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The Role of *Cetanā* (Volition) and *Vīriya* (Energy) in the Development of Wholesome Consciousness and Moral Action: A Study of *Cetasikas* in Theravāda Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha

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Abstract

The paper argues that in the Theravāda Abhidhamma wholesome consciousness and wholesome morality reside together in two mental factors *(cetasika): cetanā,* which can be described as volition, takes the mental state to its goal, and is identified with *kamma, and vīriya*, which supports and sustains the mental state, preventing it from collapsing. It considers the location of each of the factors in the scheme of fifty-two *cetasikas ,* the definition of each by characteristic, function, manifestation and proximate cause, and the ways each is wholesome or unwholesome only in the presence of the factor or factors with which it is connected. It uses as the main text A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, a translation and explanation of Ācariya Anuruddha's Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha, with Abhidhammattha sangahasutra as the supporting text. It then traces how these two factors carry a wholesome state into bodily, verbal and mental action through the cognitive process (*vīthi),* the doctrine of *kamma,* the courses of action *(kammapatha*) and the requisites of enlightenment. Secondary works in Buddhist psychology, ranging from Padmasiri de Silva and Piyadassi Thera to Christopher deCharms and Karuna Cayton, are used to connect the Abhidhamma account with modern discussions of motivation, effort and self-regulation. The paper concludes that cetanā gives moral life its direction and *vīriya* gives it continuity, and that ethical development in the Abhidhamma consists in training both under wisdom.

Keywords: Theravāda Abhidhamma, *kamma, vīriya*, motivation, effort and self-regulation

1. Introduction

The Buddha placed the moral life in the mind. The opening verses of the Dhammapada state that mental states are preceded by mind, led by mind and made by mind, and that suffering or happiness follows from what one does with a corrupted or a pure mind. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 6.63) the Buddha goes further*: "Cetanāhaṁ, bhikkhave, kammaṁ vadāmi"* — "It is volition, monks, that I call kamma; having willed, one acts by body, speech and mind." These two statements frame the problem this paper addresses. If action is morally significant because of the mental state behind it, then a precise account of that mental state is required to understand how good action arises and how it can be cultivated. The Abhidhamma provides such an

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account. It analyses each moment of consciousness *(citta)* into consciousness proper and the mental factors (*cetasika*) that arise alongside it. Two of these bear most of the weight in ethical psychology: *cetanā,* the volition that wills and accumulates *kamma,* and *vīriya,* the energy that exerts and refuses to give way. Neither is good or bad in itself; both become wholesome only with the roots of non-greed, non-hatred and wisdom. The paper poses three questions:

- What is the definition of *cetanā* and *vīriya,* according to the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha in the Comprehensive Manual, and in what category are they found?
- How do these two factors, together, relate to one another in a moment of wholesome consciousness, and how do together they act in the cognitive process to produce moral action and its fruits?
- What contribution does this analysis make to a modern psychology of motivation and effort, as reflected in the secondary literature on Buddhist psychology?

It is said that *cetanā* is related to *vīriya* as direction to support. The purpose gives something a *kammic* quality of its own, and energy sustains that purpose from inertia and distraction in a wholesome state. On this perspective, moral development is a joint product of will and effort, and it is a means of developing them under the direction of wisdom.

2. Sources and Method

The Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha is the primary source, the Pāli text of which is included in A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma (Bodhi, 1993), which also reproduces the text of the classical commentaries, principally Sumangala's *Vibhāvinī-ṭīkā* and Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa's Atthasālinī and Visuddhagga, with an explanatory guide based mainly on these commentaries. The study relies mainly on Chapter II (Compendium of Mental Factors), Chapter IV (Compendium of the Cognitive Process), Chapter V (Compendium of the Process-freed, including the section on kamma), Chapter VII (Compendium of Categories) and Chapter VIII (Compendium of Conditionality). Canonical passages are cited according to their standard Pāli Text Society divisions. The method is textual and analytical. Each factor is described using the Abhidhamma's fourfold definition of characteristic *(lakkhaṇa),* function (rasa), manifestation *(paccupaṭṭhāna*) and proximate cause *(padhaṭṭhāna),* and is then traced through the larger structures of the system. The ten prescribed works of modern Buddhist psychology, along with a few additional sources, serve for interpretation and comparison; doctrinal claims rest on the Manual and the texts on which it draws. One limitation should be noted. Guenther and Kawamura's Mind in Buddhist Psychology treats a Tibetan Yogācāra-based list of fifty-one mental events rather than the Theravāda list of fifty-two. It is used here as a point of comparison, not as evidence for Theravāda doctrine.

