The bare notion of bhavaṅga consciousness is not unfamiliar to students of Theravāda Buddhism. It has been discussed briefly by a number of writers over the years. However, as with many other basic conceptions of Buddhist thought, if one searches for a straightforward account of just what is said in the Pāli sources, one soon discovers that what is written in the secondary sources is inadequate, at times contradictory and certainly incomplete.1 Existing discussions of bhavaṅga largely confine themselves to the way bhavaṅga functions in the Abhidhamma theory of the process of consciousness (citta-vīthi). It is pointed out how bhavaṅga is the state in which the mind is said to rest when no active consciousness process is occurring: thus bhavaṅga is one’s state of mind when nothing appears to be going on, such as when one is in a state of deep dreamless sleep, and also momentarily between each active consciousness process. This is about as far as one can go before running into problems.

One might be tempted to say that bhavaṅga is the Abhidhamma term for “unconsciousness” or for “unconscious” states of mind, but the use of such expressions in order to elucidate this technical Abhidhamma term turns out to be rather unhelpful, not to say confusing. Their English usage is at once too imprecise and too specific. For example, ordinary usage would presumably define as “unconscious” the state of one who is asleep (whether dreaming or not), who is in a coma, who has fainted, or who has been “knocked unconscious”, etc. But it is not clear that Abhidhamma usage would necessarily uniformly apply the term bhavaṅga to these conditions, in fact it is clear that in one instance—the instance of one who is asleep but dreaming—it would not (see below). Thus if bhavaṅga

---

is to be understood as “unconsciousness”, it must be as a specific kind of unconsciousness. Furthermore, it is surely stretching the use of ordinary language to say that someone who is “conscious” is “unconscious” between every thought. But if the expressions “unconsciousness” and “unconscious” are sometimes vague in their usage, they become even more problematic in the present context as a result of their association with certain quite specific modern psychoanalytic theories of the “unconscious”.

Partially reflecting this specific association of the “psychoanalytic unconscious” on the one hand and the somewhat vague “state of unconsciousness” on the other, discussions of bhavaṅga have tended in one of two alternative directions: they have either tended to see bhavaṅga as something akin to the contemporary idea of the unconscious; or they have tended to see bhavaṅga as a kind of mental blank. As an example of the first tendency, Nyanatiloka writes of bhavaṅga in the following terms:

“Herein since time immemorial, all impressions and experiences are, as it were, stored up or, better said, are functioning but concealed as such to full consciousness from where however they occasionally emerge as subconscious phenomena and approach the threshold of full consciousness.”

Other more recent writers, such as Steven Collins and Paul Griffiths, convey the impression that bhavaṅga is to be understood as a kind of blank, empty state of mind—a type of consciousness that has no content. For Collins bhavaṅga is a kind of logical “stop-gap” that ties together what would otherwise be disparate consciousness processes (and disparate lives):

“In the cases of the process of death and rebirth, of the ordinary processes of perception, and of deep sleep, the bhavaṅga functions quite literally as a ‘stop-gap’ in the sequence of moments which constitutes mental continuity.”

He goes on to suggest that modern Theravāda Buddhist writers such as Nyanatiloka who apparently understand bhavaṅga as something akin to a psychoanalytic concept of the “unconscious” have entered the realm of creative Buddhist

---

2 Nyanatiloka Thera, *op. cit.*, 29. Cf. Gunaratna, *op. cit.*, 23–5; P. De Silva, Buddhist and Freudian Psychology, Colombo, Lake House, 1972, 52–3. De Silva does not explicitly equate bhavaṅga and the unconscious as implied by Collins *op. cit.*, 304, n. 22, he merely discusses the term in this connection and in fact acknowledges that the term is problematic since what scholars have said about it seems contradictory and to involve a certain interpretive element.

3 See Collins, *op. cit.*, 238–47; P.J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*, La Salle, Open Court Publishing Co., 1986, 38–9; Griffiths, quite mistakenly, even goes so far as to state that “bhavaṅga is a type of consciousness that operates with no object” (36).

4 S. Collins, *op. cit.*, 2, 45.
psychology; the ancient literature, says Collins, does not support such an understanding.\(^5\) The writers cited by Collins do not generally explicitly invoke the concept of the psychoanalytic unconscious, but it seems fair to say that some of what they say about bhavaṅga tends in that direction, and certainly it is the case that these writers have not made clear how they arrive at some of their conclusions on the basis of what is actually said in the texts. In such circumstances a careful consideration of the way in which bhavaṅga is presented in the ancient sources seems appropriate. My basic sources for this exposition of the nature of bhavaṅga are the Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa, the Atthasālinī (Buddhaghosa’s commentary to the Dhammasaṅgaṇī), Buddhadatta’s Abhidhammāvatāra and Anuruddha’s Abhidhammatthasangaha.\(^6\)

In the first place, I shall point out in this paper that the tendency to view bhavaṅga as a mental blank simply does not reflect what is said in the texts. If bhavaṅga is “unconsciousness”, then it certainly is not unconsciousness in the sense of a mental blank. In fact bhavaṅga is understood in the texts as in most respects sharing the same properties as other types of consciousness (citta); bhavaṅga is not something different from consciousness, rather it is consciousness operating in a particular mode (ākāra) or consciousness performing a particular function (kicca).\(^7\) Secondly, while I do not wish to get involved here in

\(^5\) Collins, op. cit., 243-4: “Certainly, the bhavaṅga is a mental but not conscious phenomenon; but in following the sense of the term ‘unconscious’ further into psychoanalytic theory, the similarity ends. For Freud, the word unconscious was used not only in what he called a ‘descriptive’ sense, but also in a ‘systematic’ sense.’ That is, as he writes, apart from the descriptive sense, in which ‘we call a psychical process unconscious whose existence we are obliged to assume—for some such reason as that we infer it from its effects—but of which we know nothing’, it is also the case that ‘we have come to understand the term “unconscious” in a topographical or systematic sense as well…and have used the word more to denote a mental province rather than a quality of what is mental’. Insofar as the Buddhist concept of bhavaṅga might be thought of as being part of a topographical account of mind, it is so only in relation to a systematic account of perception, and not of motivation. The motivation of action, of course, is the crucial area of psychology for any psychoanalytic theory. While many aspects of the Buddhist attitude to motivation do resemble some Freudian themes, they are nowhere related systematically to bhavaṅga in the Theravāda tradition before modern times. Accordingly, the modern comparison between bhavaṅga and psychoanalytic unconscious must be developed as part of what one might call ‘speculative’ or ‘creative’ Buddhist philosophy, rather than by historical scholarship.”

\(^6\) References to the Abhidhammatthasangaha and its commentary are to Abhidhammatthasangaha and Abhidhammatthavibhāvinītā, ed. by Hammalawa Saddhātissa, PTS, 1989 and to two translations (which do not include the commentary): S.Z. Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, PTS, 1910; Nārada Mahāthera, A Manual of Abhidhamma, Kandy, 4th edition, 1980.

\(^7\) Visuddhimagga, XIV, 110; Abhidhammatthasangaha, 13–4; Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, 114–7; Nārada, A Manual of Abhidhamma, 159–74.
detailed discussions of the extent to which the Theravāda notion of bhavaṅga does or does not correspond to a psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious, I do wish to argue that bhavaṅga is clearly understood in the ancient literature as a mental province that defines the essential character and capabilities of a given being, and that this mental province is seen as exerting some kind of influence on conscious mental states.

