

Abhidhamma Interpretations of “Persons” (*puggala*): with Particular Reference to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

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Abstract General opinion holds that the Abhidhamma treats the Buddha’s teachings in terms of ultimate realities, i.e. *dharmas*, and that conventional constructs such as persons (*puggala*) fall outside the primary concern of the Abhidhamma. The present paper re-examines this ultimate-conventional dichotomy drawn between *dharmas* and persons and argues that this dichotomy does not hold true for the canonical Abhidhamma in Pali. This study explores how various types of persons are interpreted and approached by the Abhidhamma material, including Abhidhamma texts such as the *Puggalapapaññatti* and a number of *suttas* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* that are identified in this paper as proto-Abhidhamma.

Keywords Abhidhamma · Person · Puggala · Pudgala · Paññatti · Aṅguttara

The Abhidhamma and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

For most Buddhist schools, the Buddhist Canon comprises the three Piṭakas (Collections), namely the Vinaya-, the Sūtra- and the Abhidharma-Piṭaka. The Abhidharma (P. Abhidhamma) is generally regarded as later than the Sūtra (P. Sutta) material of the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas*.¹ It is widely held that the Abhidharma presents analysis and interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings in such a way that it mostly concerns *dharmas* (P. *dhamma*), which are seen as constituents of reality or ultimate constituent elements that really exist; by contrast, persons (P. *puggala*, Skt.

¹ Gethin (1998, p. 204), Reat (1996, p. 25), Williams and Tribe (2000, p. 87). Bhikkhu Bodhi’s introduction to *Abhidhamma Studies* by Nyanaponika (1998, p. ix).

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pudgala) do not really exist since a person is analyzed by Abhidharma into *dhammas*, which are all there is.² Owing to this widespread view, which is examined in “Provisional and Definitive Interpretations” and “Can “Persons” (*puggala*) be Subject Matter Appropriate for the Abhidhamma?” Sections of this paper, scholarly discussions of the Abhidharma have paid much more attention to *dhammas* than to persons. This study is an attempt to fill the lacuna in our understanding of how the Abhidharma deals with persons.

The *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is included in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pali Canon, but it can be shown to be closely related to the Abhidhamma. Its framework is based on a numerical scheme according to which each successive section (*nipāta*) deals with sets of terms one number more than those dealt with in the preceding section. This feature is also characteristic of some Abhidharma works, such as the *Puggala-paṇṇatti* of the Theravādins and the *Samgītiparyāya* 集異門足論 (*Ji yimen zu lun*, T 1536) of the Sarvāstivādins. Besides, the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*’s method of arranging sets of items according to certain principles is similar to that used in constructing the *mātrkā*s (P. *mātikā*), or comprehensive lists of the fundamental doctrinal items, as found in many Abhidharma texts.

There are different explanations for the historical origin and development of Abhidharma texts. As Cox (1995, p. 8) points out, most Western scholars contend that Abhidharma treatises evolved from the practice of formulating matrices or categorizing lists (*mātrkā*/*mātikā*) of all topics of the teaching arranged according to both numerical and qualitative criteria.³ Bronkhorst (1985, p. 307) notes that the development of such lists had run its course well before the final redaction of the Sūtra Piṭaka. He says that the later tradition which ascribes Abhidharma to Śāriputra already finds expression in the *Saṅgīti Sūtra* and *Daśottara Sūtra* of the *Dirgha Āgama* (equivalent to the *Saṅgīti Sutta* and *Dasuttara Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*), and thus we have “another indication that the Abhidharma-Vibhaṅga existed prior to the completion of the Sūtrapiṭaka” (ibid., p. 316). Frauwallner (1995, pp. 4, 7) also counts these two *sūtras* as pertaining to the earliest Abhidharma. Bronkhorst (1985, p. 316) says: “[T]he early existence of some kind of Abhidharma would explain the peculiar shape of the Sūtrapiṭaka, or rather of two sections of it, the *Samyuktāgama* / P. *Samyutta Nikāya* and the *Ekottarāgama* / P. *Āṅguttara Nikāya*.” Therefore he asserts the influence of early Abhidharma on the *sūtras* (ibid., p. 317) and states: “Mātrkā, and even one or more Abhidharma works, were in existence well before the completion of the Sūtrapiṭaka.” (ibid., p. 318) Accordingly, the peculiar structure and other features of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* can be explained by the influence of early Abhidhamma on this *Nikāya*. Even some *suttas* in the *Nikāyas* were actually Abhidhamma as Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1993, pp. 27–28) suggest. This is illustrated in “Four Types of Ascetics”–“Provisional and Definitive Interpretations” Sections of this paper.

Wogihara (1935, front-matter 1–3) takes a different viewpoint on the relation between the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and Abhidhamma. He suggests that the *Saṅgīti Sutta*

² Gethin (1998, p. 209), Bronkhorst (2004, pp. 733f.), Harvey (2013a, p. 91). Cf. also Nyanatiloka (1957, p. 57) and Norman (1983, p. 103).

³ See also Frauwallner (1995, p. 3), Willems et al. (1998, p. 12) and Hallisey (2007, p. 2).

and *Dasuttara Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* may have served as precursors of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, and that these two *suttas*, composed of numerical lists, were later expanded and transformed into many *suttas* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (*ibid.*, front-matter 1–2).⁴ Since these two *suttas* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* are attributed to Sāriputta (Śāriputra), the first person to preach Abhidhamma according to the tradition, they can be regarded as forerunners of Abhidhamma (*ibid.*, front-matter 2–3). By inference, Wogihara (*ibid.*, front-matter 3) maintains that it is no exaggeration to say that the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is the source of Abhidhamma. Similarly, Reat (1996, p. 25) thinks that the *Saṅgīti Sutta* and *Dasuttara Sutta* prefigure the organization of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and *Samyutta Nikāya*, which in turn foreshadow the Abhidhamma literature.⁵ Similarly, Cousins (1983, pp. 3–4) suggests that many of the lists in the *Saṅgīti Sutta* “must derive from suttas found only in the *Anguttara-nikāya*”, and points out that this *sutta* “is used as the basis for one of the seven canonical *abhidharma* works of the *Sarvāstivāda*”, namely the *Samgītiparyāya*.⁶

These two views are not diametrically opposite. Accepting the two possibilities, Cox (1995, pp. 9–10) states:

[T]he *Āṅguttaranikāya* adopts a numerical arrangement in which entire *sūtras* are classified according to the number of items represented by their primary topic. ... Even though these modes of organization may indicate antecedents in the *sūtra* of structural procedures that were to fully develop in the Abhidharma literature, ... they may also reflect, in individual cases, the influence of Abhidharma upon the *sūtra* collections themselves. For the final redaction of the *sūtras* certainly does not entirely precede but also overlaps the composition of Abhidharma works.

This paper is mainly concerned with the influence of early Abhidhamma on the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and early traces of the Abhidhamma material or proto-Abhidhamma found in this *Nikāya*, but I shall first illustrate a case in which a *sutta* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* provides a list of persons which evolves into items of *mātikā* and new doctrines in various Abhidharma works. This case also shows that in the course of such evolution, this *sutta*’s list of persons was subject to “depersonalization”, which is typical of some Abhidharma texts.

As noted by Bodhi (2012, p. 58), the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is distinguished among the four *Nikāyas* by its interest in defining and describing types of persons. He says (*ibid.*, p. 25):

The *Āṅguttara* ... abounds in different ways of classifying people ... and it gives primacy to their qualities, their struggles for happiness and meaning, their aspirations and attainments. The *Āṅguttara* thus became the inspiration

⁴ This view may be supported by Walshe’s (1995, p. 615 n. 1012) comment: “... the method of listing items in expanding numerical groups was used (whether earlier or later) on a large scale in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, and in fact quite a number of entries in the lists in this *Sutta* [i.e. *Saṅgīti Sutta*] appear there too.”

⁵ Cf. Willemen et al. (1998, p. 11).

⁶ Frauwallner (1995, p. 14) says: “The *Samgītiparyāya* is a commentary on the *Samgītisūtra* of the *Dīrghāgama*.”

and a major source for one of the books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, the *Puggalapaññatti*.

Concrete evidence for this has been provided by Morris (1883, p. x), who points out that nearly the whole of the third, fourth and fifth sections (Tayo Puggalā, Cattāro Puggalā, Pañca Puggalā) of the *Puggalapaññatti* are found in the corresponding sections (Tika-nipāta, etc.) of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.⁷ Below I will demonstrate that the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, besides being a chief source for the *Puggalapaññatti*, provided several points of reference to other Abhidhamma texts as well.

Person with a Mind Like Lightning and Person with a Mind Like a Diamond

Sutta 3.25 in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (hereafter AN 3.25) expounds the following three kinds of persons (translation mostly by Bodhi 2012, pp. 219f.):

- (1) What is the person whose mind is like an open sore? Some person is prone to anger and easily exasperated. ...
- (2) What is the person whose mind is like lightning (*vijjūpama-citto puggalo*)? Some person understands as it really is: “This is suffering” ... “This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.” Just as, in the dense darkness of night, a man with good sight can see forms by a flash of lightning, so too some person understands as it really is: “This is suffering” ...
- (3) What is the person whose mind is like a diamond (*vajirūpama-citto puggalo*)? With the destruction of the taints, some person ... dwells having attained the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom. Just as there is nothing that a diamond cannot cut, whether gem or stone, so too, with the destruction of the taints, some person ...⁸

This *sutta* outlines the spiritual progression from an ordinary state to liberation. These three types of persons are listed in the *mātikā* of the *Puggalapaññatti* (p. 4) and this Theravādin Abhidhamma text (p. 30) repeats, almost verbatim, part of AN 3.25 to serve as its exposition of the three items. As Law (1933, p. 48) suggests, that the *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Vibhaṅga* show close affinity with the *sutta* material indicates that they are probably the earliest of the seven canonical Abhidhamma treatises in Pali. Rhys Davids (1903, p. 188), Norman (1983, p. 102), Mizuno (1997, p. 262) and Willemen et al. (1998, p. 13) also regard the *Puggalapaññatti* as the earliest Pali Abhidhamma text, while Bronkhorst (1985, pp. 309f.) and Cox (1992,

⁷ When discussing the *Puggalapaññatti*, Nyanatiloka (1957, p. 57) says: “In fact, most of its contents has literal parallels in the *Anguttara-Nikāya* and the *Saṅgīti-sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*.”