3. The *Cetasika* Framework of the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha

Anuruddha begins Chapter II by defining a mental factor through four common characteristics: it arises together with consciousness, ceases together with it, takes the same object, and shares the same base (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. II). Consciousness, therefore, is never mere bare awareness. It always comes accompanied by a group of factors, and the ethical and psychological character

of any given moment hinges on which of those factors are present. The fifty-two *cetasikas* fall into three broad groups:

Group	**Pāli name**	**Number**	**Includes**
Ethically variable factors	*aññasamāna*	13	7 universals (including ***cetanā***) and 6 occasionals (including ***vīriya)***
Unwholesome factors	*akusala*	14	delusion, shamelessness, fearlessness of wrongdoing, restlessness, greed, wrong view, conceit, hatred, envy, avarice, worry, sloth, torpor, doubt
Beautiful factors	*sobhana*	25	19 beautiful universals, 3 abstinences, 2 illimitables, wisdom

The key to this study lies in placing both cetanā and vīriya within the first group. The term aññasamāna means "common to others": these factors assume the ethical quality of the consciousness they accompany. When a moment is rooted in greed, they serve greed; when it is rooted in generosity, they serve generosity. The two factors differ in their range. *Cetanā* is among the seven universals (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa)*, along with contact, feeling, perception, one-pointedness, psychic life faculty and attention. These seven occur in all eighty-nine (or 121) types of consciousness, so no moment of mind lacks some volition. *Vīriya* is one of the six occasionals (*pakiṇṇaka),* alongside initial application, sustained application, decision, zest and desire. In Anuruddha's combination of factors with consciousness, energy is missing from sixteen types: the five-door adverting consciousness, the two sets of fivefold sense consciousness, the two receiving consciousnesses and the three investigating consciousnesses (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. II). These are the passive, resultant or merely functional moments of the cognitive process. Energy appears wherever the mind actively engages its object, which covers every wholesome, unwholesome and supramundane state and every *javana* (impulsion) moment. The framework therefore yields a first contrast. Volition is constant, yet it varies in strength and quality. Energy is selective; its presence distinguishes consciousness that merely registers from consciousness that works.

4. *Cetanā*: Volition as the Kamma-Forming Factor

4.1 Definition

Cetanā comes from the same root as *citta.* Following the commentaries, the Manual describes it as the factor responsible for bringing about a goal: it acts upon the associated factors so that they, in turn, act upon the object (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. II). Its definition, consisting of four parts, is as follows:

Aspect	**Cetanā**
Characteristic *(lakkhaṇa*)	the state of willing *(cetayitabhāva)*

Function *(rasa)*	accumulation of kamma *(āyūhana)*
Manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna)*	coordination (*saṁvidahana)*
Proximate cause (*padhaṭṭhāna)*	the associated states

The commentaries illustrate this with a senior pupil who recites his own lesson while the other pupils recite theirs at the same time, or with a chief carpenter who does his own work while directing the others. *Cetanā* does not perceive, feel, or concentrate; those functions are performed by contact, feeling, perception, and one-pointedness. Its own task is to organise them toward a goal. For this reason, the Manual describes volition as the most significant factor in generating kamma, because it determines the ethical quality of action (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. II).

4.2 Volition and *kamma*

Because *cetanā* is universal, every *citta* contains volition, yet not every citta creates kamma. In resultant (*vipāka)* and functional (kiriya) consciousness, including all the functional states of the arahant, volition simply coordinates its fellow factors and accumulates nothing. Only in wholesome and unwholesome consciousness does it fulfil its full function. This makes clear how the arahant can act and teach without producing new *kamma:* volition is present, but it is no longer rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion. The equation of cetanā with kamma recurs repeatedly throughout the *Saṅgaha.* In dependent origination (Ch. VIII), the second link, saṅkhāra, is described as wholesome and unwholesome volition. Among the four nutriments (Ch. VII), mental volition (*manosañcetanā*) sustains the arising of new existence. In the conditional relations (Ch. VIII), cetanā acts as the kamma condition in two modes: as conascent *kamma* it conditions the factors arising together with it, and as asynchronous *kamma* a past volition conditions later resultant consciousness and *kamma*-born matter. Volition thus organises the present moment and links it to future experience.