**Bhavaṅga and Consciousness**

As defined in the Abhidhamma, then, bhavaṅga is truly a kind or mode or function of “consciousness” (citta), it is most definitely not “unconscious” (acittaka).\(^8\) The Theravādin Abhidhamma treats citta as one of the four paramattha-dhammas along with cetasika, rūpa and nibbāna. As is well known, the Abhidhamma works with what is essentially an intensional model of consciousness: to be conscious is to be conscious of some particular object. Thus the *Atthasālinī* defines citta’s particular characteristic as a dhamma as that which “thinks of an object”.\(^9\) So bhavaṅga, like all citta, is conscious of something.\(^10\) (Our lack of awareness of bhavaṅga should be explained not by reference to bhavaṅga’s being unconscious, but by reference to our not clearly remembering what we were conscious of in bhavaṅga.) I shall return to the question of the object of bhavaṅga below, but, in general, objects of the mind may be of four kinds: a physical object (i.e., a past, present or future sight, sound, smell, taste or bodily sensation), a mental object (i.e., a past, present or future complex of citta and cetasika), a concept (paññatti), and the unconditioned (asaṅkhata-dhamma, nibbāna),\(^11\) the object of bhavaṅga may be any of the first three kinds but is in effect always a past object, except in the case of paññatti, which is “not to be

---

\(^8\) Whether one is, from the physiological point of view, conscious or unconscious in fact turns out to have nothing to do with whether one is in bhavaṅga or not; bhavaṅga-citta is contrasted with viṭṭhi-citta or process-consciousness, and active consciousness processes can occur whether one is conscious or unconscious (as in the case of dreams, see notes 15 and 45 below). Thus bhavaṅga is understood to be a citta and not acittaka; from the Abhidhamma point of view the only times a being is strictly unconscious (acittaka) is in the meditation attainment that leads to rebirth amongst the “unconscious beings” (asaṅña-satta), when reborn as an unconscious being, and during the attainment of cessation (saṅña-vedayita-nirodha or nirodha-samāpatti). The attainment of cessation as being acittaka is discussed by Griffiths (*op. cit.*); on the asaṅña-sattas see D, I, 2H, Sv 118; DAṬ, I, 217.

\(^9\) *Atthasālinī*, 63: arammaṇaṁ cintetī ti cittaṁ.

\(^10\) For a specific reference to bhavaṅga’s having an object see *Visuddhimagga*, XIV, 114.

classified” (na-vattabba) as either past, present or future. According to Theravāda Abhidhamma, cittas cannot arise as a dhamma in isolation from other dharmas; it always occurs associated (sampayutta) with other mental dharmas or cetasikas. The minimum number of associated cetasikas is seven according to the post-canonical Abhidhamma; the maximum is thirty-six. In general, the eighteen kinds of mind without motivations (ahetuka) which perform the more or less mechanical part of the consciousness process are simpler in nature with fewer cetasikas than the kinds of mind that have motivations (sahetuka). I shall return to the question of the nature of the specific types of mind that can perform the function of bhavaṅga below; suffice it to note here that they have ten, or between thirty and thirty-four cetasikas; from this perspective bhavaṅga is as rich and complex a form of consciousness as any other type of consciousness.

Consciousness is said to be in its bhavaṅga mode whenever no active consciousness process is occurring; in other words, bhavaṅga is the passive, inactive state of the mind—the mind when resting in itself. Ordinary waking consciousness is to be understood as the mind continually and very rapidly emerging from and lapsing back into bhavaṅga in response to various sense stimuli coming in through the five sense-doors and giving rise to sense-door consciousness processes; these will be interspersed with mind-door processes of various sorts. In contrast, the dream state is understood as essentially confined to mind-door processes occurring in what the texts, following the Milindapañha, call “monkey sleep” (kapi-niddā, kapi-middā, makkata-niddā). In deep sleep, the mind rests in inactivity and does not emerge from bhavaṅga.

This basic switching between a passive and active state of mind is understood to apply not only to the consciousness of human beings but to that of all beings in the thirty-one realms of existence, from beings suffering in niraya to the brahmās in the pure abodes and formless realms; the only exception is the case

---

12 Strictly during the process of rebirth, it is possible for bhavaṅga briefly—for four consciousness moments—to have a present sense-object; see Visuddhimagga, XVII, 137, 141. The process of death and rebirth is discussed in more detail below.
13 The so-called seven universals (sabba-citta-sādhāraṇa) (Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, 6; Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, 9–5; Nārāda, A Manual of Abhidhamma, 77–9). The Dhammasaṅgani might be interpreted as in theory allowing a minimum of six since it does not mention manasikāra at Dhammasaṅgaṇī, 87.
15 See Milindapañha, 300; Vibhaṅgāṭṭhakathā, 406–8.
16 Visuddhimagga, XIV, 114 states that when no other citta arises interrupting its flow, such as when one has fallen into dreamless sleep, and so on, bhavaṅga occurs endlessly, like a flowing stream (asati santāna-vinivattake aṁnasmiṁ cittuppāde nadi-sotāṁ viya supināṁ apassato niddokkamana-kālādīsu aparimāṇa-saṁkhāṁ pi pavattati yevā ti).
of “unconscious beings” (asañña-satta), who remain without any consciousness (acittaka) for 500 mahākappas. In other words, to have a mind, to be conscious, is to switch between these two modes of mind. In technical terms this switching between the passive and active modes of consciousness corresponds to a switching between states of mind that are the results (vipāka) of previous kamma (that is, previous active states of consciousness) and the states of consciousness that are actively wholesome (kusala) and unwholesome (akusala) and constitute kamma on the mental level, motivating acts of speech and body, and which are thus themselves productive of results.

If bhavaṅga is essentially consciousness in its passive mode, then what exactly is the nature of this passive, resultant kind of mind? The tendency for some modern commentators to assume that bhavaṅga is a sort of mental blank is surprising in certain respects, since the texts in fact give a considerable amount of information on the question, but it probably follows from a failure to take into account the Abhidhamma schema as a whole. I have already indicated some ways in which bhavaṅga is as sophisticated and complex a kind of consciousness as any other, and at this point it is worth filling in some further details.

The developed Abhidhamma system gives eighty-nine (or 121) basic classes of consciousness. These classes of consciousness themselves are divided up in the texts according to various schemes of classification, the most fundamental of which reveals a fourfold hierarchy of consciousness. At the bottom end of the scale, there are the fifty-four classes of consciousness that pertain to the sphere of the five senses (kāmāvacara); this broad category of consciousness is characteristic of the normal state of mind of not only human beings, but also animals, hungry ghosts, hell beings, asuras, and devas. Next come the fifteen classes of consciousness pertaining to the sphere of form (rūpāvacara), followed by the twelve classes of consciousness of the formless sphere (arūpāvacara); both these categories characterise the normal state of mind of various types of divine being designated brahmās, and also the state of mind of other beings when attaining the jhānas and formless attainments respectively. Finally, there are the eight kinds of world-transcending (lokuttara) consciousness; these types of consciousness have nibbāna as their object, and are experienced only at the time of attaining one of the eight paths and fruits of stream-attainment.

18 See Visuddhimagga , XIV, 81–110; Abhidhammāvatāra, 1–15 (citta-niddesa); Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, 1–5 (citta-pariccheda). The schema of eighty-nine classes of citta is distilled by the commentarial tradition from the cittuppādakanda of the Dhammasaṅgani (9–124), which by exploiting a number of different variables greatly multiplies the number of possible classes.
(sotāpatti), once-return (sakadāgāmitā), non-return (anāgāmitā), and arahant-ship.

Various other schemes of classification operate within these four broad categories. Thus, certain of the eighty-nine cittas are wholesome, certain unwholesome, certain resultant, certain kiriyā;¹⁹ of them are with motivations (sahetuka), certain without motivations (ahetuka).²⁰ Not all of these latter categories are relevant in each of the former four broad categories. In terms of our earlier discussion, kusala/akusala comprises the thirty-three cittas of the eighty-nine that function as the active kamma of the mind.²¹ The category of resultant or vipāka comprises the thirty-six kinds of mind that are the passive results in various ways of the previous thirty-three. Since bhavaṅga is an example of mind that is vipāka, it is worth looking a little more closely at these varieties of mind. Of the thirty-six vipākas, twenty three belong to the kāmāvacara, five to the rūpāvacara, four to the arūpāvacara, and four to the lokuttara. Vipākas may be the results of either previous kusala or previous akusala states of mind; of the thirty-six, seven are the results of unwholesome states of mind, the remaining twenty-nine are the results of wholesome states of mind.

