Essay on the Aggregates of Mind

"Preface and Disclaimer"

I do not insist that the ideas put forth in the following pages are true. This essay is an attempt to put into words a hypothetical paradigm which occurred to me gradually over a period of months during the latter half of the year 1996. After much hesitation I finally decided to write it down, primarily for the following three reasons: first, to allow certain friends and benefactors to see what an incorrigible heretic I have become, so that they might not respect or support me as a result of a misunderstanding on their part, and that I might not enjoy their respect or support as a result of pretense or secrecy on my part; second, to make the thesis known to individuals whose opinions I respect, so that I might receive guidance and benefit from their wise consideration and criticism; and third, to generally stimulate thought on a subject that is of extremely profound importance, but which unfortunately has (in my opinion) long been obscured by a thick, petrified crust of dogmatic pseudoscience.

I welcome and even invite criticism of this essay. But it is not sufficient to merely say "It is rubbish." I request that my critics clearly and reasonably explain why it is rubbish. Furthermore, to say "It is rubbish because it is in bald contradiction to the Pali texts" is also not enough, as I am well aware of the heterodoxy of the thesis. A fundamental premise implicit throughout the essay is that the Buddhist scriptures and commentaries as they now stand, in accordance with the law of impermanence, no longer represent in a consistent manner the teachings of an enlightened (or even particularly wise) being, be it Gotama Buddha or anybody else. Faithful Theravadin Buddhists who are disinclined to accept this premise may find the essay little to their liking, or even positively noxious. Critics wishing to support their argument with the authority of a Pali text should be willing and able to provide convincing evidence that the text referred to is reliable.

Some readers may remark that I have to a large extent abandoned Theravadin philosophy in favor of Mahayana. I cannot deny this, although I can say that it is entirely coincidental. At no point during the writing of the essay has it been my purpose to compose a treatise on Mahayana metaphysics, or to otherwise promulgate Mahayana Buddhism. It just happens that through my own reasonings and experience I have arrived at some of the same conclusions (tentative as they may be) as have many Buddhist philosophers before me who also found orthodox Theravadin dogma to be less than convincing. The search for truth is of primary importance; and sectarian chauvinism has no proper place in Dhamma.

I will try to reply to any comments and/or criticisms I receive, but the Burmese postal system nowadays is very unreliable, particularly with regard to foreign mail. So it goes.

Paññobhāsa Bhikkhu
C/o U Han Toe
3/B May Li Kha Road
Mayangone Township
Yangon, MYANMAR (Burma)
According to Einsteinian physics, space and time are essentially similar, comprising a
four-dimensional space-time continuum. Thus from the point of view of modern science
duration is intermingled with height, length, and width; and it is just as meaningful (or
meaningless) to say that the temporal duration of an object is intrinsically distinct from its
spatial dimensions as it is to say that the length of an object is intrinsically distinct from the
duration of its height and width. And so, at a level of reality beyond that of ordinary human
perception, the movements of an entity over time – its behavior – are inseparable from the
form of the entity itself. The fact that the common person perceives space and time to be
quite different may be assumed to be largely due to peculiarities of the human nervous
system – which in turn condition the grammatical structure of human thought and speech.

In the grammar of the English language a statement cannot be formally complete and
correct unless it has both a subject and a predicate. The simple sentences “Light shines”
and “Wind blows” are essentially tautologies; i.e., both words in each sentence convey
practically the same information. Certainly there cannot be light without shining or shining
without light, nor can there be wind without blowing or blowing without wind; nevertheless,
in each case both terms are necessary in order to form a properly meaningful statement.
Of course, most sentences are not obviously tautological, but every meaningful declarative
statement must refer to exactly the same thing in two different ways. This is because of a
grammatical need – and what is virtually a psychological need – to divide the universe and
describe it in terms of spatial aspect and temporal aspect, matter and energy, form and
function. This is in accordance with the common person’s natural manner of thought, yet
from a more comprehensive point of view such dualism is seen to be illusory.

According to the Abhidhamma philosophy, mind (citta) and mental state (cetasika) are
absolutely distinct ultimate realities. However, the abhidhammists also maintain that mind
and mental states arise together at the same point in time, pass away together at the same
point in time, occur together at the same point in space, and furthermore cannot possibly
exist independently of each other and are thus absolutely inseparable. The standard illus-
tration of the relationship between mind and mental states is the analogy of clear water
mixed with colored ink. The water (mind) is by nature colorless, but serves as a vehicle
and support for the ink (mental states) which lend it the appearance of being colored,
different colors of ink added to the same water causing it to appear differently. But there is
one very palpable flaw in this analogy – namely, that water can exist without ink, and ink
can exist without water, but (as stated above) mind cannot possibly exist without mental
states, or vice versa. So it may be asked, can an instance be given of two entities which
must always occupy together the same position in space and time? One could reply with
many examples like, “a rock and a stone,” or “Earth and the third closest planet to the sun,”
but clearly these are simply the giving of two names to one object. Other examples could
be given which are not so obviously redundant, for instance, “a thing and its behavior.” Ass-
suming that remaining at rest is a mode of behavior, this example would apparently meet
the requirements of the proposition, and many people would probably be inclined to accept
it. But, as has been argued in the foregoing paragraphs, “a thing” and “its behavior” are
merely references to incomplete aspects of exactly the same entity, the entity in this case

* It should be stated at the outset that the qualified existence of physical dimensions beyond space-
time (“hyperspace,” dimensions of probability, etc.) is not denied; however, a discussion of the
subject lies beyond the dimensions of this essay.
being four-dimensional. Numerous seemingly plausible examples could be proposed, and in fact in Abhidhamma philosophy they are rather common; but if such examples are carefully scrutinized they can be seen either to be not necessarily coexistent (e.g. color and odor) or to be redundant and/or fragmentary representations of a single entity. Indeed, if two proposed objects or phenomena occupy the same point in space and time and can by no possible means exist separately, then they are the same; the notion of their plurality is false.

In the philosophy of the suttantas mental state (cetasika) is generally divided into three classes, namely: “the aggregate of sensation” (vedanākkhandha), “the aggregate of perception” (saññākkhandha), and “the aggregate of formation” (sañkhārakkhandha); and that which in Abhidhamma is known as “mind” (citta) is appended to the list as “the aggregate of consciousness” (viññānakkhandha). Thus in suttanta philosophy these four aggregates or factors constitute the whole of human mentality. Sensation, the first of these so-called “mental aggregates,” is, simply stated, an undifferentiated mental image (although, of course, not necessarily a visual one). It may be directly conditioned by the external organs of sense, or it may arise more or less independently of them – as in a memory, a dream, a mood – in which case it will be referred to in this discussion as “mental sensation” (in contrast to visual sensation, auditory sensation, etc.). The image is undifferentiated both spatially and temporally, it is non-pluralistic and timeless, precisely because it completely lacks the function of discrimination; in it there is absolutely no distinction between “this” and “that,” or between “now” and “then.” From a perceptual point of view the image is variegated and changes over time, but at the level of pure sensation each image is the only image, and each moment the only moment. Furthermore, it follows that the sensory image is essentially meaningless; it is utterly devoid of significance. It simply is what it is. This “aggregate of sensation” may rightfully be called the essential substance of mentality, as all other mental states are based upon it.

Closely allied to vedanā is viññāna (=citta), which is not quite so straightforwardly defined, the standard explanations of the term being characteristically ambiguous and uninformative. A literal translation from the Pali language might be something like “out-knowing,” which presumably would imply some relationship to the faculty of knowledge; yet some translators and lexicographers have imposed upon it such renderings as “animation” and “the life-force.” Definitions more in accordance with the orthodox and/or generally accepted point of view are, for example, “consciousness of the senses,” “awareness of an object,” and “the field of sense and sense reaction.” Considering the last example first, it can be seen that if “the field” (mind) represents the potential scope of a being’s sense and sense reaction (mental states), then it is merely an abstraction. On the other hand, if the mind-field absolutely must exist in the immediate presence of sense and sense reaction, as the experts confidently assert, then the field is effectively limited to the precise dimensions of the mental states themselves and can hardly be called a “field” at all; and the definition, such as it is, fails to serve as an adequate explanation. Considering the first two (orthodox) examples, it may be reasonably assumed that “consciousness of the senses” and “awareness of an object” are synonymous, i.e., that “awareness” is the same as “consciousness” (is the same as “knowing”), and that the “object” is an object of