4.3 The ethical neutrality of cetanā

As an ethically variable factor, cetanā has no moral colour of its own. What lends it a wholesome character is the presence of the wholesome roots (*alobha, adosa*, and in some states *amoha*) together with the nineteen beautiful universals, beginning with faith, mindfulness, moral shame *(hiri)* and moral dread (*ottappa).* This point matters for the psychology of moral development. The Abhidhamma does not locate goodness in a special faculty of good will. It locates it in the quality of the company that volition keeps. So to develop wholesome volition is to cultivate the roots and beautiful factors that give it shape.

5. Vīriya: Energy as Support and Striving

5.1 Definition

Vīriya is related to *vīra*, a hero or a person of strength, and is defined as the state of one who is energetic. The *Manual* gives its fourfold definition from the commentaries (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. II):

Aspect	**Vīriya**

Characteristic (*lakkhaṇa)*	supporting *(upatthambhana*), exerting (*paggaha*) and marshalling *(ussahana*)
Function *(rasa)*	to support its associated states
Manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna)*	non-collapse (*asaṁsīdana)*
Proximate cause (*padhaṭṭhāna)*	a sense of urgency (*saṁvega),* or a ground for arousing energy

Two similes drawn from the commentaries make its function clear. Energy resembles new timbers that keep an old house from collapsing, and reinforcements that keep an army from retreating. In both images, energy introduces nothing new to the object; it supports what is already there. Where cetanā organises, vīriya props up. The commentaries add that energy, when rightly applied, should be regarded as the root of all attainments.

5.2 Vīriya in the categories of Chapter VII

No factor appears more frequently in the Abhidhamma's categories of practice. In Chapter VII, *vīriya* shows up as a faculty *(vīriyindriya*), as a power (*vīriyabala*), as one of the four dominants (*vīriyādhipati)* and, among the thirty-seven requisites of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā),* as:

- the four supreme efforts (*sammappadhāna);*
- the means to accomplishment of energy (*vīriyiddhipāda);*
- the faculty and the power of energy;
- the energy factor of enlightenment (*vīriyasambojjhaṅga);*
- right effort (*sammā-vāyāma)* in the Noble Eightfold Path.

As the Manual observes, energy is counted nine times among the thirty-seven requisites, more than any other single factor (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. VII). The structure of the requisites therefore confirms what the definition implies: the path rests on sustained effort.

5.3 Four great plays

Vīriya has its ethical programme from the four supreme efforts. The practitioner puts in effort (1) to prevent the arising of unwholesome states, (2) to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen, (3) to arouse wholesome states which are not yet arisen, and (4) to maintain and perfect wholesome states which have arisen.

5.4 The ethical neutrality of vīriya

As with *cetanā, vīriya* is ethically variable. It occurs in all twelve unwholesome types of consciousness, where it turns into wrong effort (*micchā-vāyāma),* as in the persistence of someone seeking revenge. The very "non-collapse" that keeps a meditator on the cushion keeps an addict locked in a habit. Energy turns into right effort only when it arises together with the

wholesome roots and is guided by wisdom. Its direct opponent is sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*), which render consciousness dull and unwieldy.

6. The Interplay of Cetanā and Vīriya in Wholesome Consciousness

6.1 Direction and support for a single citta

Cetanā and *vīriya* are present in all the eight *cittas* of the wholesome characteristics of the sense-spheres. They complement each other's roles. Volition is setting the objective and guiding the factors towards it. These factors do not sink back because of energy. A third occasional, chanda (desire-to-act), gives the desire to attain the goal. Good intention, if it lacks energy is a good wish; but energy, if it lacks any good intention becomes restlessness or wrong striving. This relation is more precisely defined by the theory of the dominants (*adhipati).* The four factors which can dominate a state are desire, energy, consciousness and investigation (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. VII). *Cetanā* is not among that bunch. Volition is always there, always controlling, but when a good work is done by pure perseverance, it is to *vīriya* that it is entrusted. Such an act of giving may then be largely an act of energy - the donor continues to give even when they are tired or not inclined to do so.