Beings experience the results of wholesome and unwholesome states of mind in a variety of ways. Leaving aside the perhaps rather exceptional circumstances of the experience of the transcendent vipākas, resultant citta is taken as most commonly experienced, at least consciously, in the process of sensory perception.²² The bare experience of all pleasant and unpleasant sensory stimuli

¹⁹ Kiriya-citta is a class of consciousness that is neither productive of a result (i.e., it is not actively wholesome or unwholesome) nor is it the result of actively wholesome or unwholesome citta: it is neither kamma nor vipāka (see Attasālinī, 293). For the most part, the term thus defines the consciousness of Buddhas and arahants, and consists of seventeen classes of citta that in principle mirror the seventeen classes of actively wholesome citta of the sense, form, and formless spheres. However, there are two classes of kiriyā-citta essential to the processes of thinking and that all beings continually experience in ordinary consciousness: citta that advert to the five sense-doors (kiriyā-manodhātu, pañcā-dvārāvajjana) and citta that advert to the mind-door (kiriyā-mano-viññāna-dhātu, manodvārāvajjana).

²⁰ There are in essence six dhammas that are regarded as hetus: greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), delusion (moha), non-attachment (alobha), friendliness (adosa), and wisdom (amoha). These dhammas are hetus in the sense of being “roots” (mūla) (Attasālinī, 46, 154). Of the eighty-six classes of citta, eighteen are said to be without hetus (in principle the basic consciousnesses of the sense door process), the remaining seventy-one all arise with either one, two or three hetus. See Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, 12–3; Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, 113–4; Nārada, A Manual of Abhidhamma, 154–9.

²¹ Twelve akusala and eight kusala from the kāmāvacara, five and four kusala from the rūpāvacara and arūpāvacara respectively, four from the lokuttara.

²² For the consciousness process in the ancient texts, see: Visuddhimagga, XIV, 110–24, XVII, 120–45, XX, 43–5; Attasālinī, 266–87; Abhidhammaḥvātāra, 49–59; Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, 17–21. The fullest modern accounts are to be found in: Sarathchandra, op. cit.; Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, 25–53 (this is an important account by a Burmese Abhidhamma master which seems in places to be based on continuing Burmese Abhidhamma traditions); Gunaratna, op. cit.; Cousins, op. cit. For briefer summaries, see: Lama Anagarika Govinda, The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy, London, 1969, 129 –2; W.F. Jayasuriya, The Psychology and Philosophy of Buddhism, Kuala Lumpur, Buddhist Missionary Society, 1976, 100–8; E. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, London, 1962, 186–91.
through the five senses is regarded as the result of previous wholesome and unwholesome kamma respectively. This accounts for ten of the thirty-six vipākas.²³ In the wake of this experience, in order to respond actively with wholesome or unwholesome kamma at the stage known as “impulsion” (javana), the mind must pass first of all through the stages of “receiving” (sampati-cchana), “investigating” (santīrana) and “determining” (votthapana); the first two of these three stages are also understood to be the province of five specific types of vipāka consciousness.²⁴ At the conclusion of such a sense-door process and also at the conclusion of a kāmāvacara mind-door process, the mind, having reached the end of the active javana stage, may pass on to a stage of the consciousness process known as tad-ārammaṇa or “taking the same object”. At this stage one of the eight mahāvipāka-cittas (the eight kāmāvacara vipākas with motivations) holds on to the object of the consciousness process for one or two moments. This brings us directly to the notion of bhavaṅga, for tad-ārammaṇa is understood as something of a transitional stage between the truly active mode of mind and its resting in inactivity.²⁵ Thus, at the conclusion of a consciousness process, the mind, no longer in its active mode, nevertheless momentarily holds on to the object it has just savoured, before finally letting go of that object and lapsing back into the inactive state whence it had previously emerged.

Of the total of eighty-nine classes of consciousness, nineteen among the thirty-six vipākas are said to be able to perform the function of bhavaṅga: unwholesome resultant investigating consciousness, wholesome resultant investigating consciousness, the eight sense-sphere resultants with motivations, the five form-sphere resultants and the four formless-sphere resultants.²⁶ Thus bhavaṅga consciousness is not just of one single type; the range of citta that can perform this function is considerable. Since the kind of citta that can perform the function of bhavaṅga is exclusively resultant, it is a being’s previous wholesome and un-

²³ Five varieties each of akusala-vipāka and kusala-vipāka sense consciousness.
²⁴ Two receiving cittas (akusala- and kusala-vipāka); three investigating cittas (akusala-vipāka and two kusala-vipāka). The function of votthapana is performed by the kiriya mano-viññāna-dhātu/mano-dvārāvijjana citta.
²⁵ Attasālinī, 270–1, discusses how in different circumstances tad-ārammaṇa can be termed “root” (mūla) bhavaṅga and “visiting” (āgantuka) bhavaṅga.
²⁶ Visuddhimagga, XIV, 113–4; Abhidhammatthaśaṅgaha, 13.
wholesome kamma that will determine precisely which of the nineteen possible classes will perform the function of bhavaṅga for that being.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, at the risk of spelling out the obvious, unwholesome resultant investigating consciousness (akusala-vipāka-upaṭṭhassahagata-saṁtīraṇa-citta) is considered to result from the twelve varieties of actively unwholesome citta motivated by delusion and greed, delusion and hate, or merely delusion. A being who experiences this as his or her bhavaṅga must be one of four kinds: a hell being, an animal, a hungry ghost, or an asura. Wholesome resultant investigating consciousness, on the other hand, is the result of actively wholesome consciousness of the sense-sphere, but wholesome consciousness that is somehow compromised it is not that wholesome. In other words, it appears to be regarded as the result of rather weak varieties of the four classes of wholesome sense-sphere consciousness that are not associated with knowledge (ñāna-vippayutta) and thus have only two of the three wholesome motivations: non-attachment (alobha) and friendliness (adośa). This kind of citta is said to function as bhavaṅga for human beings born with some serious disability.\textsuperscript{28} The eight wholesome sense-sphere resultants with motivations are the results of stronger wholesome cittas which they exactly mirror, being either with just two motivations or with all three motivations. These are the bhavaṅga for normal human beings and also for the various classes of sense-sphere devas. The five form-sphere and four formless-sphere resultant cittas again exactly mirror their actively wholesome counterparts and perform the function of bhavaṅga for the different kinds of brahmā.

What follows from this is that it is the nature of bhavaṅga that defines in general what kind of being one is—it gives one’s general place in the overall scheme of things. However, as the implications of this understanding are drawn out, I think it becomes clear that we need to go further than this: bhavaṅga does not simply define what one is, it defines precisely who one is.

The kind of bhavaṅga within a general class of beings is also variable, and this relates to the kind of experiences that a being may experience during his or her

\textsuperscript{27} The details of what follows are taken primarily from the discussion of the four kinds of paṭisandhi and of kamma (Abhidhammatthaśāṅgaha, 23–6; Aung, Compendium of Philosophy, 139–49; Nārada, A Manual of Abhidhamma, 241–55, but reference has also been made to Attasālinī, 267–88 (275), Abhidhammāvatāra, 49 (vv. 382–3).

