Bhavanga and the Buddhist Psychology of Perception

ONE of the most interesting theories in the whole ethico-psychological system of the Abhidhamma is that of bhavanga, 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 that 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. Bhavanga 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 bhavanga as well as in the idea of the stream of consciousness, what we see is an application of the subjective side of the Buddhist analysis of objective reality as a constant flux. Bhavanga 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 bhavanga. Though the words bhava and bhavasota appear to the Nikāyas, the occurrence of the word bhavanga is much later and is confined, in the main, to the Abhidhamma literature.

About the word bhavanga itself, there seems to be no necessity to reject the traditional exegesis of bhavasa anga, as the word itself seems to be peculiar to commentarial Pali, and has been, in all probability, coined by the scholiasts. Mrs. Rhys Davids' attempt to derive it from bhavana + gya is far-fetched and untenable. If we may be allowed to play about with etymologies in the same way, we might rather suggest bhavana + ga from gacchati. This would be more plausible and far more tempting, in view of the Upānishadic sātā sampanno, and svām api to. 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 bhavana + gya. —The Milinda Questions, p. 115.

Brahma Sutras II, 1, 9.
Yatrātāt parāsah svapitā naṁ satā Somya tadā sampanno bhavati; svam api to
Chand. Up. VI, 8, 1.
Prājñātām dharmaparigvako na bāhyan hīcana veda nāntaram—Bṛhad. Up.
Tadābhaya nādiśv avadhipratām ca (The absence of that, viz., dreams, takes the nādis and in the Self)—Br. Sut. III, 2, 7.

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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) is "entered into bhavaṅga." 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 "being," 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 (āśeṣa), the subjective aspect of the universal becoming (bhava). Thus, of the Upanishad theory, the Buddhists 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' (sabhava) by the more dynamic 'that which becomes.'

Once hit upon, the theory of bhavaṅga seems to have supplied a long-needed idea. Hence its application was extended in the commentaries and the Abhidhamma literature to make up for, to a great extent, the aversion of the survivalists to the concept 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 unanswerable questions as to the identity of the individual after survival, the final result is not altogether convincing. The theory of a succession of mental states (dhamma-santatis) and the rather self-contradictory conclusion that the surviving person is neither the same nor another (na ca so na ca aṅka) must have been felt, in the last analysis, unsatisfactory. The scholiasts a later day evidently found in bhavaṅga a more plausible way out of the 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. And, between this state and that of actual death, the only difference seemed to be the extent to which bhavaṅga functioned in the living individual. The word had, also, the peculiar import to distinguish it from the ideas of soul in the Upanishads and other systems of Indian thought. And this import was heightened by the connotation of stream (sota) from the original bhavaṅga. But of the old idea of soul appearing in a new garb seems to have been preserved. Hence the Abhidhamma psychologists did not wish bhavaṅga understood as a permanent substratum of consciousness. Hence its application was extended in the commentaries and the Abhidhamma literature to make up for, to a great extent, the aversion of the survivalists to the concept of a 'soul.'

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

It is also noteworthy that the full explanation of the theory of bhavaṅga in the Abhidhammatthasamgaha, in connection with the philosophy of rebirth, is thus detailed:

To those who have thus got rebirth the same kind of consciousness and rebirth, occupied with the same field of objects, starting straight after the moment of rebirth, goes on, in the absence of any process of change, in unbroken flux, like the stream of a river till the appearance of death. And this flux of mind, because it is a condition of becoming, the continuity of the condition of becoming." Here bhavaṅga is defined as bhavaṅga citta, and the Sinhalese paraphrase of Sariputta, as well as the Vedantic Tīkā of Sumangala, both explain citta as the 'cause,' 'factor' or 'function,' and not 'part' or 'portion.'