For instance, Abhidhamma claims that in every unit of matter the ultimately real material properties of earth element (pathavīdhatu), water element (āpoddhatu), heat element (tejoddhatu), wind element (vāyoddhatu), color (vanna), odor (gandha), flavor (rasa), and nutritive essence (ojā) must invariably exist together, at a single point, in inseparable union.
sensation. But, again, under the light of scrutiny problems arise. For instance it could (and even should) be asked, what is the difference between the awareness of a mental image and the mental image itself? There are without doubt many psychologists and philosophers who maintain, or at least hypothesize, that the mind of man is chock full of thoughts and feelings to which he is usually, if not always, oblivious. But in what sense could an unconscious mental image be truly said to be "mental," or, for that matter, an "image"? The fact that much of the physiological function of the brain is unconscious is not in question here, nor is the idea that much of that function has the potential, at least, to become conscious; what is impugned is the notion that what lies beyond the bounds of all immediate, subjective experience is deserving of the name "mentality." To the extent that a mental image is unaccompanied by conscious awareness, to that very extent it is a non-existent mental image. In fact, what the various interpretations of orthodox Theravadin philosophy boil down to (without orthodox Theravadin philosophers realizing it) is just this: that a sensation (vedanā) is a mental image, and that consciousness (viññāṇa) is the presence of a mental image. Pure sensation is by nature devoid of significance, as has been previously stated; and the function of that which is devoid of significance can be nothing more than existence itself, i.e., the "act" of simply being present. Thus sensation is the essential substance of mentality, and consciousness (=awareness) its essential function — "conscious sensation" is in truth a bifurcated representation of one and the same transcendent entity, and is as tautological as the term "shining light." And so, two mental aggregates become one.

The aggregate of perception (saññākkhandha), despite its mind-boggling complexity, conveniently avails itself of a simple definition, even of several simple definitions. In short, perception is significance — it is the attribute of meaning imposed upon sensation. It may also be defined as "inference," "hypothesis," or "belief." One might object that such terms as "perception," "significance," "inference," and "belief" are not precisely synonymous; for example, one may perceive the equation "2+2=5" written upon a chalkboard and not believe the statement. This is of course true, but if one is to perceive the equation at all one must believe something about it. It may be believed to be a false equation. It may be believed to be a mathematical statement of some sort. It may be believed to be symbols written upon a chalkboard. Or, if the perceiver is extremely nonintellectual, it may be believed to be nothing more than light figures on a dark background. To observe the equation without believing anything about it would be merely to sense it, not to perceive it. All perceptions are significant, or meaningful, and all significance is perceptual; all meaning is inferred, or hypothesized, and all hypotheses are meaningful; all inferences are believed, and all beliefs are inferred. Thus all the definitions given above for perception are actually synonyms despite their seeming difference. Nevertheless, "significance" is usually a more useful definition than "inference" or "belief" as the connotations of the word are more comprehensive. For example, it would sound awkward to say that an angry person believes his feelings of anger, but it would sound quite reasonable to say he attributes significance to his feelings of anger — although, of course, both are true. To describe the various sorts of perception and to explain in detail the mechanisms by which they function could easily occupy hundreds, even thousands, of pages, and lies far beyond the scope of the present discussion; however, some explanation of the basic function of perception may be of interest. A simple perception occurs in two phases: first, there is the differentiation of figure

* This would not, however, rule out the possibility that one person may unknowingly have more than one mind.
from ground, which may occur with regard to any of the modes of sensation; then there is the identification of this figure by equating it with another differentiated (and symbolic) figure, which is generally derived from mental sensation functioning as memory. Thus a simple perception may be wrought into the form “this is that,” “this” being the primary, discriminated, sensory sub-image (“form”), and “that” being the more generalized symbolism equated with it (“name”). In fact, even the preliminary, discriminative phase of perception could, with a bit of imagination, be worked into the same formula, although the term “that” would necessarily be a negation, i.e. “this is not else,” or “figure is not ground.” Perception is, at any rate, by its very nature pluralistic and relative, as opposed to sensation which is essentially monistic and absolute. Perception discriminates and generalizes in order to render useful the “absolute specific” of bare sensation.

The one mental aggregate which remains to be discussed is saṅkhārakkhandha, the aggregate of formation. The orthodox tradition has bestowed upon it a relatively unambiguous (and also relatively complex) definition, yet the Pali term strangely eludes a clear, concise English translation. Saṅkhāra in the context of saṅkhārakkhandha has been variously rendered as “mental concomitant,” “(karma) formation,” “purposive intencion,” “determination,” “determinant,” “construction,” “condition,” “essential,” etc. etc. According to classical Abhidhamma, saṅkhārakkhandha is a conglomeration of fifty ultimately real mental states (cetasika) including, for example, delusion (moha), unconscientiousness (ahimsa), wrong view (diṭṭhi), envy (issā), indecision (vicikicchā), aversion (dosa), non-aversion (adosa), adaptability of mind (citta-kammaññatā), right speech (sammā-vocca), right action (sammā-kammanta), and right livelihood (sammā-ājīva); in fact, the Abhidhamma scholars (rather unsystematically) lump all mental states except sensation and perception into the category of saṅkhārakkhandha. Nevertheless, they also maintain (again rather unsystematically) that what saṅkhāra mainly is, is cetana, which is usually translated as “volition.” “Volition,” though, is not a very good translation of the word, as it is laden with the connotation of deliberate free will, whereas cetana includes more or less stereotyped and “automatic” functions such as habit, instinct, and, to some degree, even reflex. Perhaps a more descriptive, if not more literal, rendering would be “impulse,” or “urge.” Significantly, there is a classic passage in the suttantas which directly equates cetana with kamma – “cetanāhaṁ bhikkhave kammam vadāmi…” – and it should be noted that the literal meaning of the word kamma is “action,” “work,” or “making.” With regard to the other 49 supposed ultimately real mental states included in saṅkhārakkhandha, a bit of logical scrutiny will reveal that they are simply artifacts of specious philosophizing which generally can be explained in terms of vedanā, viññāna, saññā, and cetanā. For example, delusion and wrong view are merely cases of relatively aberrant perception. Indecision is essentially the presence of two mutually conflicting perceptions or urges (with, perhaps, additional volition/perception stewing over the conflict). And such so-called “mental states” as non-aversion and adaptability of mind are for the most part abstractions and are not necessarily discrete mental states at all – they are perceptions to the extent that they are figments of the Abhidhamma scholars’ imagination. Thus it appears that the aggregate of formation is essentially the same as volition, or urge. It is a creative force that results in purposive actions, both mental and physical. The term “formation” should not be construed in the sense of something produced (as a formation of soldiers), but rather in the sense of an active process; hence in this discussion the term always occurs in the singular – active formation, not static formations. The aggregate of formation is more of a mental function than a mental substance or form; and this being so, it should be asked, what is the form by which the function of formation invariably manifests itself? What is the observable state
which necessarily coexists with the act of volition, just as an object necessarily coexists with its own behavior? The answer, as the reader may have already anticipated, is, conveniently, none other than the aggregate of perception. Perception is the very form of the creative force - and thus two more mental aggregates become one.

The essential unity of formative perception is not so readily apparent as that of conscious sensation, which is presumably due to the relative complexity of the issue. For instance, it is obvious that the volitional urge is responsible not only for the generation of concepts, but also for the volitional movements of the body. From the point of view of the idealist philosopher this presents no problem at all, since by his reckoning the movements of the body, as well as the body itself, are generated concepts. But for the sake of argument let it be assumed that the philosophical realists are at least partially correct, and that there exists some kind of Universe external to the workings of the mind. The movements of the body would then, strictly speaking, not be pure perception, but would be effected by a sort of "motor perception," i.e., a perceptual area of the brain linked with motor function perceiving a physical action, and that physical action thereby taking place. A man imagines that he walks (via motor perception, not merely conceptual perception), and so he walks. Thus the will to move and the motor perception are naturally simultaneous, and the resultant physical movement is as simultaneous with them/it as the speed of nerve impulses and other necessary chemical reactions will allow. But, it may be objected, many reputable Buddhist meditation masters instruct their students to observe the volition to perform an act considerably before the act occurs, and furthermore the students are often able to do so. This objection is true, but, unfortunately for the masters and their students, the instruction is based upon a dogmatic myth, and the students' seeming success is due largely to the power of suggestion. The meditators are told to observe a preceding volition, and so they dutifully conjure one up in order to observe it. Physical movements, and also mental movements, are of course frequently preceded by a volitional desire to generate them, but this volitional desire is not the same as the volition which actually causes the movement. In the case of a physical action - say, the movement of a leg - the former is a conceptual volitional perception which facilitates, but does not necessitate, the motor volitional perception which follows it. It would be unrealistic to suggest that each swing of the leg in the act of walking is the result of a premeditated intention, just as it would be unrealistic to suggest that each word, or part of a word, in one's thought or speech is necessarily premeditated. A being, although a virtual slave to the principle of Cause and Effect, in a sense spontaneously imagines his life as he goes along, both mentally and physically.