\textsuperscript{28} Visuddhimagga, XVII, 134: tattha akusala-vipākāya ahetuka-manoviññāṇā-dhātuyā apāyesu paṭisandhi hoti, kusala-vipākāya manussa-loke jacc-andha-jāti-badhira-jāti ummattaka-jāti-ēḷamūṅnapumāsakādīnaṁ, ājñāhi sahetuka-kāmāvacara-vipākehi kāmāvacara-devesu ceva manussasse ca puññavāntanaṁ paṭisandhi hoti. paṭicahi rūpāvacara-vipākehi rūpi-brahmaloke. catthi arūpāvacara-vipākehi arūpa-loke ti yena ca yattha paṭisandhi hoti sā eva tassa anurūpā paṭisandhi nāma. Also cf. Visuddhimagga, XIV, 111–3; incidentally, here wholesome resultant investigating citta is described as the result of weak two-motivated wholesome kamma (dubbha-dvihetuka-kusala-vipāka).
lifetime. The general principle of this way of thinking is established by the fact that beings in any of the four descents—beings with a bhavaṅga that is unwholesome resultant citta without motivations—are said to be intrinsically unable to generate, however hard they try, the five kinds of form-sphere jhāna consciousness, the four formless-sphere consciousnesses and the eight varieties of transcendent consciousness—all these kinds of citta are quite simply beyond their capabilities.29

But let us consider this further with regard to human beings. Human beings can be born with three basic classes of bhavaṅga: (i) the wholesome resultant citta without motivations; (ii) the four kinds of two-motivationed wholesome resultant citta; (iii) the four kinds of three-motivationed wholesome resultant citta. The texts further refine this by splitting the second category to give four classes of bhavaṅga for human beings: two-motivationed wholesome resultant citta may be either the result of two-motivationed wholesome citta alone, or it may be the result of two-motivationed wholesome citta and weak three-motivationed wholesome citta; three motivationed resultant citta is exclusively the result of three-motivationed wholesome citta. However, even among human beings, it is only those with a three-motivationed bhavaṅga—a bhavaṅga that includes the motivation of wisdom (amoha)—that can generate jhāna consciousness and the other attainments.30

Bhavaṅga and the Process of Death and Rebirth

Having discussed the nature of the kinds of citta that can function as bhavaṅga for different kinds of beings, it is necessary at this point to look more closely at the process by which a being’s bhavaṅga is established. A being’s bhavaṅga is of the same type throughout his or her life—this is, of course, just another way of saying that it is the bhavaṅga that defines the kind of being.31 It follows that the only time the nature of a being’s bhavaṅga can change is during the process of death and rebirth. So how does it come about that a being’s bhavaṅga is of such and such a kind and not another?

Essentially the nature of bhavaṅga for a given lifetime is determined by the last full consciousness process of the immediately preceding life. This last process is in turn strongly influenced and directly conditioned by though it is, of

29 Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, 21: duhetukānam ahetuṅkaṇaṁ ca panetthā kiriyā-javanāni ceva appanā-javanāni ca na labhanti.
30 This follows from Buddhadatta’s full exposition of which classes of consciousness are experienced by which kinds of being; see Abhidhammāvatāra, 38–9 (vv. 215–85).
31 Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, 24: “Thus rebirth, bhavaṅga and the mind at death in a single birth are just one and have one object.” (paṭisandhi bhavaṅgāṁ ca tathā cavana-mañāsaṁ | ekam eva tath’ ev’ eka-visayaṁ c’ eka-jātiya).
course, not its result in the technical sense of *vipāka* the *kamma* performed by the being during his or her life.\textsuperscript{32} Relevant here is a fourfold classification of *kamma* according to what will take precedence in ripening and bearing fruit. The four varieties are “weighty” (*garukha*), “proximate” (*āsanna*), “habitual” (*bahula, ācīṇa*), “performed” (*kaṭattā*).\textsuperscript{33} This list is explicitly understood as primarily relevant to the time of death. In other words, it is intended to answer the question: at the time of death, which of the many *kammas* a being has performed during his or her lifetime is going to bear fruit and condition rebirth?\textsuperscript{34} The answer is that if any “weighty” *kammas* have been performed then these must inevitably come before the mind in some way and overshadow the last consciousness process of a being’s life. But if there are no weighty *kammas* then, at least according to the traditions followed by the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, some significant act recalled or done at the time of death will condition the rebirth.\textsuperscript{35} In the absence

\textsuperscript{32} The relevant conditions would be *nissaya, upanissaya, āsevana.*

\textsuperscript{33} *Visuddhimagga*, XIX, 14–16; *Abhidhammāvatāra*, 117 (v. 1244); *Abhidhammattha-saṅgha*, 24.

\textsuperscript{34} The key to interpreting the list is the comment made with regard to *kamma* that is *kaṭattā*: in the absence of the other three, it effects rebirth (*Visuddhimagga*, XIX, 15: *tesaṁ abhāve taṁ patisandhiṁ ākaḍḍhati*). However, *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīṭkā*, 130–31 gives the fullest comment: “Therein *kamma* may be either unwholesome or wholesome; among weighty and unweighty *kammas*, that which is weighty—on the unwholesome side, *kamma* such as killing one’s mother, etc., or on the wholesome side, sublime *kamma* [i.e., the *jhāna*, etc.]—rippens first, like a great flood washing over lesser waters, even if there are proximate *kammas* and the rest. Therefore, it is called weighty. In its absence, among distant and proximate *kammas*, that which is proximate and recalled at the time of death ripens first. There is nothing to say about that which is done close to the time of death. But if this too is absent, among habitual and unhabitual *kammas*, that which is habitual, whether wholesome or unwholesome, ripens first. But *kamma* because of performance, which is something repeated, effects rebirth in the absence of the previous [three].” (*tathā kusalam vā hotu akusalam vā garukāgarukesu yaṁ garukam akusa-pakkhe māthusvākādi-kamman kusala-pakkhe mahaggata-kamman vā tad eva paṭhamanā vipaccati, sati pi āsannādi-kamme parittām udakām ottharitvā gacchanto mahoghī viya. tathā hi tāṁ garukan ti vuccati. tasmiṁ asati dārasantesu yaṁ āsannaṁ maraṇa-kāle anussartāṁ tad eva paṭhamanā vipaccati. āsanna-kāle kate vattabam eva naththi. tasmiṁ asati ācinnānācinnesu ca yaṁ ācinnam susīlāṁ vā dussīlāṁ vā tad eva paṭhamanā vipaccati. kaṭattā-kamman pana laddhāsevanam purāṇam ābhāvena patisandhim ākaḍḍhati.*)

\textsuperscript{35} The *Visuddhimagga* and *Abhidhammāvatāra* give habitual *kamma* precedence over death proximate *kamma*; *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīṭkā*, 131 acknowledges the discrepancy but argues that the order preserved in *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, makes better sense: “As when the gate of a cowpen full of cattle is opened, although there are steers and bulls behind, the animal close to the gate of the pen, even if it is a weak old cow, gets out first. Thus, even when there are other strong wholesome and unwholesome *kammas*, because of being close to the time of death, that which is proximate gives its result first and is therefore given here first.” (*yathā pana gogana-paripuṇṇassā vajassā dvāre vivate aparabhāge dammavā-galavāgavesu santesu pi yo vajā-dvārassā āsanno hoti antamaso dubbalajaraṅgavo pi, so yeva paṭhamataraṁ nikkhami evaṁ gurukato aññesu kusalakkusalesu santesu pi, maraṇa-kālassa āsannattā āsannam eva paṭhamanā vipākaṁ deti ti idha taṁ paṭhamanā vuttam.*)
of this, that which has been done repeatedly and habitually will play the key role. Failing that, any repeated act can take centre-stage at the time of death.