6.2 Congsciousness

Wholesome consciousness is classified into unprompted *(asaṅkhaṃ*), and prompted (*sasaṅkhāṃ)* by the *Saṅgaha.* Prompted consciousness is only evident when there is some kind of stimulus, either from inside or outside. The Manual specifies that this is a preliminary effort or a way to get rid of the mind's resistance (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. I). Here is where the connection between volition and energy comes into the classification of consciousness. When wholesome volition is weak, energy has to be summoned first in order to get it going. Volition comes with well established healthy practices. From this point of view, moral training is the progressive shift from prompted to unprompted "good" states: from "goodness with effort" to "goodness without effort.

6.3 Balance of faculties

Of the five spiritual faculties, the Visuddhimagga teaches that energy needs to be balanced against concentration: an excess of energy brings agitation, while an excess of concentration brings idleness (Vism IV). In the same way, the Saṁyutta Nikāya (SN 46.53) recommends cultivating investigation, energy and zest when the mind is sluggish, and tranquillity, concentration and equanimity when it is agitated. The Abhidhamma's ideal is effort that is well judged, not effort at its maximum.

6.4 Effort in the three volitions of a good deed

The commentaries break a gift down into three volitions: before giving (pubba-cetanā), while giving (muñcana-cetanā), and when recalling it afterwards (apara-cetanā). The Manual ranks wholesome kamma as superior (ukkaṭṭha) or inferior (omaka) depending on whether the act is accompanied by wholesome or unwholesome states (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. V). Maintaining a wholesome mind through all three phases is the task of energy.

7. From Wholesome Consciousness to Moral Action

7.1 The *javana* phase

In the cognitive process (vīthi) it is claimed that, *kamma is* generated during the *javana,* or impulsion, phase. Once an object has been received, investigated and determined, the mind proceeds through a series of usually seven javana moments of the same kind. These are the only moments within a process in which the mind is ethically active. Each of them carries both c*etanā* and *vīriya.* The Manual explains that the firs*t javana* volition is the weakest and may ripen in this life, the seventh may ripen in the next life, and the five in between may ripen at any later time (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. V). Moral action in the Abhidhamma is therefore a stream of volitional moments, each supported by energy, rather than a single decision.

7.2 Courses of action and abstinences

The ten wholesome courses of action *(kusala kammapatha*) span body, speech and mind. In the bodily and verbal courses, a wholesome volition expresses itself by way of bodily or vocal intimation. The Saṅgaha adds a significant refinement. The three abstinences *(virati)* — right speech, right action and right livelihood — are counted as distinct beautiful factors. In mundane consciousness they arise one at a time, only when a person deliberately refrains from an opportunity to transgress; in supramundane path consciousness all three arise together (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. II). Abstinence is therefore not merely the absence of a bad act. It is a positive mental factor, energised and directed by volition, which confronts temptation and turns away from it. The Visuddhimagga expresses this same perspective when it includes volition (*cetanā-sīla*) and abstinence (*cetasika-sīla)* among the meanings of virtue (Vism I).

7.3 Habit and the formation of character

The Manual categorizes kamma by the order in which it ripens into weighty, death-proximate, habitual (*āciṇṇa),* and reserve *kamma* (Bodhi, 1993, Ch. V). Habitual *kamma* is formed by repeating a particular kind of volition many times, which relies on energy maintained over time. The repetition condition (*āsevana-paccaya)* in Chapter VIII reveals the same process within a single cognitive series, in which each *javana* imparts force to the next. Over the course of a life, repeated wholesome volition backed by energy turns into character: a person becomes good not through a single choice but through cultivated continuity.

7.4 Three bases of merit

Giving (dāna), virtue (sīla), and mental cultivation (bhāvanā) each depend on both factors. Volition provides the moral substance of each; energy overcomes possessiveness in giving, sustains abstinence against habit in virtue, and in cultivation carries the mind toward the supramundane path, where right effort becomes a path factor.