According to Sāriputta, bhavaṅga is the cause of the unbroken continuity of the individual in various existences. 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. 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 personal consciousness, without postulating a transmigrating entity, becomes further clear from a consideration of the philosophy of death and rebirth. Ledi Sadaw, contemporary exponent of the Abhidhamma in Burma, explains bhavaṅga as 'the function of being, by reason of which the passive side of existence (upatīti-bhava) continuously exists so long as the janakakamma of the past existence, which caused that existence, lasts.' 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 end his rebirth, or a symbol of it, or a presentiment of his destiny in the next existence, some time before actual death-consciousness (citta-ittita) sets in. Any of these three presentations, respectively termed kamma, kamma-nimitta and citta-nimitta, are regarded as being the object of the rebirth-consciousness in the next existence. Consciousness has been defined in the Abhidhamma as the relationship between subject and object. And birth (sabbanihita, joining up) and death (citti) are looked upon as artificial dividing points of 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 Atthasāli, after detailing the cognitive process, triumphantly remarks that there is no 'doer' or 'one who causes to do' but that the process goes on of itself.

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 muststrip the Abhidhamma of its ethical accretions and consider only the psychological aspect. Perception in general is regarded as an attentiveness of the mind to the constant flux of external reality. The ultimate unit

12. L. edānamadādhikṛtāt vyākhyātāt bhavaṅga sarvānta.
13. Compendium, p. 266.
14. loc. cit.
15. Patisamkāta-citta-sabbanihitaṁ dovarāminnānam abham paripūratītā dhammaṁ ca yebhuyena bhavaṅgasya chaddhārayagatāṁ... komma-kammanimittata-matam—Abhidhammattha Compendium, Chap. III.
through the door of the mind (manovára), and presentative cognition through the doors of the five external senses (paññadevára). 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 a sub-conscience 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, thought 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.

From the modern standpoint, questions also arise as to whether bhavaṅga could properly be understood as consciousness at all. For, functionally, 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. It is also clear that, though the original concept there was a probable identification of consciousness with life, the later scholars were anxious to avoid any such implications. 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 seemed 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 cittas.

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 present themselves to the dying man in his previous existence.

In illustration of the process of cognition the Buddhist writers, mainly the commentators, have given us the well-known mango-simile (ambopamāla), which is set forth in full in the Aṭṭhasālānī. Mrs. Rhys Davids summarizes 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 (preceeding cittas), and vibrating bhavaṅga 2, 3). This causes a mango to fall by itself into the house."


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for disruption of unconscious life). The man is awakened by the falling mango (averting, 4). He uncovers his head (sense-impression of fruit, 5), the fruit (receiving, 6), inspects it (investigating, 7), determines what it is (perception, 9-15), swallows the last morsels (digesting, 16, 17), recovers his head and sleeps again (subside into bhavaṅga)."

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. 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 in the life that constitute, in the main, the stuff that dreams are made of.30 Indra Pañha as well as the Sapphavadinonā agree in stating that dreams when he is neither asleep nor awake, in an intermediate state which is like the ‘sleep of a monkey.’31 A detailed discussion of the kinds of dreams appears in the Sapphavadinonā,32 and we learn from the Abhidhamma that dreams caused by purely physical causes as visceral disturbances (pitthānam kho bhāvakāya paccayayogena dhātuko dhānakāhobhato), dreams caused by memories of past lives (anubhāvā 40), dreams due to the influence of supernatural beings (devato pasanāhārato), and prophetic dreams (pubbanimittato). The Sapphavadinonā also speaks of dreams we would now call day-dreams (pabbatā pañanto viya, ākāsena gacchanto viya), and he classes among those due to physical causes.

Modern psychologists are in agreement as regards this position.

Z. Aung33 refers to an interesting development in the dream-theory of the Abhidhamma when he avers that “some authorities” are of opinion that the dreams 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 dependent on whether it is a waking-process or a dream-process but on the content of the dream.


Milinda Pañha: kapimiddhapareto kho mahārāja supinam passati.—Col. Ed., yo so mahārāja supinam passati no so niddāyaṃ passati nāpi jaganto passati—40. Cf. also, Freud: “It is true that dreams only show us the dreamer in his not asleep: nevertheless they are bound to reveal to us characteristics of the dream 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 arise 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 were 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. Cetanâ 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 Pârâjikâ Atthakathâ, where it is stated that the power of volition (cetanâ) in a dream-process is not sufficiently strong to bring about rebirth.  

E. R. de S. SARATHCHANDRA