⁸ AN I 124: (1) *Katamo ... arukūpamacitto puggalo? ... ekacco puggalo kodhano hoti upāyāsabahuḷo ...* (2) *Katamo ... vijjūpamacitto puggalo? ... ekacco puggalo idaṃ dukkhaṃ ti yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti, ... pe ... dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ti yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. Seyyathāpi ... cakkhumā puriso rattan-dhakāratimisāya vijjantarikāya rūpāni passeyya, evaṃ eva kho ... idh' ekacco puggalo idaṃ dukkhaṃ ti ... yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti ...* (3) *Katamo ... vajirūpamacitto puggalo? ... ekacco puggalo āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ ... upasampajja viharati. Seyyathāpi ... vajirassa n'atthi kiñci abhejjaṃ, maṇi vā pāsāṇo vā, evaṃ eva kho ... ekacco puggalo āsavānaṃ khayā ...*

p. 156) identify the *Vibhaṅga* as reflecting the earliest stage.⁹ The *Puggalapaññatti*, faithfully following AN 3.25, does not at all “interpret” the three items in this *sutta* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*. An interpretation is found in another Theravādin Abhidhamma text, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*.

Two of the above three items are alluded to in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*. The second dyad among the 42 dyads in the *suttanta-mātikā* of this text (p. 7) is as follows:

- (1) lightning-like states (*vijjūpamā dhammā*);
- (2) diamond-like states (*vajirūpamā dhammā*).

This pair of “states” (*dhamma*) instead of “persons” (*puggala*) is apparently derived from the last two of the three persons in AN 3.25. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* explains “lightning-like states” as “insight into the three lower noble paths”¹⁰ and “diamond-like states” as “insight into the highest path of arahantship”.¹¹ This interpretation seems to conform to the purport of the above *sutta* as far as it makes a distinction between the two items in terms of spiritual level with diamond-like states being higher than lightning-like states.

While AN 3.25 has no parallel in the extant Chinese *Āgamas* (two of which belong to the Sarvāstivāda, see below), this *sutta* apparently has a Sarvāstivāda counterpart which is interpreted by the Abhidharma of this school. The *Samgūtiparyāya* (T 1536), among the oldest of the seven canonical Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma works,¹² refers to the above three persons in AN 3.25 as three minds (三心). In its chapter on sets of three *dharma*s, these three types of mind are expounded in detail. Below are only some main points.

- (1) Why is that mind called “like an open sore”? Because when that mind contacts adverse circumstances, it produces a wide variety of defilements.
- (2) Why is that mind called “like lightning”? Because that mind attains the fruit of non-return (*anāgāmin*) and it can shine for a while but soon goes out.
- (3) Why is that mind called “like a diamond”? Because that mind attains the fruit of one-beyond-training (*aśaikṣa/asekha*, i.e. the arhat/arahant) and there are no fetters (*saṃyojana*) and so on that it cannot destroy.¹³

Similar to “diamond-like states” in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, “the mind like a diamond” in the *Samgūtiparyāya* is associated with the arahant, the fully liberated person without any taints or fetters. This corresponds well with the above description of the “person whose mind is like a diamond” in AN 3.25: “with the destruction of the taints, some person ... dwells having attained the taintless liberation of mind,

⁹ Some scholars regard the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* as the earliest Pali Abhidhamma text. Cousins (1983, p. 8) says that it “is both the first and probably also the oldest work in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*.” He (1983–1984, p. 108 n. 5) further notes that the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* “is presupposed by the other works of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka (except *Puggala-paññatti*)”. See also Ronkin (2005, p. 123 n. 15).

¹⁰ Dhs §1298: *Heṭṭhimesu tisu ariyamaggesu paññā, ime dhammā vijjūpamā*.

¹¹ Dhs §1299: *Upariṭṭhime arahattamagge paññā, ime dhammā vajirūpamā*.

¹² Cox (1992, p. 156) and Frauwallner (1995, p. 14).

¹³ T XXVI 379b–c: 問何故彼心名漏瘡喻？答彼心意識暫觸違緣，便速發生種種穢惡。... 問何故彼心名電光喻？答彼心意識證不還果，暫能照了速還隱沒。... 問何故彼心名金剛喻？答彼心意識證無學果，無結縛等而不能壞。

liberation by wisdom". However, "the mind like lightning" in the *Samgūtiparyāya* does not match the "lightning-like states" of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* in that the former refers to the fruit of non-return while the latter relates to the three lower noble paths.

It should be noted here that what is described as a "person" in *sutta* 3.25 is replaced by "*dhamma*" (state) and "mind" respectively in the two Abhidharma books, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and the *Samgūtiparyāya*. This suggests purposeful modification of the *sutta/sūtra* terminology in line with the Abhidharma tendency to "depersonalize", which however does not necessarily entail the exclusion of persons from the Abhidharma exposition as will be discussed in "Can "Persons" (*puggala*) be Subject Matter Appropriate for the Abhidhamma?" Section.

There was still further development in the Abhidharma from the foregoing idea in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. As Frauwallner (1995, pp. 177f.) notes, the "person whose mind is like a diamond" in this *Nikāya* was developed by the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma in such a way that it led to "felicitous invention" (p. 178) of the term *vajropama-samādhi*, "diamond-like concentration", which is used to designate the final "immediate path" (無間道, 無礙道, *ānantarya-mārga*) to liberation, wherein the last remaining defilements (*anuśaya*) are eliminated and thus all defilements are eradicated. The "diamond-like concentration" in this sense is found in several Abhidharma texts, including the *Jñānaprasthāna* 發智論 (*Fazhi lun*, T 1544),¹⁴ one of the canonical Abhidharma works of the Sarvāstivādins, and some post-canonical Abhidharma texts such as the **Abhidharmamahādaya* 阿毘曇心論 (*Apitan xin lun*, T 1550)¹⁵ and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.¹⁶

In sum, *sutta* 3.25 of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and its Sarvāstivāda counterpart provided source materials for the architects of the Abhidharma of different schools at different times to construct and elaborate their philosophical systems. Lamotte (1988, p. 184) aptly remarks that "the Abhidhamma abounds in repetitions, rectifications, reclassifications and explanations which give it the character of an unfinished work still in the process of elaboration".

Four Types of Ascetics

The *mātikā* of the *Puggalapaññatti* (p. 8) contains a set of four persons:

- (1) the unshaken ascetic
- (2) the red-lotus ascetic
- (3) the white-lotus ascetic
- (4) the delicate ascetic among ascetics

¹⁴ T XXVI 922b: 若無間道, 金剛喻定, 正滅, 解脫道, 盡智正生。爾時名未來無學心生時解脫一切障。This text is dated at approximately 150 BCE by Yinshun (1968, p. 115).

¹⁵ T XXVIII 819c: 金剛喻定次必逮得盡智者...第九無礙道最後學心, 於中一切諸煩惱永盡無餘。The author of this text is dated around the beginning of the third century CE by Dessein (2003, pp. 291–292).

¹⁶ Pradhan (1967, p. 364): *sa cānantaryamārgo vajropamaḥ samādhir ity ucyeta / sarvānuśayabheditvāt/* Anacker (2005, p. 10) dates its author, Vasubandhu, between 316 and 396. Katō (1989, p. 63) dates him between 320 and 400.

This set of four persons is also listed in the *Saṅgīti Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (no. 33 at DN III 233) and four *suttas* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (4.87–90 at AN II 86–91). Therefore, this set of four ascetics, which the *Āṅguttara* commentary (Mp III 113) refers to as a *mātikā*, probably belongs to a very old *mātikā* that already existed before the completion of the *Nikāyas*.

The *Saṅgīti Sutta* (DN 33) mentions these four ascetics without any explanation. In contrast, a series of four *suttas* (4.87–90) in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* defines each of them in four different ways, but three of them (4.87, 4.89, 4.90) agree partly on the referents of these four ascetics. In *sutta* 4.87 the four kinds of persons are defined as follows (abridged)¹⁷:

- (1) the unshaken ascetic: a monk is a trainee (*sekha*) practising the way who dwells aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage.
- (2) the white-lotus ascetic: with the destruction of the taints, a monk ... dwells having attained the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom; yet he does not dwell having touched personally¹⁸ the eight emancipations.
- (3) the red-lotus ascetic: with the destruction of the taints, a monk ... dwells having attained the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom; and he dwells having touched personally the eight emancipations.
- (4) the delicate ascetic among ascetics: a monk usually uses a robe that has been specifically offered to him ... he usually eats almsfood that has been specifically offered to him ... lodging ... medicines ... His fellow monks ... usually behave toward him in agreeable ways ... With the destruction of the taints, he ... dwells having attained the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom. If one could rightly say of anyone: “He is a delicate ascetic among ascetics”, it is precisely of me [the Buddha referring to himself] that one might say this.¹⁹

Let us first look at the definitions of the second and third types of persons. As Bodhi (2012, pp. 57f.) points out, these two definitions introduce a distinction between two kinds of arahants. The white-lotus ascetic refers to the arahant “liberated by wisdom” while the red-lotus ascetic refers to the arahant “liberated in both

¹⁷ My translation frequently follows Bodhi (2012, pp. 468–470).

¹⁸ *kāyena phassitvā*, lit. “having touched with the body”. This phrase is glossed as “with the immaterial (mental) body” by the commentaries (e.g. Mp III 114, Ps I 162: *kāyena phassitvā ti nāmakāyena phusitvā*). Instead of “with the body”, Nyanatiloka (1957, p. 58) translates *kāyena* as “in his own person”, which makes good sense in this context. Cf. footnote 47 below.

¹⁹ AN II 86–88: (1) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇamacalo hoti? ... bhikkhu sekho hoti paṭipado anuttaraṃ yogakkhemaṃ patthayamāno viharati ...* (2) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇapundariko hoti? ... bhikkhu āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ ... upasampajja viharati, no ca kho aṭṭha vimokhe kāyena phassitvā viharati ...* (3) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇapadumo hoti? ... bhikkhu āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ ... upasampajja viharati, aṭṭha ca vimokhe kāyena phassitvā viharati ...* (4) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇesu samaṇasukhumālo hoti? ... bhikkhu yācito va bahulaṃ cīvaraṃ paribhuñjati ... yācito va bahulaṃ piṇḍapātaṃ paribhuñjati ... senāsanaṃ ... gilānapaccayabhesajjaparikkhāraṃ ... Yehi kho pana sabrahmacārīhi saddhiṃ viharati, tyāssa manāpen’ eva bahulaṃ kāyakammena samudācaranti ... Āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ ... upasampajja viharati ... Yaṃ hi taṃ bhikkhave sammā vadamāno vadeyya samaṇesu samaṇasukhumālo ti, maṃ eva taṃ bhikkhave sammā vadamāno vadeyya samaṇesu samaṇasukhumālo ti.*

respects”.²⁰ These two kinds of arahants will be examined in the next section of this paper. The first type of ascetic is said to be a trainee (*sekha*) aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage, so this represents a practitioner who is not yet liberated. The fourth type of ascetic refers to the Buddha himself, a perfectly liberated person who enjoys more comfort and respect than other monks. The set of four ascetics as defined in this way shows a sense of hierarchy.

