

I

The Earliest Abhidharma

The question as to how the system of the Sarvāstivāda originated, the last authoritative summary of which is represented by Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* and Saṃghabhadra's *Nyāyānusāra*, can be answered—at least as far as the earliest period is concerned—with reference to a wealth of material in the canonical *Abhidharma* works of this school. Thus, it is with these works that research must begin, and the following essay is an attempt to characterize these works, assign them a place in the overall development, and demonstrate the contribution of each particular work to this development. However, consideration should be given to the following factor: the philosophical development as such began at a later period, and was then only gradual. The period prior to this was confined to collecting and working through the doctrinal material contained in the Buddha's sermons. Since this period represents the soil that nurtured the later development, however, and since the approach and method which were developed at that time continued to influence even the last canonical works of the *Abhidharma*, this period must first be briefly described.

The oldest Buddhist tradition has no *Abhidharmapiṭaka* but only *māṭṛkāḥ*.¹ What this means is that besides the small number of fundamental doctrinal statements, the Buddha's sermons also contain a quantity of doctrinal concepts. The most suitable form for collecting and preserving these concepts would have been comprehensive lists. Lists of this kind were called *māṭṛkā*, and it was from these lists that the *Abhidharma* later developed.

This must have happened in more or less the following fashion: first the attempt was made to collate all the more important

doctrinal concepts scattered among the sermons without distinction and as comprehensively as possible. An early list of this kind has come down to us in the Saṃgītisūtra of the Dhīrghāgama.² In this list, completely heterogeneous concepts are combined indiscriminately and arranged numerically in a purely superficial way.³ However, this purely superficial arrangement of a variety of concepts was hardly a suitable vehicle for the propounding and explanation of the doctrine. For this reason, from an early date onwards, we also encounter shorter lists which group related doctrinal concepts together. One of these lists, which comprises several groups of elements of import for entanglement in the cycle of existence and which is modelled on the Oghavagga of Saṃyuttanikāya,⁴ can be found, for example, in the Jñānaprasthāna,⁵ and recurs in a variety of other texts.⁶ A further list of doctrinal concepts which are of importance for the path of liberation, forms the basis of the first section of the Dharmaskandha⁷ and also appears in the seventh chapter of the Prakaraṇa. Shorter lists of this kind can also be found throughout the early works of the Abhidharma.

Especial importance must be assigned to those lists containing fundamental concepts under which it was attempted to subsume all the various elements. Concepts of this type in the sermons which offered themselves were in particular the 5 *skandhāḥ*, the 12 *āyatanāni*, and the 18 *dhātavāḥ*, and these therefore repeatedly occur as a group. Occasionally the 5 *upādānaskandhāḥ* appear side by side with the 5 *skandhāḥ*, and the 6 *dhātavaḥ* beside the 18 *dhātavaḥ*. These are frequently also associated with the 22 *indriyāni*.⁸ Lists of this kind constitute the first attempt at systemization and formed the basis for the Pañcaskandhaka.⁹

These lists were all intended to serve as a basis for communicating the doctrine, and were accompanied as a matter of course by explanations. Originally delivered orally, they were later preserved in written form. Examples of these will be dealt with in the discussion of the individual works of the Abhidharma. The works invariably start with the list and the individual elements are then discussed in the same order as they appear in this list. The first explanations are little more than involved circumstantial paraphrases.¹⁰ Progress towards clear terminology and definitions was made only gradually. This descriptive method was retained even after new doctrines began to be developed. Thus, we encounter it both in the first section of the Dhātukāya, the first independent

attempt at a systematic psychology, and later in the Pañcavastuka. It offered an alternative to the sūtras of the Brahmanic philosophical systems and made the creation of similar sūtras for the Buddhists superfluous.

Parallel to this simple method of explaining the lists of elements, we find quite early on a further, somewhat curious method. It consists of composing a list of attributes and discussing the nature of the relevant elements with the aid of this list. I have dubbed these lists "attribute-*mātrkāḥ*". They originally consist of dyads, of which the question is asked whether an attribute can be assigned to these items or not, whether they possess a particular attribute or its opposite, whether, for example, they are conditioned or not, whether they are internal or external. Sometimes they consist of triads, where three possibilities are considered: for example, whether something is past, future, or present. Some of these groups regularly appear together and recur frequently. They must originally have been associated with particular problems, for example the following five dyads:

<i>rūpi</i>	<i>arūpi</i>
<i>sanidarśanam</i>	<i>anidarśanam</i>
<i>sapratigham</i>	<i>apratigham</i>
<i>sāsravam</i>	<i>anāsravam</i>
<i>saṃskṛtam</i>	<i>asaṃskṛtam</i>

