

# An Introduction to the Abhidharma

Over a period of ten days in June of 1990, Thich Nhat Hahn presented a system of buddhist psychology, called Abhidharma, to a group of retreatants in the south of France. The abhidharma was presented in order for us to be able to study a text by the 5th century teacher, Vasubandu, called “30 Verses on mere Manifestation”.

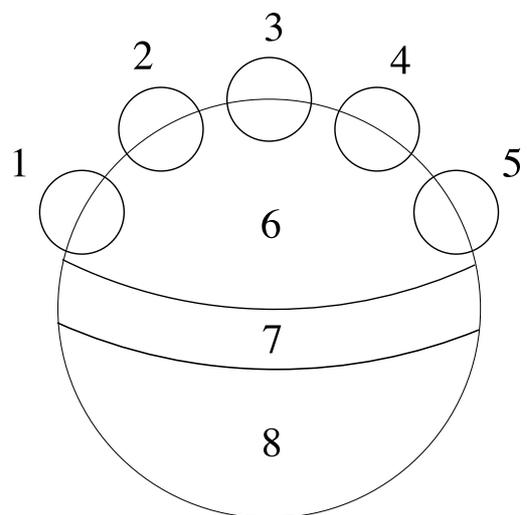
The following outline of this material is intended to both define the most basic terms used, and to give an overview of the system. This will allow a student to see at any time during the lectures where the subject of Thay’s talk stands in relation to the whole. I found, when first hearing these lectures, that it was not always easy to organize the material presented. By the 6th or 7th day however, an image of the whole subject arose, and it became possible from that point on to review any of the material in relation to the entire subject.

After his description, Thay went on to explain how we may best use the abhidharma in our daily lives.

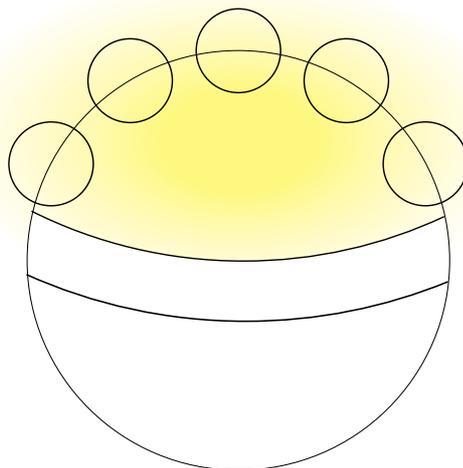
Part I. The abhidharma that Thay explains presents us with an 8-fold division of consciousness.

“A different function of consciousness may be described as a different entity.”

The first five consciousnesses are easy. They are the five senses we know them; eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness and body (or touch) consciousness.



The 6th consciousness is mind, and this functions through the first 5. Mind-consciousness has its physical base in the brain and central nervous system, and its subtle physical counterpart in our psychic nature. The Sanskrit term for mind-consciousness is Manovijnana.



The 6th consciousness is subject to change, and this accounts for changes in the nature and quality of our perception.

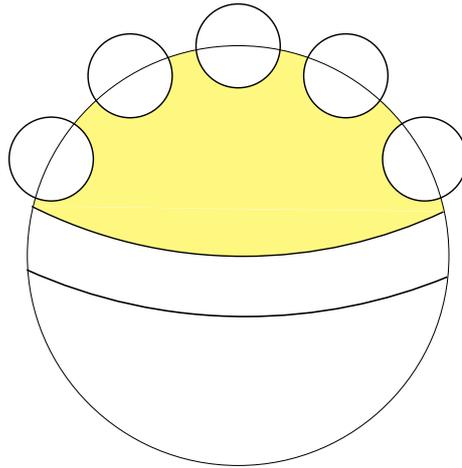
To paraphrase Thay, in daily life, many times what we see is an object of consciousness, not an object of reality. (we are seeing our own minds, coloring, obscuring)

“There are two ways of perceiving (in Manovijnana) direct, and inferential.”

“Sometimes our inferences are correct, sometimes not. An archeologist finding utensils infers they were used by a cook; someone seeing smoke infers fire.”

“The first five consciousnesses are all direct perceivers. Manovijnana can be direct at times. (This is intuition) If you reason too much, you weaken Manovijnana’s capacity for direct perception.”

Mind consciousness can also function independent of the first five.



“Manovijnana functions alone when

1- We are not concentrated, in dispersion, daydreaming

2- When practicing concentration without the 5 consciousnesses. This is Manovijnana in samadhi-concentration.