Sutta 4.89 (AN II 89f.) defines the unshaken ascetic as possessing right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, which constitute the Noble Eightfold Path. By contrast, the white-lotus ascetic and the red-lotus ascetic are not only endowed with the Noble Eightfold Path, but also with right knowledge and right liberation. This implies that these two types of ascetics are liberated arahants, while the unshaken ascetic is not yet liberated. Similar to *sutta* 4.87, *sutta* 4.89 describes the white-lotus ascetic as one who “does not dwell having touched personally the eight emancipations”, and the red-lotus ascetic as one who “dwells having touched personally the eight emancipations”. Accordingly, the white-lotus ascetic and the red-lotus ascetic as defined in *sutta* 4.89 also refer respectively to the arahant “liberated by wisdom” and the arahant “liberated in both respects” as explained in the Pali commentary.²¹ For the fourth type of person, the delicate ascetic among ascetics, *sutta* 4.89 gives the same definition as that in *sutta* 4.87, i.e. the Buddha.

Sutta 4.90 (AN II 90f.) defines the unshaken ascetic as “a trainee who has not attained his mind’s ideal and dwells aspiring for the unsurpassed security from bondage”, which is almost identical to the definition of the unshaken ascetic in *sutta* 4.87. The white-lotus ascetic and the red-lotus ascetic are both depicted as a monk who dwells contemplating rise and fall in the five aggregates subject to clinging, but the former “does not dwell having touched personally the eight emancipations” while the latter “dwells having touched personally the eight emancipations”. The definitions of these two ascetics make no mention of their liberation, and the Pali commentary glosses both of them as trainees (*sekha*) with the distinction that the white-lotus ascetic produces no *jhānas* whereas the red-lotus ascetic attains the eight emancipations.²² In this *sutta*, the delicate ascetic among ascetics is again defined in the same way as in *sutta* 4.87.

While the above three *suttas* appear to define the four kinds of persons in a somewhat similar way, *sutta* 4.88 defines them in a totally different fashion as follows (in brief):

- (1) the unshaken ascetic: a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*).
- (2) the white-lotus ascetic: a once-returner (*sakadāgāmin*).

²⁰ In fact, the Pali commentary (Mp III 113) identifies the white-lotus ascetic with the dry-insight arahant (*sukkhavipassaka-khīṇāsava*) who lacks the *jhānas*; in other words, the white-lotus ascetic is the arahant “liberated by wisdom”. The commentary identifies the red-lotus ascetic with the arahant “liberated in both respects” (*ubhatobhāgavimuttaṃ khīṇāsavaṃ*). See Bodhi (2012, p. 1694 n. 778).

²¹ Mp III 115: *duṭṭiyavāre ... arahattaphalañāṇa-arahattaphalavimuttihi saddhiṃ aṭṭhaṅgikamaggavassena vā sukkhavipassaka-khīṇāsavo kathito, tatiyavārena ubhatobhāgavimutto*.

²² Mp III 115: *duṭṭiyavārena anuppāditajjhāno āradhaviṇṇasako appamādeviṇṇasako sekhapuggalo kathito. tatiyavārena āradhaviṇṇasako appamādeviṇṇasako aṭṭhavimokkhalābhī sekhapuggalo kathito*.

- (3) the red-lotus ascetic: one of spontaneous rebirth, due to attain final Nirvana there without returning from that world (*opapātiko hoti tattha-parinibbāyī anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā*), i.e. a non-returner (*anāgāmin*).
- (4) the delicate ascetic among ascetics: with the destruction of the taints, a monk ... dwells having attained the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom; in other words, an arahant.²³

This *sutta* corresponds to *sūtra* 7 in chapter 28 of the *Ekottarika Āgama* (hereafter EĀ 28.7) of probably Mahāsāṃghika origin.²⁴ This *sūtra* defines four kinds of ascetics in somewhat different terminology and sequence:

- (1) the ascetic like a yellow-blue-flower: a stream-enterer.
- (2) the white-lotus ascetic: a once-returner.
- (3) the delicate ascetic: a non-returner.
- (4) the delicate ascetic among the delicate [*sic*]: a person has destroyed the taints, attaining the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom; in other words, an arahant.²⁵

Thus, *sutta* 4.88 of the AN, likewise EĀ 28.7, expounds this set of four persons in terms of the four fruits by the stock description of these four spiritual types that recurs in the *Nikāyas*.²⁶ Only the fourth kind, the delicate ascetic among ascetics, represents a liberated arahant. The white-lotus ascetic is not distinguished from the red-lotus ascetic by his lack of the eight emancipations, and neither of the two ascetics refers to an arahant. Such a significant deviation from the definitions in the other three *suttas* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* is surprising since all these four *suttas* are presented in the form of the Buddha’s discourses delivered to his disciple monks. It is inconceivable that the Buddha should have defined these four types of persons in such contradictory ways that his disciples would have been confused.²⁷ Even the

²³ AN II 88f.: (1) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇamacalo hoti? Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu tiṇṇaṃ saññojanānaṃ parikkhayā sotāpanno hoti avinipātadhammo niyato sambodhiparāyaṇo ...* (2) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇapuṇḍarīko hoti? Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu tiṇṇaṃ saññojanānaṃ parikkhayā rāgadosamohānaṃ tanuttā sakadāgāmi hoti, sakid eva imaṃ lokaṃ āgantvā dukkhass’ antaṃ karoti ...* (3) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇapadumo hoti? Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu pañcannaṃ orambhāgiyānaṃ saññojanānaṃ parikkhayā opapātiko hoti tattha-parinibbāyī anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā ...* (4) *Kathaṇ ca bhikkhave puggalo samaṇesu samaṇasukhumālo hoti? Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ ... upasampajja viharati.*

²⁴ Kuan (2013b). Cf. also Kuan (2013a).

²⁵ T II 653c–654a: (1) 似黃藍花沙門 ... 須陀洹 ... (2) 鄒陀利花沙門 ... 斯陀含 ... (3) 柔軟沙門 ... 阿那含 ... (4) 柔軟中柔軟沙門 ... 一人有漏盡，成無漏心解脫、智慧解脫。

²⁶ E.g. DN I 156, MN I 34f., AN II 238.

²⁷ One might argue that in this case there are “differences” or “alternative ways of explaining the same terms” rather than contradictions. Let us consider *sutta* 4.87 and *sutta* 4.88 for example. *Sutta* 4.87 defines the white-lotus ascetic as a type of arahant while *sutta* 4.88 defines the white-lotus ascetic as a once-returner. *Sutta* 4.87 defines the red-lotus ascetic as another type of arahant while *sutta* 4.88 defines the red-lotus ascetic as a non-returner. Are there no contradictions here but just “differences”? The historical Buddha was a man who spoke the truth, according to the tradition. Could he have said: “The white-lotus ascetic is an arahant” on one occasion, but on another occasion have said: “the white-lotus ascetic is a once-returner”, hence “the white-lotus ascetic is NOT an arahant”? If so, which statement should his disciples accept as true? Or could both statements be true? In other words, could it be that “the white-lotus ascetic is an arahant” is true, and that “the white-lotus ascetic is NOT an arahant” is also true?

three “similar” *suttas* also diverge considerably in several aspects as discussed above.²⁸ The only plausible explanation for this anomaly is that these diverse definitions were formulated by different people instead of just one man, the Buddha. Who were they? At least some of them were probably Abhidhamma composers or Abhidharmists as will be elucidated below.

Just as *sutta* 4.88 of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (hereafter AN 4.88), the *Puggalapaññatti* (p. 63) also explains this set of four ascetics in terms of the four fruits. Even the four definitions in this Abhidhamma text are almost identical in wording to those in AN 4.88, but curiously the definition of the white-lotus ascetic and the definition of the red-lotus ascetic are exchanged; or put more accurately, the places of the two terms “white-lotus ascetic” and “red-lotus ascetic” are swapped. This divergence should be viewed against the broader background of textual compilation. When the *Nikāyas* and Abhidhamma were compiled, there appeared to be confusions not only in defining the four kinds of ascetics but also in arranging the sequence of these four persons. In the *Saṅgīti Sutta* (DN 33) the sequence is:

1. the unshaken ascetic
2. the red-lotus ascetic
3. the white-lotus ascetic
4. the delicate ascetic²⁹

In the four *suttas* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, however, the sequence is:

1. the unshaken ascetic
2. the white-lotus ascetic
3. the red-lotus ascetic
4. the delicate ascetic among ascetics

It should be noted, in addition, that the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* version of the fourth person contains the expression “among ascetics” (*samañesu*), which is absent from the DN 33 version.

The *Puggalapaññatti* draws heavily on the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as pointed out by the scholars mentioned above. Just like the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the *Puggalapaññatti* has the expression “among ascetics” for the fourth type of ascetic in the *mātikā* (p. 8) and its exposition (p. 63). However, the sequence of these four types in the *Puggalapaññatti* follows that in DN 33, i.e. “red-lotus ascetic” before “white-lotus ascetic”. While following the sequence of the terms in DN 33, the *Puggalapaññatti* seemingly copies the definitions of the four terms from AN 4.88 in exactly the same order as the four definitions appear in this *sutta*. Consequently, the definition of the white-lotus ascetic (second ascetic) in AN 4.88 is placed under the term “red-lotus

²⁸ The commentary (Mp III 113–115) and the sub-commentary (*Aṅguttara-nikāya-ṭīkā*, referred to in CSCD) say nothing about the inconsistency among the four *suttas* except that the commentary has the following comment on *sutta* 4.89: “This *sutta* is stated by way of the persons stated in the first *sutta* [referring back to *sutta* 4.87], but the difference here is only in the exposition.” (Mp III 115: *idaṃ suttaṃ paṭhamasutte kathitapuggalānaṃ vassen’ eva kathitaṃ, desanāmatam eva pan’ ettha nānan ti.*). Curiously, the commentary makes no mention of the major discrepancy between *sutta* 4.88 and the other three *suttas*.