From their meaning we can see that they represent fundamental divisions between the elements in general. With the first three groups, an attempt is made to distinguish between material and non-material entities, a matter which was not at all easy at this early period. I therefore believe that these groups were originally intended to define more precisely the general fundamental concepts of *skandhāḥ*, *āyatanāni*, and *dhātavaḥ*, and to facilitate categorization. In any case, they are still closely linked with the Pañcaskandhaka even at a relatively late date.¹¹

A similarly close link is evident in five triads which also recur from the earliest times onwards. These are as follows:

<i>añitam</i>	<i>anāgatam</i>	<i>pratyutpannam</i>
<i>kuśalam</i>	<i>akuśalam</i>	<i>avyākṛtam</i>
<i>kāma-</i>	<i>rūpa-</i>	<i>ārūpya-pratisaṃyuktam</i>
<i>śaikṣam</i>	<i>aśaikṣam</i>	<i>naivaśaikṣanāśaikṣam</i>
<i>darśana-</i>	<i>bhāvanā-</i>	<i>a-prahātavyam</i>

They seem originally to have been connected with the doctrine of entanglement in and liberation from the cycle of existence, which I refer to as the Abhisamayavāda.¹² Attribute-*mātrkāḥ* of this kind could of course easily be extended and applied to any of the groups of elements. And by and large this is what happened.

Nonetheless, the explanation dealt not only with the nature of the elements collected in the lists, but also with their relationship to one another. The question of which of the various elements were included (*saṃgrahaḥ*) in the *skandhāḥ*, *āyatanāni*, and *dhātavaḥ* arose quite early on. What this meant was that when the need was felt to collect all the elements in groups and a serviceable principle of classification was being sought in the Buddha's sermons, only the series of the 5 *skandhāḥ*, the 12 *āyatanāni*, and the 18 *dhātavaḥ* were found to be suitable for the purpose. Thus, in order to classify any element systematically, the only possibility was to determine the *skandhāḥ*, *āyatanāni*, or *dhātavaḥ* to which they belong. This method was then adopted extensively, and works such as the Dhātukathā of the Pāli Abhidharma are to all intents little more than a subsumption of the various elements under *skandhāḥ*, *āyatanāni*, and *dhātavaḥ*. Eventually, in the Pañcaskandhaka, the *āyatanāni*, *dhātavaḥ*, and particularly the *skandhāḥ* also served as the framework for a first, consistent attempt at systematization. The inconvenient factor here was that there were three different principles of classification. However, it was impossible for any one of them to be omitted if the Buddha's word was to be adhered to. Therefore an attempt had to be made to harmonize them and to establish their relationships to one another. This led to the question of which of the *skandhāḥ* included the various *āyatanāni* and *dhātavaḥ* and vice versa. The discussion of this question occurs regularly at the end of the various versions of the Pañcaskandhaka.

A further question concerning the relationship of the elements to each other is the question of their association with each other (*saṃprayogaḥ*). It had been observed that certain elements only occur together, not alone, and thus it seemed only logical to attempt to establish which elements this applied to. This also occupies a major part of works such as the Dhātukathā. Later it was also observed that in groups of elements of this kind, one of them could represent the center, or support of the others, and the question

arose as to which elements this was accompanied by (*samanvāgamah*).

It was often observed that the spheres of two elements overlapped. This prompted the question of whether the first was completely or only partially included in the second and vice versa. Discussions of this kind occur frequently in the Jñānaprasthāna and long stretches of the Yamaka of the Pāli Abhidharma are constructed on the formulation of such questions.

Finally, mention should be made here of a factor which is characteristic of the early Abhidharma, that of the form of the catechesis. Subjects are generally not described and explained; it is rather that questions are asked which demand an answer. Unfortunately the answers confine themselves all too often to nothing more than a superficial statement of the facts, often merely in the form of an enumeration. One searches in vain for explanation or substantiation.

We have now examined the most important ways in which the old Abhidharma treats the transmitted doctrinal material. The occurrence of other, unusual forms is rare. One case of this, however, is to be found in the Dharmaskandha, where the list of elements to be treated is not simply enumerated and explained as such; the individual elements from the list are attested by passages from the sūtras which are then explained.¹³ A strangely artificial use of an attribute-*mātrkāḥ* occurs in the Daśottarasūtra, which was early enough to have been incorporated into the Sūtrapīṭaka.¹⁴ Here the question treated is that of which things are efficacious (*bahukarāḥ*), which of them have to be practised (*bhāvayitavyāḥ*), which of them must be cognized (*parijñeyāḥ*) and so forth. However, the discussion of whether these attributes can be assigned to them or not does not follow a list of elements; rather, those things are enumerated that occur singly, in pairs, in threes etc., and which possess these attributes.