8. Psychological Perspectives from the Secondary Literature

Contemporary interpreters of Buddhist psychology understand the Abhidhamma account of volition and energy in a number of ways. Four themes stand out. Motivation and responsibility: Padmasiri de Silva’s An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology sets out the Buddhist theory of motivation through the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion and their opposites, and compares

it with Western theories, particularly psychoanalysis. His interpretation supports the position adopted here: Buddhist ethics regards motivation as something that can be analysed and trained, and holds the agent responsible for it. Piyadassi Thera's The Psychological Aspect of Buddhism likewise emphasizes that the Buddha's teaching starts from mind as the forerunner of action, and that liberation is attained through one's own effort rather than through external grace. Both works affirm the Abhidhamma's pairing of volition (what one intends) with energy (what one makes oneself do). Practice and everyday life: Caroline Brazier's Buddhist Psychology demonstrates the way conditioned patterns of mind reinforce one another and how practice works to loosen them. Joy Manné presents early Buddhist teaching as a method meant to be tested in everyday experience, and Ch. Venkata Siva Sai's Buddhism: A Practical Psychology approaches it as applied psychology. In Abhidhamma terms, these authors describe the four supreme efforts operating in ordinary life. The mind that misleads: Karuna Cayton's The Misleading Mind contends that a great deal of human suffering arises from the mind's own habits of interpretation. This aligns with the Abhidhamma insight that volition is ethically neutral and can be seized upon by delusion. Cayton's focus on altering habitual reactions parallels the doctrine of habitual *kamma* and the gradual movement from prompted to unprompted wholesome states. C. D. Naik's Buddhism and Psychology, which offers extended treatment of *kamma*, the Abhidhamma and the classes of consciousness, and Bodo Balsys's A Treatise on Mind both place this ethical training within a wider account of the nature and transformation of consciousness. Comparative frameworks: Guenther and Kawamura's Mind in Buddhist Psychology translates a Tibetan treatise in which volition ranks among the ever-present mental events, as it does in the Theravāda. Yet diligence *(vīrya)* is counted there only among the positive factors, while the Theravāda regards *vīriya* as ethically variable. The Theravāda view is psychologically more precise: perseverance can be put to harmful ends and must be qualified by wholesome roots. Christopher deCharms's Two Views of Mind contends that Abhidharma and brain science can inform one another. The distinction between setting a goal (*cetanā*) and sustaining effort toward it (*vīriya)* resembles the modern distinction between forming an intention and maintaining it under fatigue, though such parallels should be held lightly, since the Abhidhamma's categories derive from meditative analysis rather than experiment.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined two mental factors that the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha counts among the ethically variable *cetasikas* . *Cetanā* is universal: it is present in every moment of consciousness, organises the associated factors toward their goal and, in wholesome and unwholesome states, accumulates *kamma. Vīriya* is occasional: it arises wherever the mind actively engages its object, supports the associated factors and keeps them from collapse. Neither one is good on its own. Each becomes wholesome only when accompanied by non-greed, non-hatred and wisdom, and by beautiful factors such as faith, mindfulness, moral shame and moral dread. Three conclusions emerge. First, the two factors are related by way of direction and support. Volition gives a wholesome state its purpose and *kammic* weight; energy gives it continuity. Second, in the Abhidhamma moral action is a process, not a single act. It unfolds through the *javana* moments of the cognitive process, through the preceding, releasing and subsequent volitions of a deed, and through the repetition that turns volition into habit and

habit into character. Third, ethical development is the training of both factors together under the guidance of wisdom: the four supreme efforts, the balance of the faculties and the gradual shift from prompted to unprompted goodness describe this training precisely. For modern psychology, the Abhidhamma offers a model in which intention and effort are distinct, measurable in experience, ethically neutral in themselves and transformable through practice. Its central lesson remains the one stated in AN 6.63: *kamma* is volition. The Saṅgaha adds that volition becomes a path only when right effort sustains it.

Abbreviations:

AN — Aṅguttara Nikāya

SN — Saṁyutta Nikāya

Vism — Visuddhimagga (cited by chapter)

CMA / Manual — Bodhi (1993), cited by chapter

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