²⁹ DN III 233: *Apare pi cattāro puggalā: samaṇa-m-acalo, samaṇa-padumo, samaṇa-puṇḍarīko, samaṇa-sukhumālo.*

ascetic” (second ascetic) in the *Puggalapaññatti*, and the definition of the red-lotus ascetic (third ascetic) in AN 4.88 is placed under the term “white-lotus ascetic” (third ascetic) in the *Puggalapaññatti*. Therefore the definitions of these two kinds of ascetics in one text are reversed in the other. It is difficult to assert which of the two versions is original, but considering the general assumption that Abhidhamma texts are founded on *suttas*, the *Puggalapaññatti* version may be a secondary development from the above two *Nikāyas*. Alternatively, it is possible that this *Puggalapaññatti* version originated from certain ancient Sutta literature or perhaps more likely Abhidhamma literature, which then evolved in different directions into the *Saṅgīti Sutta* (DN 33) and *sutta* 4.88 of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as well as EĀ 28.7. This may also explain why the *Puggalapaññatti* version bears the different characteristics of both *suttas* extant today.

Let us now return to the point that even the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* itself describes diverse ways of defining the four types of ascetics in a series of four *suttas*. Only the version of *sutta* 4.88 is adopted by the *Puggalapaññatti* presumably because the author of this shortest canonical Abhidhamma work wanted to give a succinct and standard definition of these four kinds of persons. In contrast, the compilers of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* faithfully preserved four versions of the definitions and allocated them to four *suttas* in a series, and apparently admitted the existence of disagreement on how to define or interpret the four types of ascetics. In this connection, we may venture to suggest that at least some versions of these definitions in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* were interpolated into this “Sutta literature” as a kind of “Abhidhamma”, even if the possibility cannot be excluded that a certain version/versions might contain the Buddha’s own interpretation. It was not uncommon for Buddhists to disagree about Abhidhamma even during the Buddha’s lifetime according to the *Kinti Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (no. 103). In this *sutta* the Buddha is depicted as saying: “While you are training in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, two monks might make different assertions about the Abhidhamma.”³⁰ These four *suttas* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* provide us with such different assertions about the Abhidhamma. It should be noted that “Abhidhamma” in this sense cannot be equated with the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, but nevertheless, as Kimura (1968, pp. 31–33) and Willemsen et al. (1998, pp. 12–13) suggest, such discussions or debates on the Abhidhamma among the Buddha’s disciples can be seen as the inception of the Abhidhamma literature. When Watanabe (1983, p. 37) raises the question: “What is then the original (or simple) form of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka?”, he supplies an answer by drawing our attention to the following two points regarding “the [Buddha’s] disciples’ attempts at the elementary philosophical study of *dhammas*”: (1) defining *dhammas*, (2) arranging *dhammas* in numerical order. Defining the items and arranging them in numerical sequence are exactly the issues involved in the four kinds of ascetics discussed above.

³⁰ This translation mostly follows Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (2001, p. 848). MN II 239: *Tesaṃ ca vo, bhikkhave, samaggānaṃ sammodamānānaṃ avivadamānānaṃ sikkhataṃ, siyaṃsu dve bhikkhū abhidhamme nānāvādā.*

“Liberated by Wisdom” and “Liberated in Both Respects”

Let us now move on to the interpretations of “liberated by wisdom” and “liberated in both respects”. First, we should look into the Sutta Piṭaka.

The *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (no. 70) gives a listing of seven spiritual types, among which the highest two are “the person liberated in both respects” and “the person liberated by wisdom”. These are the two kinds of arahants or fully liberated persons found in the *Nikāyas*.³¹ The *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* explains these two kinds of persons as follows:

Here some person dwells having touched personally those peaceful emancipations that are formless and transcending forms; and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed. This is called “the person liberated in both respects”. ...

Here some person does not dwell having touched personally those peaceful emancipations that are formless and transcending forms; and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed. This is called “the person liberated by wisdom”.³²

According to the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, the distinction between these two kinds of arahants is this: a person who is “liberated in both respects” experiences the peaceful emancipations that are formless and transcending forms (*santā vimokhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā*), but a person “liberated by wisdom” does not have such experience of those formless emancipations. Apparently the “formless emancipations” (*vimokhā āruppā*) refer to the four formless attainments, which transcend the four *jhānas* in the form sphere (*atikkamma rūpe*). By implication, a person “liberated by wisdom”, although devoid of the formless attainments, may have experience of the *jhānas*.

Disagreeing with the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, the *Puggalapaññatti* defines these two persons thus:

Here some person dwells having touched personally the eight emancipations; and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed. This is called “the person liberated in both respects”. ...

Here some person does not dwell having touched personally the eight emancipations; and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed. This is called “the person liberated by wisdom”.³³

³¹ E.g. SN I 190–191, SN II 119–124.

³² MN I 477f.: *Idha bhikkhave ekacco puggalo ye te santā vimokhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave puggalo ubhato bhāgavimutto. ... Idha bhikkhave ekacco puggalo ye te santā vimokhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te na kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave puggalo paññāvimutto.*

³³ Pp 14: *Idh’ ekacco puggalo aṭṭha vimokkhe kāyena phusitvā viharati, paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Ayaṃ vuccati puggalo ubhato-bhāga-vimutto. ... Idh’ ekacco puggalo na h’ eva kho aṭṭha vimokkhe kāyena phusitvā viharati, paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Ayaṃ vuccati puggalo paññā-vimutto.*

This Abhidhamma definition deviates from that of the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, which also belongs to the Theravāda. In this case, surprisingly, the *Puggalapaññatti*, a Theravāda Abhidhamma text, does not invoke the Sutta literature of the Theravāda, but rather closely parallels the following Sūtra literature of the Sarvāstivāda now extant in Chinese translation. The Sarvāstivāda³⁴ counterpart of the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, *sūtra* 195 of the *Madhyama Āgama* (MĀ 195), states:

Some monk dwells having touched personally and attained the eight emancipations; and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed and understood. This is called “the monk liberated in both respects”. ...

Some monk does not dwell having touched personally or attained the eight emancipations; and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed and understood. This is called “the monk liberated by wisdom”.³⁵

A virtually identical definition is also found in *sūtra* 936 of the *Samyukta Āgama* (SĀ 936),³⁶ which is widely ascribed to the Sarvāstivāda³⁷ or perhaps more specifically the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition.³⁸ Therefore, according to the Sarvāstivāda tradition (MĀ 195 and SĀ 936), what distinguishes one type of arahant from the other is that the person “liberated in both respects” has experience of the eight emancipations whereas the person “liberated by wisdom” does not have such experience of the eight emancipations. The last five of the eight emancipations are the four formless attainments and the “cessation of perception and feeling” (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*) according to many *suttas*,³⁹ but the identity of the first three is unclear in the *suttas*. In the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* the first three emancipations are connected with the four *jhānas*.⁴⁰ Bodhi (2007, p. 69 n. 43) explains them thus: “The first three emancipations are equivalent to the four *jhānas*, but they deal with the state of *jhāna* in terms of its objects rather than in terms of its subjective experience.” In sum, the eight emancipations cover all the nine attainments in concentrative meditation (*samādhi*). Therefore, an arahant “liberated by wisdom” lacks all attainments in concentrative meditation, including even the *jhānas*.

The above passage quoted from the *Puggalapaññatti* conforms to this Sarvāstivāda Sūtra tradition that dissociates “liberated by wisdom” from all the nine meditative attainments, and deviates from its own Theravāda Sutta tradition that an arahant “liberated by wisdom” lacks only the formless attainments and may possess the *jhānas*. What should we make of this bizarre fact? The answer may be as follows.

³⁴ Prevailing opinion holds that the *Madhyama Āgama* in Chinese translation stems from the Sarvāstivāda tradition. See Lü (1963, p. 242), Kumoi (1963, p. 248), Mayeda (1964, pp. 643–644), Ui (1965, p. 136), Enomoto (1984a, p. 1071), Thich Minh Chau (1991, pp. 18–27), Oberlies (2003, p. 48).

³⁵ T I 751b: 若有比丘八解脫身觸成就遊，以慧見，諸漏已盡、已知，如是比丘有俱解脫 ... 若有比丘八解脫身不觸成就遊，以慧見，諸漏已盡、已知，如是比丘有慧解脫。

³⁶ T II 240a: 八解脫具足身作證，以智慧見，有漏斷、知。如是聖弟子 ... 說阿羅漢俱解脫。 ... 不得八解脫身作證具足住，然彼知見有漏斷，是名聖弟子 ... 慧解脫。

³⁷ Kumoi (1963, p. 248), Ui (1965, p. 136), Yinshun (1994, p. 97), Hiraoka (2000, p. 501).

³⁸ Lü (1963, p. 242), Enomoto (1984a, p. 1071; 1984b, p. 99), Mizuno (1996, pp. 373–375), Hiraoka (2003), Oberlies (2003, p. 64).

³⁹ E.g. DN 15 (II 70–71), DN 33 (III 261–262), DĀ (T I 52b), DĀ 14 (T I 62b), MĀ 97 (T I 582a).

⁴⁰ Dhs §§204, 205, 248–250.

When this Abhidhamma work, the *Puggalapaññatti*, was not yet completed, the issue of “liberated by wisdom” as against “liberated in both respects” was still under debate. A consensus was probably reached regarding “liberated in both respects”, which was seen to denote the “fully-fledged” arahant with experience of all the nine attainments in concentrative meditation. In contrast with such a “fully-fledged” arahant, the one “liberated by wisdom” was seen as incomplete in concentrative attainments. Disagreement arose about the scale of meditative attainments that was expected of the arahant “liberated by wisdom”, and hence the divergent definitions of these two kinds of arahants circulated among the Theravādins and Sarvāstivādins. As Kuan (2013a, pp. 64–68) demonstrates, the seven spiritual types, including these two kinds of arahants, were interpolated into many *sūtras* as a result of scholastic debates after the Buddha’s death. The seven spiritual types are found twice in the *mātikā* of the *Puggalapaññatti* (pp. 3, 10) and expounded in this Abhidhamma text (pp. 14f., 72). In view of these facts, the diverse definitions of the two types of arahants, often subsumed under the seven spiritual types, could have stemmed from Abhidhamma debates or discussions mentioned in the previous section.