However, these are exceptions, and have no lasting influence. In general, it is the approaches already discussed which predominate, and which were developed into a proper method that could be used for the various subjects. The term "scholasticism" springs to mind as a characterization of this method.¹⁵ However, it is scholasticism of a special kind. I have described scholasticism in Indian philosophy elsewhere¹⁶ as a form of philosophizing that does not

start out from a direct perception of things but is based instead on given concepts, which it develops into a system. However, in terms of content, nothing new is created. It remains the same, merely being considered from continually new aspects and presented in ever new forms. Thus, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of “formal” or “formalistic” scholasticism.

To a certain degree, however, the use of this method was justified. For in the early period it was not deemed necessary to create something entirely new. The sole aim was to preserve safely what the Buddha had taught and to illuminate it from a variety of different angles. Even if this was done in a fairly superficial manner, the aim had nevertheless been achieved to a large extent. However, the method that had been developed for this bore the seeds of degeneration within itself. The constant endeavor to say something new while presenting the same content and each time giving the material a new form naturally led to exaggeration and excess.

On examining these phenomena individually, the first impression gained is that of a tedious prolixity. At certain levels of Buddhist literature, such long-winded treatment has occasionally been explained by the fact that it was a matter of religious merit to produce as many of these texts as possible. Here in the early Abhidharma the impression of bombastic pomposity preponderates. Typically, when a short, clear basic exposition would have sufficed, each individual case is treated in minute detail according to a stereotype, frequently with very little variation. A typical example of this is the first chapter of the *Dhammasaṅgāṇi*, which treats the question of which mental elements are good, evil, or indeterminate. Here one author has managed to spin out to 130 pages what Vasubandhu says in under two pages in the *Abhidharmakośa*,¹⁷ by enumerating all the elements that could conceivably be considered in each possible case.

This excessive breadth of treatment is combined with an abuse of the method by applying it in the wrong place. It is, for example, entirely appropriate for a list presenting a series of elements to be followed by explanations of these elements. However, the repetition of the same explanations whenever these elements are mentioned in any context whatsoever becomes nonsensical. The same is true of the subsumption under the general fundamental concepts (*saṃgrahaḥ*). When elements are introduced and

explained for the first time, it is quite appropriate to establish how they should be assigned to *skandhāḥ*, *āyatanāni*, or *dhātavaḥ* etc., but not each time that these same elements occur in any context whatsoever. The above-mentioned chapter in the Dhammasaṅgaṇi offers a wealth of examples of both kinds.¹⁸

In other cases, the method degenerates into artificiality and senseless exaggeration. A particularly blatant example of this is the development of the attribute-*mātykāḥ*. As we have seen, these originally appear to have been short lists intended for a particular purpose. They were then also used for other subjects, their original purpose having been forgotten, and were then extended in a variety of different ways. The questions posited included, for example, whether the elements concerned were internal or external, high or low, large or small, limited or unlimited, mundane or supramundane and so forth. Methods were soon found for extending these lists in such a way without effort or imagination. Dyads were easily formed by the negation of a concept. Thus, old triads could be transformed into three dyads, for example, by distinguishing between *kāmāvacarā—na kāmāvacarā*, *rūpāvacarā—na rūpāvacarā* and *arūpāvacarā—na arūpāvacarā dhammā* instead of *kāmāvacarā*, *rūpāvacarā* and *arūpāvacarā dhammā* (Dhammasaṅgaṇi, pp. 13,25–14,4). Triads were easily formed by either combining or negating both concepts of a dyad. Thus, *ajjhāttabhiddhā dhammā* was placed beside *ajjhattā* and *bhiddhā dhammā*, for example (Dhammasaṅgaṇi, p. 5,17–19. cf. p. 11,19f.). Pairs of concepts proved an especially rich vein for the formation of tetrads. One only needed to distinguish the four possibilities: whether either one or the other, both, or neither of the two concepts occur. It was asked for instance which elements were *kuśalā na kuśalahetukāḥ*, *kuśalahetukā na kuśalāḥ*, *kuśalahetukāś ca kuśalā ca* and *naiva kuśalā na kuśalahetukāḥ* (numerous examples in the Prakaraṇa, T 1541, p. 633b13ff. = T 1542, p. 733b29ff.). Furthermore, newly occurring concepts could be used to form new groups. In connection with the development of the doctrine of causality, the question that was often asked was which elements represented the bases (*ālambanapratyayaḥ*) of particular mental processes. Accordingly, the question was now not simply one of which elements were *parittā* etc., *aṭṭā* etc., and *ajjhattā* etc., but also which of them were *parittārammaṇā* etc., *aṭṭārammaṇā* etc.

and *ajjhattārammaṇā* etc. (Dhammasaṅgaṇi, pp.4,18–23; 5,11–16; 5,17–22).