Thus far the whole of human mentality has been reduced to two basic factors - conscious sensation, which is passive, non-discriminative, and absolute knowledge, and formative (or volitional) perception, which is active, discriminative, and relative belief. Naturally, these two levels of mind are profoundly interrelated. From the biological point of view it can be said that the very purpose of sensation is to supply raw data to be perceived and generalized so that beings can successfully navigate their way through life. On the other hand, perception, although it has great capacity for conditioning the arising of sensation, is so utterly dependent upon sensation that its existence without the latter is absolutely inconceivable. It is in fact composed of sensation just as a clay pot is composed of clay. Although bare sensation devoid of perception can be intellectually conceived of and even to some extent directly realized, perception without at least mental sensation is as impossible as a clay pot without the clay. And so perception can be seen to be a form or product of sensation, thereby ultimately reducing the number of "mental aggregates" to
only one — or, at most, perhaps one and a half. But from all of this a very serious problem arises which has troubled Oriental philosophers for many centuries; namely: how is it that what is obviously differentiated and relative is ultimately undifferentiated and absolute? The Theravadin Buddhists gave up on the question early on in their history and became unrepentant pluralists, yet the answer lies within the mind of every sentient being, in the workings of perception, the sole origin of all differentiation and relativity. During the primary, discriminative phase perception consciousness (i.e. sensation) is volitionally contracted down to the same scope as the object to be perceived. This sensory "sub-image" is generally of much smaller compass than the full field of consciousness, but is still internally undifferentiated and essentially monistic. Further, the sub-image comes to be superimposed upon the full sensory field, thereby creating a conscious sensation surrounded by conscious sensation, an image within an image, which generates the appearance of "figure" and "ground." Such constructed, artificially dualistic distinctions between figure and ground are the fundamental building blocks with which all perceptions, no matter how complex, are formed from the undifferentiated complexity of sensation. The questions of exactly how the mind superimposes one sensory image upon another and of how perception has the capability of causing further perception, and thereby sensation as well, to arise possibly lie more within the expertise of the neurophysiologist than the (unenlightened) Buddhist philosopher.

What is the driving force behind this seeming division of the undivided, and how? The answer is of course the saṅkhāra aspect of formative perception, which is essentially cetanā, which is essentially kamma. And what is the origin of this kamma? From the Buddhist perspective the origin of present kamma is past kamma, and the origin of past kamma is kamma further past, the ultimate origin being simply "not seen," and the intellectual search for it is discouraged. In the Sautrantika Yogacāra school of Buddhism the term corresponding to cetanā/kamma is "anādi-vōsanā," which may be translated as "beginningless predisposition." Interestingly, a well-known English translation of a cardinal Mahayana Buddhist text renders the term "karma" as "habit energy"; and although "habit" is a not quite adequate description, it is nevertheless very informative. From the point of view of biology a person's volitional urges undoubtedly originate in genetics and past experience, the past experience itself being strongly flavored by blindly evolved genetic predispositions (the effective purpose of which, incidentally, is to maximize the likelihood of successful reproduction). Either way, kamma/cetanā/saṅkhāra is a kind of intrinsic psychic momentum which conditions present behavior as a result of pre-existing latent tendencies. Kamma, and thus also perception, is always, in a profound sense, for lack of a better word, habitual.

It has been stated above that sensation is "absolute" and perception is "relative." This statement is true in more than one sense. Sensation is absolute not only in the sense of being utterly simple and unadulterated due to its complete lack of spatial and temporal differentiation; it is also absolute in the sense of being ultimately real. Sensation simply cannot be argued with or doubted. Certainly, one may impose a grossly invalid interpretation upon a sensory image, but the very existence of the image itself cannot reasonably be denied. It is there — or rather, it is here — and no amount of skepticism or clever dialectic can erase it. It is in fact a Kantian noumenon, a thing (in this case the mind) as it really is; and furthermore it is the only thing-in-itself, the only Reality, that the common person can, or will, ever know. On the other hand, the content of perception is manifestly doubtful. The "truth" of a concept is simply its practical conformity with a prevailing corpus of other concepts. This relative consistency is essential for furthering the purposes
of the organism, and passes for truth; yet as the naturally plastic paradigm changes to
harmonize with changing experience, "truth" often becomes falsehood, and falsehood,
truth. A perception is a phenomenon, a thing as it merely seems to be, the underlying
 noumenon or "thing" always being sensation. Perception is not only relative in the sense
of being discriminative and comparative, but also in the sense of being wholly reliant upon
context for its validity, or, rather, its "reality." Formative perception is thus, at its best,
relative or conventional reality, as opposed to the Ultimate Reality that is conscious sen-
sation; and since it is not ultimately true, it follows that it is necessarily to some degree
delusive. And this in fact brings up another definition and virtual synonym for the term
"sañña" that has hitherto not been attributed to it in this discussion – namely, "delusion." And
so, in accordance with the foregoing line of argument, sensation, representing the
purely conscious, perfectly indifferent, and ultimately real aspect of mind, may rightfully be
called the true essence of enlightenment, which corresponds to Nibbāna, and perception,
being the source of all unease, error, and falsehood, may be called the essence of unen-
lightenment, which corresponds to Saṁsāra.

This explanation of consciousness is sensation, is Reality, is Nibbāna versus urge is
perception, is delusion, is Saṁsāra may seem like a case of Occam's razor gone wild; in
other words, it may seem too plain and simple to be true. However, if compared with the
corresponding doctrines of the Theravada and Mahayana schools it may be judged to be
far preferable. For example, with regard to Nibbāna, the orthodox Theravadins maintain
that it is "the principle of cessation of suffering and lasting peace," and that it "always exists
in nature." This is essentially true; but the orthodox Theravadins then state that Nibbāna is
only one of a total of 82 ultimate realities (including such wondrous "realities" as femininity,
verbal intimation, and tongue sensitivity), and that furthermore it is neither mental or phys-
ical. How the cessation of suffering can be an existent state and not be mental is extremely
difficult to understand. The doctrines of the Mahayanists seem to come much closer to the
truth on the subject, but they are nevertheless obscured in a shroud of enigmatic and
paradoxical jargon. What they mysteriously refer to as "the Essence of Mind" and "the
Buddha-Nature" is actually no more than simple conscious sensation. Their controversial
and abstruse doctrines that Samsara is ultimately the same as Nirvana, and that all beings
are Buddhas (doctrines which confound and arouse the scorn of so many Theravadins)
can be easily understood when one realizes that perception, which is delusion and
Samsara, is entirely composed of, and is therefore a mode of, sensation, which is the
essence of enlightenment, and Nirvana.

It is stated in the Pali texts that the Arahant produces no kamma, and some of the most
ancient suttas also state that he forms no perceptions. Considering that kamma and per-
ception are two aspects of the same phenomenon, this is naturally quite reasonable. An
assumption could therefore be made that the fully enlightened being has eliminated all
formative perception from his mind and lives completely at the level of conscious sen-
sation; but this notion without qualification gives rise to difficulties. First, it has already been
mentioned that perception is necessary for a being to effectively function in the world. If the
Arahant is not to be a vegetable (a contented and fully conscious vegetable, but a
vegetable nevertheless), then he simply must generate some semblance of perception.

* That is, the noumenon of a perception as perception is always sensation. To say that the
 noumenon of a perceived external object, say, a tree, is always sensation would be true only if some
 kind of radical idealism is correct.
** Passages illustrating this latter point may be found in Appendix III.
Also, scientific evidence suggests that the act of "volitional" perception is in some respects quite involuntary; for example, certain visual areas in the brain automatically begin differentiating figures, such as lines and simple shapes, upon reception of neural impulses from the eye, and evidently begin doing so even before the conscious image becomes manifest. Thus the hypothetical enlightened being would perhaps be unable to completely and permanently eradicate perception from his mind, even if he were amenable to becoming a vegetable by doing so. The formulators of Abhidhamma philosophy have hypothesized the existence of a special kind of consciousness called "kinjla citta" which is experienced only by Arahants and allows them to act without creating kamma, wholesome or unwholesome. This concept is entirely lacking in the generally older and more reliable Buddhist texts (i.e., the suttantas), and furthermore it is superfluous. Since perception is a mode or aspect of sensation (much as the clay pot is a mode or aspect of clay), perception can be experienced as perception or as sensation. This is precisely what the (hypothetical) Arahant does: he suffers his brain to run most of its natural courses and to conjure up whatever perceptions are necessary and/or appropriate, but he experiences these perceptions at the level of bare conscious sensation. The enlightened being thinks, speaks, and acts, but he does not attribute any real significance to — he does not believe — his thoughts, speech, or actions. Thus his perceptions, such as they are, are only the semblance of perceptions; they are mere outward form divested of their outward nature of delusion. His thoughts being deprived of their perceptual weight, so to speak, are thereby also deprived of their habitual and instinctual psychic momentum; The Arahant is not caught up in restless and gratuitous chains of association, as is generally the case with the unenlightened individual, but, in a sense, artfully uses his thoughts as indifferent tools performing indifferent functions, all merged in a field of undifferentiated Reality. This state or process of keeping the mind (including perception) at the level of conscious sensation, which presumably is perfected in the Arahant but is relative and variable in the common person, plays a key role in Buddhist philosophy and practice. In Pali it is called "sati," and in English, "mindfulness."