It is likely that the *Puggalapaññatti* was composed before the *Nikāyas* had incorporated the Abhidhamma issue of defining the two kinds of arahants. Therefore, without being constrained by a fixed definition in the Theravāda Sutta literature, the *Puggalapaññatti* happened to choose the definition in terms of the eight emancipations, and such a definition was also accepted earlier or later by the Sarvāstivādins. By contrast, after the *Puggalapaññatti* had been finalized, the compilers of the *Majjhima Nikāya* decided to incorporate the definition in terms of the formless emancipations while redacting the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*. On the other hand, *suttas* 4.87 and 4.89 of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* adopted the definition in terms of the eight emancipations to define the white-lotus ascetic and red-lotus ascetic, which allude respectively to the arahant “liberated by wisdom” and the arahant “liberated in both respects” as indicated above. This suggests the possibility that the definition of the two types of arahants in the *Puggalapaññatti* could be modelled on the two kinds of ascetics in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* considering the close relationship between the *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as mentioned above. These divergent interpretations of persons as found in the *Majjhima* and *Aṅguttara Nikāyas* represent the outcome of Abhidhamma debates, just as we find in the independent self-avowedly Abhidhamma text, the *Puggalapaññatti*.

Provisional and Definitive Interpretations

A series of 10 *suttas* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 9.42–51) explain various terms by using two opposite modes or methods, namely “with *pariyāya*” (*pariyāyena*) and “without *pariyāya*” (*nippariyāyena*). The following is relevant information given at PED p. 433, s.v. *pariyāya*:

in Abhidhamma terminology, specifically: *pariyāyena*, the mode of teaching in the Suttanta, *ad hominem*, discursively, applied method, illustrated discourse, figurative language as opposed to the abstract, general statements of Abhidhamma = *nippariyāyena*.

As Gombrich (2009, pp. 6) explains, the word *pariyāya* literally means “way round” and so “indirect route”, but it refers to a “way of putting things”. To sum up, “with *pariyāya*” (*pariyāyena*) is a way of putting the subject matter indirectly in figurative language, and therefore this term connotes “in a provisional sense” as rendered by Bodhi (2012, pp. 1319ff.). Then “without *pariyāya*” (*nippariyāyena*) can be understood as a way of putting the subject matter directly and non-figuratively, and thus it connotes “in a non-provisional sense” as rendered by Bodhi (2012, pp. 1319ff.).

The first *sutta* (AN 9.42) in the series of ten *suttas* makes it clear that each of these *suttas* consists of dialogues between two disciples of the Buddha—Ānanda answers questions put by Udāyī. As Cox (1995, p. 8) points out, this “catechetical style characterized by an exchange of questions and interpretative answers intended to clarify complex or obscure points of doctrine” is seen as the origin of Abhidhamma by many Japanese scholars. As the last member of the ninefold division of the Dharma, *vedalla* represents the genre of questions and answers.⁴¹ Dhammajoti (2005, p. 112) notes that in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (III 107), “*vedalla-kathā* occurs juxtaposed with *abhidhamma-kathā* which according to the consensus of scholarly opinion was an important fore-runner of Abhidhamma in the later technically developed sense.” In the *sutta* AN 9.44,⁴² Udāyī asks: “It is said, friend, ‘liberated by wisdom, liberated by wisdom.’ In what way has the Blessed One spoken of one liberated by wisdom?” Ānanda answers (abridged):

... a monk ... dwells having attained the first *jhāna*, and he understands it with wisdom. To this extent the Blessed One has spoken of one liberated by wisdom in a *provisional* sense.

... a monk ... dwells having attained the second *jhāna* ... the third *jhāna* ... the fourth *jhāna* ... the sphere of infinite space ... the sphere of infinite consciousness ... the sphere of nothingness ... the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and he understands it with wisdom. To this extent, too, the Blessed One has spoken of one liberated by wisdom in a *provisional* sense.

... a monk ... dwells having attained the cessation of perception and feeling, and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed; and he understands it with wisdom. To this extent, friend, the Blessed One has spoken of one liberated by wisdom in a *non-provisional* sense.⁴³

⁴¹ Bodhi (2012, pp. 392, 1678 n. 631).

⁴² The following translation mostly follows Bodhi (2012, pp. 1321–1323).

⁴³ AN IV 452f.: ‘*Paññāvimutto paññāvimutto*’ ti āvuso vuccati. Kittāvatā nu kho āvuso paññāvimutto vutto Bhagavatā ti? ... bhikkhu ... paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti. Ettāvatā pi kho āvuso paññāvimutto vutto Bhagavatā pariyāyena. ... bhikkhu ... duttiyam jhānam ... tatiyam jhānam ... catuttham jhānam ... ākāśānañcāyatanam ... viññāṇañcāyatanam ... ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ ... nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ upasampajja viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti. Ettāvatā pi kho āvuso paññāvimutto vutto Bhagavatā pariyāyena. ... bhikkhu ... saññāvedayitanirodham upasampajja viharati, paññāya c’assa disvā āsavā parikkhīnā honti, paññāya ca nam pajānāti. Ettāvatā pi kho āvuso paññāvimutto vutto Bhagavatā nippariyāyena ti.

In the next *sutta*, AN 9.45, Udāyī asks about “liberated in both respects”. Ānanda answers in exactly the same way as in the previous *sutta* except that the phrase “he dwells having touched that sphere personally in whatever way [it is attained]”⁴⁴ is inserted into each of the statements of the nine spheres or meditative attainments. For example, for the first *jhāna* and the highest attainment, Ānanda states:

... a monk ... dwells having attained the first *jhāna* ... *He dwells having touched that sphere personally in whatever way [it is attained]*, and he understands it with wisdom. To this extent the Blessed One has spoken of one liberated in both respects in a *provisional* sense.

... ..

... a monk ... dwells having attained the cessation of perception and feeling, and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed. *He dwells having touched that sphere personally in whatever way [it is attained]*, and he understands it with wisdom. To this extent, friend, the Blessed One has spoken of one liberated in both respects in a *non-provisional* sense.⁴⁵

Now we can work out the “non-provisional” or “definitive” interpretation of the two kinds of liberation. According to AN 9.44, if a person attains the highest meditative sphere (the cessation of perception and feeling, which presupposes the eight lower meditative attainments), and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed, then such a person is “one liberated by wisdom” in a definitive sense. According to AN 9.45, if a person attains the highest meditative sphere, and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed, and he *dwells having touched that sphere personally*, then such a person is “one liberated in both respects” in a definitive sense. In contrast to the “definitive” interpretation, “provisional” interpretations of the two types are distinguished by describing persons as being able to attain some of the eight lower meditative spheres (i.e. the four *jhānas* and four formless attainments) but not the highest meditative attainment.

Therefore, according to the definitive, non-provisional definitions in these two *suttas*, both “a person liberated by wisdom” and “a person liberated in both respects” must experience the highest meditative attainment (“dwells having attained the cessation of perception and feeling” as stated in both *suttas*), not to mention the eight lower attainments. If the texts are taken literally, there is only one difference between the two: “a person liberated in both respects” dwells having touched that sphere (the cessation of perception and feeling) personally in whatever way [it is attained] whereas “a person liberated by wisdom” does not. This distinction is puzzling, however, because “to dwell having attained the cessation of perception and feeling” can hardly be distinguished from “to dwell having touched personally the cessation of perception and feeling”. Therefore, “liberated by wisdom” is hardly different from “liberated in both respects”. Unfortunately, the Pali commentary (Mp IV 206–207) offers no relevant comment regarding this issue. In

⁴⁴ *Yathā yathā ca tad āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati.*

⁴⁵ AN IV 453: ... *bhikkhu ... paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. Yathā yathā ca tad āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti. Ettāvata pi kho āvuso ubhatobhāgavimutto vutto Bhagavatā pariyāyena. ... bhikkhu ... saññāvedayitanirodham upasampajja viharati, paññāya c’assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Yathā yathā ca tad āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya ca nam pajānāti. Ettāvata pi kho āvuso ubhatobhāgavimutto vutto Bhagavatā nippariyāyena ti.*

any case, according to these *Āṅguttara suttas*, all the nine meditative attainments are indispensable to both “liberated by wisdom” and “liberated in both respects” in a non-provisional, definitive sense. This interpretation diverges significantly from those in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Madhyama Āgama*, *Saṃyukta Āgama* and *Puggalapaññatti*, where “liberated by wisdom” is distinct from “liberated in both respects” in lacking either the higher meditative attainments or all nine meditative attainments.

In this connection, it is worth noting the following remark by Hamilton (2000:8):

That it was the spirit rather than the letter of them that mattered is further supported by the style in which the central doctrinal teachings have been preserved in the *Nikāyas*: they are nearly all given cryptically, open to various interpretations but with no one definitive interpretation attached. It is, indeed, this cryptic equivocal style that has allowed there to be confusion and disagreement about what the teachings mean at all ... The later Theravāda Buddhist *Abhidhamma* scholars ... pronounced the style of the early material to be just ‘a way of putting things’ (*pariyāya*). And though they then interpreted and explained the teachings in definitively ‘put’ terms (*nippariyāyena*) in their own texts ...

In view of this observation, *suttas* 9.44 and 9.45 of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* may be seen to verify the fact that “liberated by wisdom” and “liberated in both respects” in the *Sutta* literature are usually described cryptically, in ways open to various provisional interpretations but with no one definitive interpretation attached. Therefore, we have the various interpretations of these two kinds of liberation in the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas*. Most of these interpretations are merely oblique and figurative “ways of putting things”, and thus they should not be taken literally⁴⁶ but require further explication for clarity. As Ronkin (2005, p. 26) states: “[T]he *Abhidhamma* methods of instructing the teaching ... does not need any further explication, because it is couched in non-figurative, definitely put terms (*nippariyāya-desanā*).” The two *suttas* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* quoted above obviously serve as *Abhidhamma*, which purports to explain “liberated in both respects” and “liberated by wisdom” in a definitive, non-figurative way (*nippariyāyena*), and hence is entitled to label other definitions as just figurative or provisional (*pariyāyena*). A certain *Abhidhammist* probably compiled these two *suttas* in an attempt to provide a final solution to the issue under debate.

Apart from these two *suttas*, the other *suttas* in this series of ten *suttas* on *pariyāyena* and *nippariyāyena* are apparently all meant to serve this purpose. Let us examine a *sutta* on another type of person. In AN 9.43, while explaining the “witness-in-person” (*kāya-sakkhi*),⁴⁷ Ānanda says:

⁴⁶ Cf. Gombrich (2009, p. 6).

