

***Bhavaṅga* and Rebirth According to the Abhidhamma**

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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*

¹ See E.R. Sarathchandra, *Buddhist Psychology of Perception*, Colombo, 1961, 75–96 (this is the fullest account); *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, ed., G.P. Malalasekera *et al.*, Colombo 1961–, s.v. *bhavaṅga*; Nyanatiloka Thera, *Buddhist Dictionary*, Colombo, Frewin & Co., 1956, s.v. *bhavaṅga*; V.F. Gunaratna, “Rebirth Explained”, *The Wheel*, 167/169, Kandy, 1980; L.S. Cousins, “The Paṭṭhāna and the Development of the Theravādin Abhidhamma”, *JPTS*, 10, 1981, 22–46, 22–5; S. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, 238–47 (the fullest account in more recent literature).

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.”²

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.³ 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.”⁴

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 *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.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 (*kiicca*).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 psychological 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 *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and its commentary are to *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and *Abhidhammattahvibhāvinīṭīkā*, 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; *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 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-dhātu*, *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 *vīthi-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” (*asañña-satta*), when reborn as an unconscious being, and during the attainment of cessation (*sañña-vedayita-nirodha* or *nirodha-samāpatti*). The attainment of cessation as being *acittaka* is discussed by Griffiths (*op. cit.*); on the *asañña-sattas* see D, I, 2H, Sv 118; DAṬ, I, 217.

⁹ *Atthasālinī*, 63: *ārammaṇaṃ cintetī ti cittaṃ*.

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

¹¹ *Abhidhammāvatāra*, 43–48; *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 15–6; Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, 119–22; Nārada, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, 181–94.

classified” (*na-vattabba*) as either past, present or future.¹² According to Theravāda Abhidhamma *citta* cannot arise as a *dhamma* in isolation from other *dhammas*; it always occurs associated (*sampayutta*) with other mental *dhammas* or *cetasikas*. The minimum number of associated *cetasikas* is seven according to the post-canonical Abhidhamma,¹³ the maximum is thirty-six.¹⁴ 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 (*sa hetuka*). 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-middha*, *makkata-niddā*).¹⁵ In deep sleep, the mind rests in inactivity and does not emerge from *bhavaṅga*.¹⁶

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*) (*Abidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 6; Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, 9–5; Nārada, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, 77–9). The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* might be interpreted as in theory allowing a minimum of six since it does not mention *manasikāra* at *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, 87.

¹⁴ *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 8–11; Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, 102–10; Nārada, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, 127–41.

¹⁵ See *Milindapañha*, 300; *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā*, 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 aññasmiṃ cittuppāde nadī-sotaṃ viya supinaṃ apassato niddokkamana-kālādīsu aparimāṇa-saṃkhaṃ pi pavattati yevā ti*).

of “unconscious beings” (*asañña-satta*), who remain without any consciousness (*acittaka*) for 500 *mahākappas*.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁷ *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 23 4; Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, 142; Narada, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, 242–5.

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 *cittuppādaḥkaṇḍa* of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* (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 *kiriya*;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 *kiriya-citta* essential to the processes of thinking and that all beings continually experience in ordinary consciousness: *citta* that adverts to the five sense-doors (*kiriya-mano-dhātu. pañca-dvārāvajjana*) and *citta* that adverts to the mind-door (*kiriya-mano-viññāṇa-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-rune 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; *Abhidhammāvatāra*, 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” (*sampaṭi-cchana*), “investigating” (*santīraṇa*) 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 *mahāvīpāka-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-viññāṇa-dhātu/mano-dvārāvajjana 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; *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 13.

wholesome *kamma* that will determine precisely which of the nineteen possible classes will perform the function of *bhavaṅga* for that being.²⁷ Thus, at the risk of spelling out the obvious, unwholesome resultant investigating consciousness (*akusala-vipākā-upekkhāsahagata-santīraṇa-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 (*ñāṇa-vippayutta*) and thus have only two of the three wholesome motivations: non-attachment (*alobha*) and friendliness (*adosa*). This kind of *citta* is said to function as *bhavaṅga* for human beings born with some serious disability.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

²⁷ The details of what follows are taken primarily from the discussion of the four kinds of *paṭisandhi* and of *kamma* (*Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 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).

²⁸ *Visuddhimagga*, XVII, 134: *tattha akusala-vipākāya ahetuka-manoviññāṇā-dhātuyā apāyesu paṭisandhi hoti. kusala-vipākāya manussa-loke jacc-andha-jāti-badhira-jāti ummattaka-jāti-elaṃuṅnapuṃsakādīnaṃ. aṭṭhahi sahetuka-kāmāvacara-vipākehi kāmāvacara-devesu ceva manussesu ca puññavantānaṃ paṭisandhi hoti. pañcahi rūpāvacara-vipākehi rūpi-brahmaloke. catūhi 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* (*dubbala-dvīhetuka-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-motivated wholesome resultant *citta*; (iii) the four kinds of three-motivated wholesome resultant *citta*. The texts further refine this by splitting the second category to give four classes of *bhavaṅga* for human beings: two-motivated wholesome resultant *citta* may be either the result of two-motivated wholesome *citta* alone, or it may be the result of two-motivated wholesome *citta* and weak three-motivated wholesome *citta*; three motivated resultant *citta* is exclusively the result of three-motivated wholesome *citta*. However, even among human beings, it is only those with a three-motivated *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 ahetukānañ ca panettha kiriyā-javanāni ceva appanā-javanāni ca na labbhanti*.