The practical ethic of the Buddhist disciple astutely striving for Nibbāna is considerably different from that of the typical aspirant to goodness, lasting happiness, paradise, or heaven. Ethically, the latter makes perceptual, and more or less arbitrary, discriminations between good and bad, right and wrong; whereas the former distinguishes primarily between Reality and illusion, and eventually transcends even that distinction. For the earnest, skillful practitioner, "good" is that which tends to enlightenment, and "evil" is that which tends to habit and delusion, especially greater habit and delusion than are one's current lot; and since habitual delusion is essentially perception, which is essentially the attribute of significance, the more meaningless one's conscious experience is, the better. For example, from this perspective an act of charitable giving is not good and wholesome due to the positive, benevolent feelings (i.e., perceptions) evoked in the giver, much less to the material benefit or mental ease derived by the recipient; the act is "good" to the extent that it weakens the giver's concept of "self" and compulsive feelings of selfishness, which are fundamental components of the unenlightened mind, and therefore also of Samsara. Indulgence in sexual intercourse, which seems relatively benign from the Western utilitarian point of view, but for a Theravadin monk constitutes as grave an offence as the commission of murder, is almost always morally deleterious because of the very intense urges and perceptions associated with it, which furthermore reinforce what is already one of the most deep-rooted and pervasive "instinctual addictions" inflicted upon the human psyche. And the scrupulous fidelity of (some) Theravadin bhikkhus to seemingly countless
rules of discipline, which strikes many Western observers as being rather pointless, is
ideally, moral mainly in the sense that it helps to undermine and render meaningless the
habitual tendency toward discriminative personal preference. All morality may likewise be
explained in terms of relative meaninglessness of experience, that is, conscious absence
of perception, or mindfulness; and consequently those who ignorantly attribute great sig-
ificance to their acts of merit (like the Pharisee in the Temple) may actually be doing
themselves more harm than good. Strangely, that which Buddhists generally consider the
highest act of merit, the greatest good, is just the perfection of insignificance. This highest
of perfections may be attained only through the most refined ethical practices, particularly
through the meditative cultivation of unbroken mindfulness. In the beginning and inter-
mediate stages of this practice the meditator simply decreases the specific content and
successiveness of his perceptions; for example, instead of perceiving the barking of a dog,
which sounds like the neighbor's dog, and which out to be trained not to be so noisy, etc.,
he perceives only the experience of hearing. Such willful approximation of perception to
sensation is called, in the jargon of the meditation center, “mindful noting.” At the most ad-
vanced stage of practice, which many reputable meditation systems never reach, the
meditator dispenses with perceptual noting, and all perception, altogether; and his mind
attains, at least during formal meditation, what is essentially a state of enlightenment.
Significantly, the process of restraining one's perceptions by the method briefly described
above is often referred to in the texts as “indriya-saṅvara-sīla,” or, “the morality of restraint
of the (sense) faculties.” Although the attaining of enlightenment may be considered the
apex of virtue the Arahant and Nibbāna itself are of course amoral, as they do not tend to-
ward anything and utterly disregard all dualistic notions, including those of good and bad,
right and wrong, even Reality and illusion. Ethics, morality, and virtue are essentially
relative, and consequently they belong solely to the realm of delusion.

For the sake of completeness it is necessary to mention one more khandha, although it
is generally not considered to be a mental factor. “Rūpakkhandha,” as it is called, is vari-
ously translated as “aggregate of form,” “aggregate of corporeality,” “aggregate of material
qualities,” etc., and is first on the standard list of five, the other four aggregates having
already been discussed at some length. Rūpakkhandha is said to be the physical matter
which constitutes (what appears to be) the body of a living being. Without any further ado,
it should be pointed out that the existence of matter in a Universe external to the mind is,
as many philosophers have lamented and many others have triumphantly proclaimed,
ultimately uncertain, and is largely, if not wholly, an inference based upon the apparent
consistency of experience – that is, a perception based upon perception. Presumably even
a Buddha cannot directly know anything other than mind; and what can only be indirectly
experienced properly lies beyond the scope of practical Dhamma. Judging from the only
thing-in-itself known to man, it is evident that his attempts to perceptually represent Reality
are at best very, very crude (yet more or less consistent) approximations to the truth. The
perceptual model of conscious sensation generally considered to be most rigorous and
acceptable is the scientific concept of the interaction of molecules and ions in a highly
complex structure called “the brain.” It can be plainly seen how radically divergent is the
perception from the Reality that it seems to represent. This may very well be true of all
noumena/phenomena in the observable universe. Also, it is quite remarkable that what the

* Thus such seemingly unprofitable acts as ingesting psychedelic drugs, listening to disorienting
experimental music, and even watching old episodes of “Monty Python's Flying Circus” may, under
certain circumstances, be morally and spiritually wholesome deeds...
scientists perceive to be "matter" is ultimately consciousness. This, likewise, may very well be true of all so-called "matter" in the observable universe. The notion that matter is merely form, i.e., that the material universe is wholly an illusive manifestation of mind (or, MIND), is certainly not insisted upon and is not crucial to the general thesis at hand, but it is quite compatible with it; and, interestingly, the occasional particle physicist, following rigorous scientific methods, has found himself arriving at similar conclusions.

Regardless of the observation that the existence of material rūpa is problematic, let it be assumed for the moment that matter of some kind or another truly exists (which, admittedly, does seem to be the prevailing opinion). The body of a person may then consist of real matter, but this matter would be undifferentiated from the rest of the matter in the Universe, differentiation being, as has been repeatedly stated, an artificial mental process constituting the basic function of formative perception (and the fundamental essence of delusion). Yet this monistic argument may also be directed against the supposedly distinct aggregate of conscious sensation. If plurality is an illusion, then all the consciousness in the Universe, along with all else, is ultimately unified. (This transcendent unity of mind, especially if conjoined with the previously hypothesized mentality of matter, could, if real and realized, clear up many mysteries. It would render plausible, at least, a sort of non-discriminative omniscience in the fully enlightened being, not to mention other, lesser "miracles" and "superhuman powers" that are far better documented and verified.) The common person's almost total ignorance of this monistic state is presumably a result of the inherently, and necessarily, limited mechanism of perception. The more mindful, or wise, or enlightened one becomes, the more unspecified and indifferent the the world becomes, and the more such terms as "khandha," "aggregate," "factor," — indeed, all terms and distinctions — become meaningless; thus, speaking as strictly as it is possible to speak, the total number of khandhas is, at most, zero. This points to the truest explanation of the profound Buddhist doctrine of anattā (no self): there is ultimately no self because there is ultimately no difference. Sabbe saṅkhārā — all perceptual, samsaric phenomena — are ephemeral and characterized by Unease, but sabbe dhammā — all that is real — is devoid of separated individuality.

The faithful Theravadin who has persevered thus far in reading this essay may harbor any number of serious (perhaps passionate) objections to it, two of the most unlikely of which will be summarily discussed. First, the doctrine of paññakkhandhā is common to most if not all schools of Buddhism and is liberally represented in the Pāli Tipitaka. It is found in some of the most cardinal of Pāli suttas and forms an integral part of classical Buddhist philosophy. So, if the foregoing thesis comes anywhere near to being correct, how (it might be asked) could such a grossly inaccurate doctrine come to be incorporated into the teachings of the Buddha? In answer to this it should be pointed out straightaway that the universal acceptance of a specific religious or philosophical doctrine by the adherents of the general system is no reliable indication of its truth or authenticity. The consensus of Western Buddhistic scholars (using many of the same methods of literary analysis and criticism that have so greatly diminished the credibility, even among Christians, of the Christian Bible) is that the majority of Theravadin Buddhist scripture (not to mention the other schools) is simply not authentic, ranging from loose paraphrase of the Buddha’s teachings to sheer fabrication. * A few scholars, notably C.A.F. Rhys Davids and

---

* This organic mutation of Buddhism evidently began almost at the same time as Buddhism itself, and is very much in keeping with the almost total disregard for historical accuracy that was traditional in ancient and medieval India — and also in keeping with (unenlightened) human nature.
G.C. Pande, have expressed the opinion that the theory of the five *khandhas* belongs to the category of sheer fabrications; and although the corroborating evidence they produce is certainly not conclusive, it is, at any rate, evidence. Furthermore, it is worthy of note that many of the suttas and portions of suttas considered by the Western "authorities" to be most likely to be most ancient are ostensibly quite in harmony with the paradigm put forth in this essay. For example, *dīthi*, from which the bhikkhu is enjoined ever to remain aloof, is interpreted in the later texts to mean "wrong view" (i.e., "heretical view") — thus opening the door to the notion that the orthodox symbolic paradigm is Ultimate Truth; but the older passages, in accordance with the etymology of the word, interpret it to mean simply (and literally) "view." Right view is non-perceptual view. Yet even if the Buddha did teach some form of the doctrine of *pañcakkhandhā* it should be borne in mind that he was constrained to speak in terms of *vohāra-desanā*, that is, in necessarily illusive symbolic language that his hearers would be able to understand and be inclined to accept.