⁴⁷ The word *kāya* is usually translated as “body”, but in this case it cannot refer to the “body”, which is normally understood as the physical body. According to this *sutta* and MN 70 cited below, a *kāya-sakkhi* may experience formless meditative attainments, which fall into formless spheres that cannot be experienced by the body because the body belongs to the form sphere. In such a case *kāya* is better understood to denote the individual or experiencer (see Kuan 2008, p. 99), and *kāya* can often mean “body” in the sense of a “collection” and thus include not just the physical body but the collection of the five aggregates. While rendering *kāya-sakkhi* as “Body-Witness”, Nyanatiloka (1970, p. 82) explains: “He is one who ‘in his own person (lit. body) has attained the 8 deliverances (*vimokkha*, q.v.)...’.” Therefore, the compound *kāya-sakkhi* may be taken to mean someone who has “witnessed (*sakkhi*) in person (*kāya*)”, so I translate it as “witness-in-person”.

... a monk ... dwells having attained the first *jhāna* ... He dwells having touched that sphere personally in whatever way [it is attained]. To this extent the Blessed One has spoken of a witness-in-person in a *provisional* sense.

... the second *jhāna*... ... the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception ... in a *provisional* sense.

... a monk ... dwells having attained the cessation of perception and feeling, and having seen with wisdom, his taints are destroyed. He dwells having touched that sphere personally in whatever way [it is attained]. To this extent, friend, the Blessed One has spoken of a witness-in-person in a *non-provisional* sense.⁴⁸

Therefore, in definitive terms, a witness-in-person is a taintless liberated person, i.e. an arahant. This “non-provisional” (*nippariyāya*) interpretation deviates from the usual *sutta* interpretation of this person as inferior to the arahant. According to another *sutta* also in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 3.21 at I 120), a witness-in-person is one who is practising for arahantship, or a once-returner, or a non-returner, and is never an arahant. Similarly, according to the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta* (MN 70), the Buddha defines the “witness-in-person” thus:

Here some person dwells having touched personally those peaceful emancipations that are formless and transcending forms; and having seen with wisdom, *some of* his taints are destroyed. This is called “the person who is a witness-in-person”. I say that such a monk still has work to do with diligence.⁴⁹

Accordingly, a witness-in-person has destroyed only some of his taints, and thus is not a taintless arahant. This is in stark contrast to the definitions of “the person liberated in both respects” and “the person liberated by wisdom”, who are both said to have destroyed taints and have no work to do with diligence (MN I 477–478); in other words, these two persons are arahants. From the Abhidhamma viewpoint as expressed in the “*sutta*” AN 9.43, the interpretations of witness-in-person in AN 3.21 and MN 70 are just provisional (*pariyāyena*), and hence should not be taken at face value. According to the serial *suttas* AN 9.43, AN 9.44 and AN 9.45, the three kinds of persons, namely “witness-in-person”, “one liberated by wisdom” and “one liberated in both respects”, are only nominally different; in effect they all refer to the same type of person, i.e. the liberated arahant. The standpoint represented in

⁴⁸ AN IV 451–452: ... *bhikkhu ... paṭhamam jhānam upasampajja viharati. Yathā yathā ca tad āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati. Ettāvata pi kho āvuso kāyasakkhī vutto Bhagavatā pariyāyena. ... dutiyam jhānam ... nevasaññānāsaññāyatanam ... pariyāyena. ... bhikkhu ... saññāvedayitanirodham upasampajja viharati, paññāya c’assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Yathā yathā ca tad āyatanam tathā tathā nam kāyena phassitvā viharati. Ettāvata pi kho āvuso kāyasakkhī vutto Bhagavatā nippariyāyena ti.*

⁴⁹ MN I 478: *ekacco puggalo ye te santā vimokhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phassitvā viharati, paññāya c’assa disvā ekacce āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. Ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave puggalo kāyasakkhī. Imassa kho ahaṃ bhikkhave bhikkhuno appamādena karaṇīyan ti vadāmi.*

these three serial *suttas* seems to be unique, as Buddhist literature usually distinguishes those three kinds of persons into three hierarchically different types.⁵⁰

The position taken by these three *suttas* is surprisingly similar to the following idea in one Mahāyāna text, namely the part of the **Mahāvaiṣṭhīya-mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra* 大方等大集經 (T 397) translated by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (385–433 CE).⁵¹ This text identifies the arahant “liberated-by-wisdom” (慧解脫) and the arahant “liberated-in-both-respects” (二分解脫) respectively with “witness-in-person” (身證), and thereby equates the three types of persons (T XIII 159a). This Mahāyāna conception of spiritual types is consonant with the above Abhidhamma hermeneutic approach (*nippariyāyena*) to the three kinds of persons. These types of persons are just conventionally, nominally designated and do not exist in ultimate reality, as Apple (2004, pp. 261–262) observes:

The *Prajñāpāramitā* literature repeatedly states that while coursing in the practice of *prajñāpāramitā* – i.e., viewing things through cognizing emptiness, *bodhisattvas* see the various stages from Stream-enterer up to Buddhahood as being like an illusion. A *bodhisattva*, if obtaining a result such as Stream-enterer, does not think “I have obtained the result of Stream-enterer.” ... Therefore, all stages are ultimately seen as like illusions, like a fictitious person.

Such a fictitious and non-essentialist perspective of persons could have led to the foregoing interpretations that blur the boundaries between the various spiritual types as found in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*’s Abhidhamma portion and also in the Mahāyāna *sūtra* quoted above. Since persons, including the spiritual types, do not exist in essence, their definitions are after all just conventionally designated in order to convey significant information concerning the ultimate goal of liberation and how to progress to this goal.

The non-essentialist perspective of persons coincides with the “absence of essence (*ātman*, Self) in persons” (*pudgala-nairātmya*) as conceived by the pre-Mahāyāna traditions.⁵² This exegetical approach to the concept of person (*pudgala*) was already taken up in the Abhidharma and then followed by the Mahāyāna. It is widely held that the Mahāyāna, including the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) literature, criticizes the Abhidharma for its inability to understand the “absence of essence (Self) in *dharma*s” (*dharma-nairātmya*); instead the Abhidharmists considered *dharma*s to be things that really, ultimately exist.⁵³ If the

⁵⁰ Cf. Harvey (2013b, pp. 27ff.) For Chinese sources, see e.g. T I 232c, T I 255c, T I 747a–b, T II 240a, etc.

⁵¹ FGD 6234.

⁵² Cf. Williams (2009, p. 53).

⁵³ Harvey (2013a, p. 116) and Conze (1962, p. 198). Referring to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Williams (2009, p. 54) says: “So the terminology of the Perfection of Wisdom is that of the Abhidharma, but the critique is of the claim to have found some things which really, fundamentally, ultimately exist, i.e. *dharma*s.” Such a critique is also found in some other Mahāyāna texts. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* 楞伽經 (T 671) states: “The śrāvakas attain the absence of essence in persons without attaining emptiness [which is] the absence of essence in *dharma*s.” (T XVI 555b19: 諸聲聞得人無我，而不得法無我空。) The **Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* 攝大乘論 (T 1592) states: “The śrāvakas realize the absence of essence in persons ... The bodhisattvas realize the absence of essence in *dharma*s...” (T XXXI 129b: 聲聞通達人無我 ... 菩薩通達法無我 ...)

Abhidharmists simply thought of “persons” (*pudgala/puggala*) as conventional constructs in opposition to *dhammas*, the ultimately realities, how could there be so many “Abhidharma” expositions of persons (as discussed above) apart from those of *dhammas*, which alone were perceived as real and should be the proper subject matter for the Abhidharma? Moreover, as demonstrated above, the three items “person whose mind is like a diamond”, etc. in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* were, as expected, “depersonalized” in the Abhidhamma texts of two different schools, namely the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and the *Samgītiparyāya*. But why did the *Puggalapaññatti*, also an Abhidhamma text, fail to depersonalize those same items in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*?

Can “Persons” (*puggala*) be Subject Matter Appropriate for the Abhidhamma?

The *mātikā* of the *Puggalapaññatti* consists of the following six designations or descriptions (*cha paññattiyo*):

1. designation of aggregates (*khandha-paññatti*)
2. designation of bases (*āyatana-paññatti*)
3. designation of elements (*dhātu-paññatti*)
4. designation of truths (*sacca-paññatti*)
5. designation of faculties (*indriya-paññatti*)
6. designation of persons (*puggala-paññatti*)

According to Kimura (1968, pp. 70, 82), this list represents the southern, or Theravāda, classification of the Abhidhamma. While the last designation is expounded in the *Puggalapaññatti*, the first five designations relating to *dhammas* are treated in the *Vibhaṅga*.⁵⁴ As mentioned above, the *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Vibhaṅga* are probably the earliest of the seven canonical Abhidhamma works in Pali. It is likely that these two texts were meant to be complementary to each other, and therefore persons and *dhammas* may have enjoyed equal status at the incipient stage of the Abhidhamma. However, Nyanatiloka (1957, p. 57) questions whether the *Puggalapaññatti* qualifies as an Abhidhamma text:

This smallest of the seven Abhidhamma books appears to be somewhat out of place in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, as shown even by its title “Description of Individuals”. For it is one of the main characteristics of the Abhidhamma that it does not employ conventional concepts like “individual” (*puggala*), etc., but deals only with ultimates, or realities in the “highest sense” (*paramattha-dhamma*), i.e. the mental and material phenomena, and their classifications into groups (*khandha*), bases, elements, etc. This treatise, however, in accordance with its subject-matter, is written in the conventional language as used in the Sutta-Piṭaka.

⁵⁴ Nyanatiloka (1957, p. 57) also says: “the commentary mentions that the subject-matter of these five ‘descriptions’ had already been dealt with, in full detail, in the respective chapters of the *Vibhaṅga*”.