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 bhavaṅgañ ca tathā cavana-mānasam | ekam eva tath' ev' eka-visayañ c' eka-jātiya*).

course, not its result in the technical sense of *vipāka* the *kamma* performed by the being during his or her life.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” (*garuka*), “proximate” (*āsanna*), “habitual” (*bahula*, *āciñña*), “performed” (*kaṭattā*).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?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.³⁵ In the absence

³² The relevant conditions would be *nissaya*, *upanissaya*, *āsevana*.

³³ *Visuddhimagga*, XIX, 14–16; *Abhidhammāvatāra*, 117 (v. 1244); *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, 24.

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: *tesaṃ abhāve taṃ paṭisandhiṃ ākaḍḍhati*). However, *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīṭikā*, 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.]—ripens 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].” (*tattha kusalaṃ vā hotu akusalaṃ vā garukāgarukesu yaṃ garukam akusaa-pakkhe mātughātakādi-kammaṃ kusala-pakkhe mahaggata-kammaṃ vā tad eva paṭhamaṃ vipaccati, sati pi āsannādi-kamme parittaṃ udakaṃ ottharivā gacchanto mahogho viya. tathā hi taṃ garukan ti vuccati. tasmīṃ asati dūrāsannesu yaṃ āsannaṃ maraṇa-kāle anussaritaṃ tad eva paṭhamaṃ vipaccati. āsanna-kāle kate vattabam eva natthi. tasmīṃ asati āciññānāciññesu ca yaṃ āciññaṃ susīlyam vā dussīlyam vā tad eva paṭhamaṃ vipaccati. kaṭattā-kammaṃ pana laddhāsevanaṃ purimānaṃ abhāvena paṭisandhiṃ ākaḍḍhati.*)

³⁵ The *Visuddhimagga* and *Abhidhammāvatāra* give habitual *kamma* precedence over death proximate *kamma*; *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinīṭikā*, 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 gogaṇa-paripuṇṇassa vajassa dvāre vivāṭe aparabhāge dammagava-balavagavesu santesu pi yo vāja-dvārassa āsanno hoti antamaso dubbalajaragavo pi, so yeva paṭhamataraṃ nikkhamati evaṃ garukato aññesu kusalākusalesu santesu pi, maraṇa-kālassa āsannattā āsannaṃ eva paṭhamaṃ vipākaṃ detī ti idha taṃ paṭhamaṃ vuttaṃ.*)

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 *Sammohavinodanī*, and are summarised in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.³⁶ 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-viññāṇa-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

³⁶ *Visuddhimagga*, XVII, 133–45; *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā*, 155–60; *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, 27–8; Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, 149–53; Nārada, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, 265–74.

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 *cetiya* 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 *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā*, 155–6.

³⁸ *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā*, 156 defines it more specifically as produced skilful and unskillful volition (*āyuhitā kusalākusala-cetanā*).

³⁹ *Visuddhimagga*, XVII, 138, 142; *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā*, 158–9. In the context of rebirth in the *kāmadhātu* the *Visuddhimagga* and *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā* 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 *Abhidhammatthavibhāvīnīṭīkā*, 147, following Ānanda's *Mūlaṭīkā*.

⁴⁰ M. Nārada, *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, 182: *dvāra-vimuttānañ ca pana paṭisandhi-bhavaṅga-cutī-saṅkhātānaṃ chabbidhaṃ pi yathā-sambhavaṃ yebhuyyena bhavantare cha-dvāra-gahitaṃ paccuppannam atītaṃ paññatti-bhūtaṃ vā kammaṃ kamma-nimittaṃ gati-nimitta-sammatam ālambanaṃ hoti.*

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.*”⁴¹

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 *dhammas* is that they did not regard every instance of a particular *dhamma* as phenomenologically indistinguishable from every other instance. Thus according to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, 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

⁴¹ P.J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, 53–4 (my italics).

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” (*saññā*):

“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, *saññā* associated with unwholesome consciousness is one thing and that associated with wholesome consciousness quite another; indeed, *saññā*

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-majjhataṭṭā* is only to be classified as *upekkhā* in certain types of consciousness. Again, the *dhammas* covered by such groupings as the *bojjhaṅgas maggaṅgas*, 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.