The mechanics of the final consciousness process are discussed in some detail in both the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Sammohavinodani*, and are summarised in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*. The account of any consciousness processes begins with bhavaṅga. From bhavaṅga the mind adverts in order to take up some different object. If the object is a present sense object, in normal circumstances, the mind adverts to the appropriate sense door by means of the kiriya mind element ( mano-dhātu); if the object is a past (or future) sense-object, citta or cetasika, or a concept (paññatti), the mind adverts to the mind door by the kiriya mind consciousness element ( mano-viññāna-dhātu). The object of the death consciousness process may be either a sense-object (past or present), or citta and cetasika (past), or a concept; the process may thus occur either at one of the sense-doors or at the mind-door. Having reached the stage of javana, either by way of one of the sense-doors or just the mind-door, five moments of javana will occur, followed in certain circumstances by two moments of tad-ārammaṇa. Immediately after this is the last consciousness moment of the lifetime in question; this is a final moment of the old bhavaṅga, and it receives the technical name of “falling away” or “death consciousness” (cuti-citta). It is important to note that this final moment of bhavaṅga takes as its object precisely the same object it has always taken throughout life. However, the last bhavaṅga of one life is immediately followed by the first bhavaṅga of the next life; this first moment of bhavaṅga is called “relinking” or “rebirth consciousness” (paṭisandhi-citta) and, being directly conditioned by the last javana consciousnesses of the previous life, it takes as its object the very same object as those—that is an object that is different from the object of the old bhavaṅga. Thus the new bhavaṅga is a vipāka corresponding in nature and kind to the last active consciousnesses of the previous life, with which it shares the same object. The paṭisandhi is followed by further occurrences of the new bhavaṅga until some consciousness process eventually takes place.

It is worth considering the nature of the object of the death consciousness process further in order to try to form a clearer picture of just what is understood to be going on. The object of the death process receives one of three technical

---

names: kamma, sign of kamma (kamma-nimitta), sign of destiny (gatinimitta).\(^{37}\) In terms of the earlier classification, kamma is past citta and cetasika cognised at the mind-door;\(^{38}\) what is being said is that at the time of death a being may directly remember a past action, making the actual mental volition of that past action the object of the mind. What seems to be envisaged, though the texts do not quite spell this out, is that this memory prompts a kind of reliving of the original kamma: one experiences again a wholesome or unwholesome state of mind similar to the state of mind experienced at the time of performing the remembered action. This reliving of the experience is what directly conditions the rebirth consciousness and the subsequent bhavaṅga. A kamma-nimitta is a sense-object (either past or present) or a concept. Again what is envisaged is that at the time of death some past sense-object associated with a particular past action comes before the mind (i.e., is remembered) and once more prompts a kind of reliving of the experience. By way of example, the Vibhaṅga commentary tells the story of someone who had a cetīya built which then appeared to him as he lay on his death bed. Cases where a present sense-object prompts a new action at the actual time of death seem also to be classified as kamma-nimitta. For example, the last consciousness process of a given life may involve experiencing a sense-object that prompts greed citta at the stage of javana, or the dying person’s relatives may present him with flowers or incense that are to be offered on his behalf, and thus provide the occasion for a wholesome javana, or the dying person may hear the Dhamma being chanted.\(^{39}\) The conceptual objects of the jhānas and formless attainments are also to be classified as kamma-nimitta in the context of the dying process. Thus, for a being about to be reborn as a brahmā in one of the realms of the rūpa-dhātu, the object of previous meditation attainments comes before him and effectively he attains jhāna just before he dies. A gati-nimitta is a present sense-object but perceived at the mind door.\(^{40}\) This kind

\(^{37}\) Vibhaṅgatṭhakathā, 155–6.

\(^{38}\) Vibhaṅgatṭhakathā, 156 defines it more specifically as produced skilful and unskilful volition (āyuhiṁ kusalākusala-cetanā).

\(^{39}\) Visuddhimagga, XVII, 138, 142; Vibhaṅgatṭhakathā, 158–9. In the context of rebirth in the kāmadhātu the Visuddhimagga and Vibhaṅgatṭhakathā appear to take kamma-nimitta as solely referring to past sense-objects perceived through the mind-door; a present sense-object perceived through one of the five sense-doors seems to be added as a fourth kind of object in addition to kamma, kamma-nimitta and gati-nimitta. Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, 27 (Nārada, Manual of Abhidhamma, 268), however, states that a kamma-nimitta may be past or present and may be perceived at any of the six doors. This suggests that Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha is taking this fourth kind of object as a kind of kamma-nimitta. This also seems to be the position of Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīṭikā, 147, following Ānanda’s Mūlāṭikā.

of object is restricted to cases of beings taking rebirth in one of the unpleasant or pleasant realms of the kāma-dhātu. In such cases a being may see where he or she is about to go; this kind of object is not regarded as some conceptual symbol of one’s destiny but is classified as a present sense-object perceived at the mind-door; in other words, it is truly an actual vision of the place one is headed for.

Again what seems to be envisaged is that this vision is an occasion for and object of a wholesome or unwholesome consciousness process as appropriate. Stripped of its technicalities, what this Abhidhamma account of what happens in the mind at the time of dying seems to be saying is this: the last consciousness process of a given life operates in principle as a kind of summing up of that life; whatever has been most significant in that life will tend to come before the mind. Moreover, what comes before the mind at this point is what will play the principal role in determining the nature of the subsequent rebirth. This is not an altogether surprising way for Buddhist texts to be viewing the matter. What is interesting, however, is that it makes clear a number of things about the basic understanding of the role and nature of bhavaṅga in Theravāda Buddhist psychology—things that seem to me to be incompatible with the view of bhavaṅga offered by Steven Collins. A bhavaṅga consciousness is directly conditioned by the last active consciousness moments of the immediately preceding life; those last active moments are a kind of summing up of the life in question. So a being’s bhavaṅga itself represents a kind of summing up of what he or she did in his or her previous life; in crude terms, it represents a kind of balance sheet carried over from the previous life detailing how one did.

Bhavaṅga, Dhammas and Classification

Having considered how bhavaṅga is understood as a kind of resultant consciousness that establishes the general nature of a being, I now want to show that it is essentially bhavaṅga that also defines a being as a particular individual. That this is so follows, I suggest, from the way in which the Abhidhamma classifies citta, and the status of these classifications. We have seen how various of the standard eighty-nine classes of citta given in the developed Abhidhamma may perform the function of bhavaṅga for different classes of being. The important thing to register fully here is that we are dealing with classes of consciousness. What I want to suggest here is that the texts intend one to understand that any particular instance or occurrence of citta is in fact unique, but will inevitably fall into one of the eighty-nine classes. That this is so may not be exactly explicit in the texts but it surely must follow from the way in which the Abhidhamma describes and uses the various schemes of classification. This is an exceedingly
important point that goes to the very heart of the question of what a dhamma is, but which is nevertheless not always fully appreciated in contemporary scholarly discussion:

“[T]he 75 dharmas are meant to provide an exhaustive taxonomy, a classification of all possible types of existent. For example, there is a dharma called ‘ignorance’ (avidyā). There is not just one uniquely individuated momentary occurrence of ignorance. Instead, the dharma ‘ignorance’ refers to a theoretically infinite set of momentary events, all sharing the same uniquely individuating characteristic and all sharing the same kind of inherent existence. Dharmas are therefore uniquely individuated, marked off from all other possible events, not in the sense that there can be no other momentary event sharing the individuating characteristic of a given momentary event, but rather in the sense that each and every momentary event within a particular set of such events is marked off from each and every momentary event within every other possible set. And there are (according to the Vaibhāṣikas; other schools differ) only 75 such sets, each containing a theoretically infinite number of members. Finally, the conclusion follows that every member of a given set must be phenomenologically indistinguishable from every other member since all share the same essential existence and the same individuating characteristic. They can be distinguished one from another only in terms of their spatio-temporal locations.”

What is at issue here is Griffiths’ final conclusion. Whether or not Griffiths thinks that this should apply to Buddhist accounts of the nature of a dharma, whatever the school, is not entirely clear, but his reference to other schools giving different lists suggests that he does. There are no doubt important differences between the Vaibhāṣika and Theravādin conceptions of the nature of a dharma/dhamma. However, while I cannot argue the case fully here, it seems to me that the same considerations that show that Griffiths’ conclusion does not work for the Theravādin conception of a dhamma should also apply in the case of the Vaibhāṣika conception.