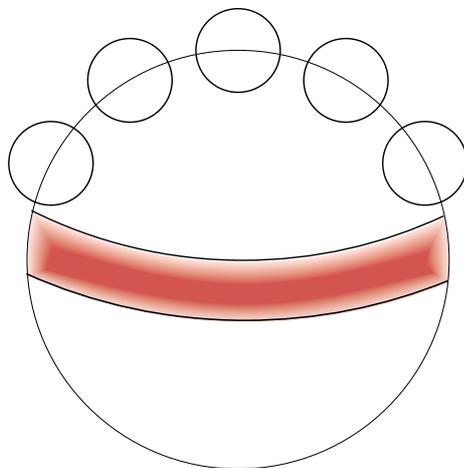
3- In dreams

4- In disturbance- psychosis- when a person is not in touch with reality”

“The five perceptions arise according to conditions, singly or together. When you shut down 1, 2 or 3, the remaining will be clearer. This is concentration.”

“When consciousness is functioning through just 1 door, it is quite concentrated. In meditation we shut the doors of the (first) five consciousnesses, so that the 6th (mind) can concentrate more on its object. Concentrating deeply on a leaf, we don't hear talk or noise. We can concentrate even in the marketplace.”

To explain the changes in the quality of mind-consciousness that we experience, Manovijnana needs a base, another consciousness. The 6th consciousness, mind-consciousness is conditioned by the 7th, called Manas, which is translated as mind.



This 7th level of consciousness is “trapped in illusions” and is the source of our errors in perception. These misperceptions are the source of much suffering.

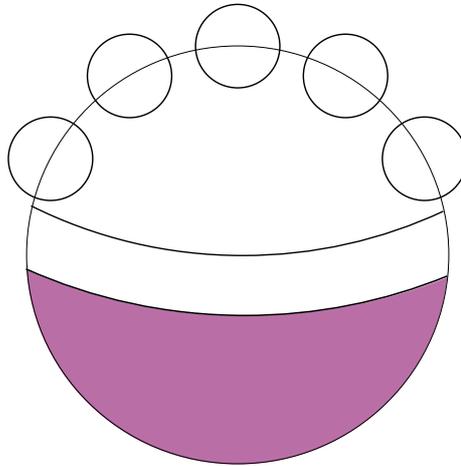
The 7th consciousness is formed by the mind taking a part of the whole of our experience to be ourself.

Manas has in its nature “the 4 veils”; self view (wrong view), ignorance where the self is concerned, pride(self importance taking up the whole scope of our vision), and self-love (referred to in the Tibetan tradition as self-cherishing; considering one’s own happiness to be more important than everyone else’s).

“Manas functions on the principle of pleasure.” “Manas is very much grounded in our body, and a number of wishes, many unfulfilled, urges manovijnana to seek fulfillment, but manovijnana is still in touch with reality and says “no”, “impossible”.

“We practice meditation in order to transform the 6th and 7th consciousnesses.” Consciousness is subject to change as our understanding matures.

All of these preceding seven consciousnesses have as their Big Base the consciousness called Alaya-vijnana, which is translated as the Store-Consciousness, or Root-consciousness.



“Alaya is the foundation of all perception. The function of root consciousness is to support the other consciousnesses, and to maintain and store everything.”

All of our experiences go into Alaya in the form of seeds (called bijas in Sanskrit). These seeds are also referred to as “internal formations”.

“Alaya, store-consciousness, has many seeds. We have the seed of an image of someone who made us suffer, one we hate, seeds of love, of anger, of desire, conviction that we have a higher education, seeds of belief that everybody’s unkind to us. All these seeds are forces, like waves under the ocean, and because of them, a large wave is born on the ocean...”

Experience may also surface from within, from Alaya.

The seeds (or energies) in Alaya, even in this latent form, as potential, act on one another. They act to transform one another.

“Real transformation happens in Alaya.”

## Five Forms of Seeds:

1. In the root - you see the possibility of becoming
2. In the trunk - which can support many different branches (manifestations)
3. In the stem - cutting - we plant and the roots grow out of that
4. In the fruit
5. In the seed

“We are the fruit, and we continue to produce more force, by our words, by our deeds, by our thoughts. When it appears to end, the underlying force continues to produce another phase of its life.”

“Certain seeds have more chance to come up under certain pressures. many beautiful seeds have no chance to come up. Every time a seed has a chance to come up, it will fall back (to Alaya) stronger.”