The second major objection might be framed as follows: From ancient times up to the present day meditators have practiced techniques described in the Pali texts and have thereby not only attained sainthood but have acquired profound knowledge penetrating into the nature of Ultimate Reality. They have seen with utmost clarity the distinct existence of both mind and matter. They have observed the *cetasikas* and states of consciousness described in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and its commentaries. They have seen with the *samādhi eye submicroscopic rūpa-kalāpas* composed of manifold (ultimately Real) elements of matter. Furthermore, they have directly experienced *Nībbāna* itself, and just as it is described in the texts. So how (it might be asked) can theories in a grossly heretical essay composed by a self-proclaimed fool stand up to the positive verification and vindication of Theravada by the personal experiences of the wisest of men? In responding to this objection the assumed experiences of assumed sages now long dead will not be taken into consideration, as they can hardly be tested objectively; rather, relatively well known modern phenomena will be briefly examined. There are presently many Theravadin monasteries and meditation centers at which methods of meditative practice more or less strictly in accordance with orthodox tradition are taught, and a few of these have produced many disciples who have convinced themselves and their instructors that they have attained superhuman mental states, even the lower stages of spiritual nobility (i.e., "ariyahood"). During the course of his training, a disciple, when not told in minute detail what he is supposed to experience, is at least given numerous hints, subtle and otherwise, to the same effect, and his progress is carefully supervised to ensure that he does not stray too far from the orthodox model (or from the instructor’s interpretation of same). In order to reach what are considered the highest attainments he often endures stresses which make him more suggestible, and he is required to cultivate intense mental concentration until he is able to enter and abide in a narrowly perceptual trance-like state which for the practitioner of *jhāna* meditation verges upon unconsciousness. Such mental states and many of the methods that produce them are well known to the experienced hypnotist, as they are part of his stock in trade. Truly, all of the psychic powers, real or imagined, which the orthodox yogi might attain after long and arduous efforts (such as clairvoyance or remembrance of past lives) may be attained at one’s first session with a competent hypnotist; and furthermore, the psychic powers listed in the texts which the hypnotist generally cannot confer upon his subject (for example the generation of multiple copies of one’s body or mobility through solid rock) have yet to be clearly demonstrated at any present-day Theravadin meditation center. And it is no wonder that deep concentrative states and the resultant "samādhi eye" are necessary to clearly “see” phenomena which are scientifically
The orthodox yogi's attainment of "ariya-hood" is no less problematic, as they are generally presumed to have attained only the lower levels of sainthood, which are difficult to disprove and extremely difficult to verify objectively. The outward behavior of these "ariyas" does not significantly differ from that of the common worldlings with whom they are living — except, perhaps, for an increased tendency toward smugness and in some a relative disinclination for meditative practice. One condition common to all of them is the categorical certainty that their experiences are genuine; but theirs is not the certainty of bare knowing — it is, ironically, a certainty of conviction, inspired by expectation, and based upon what is perceived to be profoundly meaningful.

Thus it appears that the classical exposition and practice of Theravada Buddhism has been corrupted to such an extent that it is now based largely upon adherence to misguided ideology reinforced by hypnotic suggestion. Yet the notion that the Buddha taught jhāna (or self-hypnosis) need not be denied, as trance states may be of use to the unenlightened meditator, for example, by reducing the scope of his unwieldy mind, thereby facilitating for a time the practice of mindfulness. On the other hand it is quite evident that the cultivation of trance states was very much in vogue in ancient India, and it would not have been difficult for such a trend to be associated with Buddhism during the explosion of manic religion-making which began almost simultaneously with the Buddha's disappearance from this world. Also, the existence or possible existence of fully enlightened Theravadin Buddhists need not be denied. What is seriously questioned is the notion that their enlightenment was or ever will be obtained in strict accordance with the orthodox tenets of their own religion. The true essence of Dhamma is not sophisticated, hypertechical analysis of perceived phenomena; the true essence of Dhamma is consciousness itself, and is not the monopoly of only one philosophical or religious system, but underlies them all (although, of course, many systems do not equip the disciple with the wherewithal to realize this). It is hoped that the example of the "hypno-ariya" will serve as an illustrative warning: even direct personal experience is not reliable so long as it is perceptual.

Very much in this essay has been abbreviated for the sake of keeping excess verbiage to a minimum, and the applications and implications of the general thesis are far from exhausted. But, it could be reasonably argued that far too much has already been written. So, it seems appropriate to conclude at this point with a very short summary of the foregoing. First, the entire human universe — all that people can know — is ultimately conscious sensation, and the full realization of this truth is enlightenment. Second, the way to enlightenment is the cultivation and perfection of mindfulness, which is the elimination or transcendence of perception without the elimination of sensation — or, to express it in layman's terms, remaining wide awake without believing anything one way or the other.

"Well then, Outsider, thus should you train yourself: in the seen there will be only the seen, in the heard there will be only the heard, in the felt there will be only the felt, in the mentally sensed there will be only the mentally sensed. Just so, Outsider, should you train yourself. And since, outsider, in the seen there will be only the seen, in the heard there will be only the heard, in the felt there will be only the felt, in the mentally sensed there will be only the mentally sensed, you, Outsider, are not thereby. And since, Outsider, you are not thereby, you, Outsider, are not therein. And since, Outsider, you are not therein, you, Outsider, have no here, no hereafter, no between the two. This is the very end of Unease."

— from Bōhiya Sutta (Udāna 1:10)
The wisest man...
sees without looking
hears without listening
knows without believing

Appendix I
Some Evidence Suggesting the Spurious Nature of Abhidhamma Philosophy

1. In the only canonical account of the first Buddhist council (Vinaya Cullavagga Ch.12) it is stated that the venerable Upāli recited Vinaya, then the venerable Ānanda recited the five nikāyas (i.e., the Suttantas), after which the council was brought to a close. Abhidhamma is mentioned not at all in the entire account (nor is it mentioned in the canonical account of the second council). The general consensus of Western scholars is that the traditional account of the first council is largely fiction; nevertheless, it does indicate that at the occasion of its composition (presumably some time before the third council) Abhidhamma philosophy was either unknown or considered to be unworthy of mention. Ven. Buddhaghosa in his commentary to the Dīgha Nikāya tried to rectify the omission by simply changing the details of the story, which is a rather unconvincing device. The standard Burmese explanation of the conspicuous absence of Abhidhamma in the oldest ecclesiastical histories is that it is included in the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Suttanta Pitaka, but this assertion receives no support from the ancient texts themselves. (The Burmese also consider Vinaya to be included in the Khuddaka Nikāya, thereby rendering the fifth Nikāya — "The Small Collection" or "Collection of the Small" — very much larger and more comprehensive than the entire remainder of the Canon and reducing the Buddhist scriptures to a single Pitaka.)

2. The word "abhidhamma" is very seldom found in the Vinaya and Suttanta (according to one authority eleven times), and when it is found it is usually paired with the term "abhivinaya." Since there is and never was an Abhivinaya Pitaka the context implies that "abhidhamma" here means simply "about Dhamma," not "higher Dhamma." In the very few cases where the term clearly refers to the philosophy of the Abhidhamma Pitaka it is found in relatively very late canonical exegesis of older texts — for example, the Vinaya Sutta-vibhaṅga and the Mahāniddesa.