What is quite explicit in Theravādin discussions of dharmas is that they did not regard every instance of a particular dhamma as phenomenologically indistinguishable from every other instance. Thus according to the Dhammasaṅgani, the dhamma of “one-pointedness of mind” (cittass’ ekaggatā) occurs in a number of different classes of consciousness, but it is not always appropriate to term this dhamma “faculty of concentration” (samādhindriya); the reason for this is

that sometimes the dhamma is too weak to warrant the name.\(^{42}\) Again, if we compare the first class of wholesome sense-sphere citta with the first class of wholesome form-sphere citta—the kind of citta that constitutes the attainment of the first jhāna—we find that in terms of which dhammas are present and contributing to the two classes of consciousness, there is absolutely no difference between the two; thus, if Griffiths were right there would be no grounds for making what is a basic distinction between sense-sphere consciousness and form-sphere consciousness. The distinction must be made on the grounds of some sort of difference in the quality and/or intensity of the various dhammas present. In fact, Buddhadatta tells us that cetasikas associated with sense-sphere consciousness themselves belong to the sense-sphere, while cetasikas that are associated with form-sphere consciousness themselves belong to the form-sphere.\(^{43}\) In the *Visuddhimagga* Buddhaghosa makes the following comment with regard to the dhamma of “recognition” (sañña):

“Although it is single from the point of view of its own nature by reason of its characteristic of recognising, it is threefold by way of class: wholesome, unwholesome and indeterminate. Therein that associated with wholesome consciousness is wholesome, that associated with unwholesome consciousness is unwholesome, and that associated with indeterminate consciousness is indeterminate. Indeed, there is no consciousness disassociated from recognition, therefore the division of recognition is the same as that of consciousness.”\(^{44}\)

In other words, sañña associated with unwholesome consciousness is one thing and that associated with wholesome consciousness quite another; indeed, sañña

---

\(^{42}\) See *Attasālinī*, 262–4. There are many examples one could give of this principle: adosa is only to be classified as mettā in certain types of consciousness; tatra-majjhatatā is only to be classified as upekkhā in certain types of consciousness. Again, the dhammas covered by such groupings as the bojjhangas maggagas, etc., are only to be designated as such in certain circumstances. The distinction between the otherwise identical lists of the indriyas and balas is made by reference to their relative strengths or intensity in both the Theravādin and Vaibhāṣika systems. The notion of adhipati only makes sense if the strength of dhammas can vary. See R.M.L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of the Bodhipakkhiyā Dhammā*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1992, 85–7, 141–5, 156–60, 315–7, 306–7, 338–9.


\(^{44}\) *Visuddhimagga*, XIV, 130. Buddhaghosa makes the same point with regard to other dhammas of the aggregate of saṅkhāras at *Visuddhimagga*, XIV, 132. Buddhadatta comments that in the context of unwholesome consciousness vitakka, viriya and samādhi are to be distinguished as wrong thought (micchā-saṅkappa), wrong effort (micchā-vāyāma) and wrong concentration (micchā-samādhi) (*Abhidhammattha-vibhāvinīti*, 24).
associated with one class of the eighty-nine classes of consciousness is one thing, that associated with a different class is another.

What is clear then is that a given instance of any one kind of dhamma is certainly not to be considered as phenomenologically indistinguishable from any other instance. Rather the quality and intensity of what is essentially (i.e., from the point of view of its own nature or sabhāva) the same dhamma can vary considerably—possibly even infinitely if we take into account very subtle variations.45 In other words, the finite list of dhammās, at least as far as the Theravādin Abhidhamma is concerned, is simply a list of classifications for mental and physical events. Thus to say of something that it is an instance of the dhamma of saññā, is to say that it is a mental event of the type that falls into the broad class of saññā-type events. It is certainly not to say that all events of that class are phenomenologically indistinguishable, for within the class of saññā-type events are subdivisions: some instances of saññā are vipāka, others are not; furthermore some instances of vipāka-saññā are kāmāvacara, others may be rūpāvacara or arūpāvacara or even lokuttara; some instances of kāmāvacara-vipāka-saññā may be kusala-vipāka, others not; and so on. The point is that these various qualities must be understood as in some sense inherent to the very nature of any actual instance of a dhamma, and they, in addition to spatio-temporal location, distinguish that particular instance from other instances.

The principle I am trying to illustrate is absolutely fundamental to Theravādin Abhidhamma. It is difficult to see just how, without it, it can distinguish the basic eighty-nine classes of consciousness in the way it does, for these distinctions are certainly not all based upon the principle of which cetasisikas are present and which absent. Again, it is important to grasp that the division into eighty-nine classes of consciousness is by no means final or absolute. The further division of the transcendent classes into forty is common in the texts, giving a total of 121 classes. But it is clear that the texts just regard the division into eighty-nine or 121 as the basic scheme for practical purposes of exposition. The Dhammasaṅgani seems deliberately to introduce more variables to produce ever more complex divisions in order to avoid too fixed a view of things. Thus, Buddhadatta in the Abhidhammadvatārā, which follows the Dhammasaṅgani much more closely than the later introductory manual, the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, states that though in brief there are eight kinds of actively wholesome

45 One of the clearest example of distinctions being made between different instances of essentially the same citta is in the case of dream consciousness. The same wholesome and unwholesome cittas occur in dreams as in waking consciousness, but when they occur in dreams, although they still constitute wholesome and unwholesome kamma, it is only very feeble kamma, thus one does not have to worry about committing pārājika offences in one’s dreams. See Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā, 408.
sense-sphere consciousness, if other variables are taken into account there are 17.280 kinds. What are the implications of this for the understanding of the nature of bhavaṅga consciousness? If there are 17.280 possible varieties of actively wholesome consciousness, it follows that the corresponding eight classes of resultant consciousnesses might similarly be further subdivided to give 17.280 classes. The kinds of citta capable of performing the function of bhavaṅga for human beings and the devas of the kāma-dhātu thus become more variable. What I want to suggest then is that the Abhidhamma texts understand their schemes of classification along the following lines: any given momentary occurrence of consciousness (i.e., assemblage of citta and cetasika) is understood as falling into one of eighty-nine broad classes as a result of taking into account a number of variables; if further variables are taken into account the number of possible classes increases, and the scheme of classification becomes more complex and sophisticated. Not all the variables involve black and white distinctions, some involve distinctions of degree; if all possible subtle variations were taken into account the possible classes of consciousness would be infinite; in fact any actual occurrence of consciousness consisting of an assemblage of associated citta and cetasika is unique: although it may be very similar in many respects to some other occurrence, it is not quite like any other. What I am claiming is that Abhidhamma systems of classification work in much the same way as other systems of classification. Modern biology classifies life by way of phylum, class, genus, species, and so on without any suggestion that any given instance of a species will, apart from spatio-temporal location, be indistinguishable from other instances of the same species. My conclusion then is that the Abhidhamma intends us to understand that the bhavaṅga consciousness for any given being is unique to that individual: it is the specific result of a unique complex of conditions that can never be exactly replicated. However, the principle that each actually occurring consciousness is to be regarded as unique does not fully apply in the case of bhavaṅga, since, for a given being, bhavaṅga is something of a constant throughout a being’s life; it constantly reproduces itself. Thus I think that in the case of the bhavaṅga, the momentary occurrences for a given individual being are intended to be understood as phenomenologically indistinguishable: i.e., the bhavaṅga a being experienced at the time of rebirth is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the one he or she will experience at the time of death.