⁴³ *Abhidhammāvatāra*, 16: *tattha kāmāvacara-citta-sampayuttā kāmā-vacarā. Ibid.*, 22: *rūpāvacara-citta-sampayuttā rūpāvacarā... eva rūpa-avacara-kusala-cetasikā veditabbā.*

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*, *virīya* and *samādhi* are to be distinguished as wrong thought (*micchā-saṅkappa*), wrong effort (*micchā-vāyāma*) and wrong concentration (*micchā-samādhi*) (*Abhidhammattha-vibhāviniṭṭikā*, 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 *dhammas*, 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 *cetasikas* 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 *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* seems deliberately to introduce more variables to produce ever more complex divisions in order to avoid too fixed a view of things. Thus, Buddhaddatta in the *Abhidhammāvatāra*, which follows the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* 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 *kanma*, 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.⁴⁶ 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 (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) in order to illustrate how the *sāṅkhāras* (conditioned by ignorance) of one life give rise to the third link in the chain, namely *viññāṇa*, 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 *dharmas* and assemblages of *dharmas*, will inevitably condition other *dharmas* and assemblages of *dharmas* 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 un-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 *dharmas* existing in the past, present and future, the Sautrāntika theory of *bīja*, 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, Buddhadatta and Dhammapāla had not thought of the problem. What would those ancient *ābhidhammikas* 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*,⁴⁸ 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-vijñāna* of the Sinhalese school (*Tāmrāparṇīya-nikaya*) as a forerunner of the *ālaya-vijñāna*.⁴⁹ 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 Mahīśāsakas—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*, I, 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.”⁵³

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, *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, 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.”

⁵³ *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, I, 10: *pabhassaraṃ idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ. taṃ assutavā puthujjano yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa citta-bhāvanā natthī ti vadāmī ti. pabhassaraṃ idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vipparamuttaṃ. taṃ sutavā ariya-sāvako yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. tasmā sutavato ariya-sāvakassa citta-bhāvanā atthī ti vadāmī ti.*

cient schools.⁵⁴ Certain later Mahāyāna traditions identify the originally pure mind of such passages with the *tathāgatagarbha*. Thus, the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* describes the *tathāgatagarbha* as amongst other things “naturally radiant, pure, originally pure” (*prakṛti-prabhāsvara-visuddhādi-viśuddha*).⁵⁵ More significantly for our present concerns, the Sūtra goes on to identify the *tathāgatagarbha* with the *ālaya-vijñāna* and vice versa (*tathāgatagarbha-śabda-saṃśabdītam ālaya-vijñāna, ālaya-vijñāna-saṃśabdītas tathāgatagarbhaḥ*).⁵⁶ Of some relevance here too are Yogācārin traditions concerning the relationship of the *ālaya-vijñāna* to the so called ninth or stainless consciousness (*amala-vijñāna*). In general, according to the Yogācārin 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 Yogācārin 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.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ The *Manorathapūraṇī* 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 Mahāsāṃghika, the Vibhāyavāda and the school of the *Śāriputrābhīdharma*; 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.

⁵⁵ II §28, Nanjio ed., Kyoto, 1923, 77; cf. Lamotte, *L’enseignement de Vimalakīrti*, 54.

⁵⁶ VI §82, Nanjio, ed., 221–3.

⁵⁷ P. Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 92–3.

⁵⁸ *Manorathapūraṇī*, 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.”⁵⁹

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 Godhāvarī, even unwholesome consciousness is said to be clear because of its flowing from *bhavaṅga*”.⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁹ *Manorathapūraṇī*, I, 60: *upakilitthan [sic] ti. upakkiliṭṭhaṃ nāmā ti. kathaṃ. yathā hi sīlavanto vā ācāra-sampannā mātā-pitaro vā ācariyupajjhāyā vā dussīlānaṃ durācārānaṃ avatta-sampannānaṃ puttānañ ceva antevāsika-saddhivihārikānañ ca vasena attano putte vā antevāsika-saddhivihārike vā na tajjenti na sikkhāpentī na ovadanti nānusāsantī ti avaṇṇaṃ akittiṃ labhanti. evaṃ sampadaṃ idaṃ vedītabbaṃ. ācāra-sampannā mātā-pitaro viya hi ācariyupajjhāyā viya ca bhavaṅga-cittaṃ daṭṭhabbaṃ. puttādīnaṃ vasena tesāṃ akitti-lābho viya javana- kkhāṇe rajjana-dussana-muyhana-sabhāvānaṃ lobha-sahagatādi-cittānaṃ vasena uppannehi āgantukehi upakkilesehi pakati-parisuddhaṃ pi bhavaṅga-cittaṃ upakkiliṭṭhaṃ nāma hotī ti.*

⁶⁰ *Atthasālinī*, 140: *tato nikkhantattā pana akusalam pi gaṅgāya nikkhantā gaṅgā viya godhāvarīto nikkhantā godhāvarī viya ca paṇḍaraṃ tveva vuttaṃ.*

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.