3. Very many of the terms which play integral, central roles in Abhidhamma philosophy (cetasika, citta-viṭṭhi, bhavaṅga, javana, kiriya-citta, rūpakalīpa, etc. etc.) are either entirely lacking in the Suttanta or are found there rarely and in a radically different context. The elaborate doctrine of citta-viṭṭhi, for example, which is essential to traditional abhidhammic psychology and is taught in even the most elementary of Abhidhamma courses, is entirely foreign to the first two Pitakas (and, curiously, is mentioned only briefly and obscurely in the third). Abhidhamma philosophy is claimed by orthodox authorities to be the most profound and important part of the teachings of the Buddha; but there is not a single narrative episode in the Canon, believable or otherwise, which clearly indicates that he ever taught it to anyone; and furthermore, much of the supposed "highest teachings of Buddha" (e.g., the theory of rūpakalīpas) is non-canonical — not even to be found in the Abhidhamma Pitaka itself.
4. *Kathāvatthu*, the fifth book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, deals exclusively with dogmatic controversies with schismatic sects of Buddhism that existed around the time of the third council (i.e., the mid-third century B.C.). Also, it is believed that the compiler of the work was a bhikkhu named Moggaliputtatissa, who according to ven. Buddhaghosa presided over the third council. Some fundamentalists claim that the Buddha, foreseeing the doctrinal disputes and schisms that would arise after his death, laid down the general outline of the *Kathāvatthu*, and more than two centuries later ven. Moggaliputtatissa merely elaborated upon it. Although this cannot be categorically disproved it is, needless to say, rather unlikely. (Incidentally, considering that one of the main purposes of the third council was to purge the Saṅgha of heretics and champion what one faction, presumably led by ven. Moggaliputtatissa, believed to be Right View, it may be assumed that the Canon was edited and infused with new material favoring the views of the prevailing faction.)

5. Among the many ancient schools of Buddhism there were at least two versions of the Abhidhamma or Abhidhamma Piṭaka, one being of the Theravadins, another being of the Sarvastivadins. Both of these versions consist of seven books, but this is almost their only resemblance, and they obviously are not based upon a common precursor. Other sects possessed of an Abhidharma Piṭaka, including the Mahayanists, tended to modify or borrow outright the version of the Sarvastivadins; but many schools, particularly those which diverged from the Theravada/Sarvastivada lineage prior to around the beginning of the third century B.C., had none. Now it would be absurd to suggest that all of the ancient schools of Buddhism that broke away from the Theravadin line were so foolish as to throw out an entire Piṭaka, which many Theravadins claim is the most profound and most important of the three, that the Sarvastivadins subsequently concocted another one from scratch, and that some of the other schools then adopted the counterfeit in place of the original. It would be much more reasonable to assume that there simply was no Abhidhamma Piṭaka in the earliest days of Buddhism, the trend for composing such abstract, technical philosophy beginning in the Theravada/Sarvastivada lineage shortly before the occurrence of the schism that divided them. This one point is sufficient to convince most Buddhistic scholars in the West that Abhidhamma philosophy was never taught by the Buddha.

6. Regardless of the age and authorship of Abhidhamma there remains the serious fact that many of its tenets are in bald contradiction to quite elementary and uncontroversial observations of science. Although hundreds of examples of abhidhammic nonscience and illogic could be given, for the sake of brevity only two of the more outstanding cases will be discussed.

a) It is readily apparent that the authors of Abhidhamma philosophy were completely ignorant of the function, even the existence, of the human nervous system. Sensory consciousness is claimed to occur in the sense organs themselves, not in the brain; for example, visual consciousness supposedly arises in seven layers of (elemental and ultimately real) visually sensitive matter located on the anterior surface of the eyeball. Rather than relying upon the presence of sensory nerve endings, the material basis of tactile sensation (also one of the 82 “ultimate realities”) is said to uniformly pervade the body like oil soaking a tuft of cotton wool, being everywhere except in hair, nails, and hard, dry skin. The Pali word “*matthalurīga*,” i.e., “brain,” is conspicuously absent in the canonical Abhidhamma texts (while in the commentarial literature the brain is declared to be a large lump of inert bone marrow and the source of nasal mucus); according to the Abhidhamma
scholars, thought arises not in the brain but in a small quantity of variously colored blood contained in a chamber of the heart. This belief is closely interrelated with the fundamental concept that all mentality is strictly linear, only one specific image at a time existing in the mind, arising and passing away spontaneously through the metaphysical power of kamma. The generally prevalent and empirically consistent concept of a complex, physical generator of feeling and thought is quite foreign to Abhidhamma, and modern attempts to reconcile the two result in what is essentially doublethink.

b) The classical abhidhammic theory of matter primarily deals with 28 supposed elemental qualities which are never found alone, but are always combined in or associated with quasi-atomic particles called “rupakalopas.” The naïve realism underlying this philosophy is manifest, and furthermore has been scientifically obsolete for centuries. As an example the four (“ultimately real”) secondary material qualities supposedly present in all rupakalopas – color, odor, flavor, and nutritional essence – will be very briefly considered. The formulators of the theory evidently did not perceive that color, as such, exists only in the mind and is merely a symbolic interpretation of a certain bandwidth of electromagnetic radiation; and that furthermore the hypothetical rupakalopa is much smaller than the smallest wavelength of visible light. An individual rupakalopa, unless, perhaps, it could somehow be identified with a photon, could be endowed with color only potentially and even then in a very abstract sense. The formulators also evidently did not perceive that odor and flavor exist only in the mind, and are the result of molecules and ions of certain configurations interacting with specific neurosensory receptor sites. And the formulators quite obviously did not perceive the vast complexity of human nutrition. A hydrogen atom, for example, if contained in a molecule of sucrose is endowed with a certain nutritional value; if in a molecule of ascorbic acid, another; if in a molecule of cholesterol, yet another; if in a molecule of cellulose, is non-nutritive; and if in a molecule of cyanide, is poisonous. In the case of nutrition, even more markedly than in the preceding cases, the configuration and interaction of complex groups of elementary particles is of primary importance in determining the attributes in question. Just as a single nail does not contain within it the absolute element of “houseness,” even so a single subnuclear quantum of matter does not contain within it odor, flavor, or nutritional value. And finally, although rupakalopas are declared by the authorities to be ubiquitous and of appreciable size by modern scientific standards (roughly the size of an electron according to one authority), no physicist or chemist in a normal, waking state of consciousness has ever experimentally isolated or otherwise verified the existence of one.

Appendix II
Some Evidence Suggesting the Great Antiquity of the Aṭṭhakavagga (Sutta-nipāta Ch.4)

1. The language of the Aṭṭhakavagga contains several rare and archaic grammatical forms reminiscent of Vedic Sanskrit which are absent in the more streamlined grammar of most of the rest of the Canon.

2. The Aṭṭhakavagga is referred to by name elsewhere in the Tipitaka at, for example, Udāna 5:6 in the Suttanta Piṭaka and Mahāvagga 5:13 in the Vinaya Piṭaka. Both of these passages tell the story of a young bhikkhu named Sona Kutikaṇṇa who, when requested by the Buddha to speak some Dhamma, recites the Aṭṭhakavagga. The passage in the
Udōna also (correctly) specifies that the Aṭṭhakavagga has sixteen parts. Thus it was already compiled and named before the completion of the works in which the story is found.

3. The Aṭṭhakavagga is one of the very few portions of the Pali Canon with a line-by-line commentary that is also canonical — namely, the Mahāniddesa. (Interestingly, the purpose of the Mahāniddesa is apparently not to expound upon the great profundity of the Aṭṭhakavagga, as it does more to trivialize than glorify it. Furthermore, the Mahāniddesa was probably not composed merely to comment upon a notably ancient text, as at the time of its composition many suttas were believed to predate the Aṭṭhakavagga — yet they are without a canonical commentary. Its most likely purpose seems to be to reinterpret — to explain away — a large body of proto-Theravadin or even pre-Theravadin philosophy that was clearly at odds with later doctrinal development but was nevertheless too well known to be deleted from the Canon.)

4. According to the literary evidence the Aṭṭhakavagga (but not the Sutta-nipāta as a whole) was common to many, probably most, and possibly all of the ancient schools of Buddhism, including the Mahasanghikas, who are historically the first to branch off from the proto-Theravada/Sarvastivada line (being equivalent to the Vajjiputtas in the Pali account of the second council). The story of ven. Sona Kuttikaṇṇa’s recitation of the Aṭṭhakavagga is also recorded in the Mahasanghika Vinaya, as well as in the vinayas of other ancient schools preserved in the immense Mahayana Tripiṭaka.

5. The text of the Aṭṭhakavagga contains none of the usual stock passages, little if any technical systematization of doctrine, and, with the possible exceptions of the introductory verses to the Māgandiyā Sutta and Sāriputta Sutta, no fairy-tail narratives — all of which are characteristic of later material.

