

Oppositional Narratives of the *Abhidhamma Nidānakathā*: A Janusian Analysis of Origins of Theravada and Mahayana *Abhidhamma*

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Introduction

Comparative study of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism is methodologically complex due to the distinct textual histories, doctrinal priorities, and commentarial frameworks associated with their respective Abhidhamma and Abhidharma systems. Nevertheless, a comparative inquiry remains valuable where both traditions preserve parallel narrative strategies regarding the origin, authority, and transmission of higher teachings. This study investigates the narratives surrounding the Abhidhamma desana in the Theravada tradition alongside the revelatory transmission of Mahayana Abhidharma associated with Asanga and Maitreya, exploring how structurally divergent movements are represented in the literary imagination of Buddhist exegetical traditions (Rahula, 2001).

In the Theravada tradition, the Abhidhamma is historically associated with the account of the Buddha preaching the higher teaching in the Tavatimsa heaven to celestial beings, an account that became deeply embedded in later commentarial literature (Rahula, 2001). Conversely, the Mahayana tradition centered on Asanga situates its revelatory narrative in Tushita, where Asanga is described as ascending through meditative prowess to encounter the Bodhisattva Maitreya; subsequently, Maitreya is depicted as descending to Jambudvīpa to expound the teaching, while Asanga interprets the content for human audiences (Rahula, 2001). Crucially, the primary source material cautions against interpreting these accounts as literal historical occurrences, categorizing them instead as instances of a broader religious-psychological propensity to ascribe sacred status to texts via transcendent inspiration (Rahula, 2001).

Consequently, this research does not endeavor to authenticate these narratives as historical phenomena. Instead, it examines the opposing trajectories of ascent and descent through the lens of Albert Rothenberg's theory of the "Janusian process," defined as the capacity to conceive and utilize opposite or contradictory ideas simultaneously in the act of creation (Rothenberg, 1971). Within this theoretical framework, the upward movement of the Buddha in the Theravada narrative and the downward descent of Maitreya in the Mahayana

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tradition may be interpreted as a paired structure of symbolic opposites inherent in these distinct scholastic movements (Rahula, 2001; Rothenberg, 1971).

The primary research problem concerns whether these contrasting narrative constructions may be understood as intentional manifestations of Janusian creativity in the development of Buddhist commentarial literature. This inquiry is particularly pertinent as the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* situates such transmission narratives within a wider framework of religious psychology, while Rothenberg's framework elucidates how oppositional structures function as productive elements of creative cognition rather than accidental artifacts (Rahula, 2001; Rothenberg, 1971). Thus, this study evaluates whether the interaction of ascent and descent in these traditions reflects a deeper cognitive logic in the legitimation of Abhidhamma authority.

The significance of this investigation lies in its attempt to synthesize Buddhist textual analysis with psychological theory to elucidate the construction of religious authority through narrative form. By prioritizing the literary representation of oppositional movement over sectarian polemics, this research offers a robust interpretive framework for understanding authorship, creativity, and the construction of sacred origins in Buddhist intellectual history (Rahula, 2001; Rothenberg, 1971).

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine whether the contrasting narrative patterns found in Theravada and Mahayana accounts of the transmission of higher teaching may be interpreted through Albert Rothenberg's concept of the Janusian process, defined as the simultaneous conception and utilization of opposite or contradictory ideas in creative thought (Rothenberg, 1971). Specifically, this research analyses how the Theravada account of the Buddha's teaching in Tavatimsa and the Mahayana narrative of Asanga's ascent to Tushita, paired with Maitreya's descent to Jambudvipa, represent structurally opposed movements within Buddhist narrative and exegetical traditions (Rahula, 2001).

Finally, the study aims to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship by bringing Buddhist doctrinal and commentarial analysis into dialogue with psychological theory. By doing so, it seeks to offer a new perspective on the literary construction of sacred authority and on the role of oppositional structures in the formation and legitimation of Buddhist intellectual traditions (Rahula, 2001; Rothenberg, 1971).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing textual analysis to examine non-numeric, narrative sources within ancient Buddhist literature. As the inquiry focuses on interpreting symbolic meanings, philosophical concepts, and the literary construction of sacred authority rather than statistical hypothesis testing, a qualitative, interpretive approach is most appropriate.

The research primarily involves the close reading and comparative analysis of key narrative accounts regarding the transmission of higher teachings in the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, specifically the Buddha's preaching in Tavatimsa and Asanga's encounter with Maitreya in Tushita. These sources are treated as conceptual data, which are then evaluated through Albert Rothenberg's theory of the Janusian process. This framework allows the study to explore the role of simultaneous, oppositional thinking—such as the symbolic interplay between ascent and descent—as a creative and legitimating strategy within Buddhist intellectual history.