**Bhavaṅga, Behaviour and the Ālaya-vijñāna**

We have found that bhavaṅga is regarded in the texts as most immediately the result of the last active consciousnesses of the previous life, and that these

---

46 *Abhidhammāvatāra, 4, v. 27: sattarasa-sahassāni dve satāni asīti ca | kāmāvacara paññāni bhavantī ti viniddise ||*
consciousnesses are in turn seen as a kind of summing up of the life in question; *bhavaṅga-citta* is then itself the most significant aspect of that previous life encapsulated in a single consciousness. Appropriate to this view of the matter, Buddhaghosa discusses the workings of *bhavaṅga* in the process of death and rebirth in the context of dependent arising (*paticca-samuppāda*) in order to illustrate how the *saṅkhāras* (conditioned by ignorance) of one life give rise to the third link in the chain, namely *viññāna*. understood as the first moment of consciousness in the next life.⁴⁷ So *bhavaṅga* is the basic mentality a being carries over from a previous life. Moreover, *bhavaṅga* is a complex *citta* with one specific object, and which constantly recurs throughout a being’s life.

The fact that the Abhidhamma uses the notion of *bhavaṅga* to define both the nature of a given being and also what constitutes a lifetime as that being suggests that *bhavaṅga* is being used to explain not merely the logic of continuity but also why a particular being continues to be that particular being throughout his or her life, rather than becoming some other being—to become another being is to change one’s *bhavaṅga*. Thus, why I do not suddenly start behaving like an animal is because I have what is essentially a human *bhavaṅga*. In other words, the notion of *bhavaṅga* is, in part at least, intended to provide some account of why I am me and why I continue to behave like me; it is surely intended to give some theoretical basis for observed consistency in behaviour patterns, character traits and the habitual mental states of a given individual.

The Theravādin Abhidhamma system is in certain respects rather skeletal: we are given bare bones which are not entirely fleshed out. The logic of certain details of the system is not always immediately apparent, but the obvious care and ingenuity that has gone into its working out should make us wary of attributing the quirks to muddled thinking. One of the questions that needs to be asked about *bhavaṅga* is why it is said to occur between every consciousness process. Why *bhavaṅga* is said to occur in deep dreamless sleep is obvious: without it there would be a hole. But it is not obvious that there is a hole in ordinary waking experience that needs filling with *bhavaṅga*. Why not simply run the consciousness processes together? Why say that between every consciousness process one returns to this quite specific state of mind? It does not seem possible to answer this question exactly, but reflecting on it in the light of what I have argued above about *bhavaṅga* makes it clearer what the texts are claiming: that in between every active consciousness process one, as it were, returns momentarily to the basic state of mind that defines who one is, before emerging from that state into active consciousness once more. Thus, according to the principles of the twenty-four conditions (*paccaya*) as elaborated in the *Paṭṭhāna*, the *bhavaṅga*

---

⁴⁷ *Visuddhimagga*, XVII, 133–45.
state of mind must be understood as conditioning in various ways a being’s every response to the world around him or her. Although passive in so far as it is a vipāka, the bhavaṅga mind, like all dhammas and assemblages of dhammas, will inevitably condition other dhammas and assemblages of dhammas by way of certain of the twenty-four conditional relations. There is a sense then in which the bhavaṅga can be seen as a deeper level of the mind that acts on our conscious mind. Ordinary waking experience is thus presented in the Abhidhamma as a kind of dialogue between one’s essential nature (bhavaṅga) and various external stimuli. However, even reference to the intricacies of the Paṭṭhāna is unlikely to answer all our questions.

While it is clear that bhavaṅga-citta is understood as the mechanism that carries certain mental effects from one life to the next, it does not seem possible on the basis of what is said explicitly in the texts to justify the claim that bhavaṅga carries with it all character traits, memories, habitual tendencies, etc. If we take the case of a human being taking rebirth by means of one of the four sense-sphere vipāka-cittas that have all three wholesome motivations, this is to be understood as a rebirth that is essentially the result of wholesome kamma. However, such a human being will not only have the capacity to perform wholesome kamma. That is to say, according to the principles of Buddhist thought as usually understood, such a being will also have brought with him from previous lives certain unwholesome latent tendencies (anusaya), certain as yet unre-eradicated defilements. But the bhavaṅga-citta in question is wholesome resultant. In what sense can we talk about unwholesome tendencies being carried over from one life to the next by a wholesome resultant kind of consciousness? This brings one up against one of the basic problems of Buddhist thought. If consciousness is understood to consist of a temporal series of consciousness moments each having an individual object, then when an ordinary being (puthujjana) is experiencing wholesome consciousness, what at that moment distinguishes him or her from an arahant? In other words, in what sense do the unwholesome tendencies and defilements still exist for that being? The answer is, of course, in the sense that they might arise at any moment. That is to say, they exist potentially. But where—or perhaps how—do they exist potentially? This is clearly a problem that historically Buddhist thought was well aware of. The Sarvāstivādin account of dhammas existing in the past, present and future, the Sautrāntika theory of bija, and the Yogācārin “store consciousness” (ālaya-vijñāna) all address this question in one way or another. The problem was how to answer the question whilst at the same time preserving perhaps the most fundamental principle of Buddhist thought: the middle way between annihilationism and eternalism.

Curiously, the Theravādin Abhidhamma seems not to articulate an explicit answer to the question, yet it is surely inconceivable that those who thought out
the traditions of Abhidhamma handed down to us by Buddhaghosa, Buddhadaatta and Dhammapāla had not thought of the problem. What would those ancient abhidhammikas have said? Is the answer to the problem deliberately left vague so as to avoid getting entangled in annihilationism and eternalism? The notion of bhavaṅga as explicitly expounded in the Theravādin Abhidhamma seems certainly intended to provide some account of psychological continuity. It is clearly getting close to being something that might be used to give some explanation of how latent tendencies are carried over from one life to the next and where they subsist when inactive. To understand bhavaṅga in such terms is not necessarily to assimilate it to the twentieth century notion of the unconscious. It is, however, to attribute to it some of the functions of the Yogācārin ālaya-vijñāna. Indeed, Louis de La Vallée Poussin some sixty years ago and E.R. Sarathchandra some thirty years ago suggested that the notion of bhavaṅga bears certain similarities to the ālaya-vijñāna, and it is this, as much as the modern idea of the unconscious, that has probably influenced contemporary Theravādin writers in their expositions of bhavaṅga. While assimilating bhavaṅga to the ālaya-vijñāna may be problematic, it is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that both conceptions ultimately derive from a common source or at least a common way of thinking about the problem of psychological continuity in Buddhist thought. As Lance Cousins and Lambert Schmithausen have pointed out, Vasubandhu cites the notion of the bhavaṅga-ālaya of the Sinhalese school (Tāmraparṇīya-nikaya) as a forerunner of the ālaya-vijñāna. A full comparative study of bhavaṅga and the

---

48 Sarathchandra, op. cit., 88-96; L. de La Vallée Poussin, Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: La siddhi de Hiuan-Tsang, Paris, 1926, I, 178–9, 196. P. Williams sums up the nature of the ālaya-vijñāna as follows: “The substratum consciousness is an ever-changing stream which underlies saṃsāric existence. It is said to be ‘perfumed’ by phenomenal acts, and the seeds which are the result of this perfuming reach fruition at certain times to manifest as good, bad, or indifferent phenomena. The substratum consciousness, seen as a defiled form of consciousness (or perhaps subconsciousness), is personal in a sense, individual, continually changing and yet serving to give a degree of personal identity and to explain why it is that certain karmic results pertain to this particular individual.” (Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations, London, Routledge, 1989, 91).