6. The teachings of the Aṭṭhakavagga are addressed to a Saṅgha of homeless, wandering ascetics, and are very simple (often to the point of being enigmatic) yet also exceedingly profound. They appear to come from a time when the Sūsana was still in a primitive state, most of its converts being veterans to the holy life, and being far more inclined to practically realize than to theoretically philosophize. The existence of sedentary bhikkhus living in prosperous monasteries and dedicating their efforts to intellectual investigation of Dhamma, which became the norm very early in the history of Buddhism, is clearly at variance with the spirit of these teachings.

Appendix III

Selected Verses from the Aṭṭhakavagga

1) upayo hi dhammesu upeti vādam
   antīpayam kena katham vadeyya
   attam nirattam na hi tassa atthi
   adhosī so diṭṭhīmidheva sabbāti

Indeed, one having recourse to philosophies has recourse to argumentation.
To one not having recourse, about what, how, would one make an argument?
For him, indeed, there is nothing acquired or discarded; He has shaken off all views even here.  
-- Duṭṭhatṭhaka Sutta v.8

2) sayam samādāya vatāni jantu 
uccāvacaṁ gacchati saññasatto 
vidvā ca vedehi samecca dhammarāṁ 
na uccāvacaṁ gacchati bhūripañño

A person having taken religious observances upon himself 
Goes high and low holding fast to perception; 
But the experienced one by realizations having attained to the Way 
Does not go high or low, being broad in understanding. 
-- Suddhaṭṭhaka Sutta v.5

3) attam pahāya anupādiyāno 
ñāne pi so nissayam no karoti 
sā ve viyattesu na vaggasōri 
dīṭṭhipi so na pacceti kiñci

Having abandoned what was acquired, not taking up anything, 
He would not be in dependence even upon knowledge. 
He truly is not a partisan among the schoolmen; 
He does not fall back on any view at all. 
-- Paramaṭṭhaka Sutta v.5

4) tassidha diṭṭhe va sute mute vā 
pakappito natthi anū pi saññā 
tāṁ brāhmaṇāṁ diṭṭhimaṇḍiyānaṁ 
kenidha lokasmīṁ vikappayeyya

By him, here, in the seen, the heard, or the felt, 
There is not contrived even the slightest perception. 
That holy man not adopting a view – 
By what here in the world would one judge him? 
-- Paramaṭṭhaka Sutta v.7

5) na diṭṭhiyā na sutiyā na ṅāṇena 
māgandyāti bhagavā 
sīlabbatenāpi na suddhimāha 
adiṭṭhiyā assutiyā aṅkāṇā 
asīlātā abbatā no pi tena 
ete ca nissajja anugghahāya 
santo anissāya bhavaṁ na jappe
Not by what is viewed, not by what is heard, not by inner knowledge,

(Mogandiya, said the Blessed One,)

Nor by morality and observances is purity said to be;
By absence of what is viewed, by absence of what is heard, by non-knowledge, 
By amorality, by nonobservance — also not by that.
So having let go of these, not taking hold of anything, 
A peaceful one, not being dependent, would not have longings for existence.

-- Mogandiya Sutta v.5

6) saññāvirattassa na santi ganthā 
paññövimmattassa na santi mohā 
saññāñca diññhiñca ye aggahesum 
ta ghaññayantō vicaranti loketi

There are no ties for one dispassioned toward perception;
There are no confusions for one released by understanding.
But those who have grabbed hold of perception and view 
Roam through the world causing trouble.

-- Mogandiya Sutta v.13

7) na saññasaññi na visaññasaññi 
nopi asaññi na vibhūtasaññi 
evañ sametassa vibhoti rūpañ 
saññānīdānā hi papañcasañkhā

He has no perception of perception; he has no perception of non-perception; 
He is not without perception; he has no perception of "void."
For one who has attained thus form becomes void; 
For founded in perception is diversifying designation.

-- Kalahavivāda Sutta v.13

8) na vāhametam tathiyanti brūmi 
yamāhu bōḷa mithu aññamaññaṃ 
sakañ sakañ diññhimakarĪsu saccarī 
tasmā hi bōloti param dahanti

Truly, I do not say "It is so,"
Which fools say contrarily to each other.
They have each made out their own view to be true; 
Therefore, indeed, they hold the other to be the fool.

-- Cūḷaviyūha Sutta v.5
Indeed, there are not many, different, perennial truths
In the world, except by means of perception.
So having contrived a speculation from among the views
They speak of a duality of “truth” and “falsehood.”

--- Cūlaviyūha Sutta v.9

The holy man does not conceive and have recourse to any designation;
He is neither a follower of views nor an adherent of knowledge.
And he, having known the common conventions,
Looks on indifferently while others take them up.

--- Mahāviyūha Sutta v.17

Appendix IV

Some Afterthoughts

Since writing the essay several years ago my intellectual understanding of Dhamma
has changed somewhat, and I no longer endorse all of the ideas put forth in the original
edition of the essay. I have made some minor changes in this version of it, changing a few
words here and there, but it still contains ideas that I consider to be doubtful. Even so, I still
think that the essay is still worth reading, hence this (slightly revised) version of it. It puts
forth many points that are worthy of serious consideration, and since all views are ulti-
mately invalid anyway (a point in the essay with which I still agree), my reservations should
not be taken too seriously.

One weak point in the argument, which I rectified to some degree in this version, is that
substance and form are not adequately differentiated. Nowadays I am inclined to consider
consciousness the substance or essence of mind, perception the form, and volition the
function. This leaves out vedanā altogether; and this is one reason why I consider the
essay’s discussion of that particular aggregate to be another weak point. Below is an
excerpt from a letter I wrote to a friend which describes my (provisional) position on the
issue of vedanā, or sensation.

The one criticism you made of the essay that others have also made (especially
U Kh.) is that my definition of vedanā is not orthodox. I must accept this as a valid
criticism. If there were a clear, precise definition of vedanā in the suttas I wouldn’t
have had so much trouble with it; but as far as I know, based upon my somewhat
limited knowledge of the suttas (I haven’t read all of them), there isn’t one. I
assume that the standard definition of "affective tone of experience" is to some
degree a commentarial artifact. Sometimes the suttas are not very explanatory
when it comes to technical terminology. Here is a typical example, taken from the
Mahāvedalla Sutta (MN 43):

"'Feeling, feeling,' it is called, friend. With regard to what, friend, is it called
'feeling'?"
"'It feels, it feels,' friend, therefore it is called 'feeling.' And what does it feel?
It feels pleasure, it feels pain, it feels not-pain not-pleasure. 'It feels, it feels,'
friend, therefore it is called 'feeling.'"

This might be inferred to signify "affective tone." But consider the "definition" of
viññāna just a few lines above this:

"'Consciou~ness, consciousness,~ it is called, friend. With regard to what,
friend, is it called 'consciousness'?
"'It is conscious of, it is conscious of,' friend, therefore it is called 'conscious-
ness.' And what is it conscious of? It is conscious of 'pleasure,' it is conscious
of 'pain,' it is conscious of 'not-pain not-pleasure.' 'It is conscious of, it is
conscious of,' friend, therefore it is called 'consciousness.'"

Is that clear? The only difference between the two passages are the presence of
vedanā/vedeti in one and viññānahar/vijānāti in the other, plus the addition of the
particle ti after the words sukham, dukkham, and adukkhamasukham in the de-
scription of viññāna. Thus we have "sukhampi vedeti," but "sukhantipi vijānāti." As I
say, it's not very explanatory. Consciousness is described here in terms of
pleasure, pain, not-pain not-pleasure, but it is not considered to be exclusively
affect-oriented; so feeling, which is described in almost exactly the same terms,
should not necessarily be considered exclusively affect-oriented either, at least not
when judging from the context of this kind of sutta passage. It may be that
comprehensively describing things in terms of pleasant, painful, and indifferent was
a result of certain realist philosophical beliefs held by the authors of orthodox
Theravadin doctrine – a point which I will return to indirectly.