By integrating Buddhist doctrinal study with psychological theory, the research is well-suited for exploring abstract, spiritual phenomena. This methodology prioritises analytical depth and interpretive coherence, aiming to illuminate how narrative oppositions function as intentional constructions in the development of Buddhist exegetical traditions.

Results

The textual analysis indicates that both Theravada and Mahayana traditions employ sacred transmission narratives to legitimize higher teaching, but they do so through different symbolic structures. In the Theravada tradition, the Abhidhamma teaching is associated with the Buddha's preaching in Tavatimsa, while in the Mahayana tradition linked to Asanga, the revelatory account centers on Asanga's ascent to Tushita and Maitreya's subsequent connection with the human world. These two narratives therefore present contrasting directional movements, which makes them suitable for interpretation through Rothenberg's concept of Janusian thinking as the simultaneous use of oppositional ideas in creative construction.

The sources also suggest an important chronological distinction. Asanga is generally placed in the fourth century CE, and the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* belongs to that broad historical setting. By contrast, the Theravada account preserved in the *Atthasālinī* is available to the present study through the later commentarial tradition associated with Buddhaghosa in Anuradhapura, even though that commentary itself represents an inherited interpretive tradition rather than a

wholly original composition. On this basis, it is more accurate to say that the written form available for direct comparison is later in Buddhaghosa's redaction, while the Theravada tradition it preserves is understood as older within its own lineage claims.

From a comparative perspective, the findings support the view that the Mahayana narrative associated with Asanga can be read as displaying a Janusian structure. Rothenberg defines Janusian thinking as the capacity to conceive opposite or contradictory ideas simultaneously, especially in creative production. In that sense, the symbolic contrast between the Buddha's heavenly teaching in the Theravada tradition and the Maitreya-Asanga transmission pattern in the Mahayana tradition may be interpreted as an oppositional reformulation of sacred authority, especially through the paired imagery of ascent and descent, heaven and human world, and Buddha and Bodhisattva.

At the same time, the evidence does not allow a definitive historical claim that Asanga consciously borrowed from a known Theravada narrative and intentionally reversed it. The available sources support a comparative and interpretive conclusion rather than proof of direct literary dependence. Therefore, the strongest result of the study is not that one text conclusively copied the other, but that the two traditions preserve structurally opposite narrative models that can plausibly be understood through Janusian theory as creative mechanisms for constructing religious legitimacy.

A secondary result is that the reverse possibility, namely that Buddhaghosa formulated the Tavatimsa account in response to a Mahayana narrative, is less persuasive within the present evidentiary limits. This is because the *Atthasālinī* belongs to a conservative Theravada commentarial lineage and is presented as part of an already established interpretive system rather than as a newly invented doctrinal narrative. Accordingly, the more academically defensible conclusion is that Janusian interpretation applies more convincingly to the Mahayana narrative configuration associated with Asanga than to the Theravada commentarial preservation of the Abhidhamma tradition.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the Theravada and Mahayana transmission narratives for higher teachings function as structurally opposed symbolic models. By applying Rothenberg's (1971) Janusian framework, the analysis illuminates how the Mahayana tradition's account of Asanga's visionary ascent and Maitreya's descent serves as a creative, oppositional counterpoint to the established Theravada narrative of the Buddha's teaching in the Tavatimsa heaven. The findings suggest that these divergent trajectories—ascend versus

descent and celestial teaching versus human revelation—are not merely sectarian artifacts but intentional, Janusian constructions that function to anchor doctrinal legitimacy within competing religious frameworks (Rahula, 2001; Rothenberg, 1971).

This study contributes to the field by illustrating how interdisciplinary approaches, specifically the dialogue between Buddhist textual studies and psychological theories of creativity, can clarify the mechanisms of religious authority. The implications are significant: rather than treating these narratives solely as historical or polemical claims, they may be understood as sophisticated cognitive and literary products of an intellectual history that values simultaneous, contradictory truth-claims (Rahula, 2001). Ultimately, the research confirms that oppositional narrative structures are essential creative tools in Buddhist exegesis. Future studies could expand this interpretive framework to analyze other Buddhist transmission myths, thereby deepening the academic understanding of religious authorship and doctrinal legitimation.

Keywords - Theravada, Mahayana, Abhidhamma, Janusian Thinking, Comparative Religion

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