49 See L. Cousins, op. cit., 22; L. Schmithausen. Ālayavijñāna: On the Origin and Early Development of a Central Concept of Yogācāra Philosophy, Tokyo, 1987, I, 7–8. The relevant texts are the Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa §35, see E. Lamotte, ‘Le traité de l’acte de Vasubandhu’, MCB, 4, 1936, 250, and the Pratītyasamutpāda-vyākhyā (here the notion is ascribed to the Mahiśīsakas—see L. Schmithausen, op. cit., II, 255–6, n. 68). The notion of bhavaṅga is not mentioned by Asaṅga in the earlier Mahāyānasamgraha (which makes Schmithausen sceptical about the influence of the notion on the development of the concept of ālaya-vijñāna), but is added by the commentator (see É. Lamotte, La somme du grand véhicule, Louvain, 1938, II, 28, 8*); the notion is also cited by Hsüan-tsang (see La Vallée Poussin, Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi, 1, 178–9).
ālaya-vijñāna is beyond the scope of the present paper, but it is worth trying to take the remarks of Sarathchandra and others just a little further by briefly highlighting three significant points of contact between the two notions. For the first two points, I take as a representative source Hsüan-tsang’s Ch’eng wei-shih lun (Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi).

Like bhavaṅga, the ālaya-vijñāna is understood as essentially the result of previous actions which give rise to a particular kind of rebirth; in other words, it is the nature of the ālaya-vijñāna which determines what kind of experiences a being is destined to have. Again like bhavaṅga, the ālaya-vijñāna is said to be the mode of consciousness at the time of death and rebirth; furthermore, Hsüan-tsang likens consciousness at these times to consciousness in deep dreamless sleep. Finally, we have the association of both bhavaṅga and the ālaya-vijñāna with the notion of the “originally pure mind”.

This notion, while not apparently developed to any great extent in early Buddhist texts, nevertheless appears to have been widespread. The classic source for the idea within the Pāli tradition is a passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya:

“Radiant is the mind, bhikkhus, but sometimes it is defiled by defilements that come from without. The ordinary man without understanding does not know it as it truly is. And so I declare that the ordinary man without understanding has not cultivated the mind. Radiant is the mind, bhikkhus, and sometimes it is completely freed from defilements that come from without. The noble disciple with understanding knows it as it truly is. And so I declare that the noble disciple with understanding has cultivated the mind.”

An equivalent passage referring to this “radiant mind” (prabhāsvara-citta) appears to have been well known and of some significance to a number of the an-

50 On the question of whether or not the ālaya-vijñāna has objects, see P.J. Griffiths, op. cit., 95–6.
51 L. de La Vallée Poussin, Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi, I, 97–8: “Il est vipākaphala, le ‘fruit de rétribution’ des actes bons ou mauvais qui projettent une existence dans une certaine sphère d’existence, dans une certaine destinée, par une certaine matrice.”
52 op. cit.: “Le Sūtra dit que, à la conception et à la mort, les êtres ne sont pas sans pensée (acittaka) … La pensée de la conception et de la mort ne peut être que le huitième vijñāna … En ces deux moments, la pensée et le corps sont ‘hébétés’ comme dans le sommeil sans rêve (asvapnikā nidrā) et dans l’extrême stupeur.”
cient schools.  

Certain later Mahāyāna traditions identify the originally pure mind of such passages with the tathāgatagarbha. Thus, the Lāṅkāvatāra-sūtra describes the tathāgatagarbha as amongst other things “naturally radiant, pure, originally pure” (prakṛti-prabhāsva-vaśuddhādi-visuddhā).

More significantly for our present concerns, the Śūtra goes on to identify the tathāgatagarbha with the ālaya-vijñāna and vice versa (tathāgatagarbha-śabda-saṃsādhitam ālaya-vijñāna, ālaya-vijñāna-saṃsādhitas tathāgatagarbhaḥ). Of some relevance here too are Yogācārīn traditions concerning the relationship of the ālaya-vijñāna to the so called ninth or stainless consciousness (amalaviññāna). In general, according to the Yogācārīn view of things, the ālaya-vijñāna effectively ceases at the moment of enlightenment; what remains is the stainless consciousness—consciousness from which all defilements and stains have gone. In short, the stainless consciousness is the consciousness of a Buddha. Its precise relationship to the ālaya-vijñāna seems to have been something of a moot point among Yogācārīn thinkers, some preferring to regard it as in essence something different from the ālaya-vijñāna, while others viewed it as in essence not different from the ālaya-vijñāna, but rather the ālaya-vijñāna freed from all stains—in other words, the amala-vijñāna should be regarded as the ālaya-vijñāna of Buddhas.

In the light of all this, the fact that the Theravādin commentarial tradition unequivocally states that the radiant mind of the Aṅguttara passage is bhavaṅga-citta is surely of some significance, and adds weight to the suggestion that the notions of bhavaṅga-citta and ālaya-vijñāna have some sort of common ancestry within the history of Buddhist thought. The Manorathapūrṇī explanation of how bhavaṅga comes to be termed defiled is worth quoting in full since to my knowledge it has hitherto received no scholarly comment:

“Defiled: It [i.e., bhavaṅga-citta] is called defiled is what is said. How come? It is like the way in which parents, teachers or preceptors who are virtuous and of good conduct get the blame and a bad name on account of their unvirtuous, ill-behaved and unaccomplished sons, pupils or colleagues when they do not reprimand, train, advise or instruct them. This is to be understood by way of the following equivalents: bhavaṅga consciousness should be seen like the virtuous parents, teachers and pre-

---

54 In particular, the Mahāsāṁghika, the Vibhajyavāda and the school of the Śāriputrābhidharma; see A. Bareau, Les sectes bouddhiques du petit véhicule, Saigon, 1955, 67–8, 175, 194; É. Lamotte, L’enseignement de Vimalakīrti, Louvain, 1962, 52–3.
56 VI §82, Nanjio, ed., 221–3.
57 P. Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 92–3.
58 Manorathapūrṇī, I, 60; cf. Atthasālinī, 140.
ceptors; their getting a bad name on account of their sons and so on is like the originally pure bhavaṅga consciousness’s being called defiled because of defilements which come at the moment of impulsion on account of consciousnesses that are accompanied by greed and so on, and whose nature is attachment, aversion and delusion.”

Here the commentary maintains that strictly bhavaṅga remains undefiled; it is only called “defiled” by virtue of its giving rise in some way to unwholesome consciousnesses. That bhavaṅga is seen as in some sense begetting or producing unwholesome consciousness at the moment of impulsion is in itself instructive and of some relevance to our present concerns. The point is further underlined by the Attasālinī when it comments, with reference to bhavaṅga’s being termed “clear” (pañḍara), that “in the same way as a stream that flows from the Ganges is like the Ganges and one that flows from the Godhāvarī is like the Godhāvari, even unwholesome consciousness is said to be clear because of its flowing from bhavaṅga”. The images used by the commentators here—active consciousness is like the children or pupils of bhavaṅga, or like a stream that flows from bhavaṅga—at least suggest that they understood there to be some kind of continuity between bhavaṅga and active consciousness, some kind of influence exerted by bhavaṅga on active consciousness. However, the mechanism of this influence is not spelt out. In fact, the commentarial treatment here seems to raise more questions than it answers. For example, in the case of beings reborn in the “descents” where bhavaṅga is always unwholesome resultant, how can it be said to be defiled in name only and not truly defiled? In what sense is it pure, clear or radiant?

While certain questions remain concerning the precise functioning of bhavaṅga in the Theravādin Abhidhamma, I hope to have shown in this paper that bhavaṅga is most definitely not to be understood merely as a kind of “mental blank” and “logical stop-gap”. For any given being bhavaṅga consciousness represents a mental province where at least certain characteristics unique to that individual are located (although the spatial metaphor is not the one

---


60 Atthasālinī, 140: tato nikkhantattā pana akusalam pi ānāgāya nikkhantā ānāgā viya godhāvarīto nikkhantā godhāvarī viya ca paṇḍaramaṁ rveva vuttaṁ.
preferred by the texts). Moreover this mental province exercises a certain determinative power over conscious mental states. While it is perhaps something of a misconceived exercise to speculate on whether this understanding of bhavaṅga had a direct and explicit influence on the development of the Yogācārin notion of the ālaya-vijñāna, it surely must be the case that these two concepts are to be understood as having a certain affinity and that they belong to the same complex of ideas within the history of Buddhist thought.