Wholesale extensions of attribute-*māṭṭkāḥ* were made possible in the following manner: *māṭṭkāḥ* of this type were not only suitable for use with a particular given group of elements; but the questions concerned could also be asked in regard to the elements in general; not, for example, by asking which *skandhāḥ* were conditioned or non-conditioned etc., but to which elements these attributes should be assigned in the first place. Now, the form of the catechesis determined that regardless of what elements were discussed, this discussion had to be clothed in the form of questions and answers. It was not, for example, stated that “There are a fixed number of fetters (*saṃyojanāni*).” Instead the question was asked: “Which elements are fetters?” Questions of this type, however, corresponded in form to the questions of a generally applicable attribute-*māṭṭkāḥ* and could therefore be added to the latter without further ado. Thus, “mixed” *māṭṭkāḥ* came into being in which both types were combined promiscuously. In this type of *māṭṭkāḥ*, unlimited groups of elements could be added as desired to a wide variety of attributes. We thus come across *māṭṭkāḥ* of this type consisting of well over one hundred questions (e.g. Prakaraṇa T 1541, p. 644b6ff. = T 1542 p. 711b7ff.).

In addition, the development of Buddhist doctrine facilitated the continued creation of new groups. In the area of psychology, for example, a distinction had come to be made between *cittam* and *caitasikā dharmāḥ*, which were then augmented by the concepts of *cittasaṃprayuktā dharmāḥ*, *cittasahabhuvo dharmāḥ*, *cittānuparivartino dharmāḥ* etc., all of them being subsumed in a “bundle” (*gucchakam*). Each member of this bundle, together with its negation, provided a dyad for the *māṭṭkāḥ* (Prakaraṇa T 1541, p. 644b10-15 = T 1542, p. 711b12-18; Dhammasaṅgaṇi, p. 10,21–11,18). Bundles and dyads were also formed by starting out from the concepts of *karma* and *bhāvaḥ* (Prakaraṇa T 1541, p. 644b15ff. = T 1542, p. 711b18ff.). Similarly, *saḥetukā dharmāḥ*, *hetusaṃprayuktā dharmāḥ* were placed beside the concept of the *hetavaḥ*, and dyads were again formed from each of these three concepts and its negation (Prakaraṇa T 1541, p. 644 c 4ff. = T 1542, p. 711c7f.). On the same model, the Dhammasaṅgaṇi reorganized all the members of

the old Oghavagga¹⁹ into bundles and dyads (p. 7,7-10,18). This process could, of course, be continued indefinitely if desired.

A similarly blatant process of degeneration occurred with the discussion of the relation of the elements to each other. The question of the degree to which elements are included in other elements (*saṃgrahaḥ*) or are connected with each other (*saṃprayogaḥ*) in itself offered unlimited possibilities to the imagination. New combinations were thought up; for example, the question of what the included and non-included elements were included in, what the connected and non-connected elements are connected with and so forth.²⁰ This opened the floodgates as it were; volume after volume could be filled using this method if one so wished.²¹

These are the essential features that characterize the scholasticism of the early Abhidharma. The process of the development and degeneration of the method naturally took a different course within each of the various schools. Thus, for example, the short attribute-*māṭṛkāḥ* in the early works of the Yogācāra school²²—which were of course taken over from Hīnayāna schools—demonstrate that the exaggerated inflation of these *māṭṛkāḥ* was not taken up everywhere. This degeneration was probably at its worst in the Pāli school, which confined itself exclusively to the transmitted doctrinal material and never really developed any original thought of its own. The compulsion always to say the same things while expressing them in a different form helped to promote these methodological excesses and aberrations. Ultimately, this “method” was also applied to other areas, running riot in the Yamaka and Paṭṭhāna. The Sarvāstivāda school did not go so far as this, yet even there, although there are signs of exaggeration and degeneration in the early period, they keep within certain bounds and eventually disappear completely. The reason for this was that a new, dynamic development had begun and new ideas and problems had arisen which attracted increasing interest, with the result that the old scholasticism faded away, appearing in the later texts of the school merely as the fossilized remains of an ancient heritage.²³