## Part II. Practical application of the Abhidharma

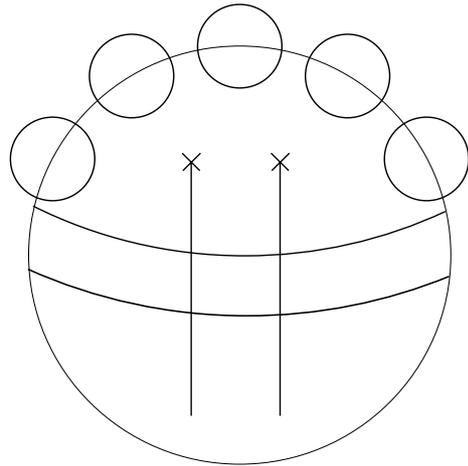
“ Suppose a seed of anger is watered by someone saying something very mean- a meditator is aware of it and can invite another seed, a beneficial seed to come up (to take care of this seed and yourself). Two things come together in Manovijnana.

A difficult guest comes,  
you invite a skillful guest  
to take care of him.

Both come from your consciousness  
and have an equal right to be  
in your living room.

If mindfulness is there,  
it will influence your feeling.  
You don't want to transform,  
but the feeling of light makes a difference.

This is a non-violent way.



“ Mindfulness has to envelop, cradle the anger. Identify yourself with the feeling, like a mother with a child.”

“ The presence of a seed next to another seed can influence that seed (energy).”

“If we understand the way the mind works, practice will be easy.”

“In the practice of meditation, we water the beneficial seeds, so that they can grow stronger and transform unbeneficial seeds.

We need mindfulness practice to keep clear, because the beneficial mental formations present in concentration will then take care of the work of transformation. Just water and take care of good seeds, and they'll help transform. This is one way of practicing; nourishing, watering.

The other way is a direct encounter with unbeneficial seeds. We do that only when we are strong and stable enough.

before that time, we practice getting in touch with beneficial dharmas.”

## LOOKING DEEPLY

“Three realms”- Objects of Manovijnana (consciousness awareness).

1. Particular - Manovijnana can go directly into the nature of things- direct perception. This is the reason for mindfulness practice.

2. Universal (representation)- There are degrees of representation- categorizing, inferring, comparing...

like seeing a white horse and thinking of horse, farm animals, animals etc.

“When we see a star, a living thing, the mind transforms it into a universal and the representation goes into store consciousness.

3. Pure Image- All images fall from manovijnana to alaya, and remain there as seed.

A pure image may arise as a true representation an “image with substance”, or as a modified image, (composite) an image with no corresponding reality (like someone flying in the air with two heads), an “object without substance”.

If such an image happens to come during sitting, it's helpful to know its roots- if it is a faithful reproduction or an image transformed by frustration, desire, anger.

Say hello to it, look deeply into it, see the forces behind it. This way it will lose its power over you. A meditator sees what happens in the present moment.

“Images can also be objects of meditation. All this- a mountain, tree, person, and things that don’t exist, like Santa Claus, or tortise hair, is a dharma. It is possible to look into tortise hair and get enlightened, It is a reality with its own roots, and it contains the whole universe.

By looking deepy you can see the base. (This is true whether you look at a true image or turtle’s hair, imaginings, modifacations.) Turtle’s hair is also a product of consciousness. It is made of the elements of reality.

All dharmas have their basis in reality.”

“You don’t have to abandon the world of representation and mere image. By looking deeply at the image of a leaf, you can get enlightened.”

The Sanskrit term “Vasana”, refers to repeated force becoming a habit energy, “a strong bija”.

“Even one action, like rolling up a piece of paper, can create (a subtle) habit energy.

“Both pleasant and unpleasant feelings can draw us to the past. We keep repeating behavior even if it has brought us much suffering.”

“The practice is to realize the kind of patterns in you to bring about a transformation at the base. You must hold insight and shine it on your behavior (all dharmas).

You see the effect of your habit energy in you. It is not necessary to go back to your childhood, it is present today.”

“Change takes place within us because these different energies influence one another.

It is as Sister Anabell told us, “Ripening is happening all the time.”

“We have to transform the depth of consciousness. Mind consciousness pushes the mind to approach Alaya, and in the morning, change has occurred.”

“The object of our work is store consciousness. Mind consciousness is the gardener, store consciousness the garden.”

“We don’t practice with mind consciousness alone. We have to entrust Alaya with the seeds of understanding and loving. Alaya will do the work of watering, taking care (maturation). Trust. Water, continue to care for the seeds in an intelligent way, and store consciousness will offer a flower of love, understanding, liberation.”