In a similar vein, Gethin (1998, p. 209) regards the Abhidharma as an attempt to give a systematic and exhaustive account of the world in terms of its constituent physical and mental events, which are known as *dhammas*, and “ultimately dhammas are all that there is” while “a person is analysed by Abhidharma as consisting of innumerable dhammas”. Nyanaponika (1998, p. 5) also says that in the Abhidharma such *sutta* terminology as “persons” is replaced by a more precise terminology, which accords with the “impersonal” nature of actuality. Therefore, a clear distinction can be drawn between *puggala* (person) and *dhammas*. While *dhammas* are “realities” in accord with the “impersonal” nature of actuality, a person (*puggala*) is just a “conventional concept” or a composite built from innumerable constituent elements or *dhammas*. The conventional terminology “person” is used only in the *suttas*; it is not employed in the Abhidhamma, which is devoted to the exposition of *dhammas*. Consequently, there appears a dichotomy between persons and *dhammas* in relation to the way such terminology is used in the Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

As mentioned above, Nyanatiloka holds that while the Sutta Piṭaka employs “conventional” concepts such as “person” (*puggala*), the Abhidhamma deals only with “ultimates”, or “realities in the highest sense”, his rendering of *paramattha-dhamma*. In other words, *dhammas* (realities) in the highest sense should be distinguished from *puggala* (person), which exists only in the conventional sense. In this context, we should note that, as Gethin (1998, pp. 207f.) points out, some of the Buddha’s teachings are said to be expressed in conventional terms (*saṃvṛti/sammuti*) while others are expressed in ultimate terms (*paramārtha/paramattha*), and that according to the later tradition, the *sutta/sūtra* collections contain teachings of both kinds whereas the Abhidharma is “an attempt to give a comprehensive statement of the Buddha’s teachings exclusively in ultimate terms”. Thus the dichotomy between persons and *dhammas* can be seen as a conventional-ultimate dichotomy.

This dichotomy, however, seems to contradict the aforementioned fact that the *Puggalapaññatti* begins with a *mātikā* composed of the six designations, including both *dhammas* and persons. In addition, Mizuno (1997, p. 262) points out that many types of persons explicated in the *Puggalapaññatti* correspond to those discussed in the *Samgītiparyāya* (T 1536),⁵⁵ a Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma work, and the *Pudgala Varga 人品 (Chapter on Persons) of the *Śāriputra-abhidharma 舍利弗阿毘曇論 (*Shelifu apitan lun*, T 1548),⁵⁶ probably belonging to the Dharmaguptaka school.⁵⁷ Therefore, apart from *dhammas*, the subject matter of “persons” is indeed among the concerns of the Abhidharma of various schools. If the *Puggalapaññatti*, along with those *pudgala*-related parts of the *Samgītiparyāya* and of the *Śāriputra-abhidharma, is regarded as an addition to the “Abhidharma proper”, we can certainly

⁵⁵ Cf. also Willemen et al. (1998, p. 13). The *Samgītiparyāya* expounds the lists of three persons (*pudgala*, 補特伽羅 *buteqieluo*), four persons, five persons, six persons, seven persons and eight persons (T XXVI 379c–378b, 404a–407b, 425c–427a, 434a–435a, 435b–436a, 441a).

⁵⁶ Cf. also Kimura (1968, pp. 111ff.). For the *Pudgala Varga* of the *Śāriputra-abhidharma, see T XXVIII 584c–589c.

⁵⁷ Mizuno (1966). Frauwallner (1995, p. 9). Mizuno (1996, pp. 334ff.). Bhikkhu Bodhi’s Introduction to *Abhidhamma Studies* by Nyanaponika (1998, p. x). Cf. also Willemen (2008, p. 37).

assume that the Abhidharma is concerned solely with *dhammas* as opposed to persons. But it is not beyond doubt that such person-related portions of the Abhidharma literature can be set aside in this way. Moreover, whether the conception of persons and that of *dhammas* are categorically different is a crucial question that requires further clarification.

The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, a canonical Abhidhamma text of the Theravāda, does not appear to uphold that *dhammas* are ultimate realities as against conventional constructs like persons. The title of this text means “compendium of *dhammas*”.⁵⁸ The text affirms that “all *dhammas* are ways of designation”, that “all *dhammas* are ways of interpretation” and that “all *dhammas* are ways of expression”.⁵⁹ While defining *paññatti* (designation), *nirutti* (interpretation) and *adhivacana* (expression), the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* in each case enumerates a long list of words as follows:

Yā tesam tesam dhammānaṃ saṅkhā (enumeration) *samaññā* (appellation) *paññatti* (designation) *vohāro* (parlance) *nāmaṃ* (name) *nāmakammaṃ* (name giving) *nāmadheyyaṃ* (name assigning) *nirutti* (interpretation) *vyāñjanaṃ* (wording) *abhiḷāpo* (talk)—*ime dhammā adhvacanā/nirutti/paññatti*.⁶⁰

In light of this passage, when the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* describes all *dhammas* as “ways of designation, ways of interpretation and ways of expression”, the text cannot but mean that all *dhammas* are just conventional (*sammuti*) constructs rather than ultimate (*paramattha*) realities.⁶¹ The commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* explains *paññatti* in this context (ways of designation) thus: “Making [one and the same idea]⁶² known in various ways, such as ‘*takka*, *vitakka*, *saṅkappa*’, is called *paññatti* (designation)”,⁶³ thereby suggesting that the word *paññatti* in this context denotes conventional usage of language or concepts. Incidentally, among the above list of words, *paññatti*, *samaññā*, *vohāra* and *nirutti* already appear together in the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (DN 9),⁶⁴ where the Buddha uses these words to indicate that the things he just mentions are merely designations in common use in the world (*loka-paññatti*, etc.). Kalupahana (1986, p. 340) suggests that by this *sutta* passage the Buddha intended to take *saṃvṛti* (P. *sammuti*, convention) and *prajñapti* (P. *paññatti*, designation) as synonyms.

Although the above passage in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* perhaps suffices to illustrate the point, it is worthwhile to compare this passage with the following passage in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* by Śāntideva (early eighth century CE):⁶⁵

⁵⁸ See Nyanaponika (1998, p. xxvii).

⁵⁹ Dhs § 1308: *Sabbe’ va dhammā paññatti-pathā*. Dhs § 1307: *Sabbe’ va dhammā nirutti-pathā*. Dhs § 1306: *Sabbe’ va dhammā adhvavacana-pathā*.

⁶⁰ Dhs §§ 1306, 1307, 1308.

⁶¹ Cf. Mizuno (1997, p. 265).

⁶² My translation is supplemented with these words according to Maung Tin (1976, p. 69). Commenting on “*takka*, *vitakka*, *saṅkappa*”, he says: “I.e., calling a single thing, viz., thought, by three names.” (ibid., p. 69 n. 3)

⁶³ Dhs-a 51: *Takko vitakko saṅkappo ti evaṃ tena tena pakārena nāpanato paññatti nāma*.

⁶⁴ DN I 202: *loka-samaññā loka-niruttiyo loka-vohārā loka-paññattiyo*.

⁶⁵ Crosby and Skilton (1995, p. xxviii) and Williams (2009, p. 66).

*anupalabhyamāṇeṣu sarvadharmeṣu katamo 'tra buddhaḥ |... śūnyaṃ hi rūpaṃ rūpeṇa yāvad vijñānaṃ || pe || yāvad eva vyavahāramātraṃ etat | nāmadheyamātraṃ saṃketamātraṃ saṃvṛtimātraṃ prajñaptimātraṃ |*⁶⁶
(Since **all dharmas** are not to be obtained,⁶⁷ what is Buddha? ... For form is empty of form⁶⁸ as far as consciousness [is empty of consciousness], and so on [the same is said of the five aggregates]. All this is just parlance, just name assigning, just agreement, just **convention**, just **designation**.)

Among this list of five Sanskrit words each combined with *mātra* (just), three words also have Pali counterparts in the above long list of words in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*:

vyavahāra = *vohāro*, *nāmadheya* = *nāmadheyyaṃ*, *prajñapti* = *paññatti*.

These five words, each combined with *mātra*, are apparently enumerated here as synonyms. Consequently, *prajñapti* (*paññatti*, designation) is synonymous with *saṃvṛti* (*sammuti*, convention) as well as with the other three words in the five-numbered list of synonyms in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*.⁶⁹ It would not be farfetched to speculate that this Mahāyāna text and the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* draw on certain Abhidharma material in common, which associates “all dharmas” with “parlance” (*vyavahāra/vohāra*), “designation” (*prajñapti/paññatti*), etc. to indicate that *dharmas* are conceptual constructs in conventional terms (*saṃvṛti/sammuti*) rather than realities in the ultimate sense (*paramārtha/paramattha*).

Kalupahana (1992, p. 145) articulates a similar view on the Abhidhamma:

If the intention of the discourses [i.e. *suttas*] in analyzing the human personality into five aggregates was merely to indicate the absence of a metaphysical agent (*anatta*) and not to discover a set of irreducible elements called “ultimate realities,” there seems to be no justification for the various psychological and physical items [i.e. *dharmas*] listed in the canonical Abhidhamma texts (both in Pali and in Sanskrit) to be considered ultimate realities.

He goes on to argue that the *Puggalapaññatti*, while explaining the conceptions relating to a “person” (*puggala*), adopts “the contextual analysis of the conceptions of aggregates and so forth”, i.e. *dharmas*, “in the previous books of the Abhidhamma” (ibid., p. 150). But the matter could be the other way round since the *Puggalapaññatti* presumably belongs to the earliest stratum of the Pali

⁶⁶ Bendall (1902, p. 257).

⁶⁷ Bendall and Rouse (1971, p. 237) translate *anupalabhyamāṇeṣu sarvadharmeṣu* as “since nothing can be perceived”. I translate *anupalabhyamāṇeṣu* as “not to be obtained” according to the following opinion of Kalupahana (1986, p. 83): “*noṣalabhyate* (implying “not obtained” or “not available”)”. That *upalabhyate* means “obtained” is attested in ancient Chinese translations of Buddhist texts (SJD 1145s.v. *Labh*: [passive] *upalabhyate* 得, 所得, 可得). Moreover, the cognates *anupalabdha*, *anupalabdhī* and *anupalambha* are all rendered as 不可得 (cannot be obtained) in Chinese translations (SJD 61).

⁶⁸ Bendall and Rouse (1971, p. 237) translate *śūnyaṃ hi rūpaṃ rūpeṇa* as “Void is form by its nature”. I translate it as “For form is empty of form” because Conze (1962, p. 220 footnote §) mentions “form should be seen as empty of form” while discussing the doctrine of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

⁶⁹ Edgerton (1953, p. 358) quotes the foregoing passage from the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* and says: “note *saṃvṛti* again, virtually = *prajñapti*”.