Next there is the question as to how there could possibly be such a thing as
neutral affect. According to the biological/psychological point of view, the very
nature of affect is to produce a response in the organism, either positive/attractive
or negative/aversive. "Neutral affect" would seem to be virtually a contradiction of
terms. I am completely incapable of imagining a neutral affect, any more than I can
think of a purely indifferent emotion. Yet the suttas repeatedly assert that there
exists indifferent, upekkhā, adukkhamasukhā vedanā. In fact the abhidhamma tra-
dition states that of all the six sense-bases only the body-base and the mind-base
are capable of feeling anything but upekkhā vedanā. Thus everything we see,
hear, smell, and taste would be felt only as upekkhā vedanā. This problem is
briefly addressed in the book Basic Pañcidasamuppāda (Nātapariññā Stage) by
ven. Ashin Sumana, who is quite orthodox and learned. He says:

"It is very hard to understand upekkhā-vedanā because we naturally
argue that if there is indifference to both well-being and suffering, then how

21
could there be a vedanā. To know this, we have to analyse vedanā in a
deeper way. Then we will find that: vedanā takes place right at the instant
of accepting the sensation of sight and at that instant it has not begun to
recognise the said sight as pleasing or repugnant. It therefore does not
sense the feeling of either sukha (well-being) or dukkha (suffering) and this
is known as cakkhu-upekkhā-vedanā, an indifferent type of vedanā arising
out of sight sensation. So also is vedanā that takes place right at the
instant of accepting the sensation of sound, smell, and taste on rūpa side
and of thinking on nāma side."

So it appears that upekkhā vedanā arises simultaneously with sensation, and
before any affective reaction has begun. According to orthodox tradition, sukhā
and dukkā vedanā also arise simultaneously with their corresponding objects.
Notice that the author (or rather his translator) refers to recognising the object as
pleasing or repugnant, and not deciding it to be. This way of thinking may be the
key to the apparent problem – but I anticipate myself again.

This leads to the classical doctrine of the passive, involuntary nature of vedanā.
In the standard 12-nidāna system of paṭiccasamuppāda the weak link in the chain,
which we must break in order to free ourselves from samsara, comes after vedanā
(between vedanā and taṇhā), because vedanā is not under our direct volitional
control; it is the fruition of our past volitions, our past kamma. But it seems clear to
me that the affective tone of our experience, our pleasure or displeasure, is
perceptual, and thus under our volitional (although maybe not entirely conscious)
control. The existence of physical pleasure and pain is not necessarily at issue
here, because objective pleasure or pain (assuming that such states exist) does
not become subjectively pleasant or painful until it is perceived to be so – and per-
ception is volitional, regardless of Abhidhamma. My conviction that pleasantness
and unpleasantness are purely perceptual and volitional was enough to cause me
to reject the "affective tone" definition of vedanā.

The problem seems to be that the aforementioned authors of orthodox
Theravadin doctrine did not fully distinguish between sensation and affective tone
(or between sensation and perception), and vedanā apparently contains elements
of both. Early in its history Theravada Buddhism became a philosophically realist
system which not only believed in an ultimately real physical, external world which
causes our sensations, but also in the factual, objective pleasantness and un-
pleasantness inherent in them. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi seems to acknowledge this
when he says, in a note corresponding to the passage on vedanā that I translated
above (note 434 in his MN translation): "The Pali construction here, sukham pi
vedeti, etc., shows feeling as simultaneously a quality of the object and an affective
tone of the experience by which it is apprehended." Thus we don’t actively decide
whether, say, the sensation of a cool breeze on the skin is pleasant or unpleasant
(and it must be one or the other – orthodox dogma does not allow neutral touch
sensations), we passively find out. In the Abhidhamma tradition even skillful
("good") and unskillful ("bad") have acquired a kind of ultimate reality. I consider
this kind of philosophy to be pathetically naïve and unbelievable; and by limiting
vedanā to sensation and relegating affect to saññā I was trying to make the theory
more logical, plausible, and elegantly systematic – to my own way of thinking,
anyhow. I guess the main lesson I have learned from the criticisms I have received
on the issue is that I shouldn't try to make sense out of orthodox Theravadin doctrine. Beware of cumulative tradition!

In your letter you suggested that phassa might be more properly considered "sensation" than vedana. I confess that phassa is even more confusing to me than vedana, and I'm glad I wasn't required to discuss it in the essay. The word literally means "touch," and in the oldest texts, such as the Ṭṭhaka Vagga, it apparently means something like "stimulation"; and I ignorantly hypothesize that it may mean that in later suttas also, not becoming a distinct mental state until the advent of abhidhamma philosophy, or thereabouts. The standard, stock description of phassa ("Dependent on the eye and forms eye-consciousness arises. The coming together of the three is contact...") does not necessarily imply that phassa is a discrete mental state. Another hypothesis I have entertained once or twice is that phassa is the sensation that arises in the peripheral sense organs, with vedana being the corresponding sensation that is somehow instantaneously relayed to the mind-base. (As you may know, tradition claims that the sense organs are themselves conscious.) But then dhammas arising in the mind-base to begin with would have no need for a phassa. If neither of these lame hypotheses is true, then phassa strikes me as being rather superfluous. If it really does mean "sensation" then I fail to understand why such a presumably fundamental and important mental state would be acknowledged and then left out of the enumeration of the five khandhas. The elaborated method of lumping 50 different mental states, including phassa, together under the label of "saṅkhārakkhandha" is not found in the suttas, and furthermore is clearly a case of uninspired sophistry. Ven. U Kh. has opined that viññāna itself corresponds to sensation. I think there's a chance that he's right; and the correctness of his guess would be somewhat less galling to me than the correctness of yours, largely because I concluded in the essay that consciousness and sensation are essentially identical anyway.

But the question as to which Pali term most closely corresponds to "sensation" is of merely academic interest to me nowadays, as I have come to consider "bare sensation" to be a term completely devoid of meaningful content. In your letter you wrote, "...I submit that bare sensation does have definite characteristics, and that different sensations have some different characteristics, whether or not these differences are perceived;" at the time I wrote the essay (six years ago) I might have agreed with you, with some qualifications; I used to use phrases like "undifferentiated complexity"; but now I realize that this kind of talk is simply a business of dismissing perception through the front door and then sneaking it in again through the back.

First there is the matter of experimental verification, the importance of which you acknowledged in your letter. As you may recall, in the essay I discussed the problematical status of rūpakkhandha, the impossibility of directly, experientially verifying the existence of physical matter, e.g.:

"Without any further ado, it should be pointed out that the existence of matter in a Universe external to the mind is, as many philosophers have lamented and many others have triumphantly proclaimed, ultimately uncertain, and is largely, if not wholly, an inference based upon the apparent consistency of experience — that is, a perception based upon perception. Presumably even a Buddha cannot directly know anything other than mind;
and what can only be indirectly experienced properly lies beyond the scope of practical Dhamma."

It wasn’t until after the essay was written that I finally realized that very similar arguments are applicable to the supposed existence of bare sensation also. A mental image completely stripped of all perception, that is, of all differentiation and designation (papañcasaniñkhā, “form and name”), would be essentially no different, subjectively, from Absolute Void. One may say that differences within a sensation, or between sensations, are still really there even if they are not perceived; but this cannot be known experientially, as the only way of being aware of differences is to perceive them, and if one is perceiving them one is not operating at the level of bare sensation. Pure, bare sensation cannot even be imagined, any more than one can imagine unperceived physical matter. Thus we seem to be given the choice of subjectively experiencing formative perception on the one hand, and Absolute Void on the other (assuming that one could be said to experience Absolute Void); and to equate either of these with raw, unprocessed sensory data would be meaningless juggling of words. At any rate, the objective existence of bare sensation cannot be practically verified, and so is problematical at best.

Furthermore, the presumed existence of raw sensation apparently gives rise to complications and difficulties. For example, the question arises as to how kamma, which is formative perception, which is essentially delusion, can result in kamma-vipāka, which is conscious sensation, which is ultimate Reality. How can illusion produce Reality? How can samsara produce Nibbāna? Another awkward point, which I noticed while writing the essay, is that since I equated Nibbāna with pure consciousness, pure consciousness with bare sensation, and bare sensation with “an undifferentiated mental image,” I wound up with the peculiar result that Nibbāna equals unprocessed sensory data. (Of course, these difficulties would be of little or no importance to anyone who rejects the hypotheses proposed in my essay; but I assure you that many more complications may be found in the orthodox doctrine than in my radically streamlined version of it.)

These difficulties may be easily eliminated, however, by a little judicious use of Occam’s razor: that is, by simply eliminating sensation from the equation. There really is no logical necessity for it, and the world can, hypothetically at least, get along fine without it. (For example, the world experienced within a dream is presumably not based upon completely non-volitional, passively received sensations.) The question as to how kamma produces kamma-vipāka is then easily answered: perceptual delusion simply leads to more perceptual delusion. Delusion and Reality, samsara and Nibbāna, are co-existent and simultaneous, yet they do not interact, any more than a raindrop interacts with the water of which it is composed. They are just two different ways of experiencing the same thing — sort of. The power of language breaks down at this point. I hope I have been able to coherently point out here that the existence of pure sensation, although it may never be demonstratively disproven, is nevertheless problematical and theoretically superfluous. It is ironical that the one thing I considered to be absolutely certain in this world is now something that I consider to be probably nonexistent. So it goes.