called 'mind-door' (*manodvāra*).

22. *Calana*, vibration, is a term full of significance for those who wish to understand the philosophy that was the basis of the Buddhist theory of perception. *Calana* seems to imply that the cognitive process was looked upon as a sort of tuning in to the speed of oscillations of the material world.

23. *Javana* has been translated as 'apperception,' but this word does not bring out the ethical import. *Javana* has also the property of volition (*cetanā*). It is, therefore, a free, undetermined act in the whole cognitive process, which can ethically modify the character. See discussion of the term in *Compendium*, p. 245 ff.

24. The *Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha* summarises the seventeen stages thus: *ellāvāṭhī-manodvāravāṭhīcittuppadō dvebhavāṅgacalanāni pubbeva atītakam ekacittakkhaṇam itī kelvānāsa cittakkhaṇāni paripūrenti*, Chap. IV.

through the door of the mind (*mano dvāra*), and presentative cognition through the doors of the five external senses (*pañcadvāra*). The steps in both processes occur in the same order, and all of them obtain or not according to the intensity of the stimulus.

In reference to the theory of *bhavaṅga* as expounded in the Abhidhamma what becomes clear to us from the above considerations, is that it is not sub-consciousness or the unconscious as understood in modern psychology. *Bhavaṅga* is said to be cut off when thought arises. It does not exist as a parallel plane below the level of the conscious plane, and as such, thoughts cannot rise from it to the conscious level or in any way affect conscious processes. It is sometimes styled the 'door of the mind,' as being the dividing point between active thought-processes and a mere passive state of pure consciousness.²⁵

From the modern standpoint, questions also arise as to whether *bhavaṅga* could properly be understood as consciousness at all. For, functioning as it does, only in deep sleep, it may be merely a physiological condition. Further, though deep, dreamless sleep is theoretically possible, it has been admitted by modern psychologists to be beyond verification, on account of the universal tendency to forget dreams.²⁷ It is also clear that, though the original concept there was a probable identification of consciousness with life, the later scholiasts were anxious to avoid any such implications. They therefore, separated thought from *bhavaṅga*, and also distinguished *bhavaṅga* from life by saying that it was, at some stage or other, cut off. But, in attempting to explain the problem of survival by means of the concept, they seem to have plunged themselves into an irreconcilable contradiction. As a form of consciousness, whether potential or otherwise, as contrasted with thought processes, we can easily understand it. At least this position is fairly clear in the Abhidhamma. *Bhavaṅga* is constantly referred to as a species of *citta*. And we have mentioned that, though *bhavaṅga* has no relationship to external objects in this world, it takes for its object one of the signs that presented themselves to the dying man in his previous existence.

In illustration of the process of cognition the Buddhist writers, mainly the commentarians, have given us the well-known mango-simile (*ambo paṇḍā*) which is set forth in full in the *Atthasālinī*.²⁸ Mrs. Rhys Davids summarises it thus:²⁹ "A man is in deep sleep with covered head beneath a mango tree (stream of unconscious life or *bhavaṅga*). A wind stirs the branches (preceding *citta* 1, and vibrating *bhavaṅga* 2, 3). This causes a mango to fall by his

25. Mrs. Rhys Davids' statement that "it would seem to mean what we now call sub-consciousness" is misleading. See *Milinda Questions*, p. 114.

26. *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, Chap. III.

27. See W. H. R. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious*, Chap. XIV.

28. Colombo Ed. p. 251.

29. *Buddhist Psychology*, p. 180.

or disruption of unconscious life). The man is awakened by the falling (diverting, 4). He uncovers his head (sense-impression of fruit, 5), receives the fruit (receiving, 6), inspects it (investigating, 7), determines what to do with it (determining, 8), eats it (apperception, 9-15), swallows the last morsels (swallowing, 16, 17), re-covers his head and sleeps again (subsidence into unconscious life)."

There is no scope, within the limits of this article, to discuss fully the Abhidhamma psychology of dreams. Dreaming is also regarded as a cognitive process, with this exception that it occurs through the door of the mind.³⁰ The Abhidhamma is in general agreement with other systems of Indian philosophy as well as with modern psychology, in stating that it is one's experiences during waking life that constitute, in the main, the stuff that dreams are made of.³¹ The *Milinda Pañha* as well as the *Sammohavinodanī* agree in stating that one does not see dreams when he is neither asleep nor awake, in an intermediate state which is like the 'sleep of a monkey.'³² A detailed discussion of the various kinds of dreams appears in the *Sammohavinodanī*,³³ and we learn from it that the Abhidhamma knew of dreams caused by purely physical causes such as visceral disturbances (*piṭṭādānam khobhākaravaṇāpaccayayogena dhātuko dhātukkhobbhato*)³⁴, dreams caused by memories of past experiences (*anubhūta pūbbato*), dreams due to the influence of supernatural forces (*devatopasamhāratō*), and prophetic dreams (*pubbanimittato*). The *Sammohavinodanī* also speaks of dreams we would now call lucid dreams (*pabbatā paṭanto viya, ākāseṇa gacchanto viya*), and he classes these among those due to physical causes. Modern psychologists are in general agreement as regards this position.

Z. Aung³⁵ refers to an interesting development in the dream-theory of the Abhidhamma when he avers that "some authorities" are of opinion that *javana* never obtains in a dream-process. The Ceylon tradition, however, does not confirm this view, for the obtaining of *javana* in a cognitive process is not on whether it is a waking-process or a dream-process but on the nature of the object.

Sammohavinodanī (P.T.S.), pp. 406-407. *Saraththadīpanī*, Col. Ed. 1933, pt. II, p. 407.

Cf. Freud: "Experience shows us that dreams are excited by residues from the previous day."—*Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams*. (Collected Works, Vol. IV, p. 139).

Milinda Pañha: *kaṭṭhāpāreto kho mahārāja supīnam passati*.—Col. Ed. p. 40. *yo so mahārāja supīnam passati na so niddāyanto passati nāpi jagganto passati*.—

40. Cf. also, Freud: "It is true that dreams only show us the dreamer in a distorted way: nevertheless they are bound to reveal to us characteristics of his unconscious life at the same time."—*loc. cit.*, p. 138.

P. 407 (P.T.S. Ed.).

Modern psychologists would qualify this statement. According to them, the content of a dream may at times be purely physical, but the dream-content would have its origin in the unconscious.

Compendium, p. 47.

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intensity of the stimulus. As to whether Aung is referring to a Burmese tradition does not seem sufficiently clear from his statement. If it was recognised that *javana* did not obtain in a dream-process, the development would be an interesting one from the modern point of view. For, it might indicate that the scholiasts regarded the dream-process as a species of autistic thinking, as do many psychologists of today. *Cetanā* or will is a characteristic property of *javana*. And the suspension of *javana* would therefore mean that there was no control of the will over the dream-process. That there was a tendency towards such a development even in the Ceylon tradition is indicated by a passage in the *Pārājikā Atthakathā*, where it is stated that the power of volition (*cetanā*) in a dream-process is not sufficiently strong to bring about rebirth.³⁶

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36. *Svāyam dubbalavatthukattā cetanāya paṭisandhim ākaddhitum asamalho.*— See *Abhidharma-prakāśaya* (1939), by Bhikṣu Doḍampahaḷa Kavindhaja, Pt. I, p. 245.