Abhidhamma as mentioned above. In any case, Kalupahana is probably right in suggesting that the Abhidhamma treats both *puggalas* and *dhammas* as context-dependent, thereby dissolving the dichotomy between persons and *dhammas* which is linked to the distinction between convention and ultimate realities as elaborated in the commentarial tradition.⁷⁰ As Ronkin (2010, p. 356) suggests, in the Pali tradition it is the commentaries, including the commentary to the *Dhammasaṅgani*, that first draw metaphysical conclusions with regard to the reality of *dhammas*; the commentaries contend that “there is no being or person apart from *dhammas*” in order to “refute the rival Puggalavāda position of the reality of the person” (Dhs-a 155, etc.), and that “a *dhamma* arises as a present, ultimate reality, and its *sabhāva* attests to its actual existence as such” (Dhs-a 45, etc.).⁷¹

As mentioned above, the Mahāyāna criticizes the Abhidharma for its failure to understand the “absence of essence in *dharma*s”, which were considered by the Abhidharma to be things that really, ultimately exist. This critique is intended primarily for the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma rather than the Abhidharma in general.⁷² The Sarvāstivādins maintain that all (*sarva*) *dharma*s exist (*asti*) as real entities (*dravyatas*), whether past, present, or future, and are defined by a fixed, intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*),⁷³ but this ontological position is not accepted by some other schools, including the Theravāda during the canonical period. Cousins (1983–1984, pp. 106f.) notes:

The Theravāda does not reify dhammas to anything like the extent found in the Sarvāstivādin abhidharma. ... In North India where the Sarvāstivādin abhidharma eventually established a commanding position, the term *dharma* came to be interpreted as a ‘reality’ and given some kind of ontological status as part of a process of reification of Buddhist terms. ... In the South, at least among the Theravādins, *dhamma* retains its older meaning of a less reified, more experiential kind.

Ronkin (2005, p. 226) also says: “The Theravādins ... do not subscribe to the Sarvāstivāda metaphysics: first and foremost they do not hold that a *dhamma* is a *dravyasat* [referring back to ‘primary existent’] and do not use the category of *sabhāva* as an ontological determinant of primary existence—at least not until late into the post-canonical period.”⁷⁴

In view of the foregoing discussion, the notion of persons and that of *dhammas* cannot be categorically differentiated from the perspective of the Abhidharma in

⁷⁰ Kalupahana (1992, p. 150) says: “Indeed, the commentarial explanation of ‘persons’ (*puggala*) as a mere convention (*sammutī*), and of the psychic (*citta*, *cetasika*) and physical (*rūpa*) elements as ‘ultimate realities’ (*paramattha*), is completely rejected by the *Puggalapapaññatti*’s enumeration of six concepts (*paññatti*).”

⁷¹ Williams (1981, p. 242) suggests that the Sarvāstivāda shared with the Theravāda an ontological stance on *dharma*s seen as “primary existents” by referring to Pali commentarial literature (the *Visuddhimagga*, the commentary to the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Atthasālinī* and the *Mūlaṭṭikā* on the *Atthasālinī*) without referring to any canonical texts.

⁷² Yinshun (1981, p. 728), Williams (2009, pp. 50, 68) and Harvey (2013a, p. 116).

⁷³ Cox (2004, p. 555) and Buswell and Lopez (2014, p. 780).

⁷⁴ Cf. also Gethin (2001, p. 149).

general. Just like persons, *dhammas* exist as experiential events rather than ontological entities according to at least the Theravādin Abhidhamma system of thought as discussed above, although the post-canonical tradition interprets *dhammas* as ultimate realities and this is followed by many scholars. In this sense there is no big difference between the two categories. Nor is there a wide gap between the Sutta and Abhidhamma literature in terms of how “persons” are treated, despite what the later tradition holds. This has been shown to be corroborated by several facts about the *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. The listings and interpretations of “persons” form a significant portion of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and of the Abhidhamma literature. We have seen above that several *suttas* on persons (*puggala*) in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* appear to be proto-Abhidhamma. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* contains a sizable amount of such Abhidhamma material in an eclectic style, embracing a wide variety of divergent Abhidhamma interpretations. By contrast, the self-avowedly Abhidhamma literature of the different schools represents the collections of scholastic thoughts which were standardized depending on the schools or the texts themselves.

It is undeniable that the ultimate concern of Buddhism is the welfare of people. The Buddha’s teaching is meant to help or liberate each person as a whole rather than each of the individual *dhammas*. Even an adequate exposition of Buddhist ethics also entails at least a certain treatment of the person as a whole. The *Vijñānakāya*, a canonical Abhidhamma text of the Sarvāstivādins, presents a debate between the “Personalist” (*pudgalavādin*) and the “Voidist” (*śūnyatāvādin*, follower of the emptiness teaching). The debate is aptly outlined by Cousins (1994, p. 21) thus:

The Personalist asks what is the object of loving-kindness. The Voidist replies that it is the five aggregates given the label of ‘being’. The Personalist, not unreasonably, suggests that this is not in harmony with the *suttas* which recommend loving-kindness towards living beings rather than aggregates. ...

Therefore, although the Abhidhamma adopted the methods that attempt to systematize and preserve the Buddha’s teaching (Dharma) by collecting all possible doctrinal concepts or elements, i.e. *dhammas*, to be found in his sermons,⁷⁵ it could not evade the topic of “persons” that is also essential to the Buddha’s teaching. Therefore, in spite of the “depersonalizing” tendencies perceptible in some Abhidhamma works, three different schools unanimously devote part of their Abhidhamma to the subject of “persons” as discussed above. In his *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidhamma*, Guenther (1974, p. 213) comments: “The Path in its four stages is essentially meant to overcome unhealthy attitudes and to produce a certain type of *man* in whom unhealthy attitudes can no longer operate.” It is therefore appropriate for the Abhidhamma to designate and interpret the various spiritual types of persons for the sake of illuminating Buddhism’s aim to transform a person into an arahant and its skilful means in designating spiritual stages which a person can go through to achieve this aim. This is not tantamount to reifying “persons”, which are still treated as conventional constructs no less than *dhammas* are.

⁷⁵ Kalupahana (1992, p. 145) and Frauwallner (1995, pp. 3–4).

Conclusion

According to a widespread opinion based on the tradition, “person” (*puggala/pudgala*) is a “conventional concept” used only in the *suttas/sūtras*; it is not employed in the Abhidhamma/Abhidharma, which interprets the Buddha’s teaching exclusively in terms of “ultimate realities”, i.e. *dhammas/dharmas*. This results in a dichotomy between persons and *dhammas*, which can be seen as a conventional-ultimate dichotomy. The Abhidharma tendency to “depersonalize” is discernible in how two Abhidharma texts interpret a list of persons in a *sutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Although the Abhidharma adopted the methods that attempt to systematize the Buddha’s teaching (Dharma) by collecting all possible doctrinal elements, i.e. *dhammas*, to be found in his sermons, it could not evade the topic of “persons” that is also essential to the Buddha’s teaching.

There are indications that “persons”, just like *dhammas*, can be subject matter appropriate for the Abhidhamma. Three different schools devote part of their Abhidharma to the subject of “persons”, notably the Theravādins’ *Puggalapaññatti*, which is closely connected with the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. The *mātikā* of the *Puggalapaññatti* consists of six designations or descriptions (*paññatti*). The last one is the “designation of persons”, which is expounded in the *Puggalapaññatti*. The first five designations, which relate to *dhammas*, are treated in the *Vibhaṅga*. The *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Vibhaṅga* are probably the earliest of the seven canonical Theravādin Abhidhamma works, and were apparently meant to be complementary to each other. Therefore persons and *dhammas* may have enjoyed equal status at the incipient stage of the Abhidhamma. That *dhammas* are reckoned as conventional constructs rather than ultimate realities is implicit in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, a canonical Abhidhamma text of the Theravāda. *Dhammas* are reified by the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma and the Theravādin commentaries, but not by the Abhidharma in general.

Just like persons, *dhammas* exist as experiential events rather than ontological entities, at least according to the Theravādin Abhidhamma. Thus, there is no big difference between the two categories. Nor is there a wide gap between the Sutta and Abhidhamma literature in terms of how “persons” are dealt with, despite what the later tradition holds. This is corroborated by several facts about the *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Several *suttas* on persons (*puggala*) in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* appear to be proto-Abhidhamma. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* contains a significant amount of such Abhidhamma material in an eclectic style, embracing a wide variety of Abhidhamma interpretations. The divergent definitions of four kinds of ascetics in a series of *suttas* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Puggalapaññatti* represent the outcome of Abhidhamma debates on how to define the items and arrange them in numerical sequence. A series of ten *suttas* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* bluntly adopt the Abhidhamma hermeneutic approach, i.e. *nippariyāyena*, whereby three types of persons are rendered just nominally different. Therefore, various kinds of “persons” are seen as conventionally designated rather than really existing in accordance with the non-essentialist perspective of persons in the Abhidhamma. It is no less appropriate for the Abhidhamma to designate and interpret various types of persons than to treat *dhammas* also as conventional

constructs. The Abhidhamma has to accommodate the “conventional” fact that the Buddha’s teaching is meant to help or liberate each person as a whole rather than each of the individual *dhammas*.

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Abbreviations

References to Pali texts are to the Pali Text Society editions.

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

CBETA *CBETA Chinese Electronic Tripitaka Collection* Version April 2010. Taipei: Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association

CSCD *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana* CD-ROM Version 3, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute

DĀ *Dīrgha Āgama* 長阿含經 *Chang ahanjing*

Dhs *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*

Dhs-a *Atthasālinī* (Commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*)

DN *Dīrgha Nikāya*

EĀ *Ekottarika Āgama* 增壹阿含經 *Zengyi ahanjing*

FGD *Foguang Da Cidian* 佛光大辭典 (*Foguang Dictionary*), ed. Ciyi 慈怡. Kaohsiung: 佛光出版社, 1988

MĀ *Madhyama Āgama* 中阿含經 *Zhong ahanjing*

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*

Mp *Manorathapūraṇī* (*Aṅguttara-Nikāyatthakathā*, Commentary on the AN)

P. Pali

PED *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede. London: Pali Text Society, reprinted 1986. (First published 1921–1925)

Pp *Puggalapapaññatti*

SĀ *Samyukta Āgama* 雜阿含經 *Za ahanjing*

SJD 漢訳対照梵和大辞典 (*A Sanskrit-Japanese Dictionary with Equivalents in Chinese Translation*), ed. Unrai Wogihara 荻原雲来, revised edition. Tokyo: 講談社, 1986

Skt. Sanskrit

SN *Samyutta Nikāya*

T *Taishō Shinshu Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Cited from CBETA)

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English titles in parentheses are my translations.

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