

A Note on the *Mahākammapibhaṅga-sutta* and Its Commentary

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What follows is concerned with the proper understanding of two terms in the *Mahākammapibhaṅga-sutta* (M III 207–15) and its commentary (Ps V 15–21): (*a*)*bhabba* and (*a*)*bhabbābhāsa*. Despite this particular focus, the problems encountered in trying to arrive at a proper understanding and translation of these terms are illustrative of the problems encountered more generally when trying to negotiate canonical Pali texts and their ancient commentaries using the available editions and dictionaries.

The *Mahākammapibhaṅga-sutta* consists of six more or less distinct sections:

- § 1. An introductory narrative (M III 207,1–209,19);
- § 2. a karmic puzzle set out in terms of four scenarios that each involves a person who acts in a particular way and is subsequently reborn (M III 209,20–10,8);
- § 3. the interpretation of each of these four scenarios by non-Buddhist ascetics on the basis of their direct knowledge of the actions and subsequent rebirth (M III 210,9–12,10);
- § 4. the Buddha's assessment of each of these four interpretations in the form of a statement of where his own analysis of karma (*kammavibhaṅga*) agrees and where it disagrees (M III 212,11–14,5);
- § 5. the Buddha's application of his analysis of karma to each of the four scenarios (M III 214,6–15,14);
- § 6. a short final summary paragraph (M III 215,15–18).

I am grateful to Margaret Cone, Eric Greene, Oskar von Hinüber, and Ulrich Pagel for advice in the course of writing this article.

The present note is concerned primarily with the translation and interpretation of the final summary paragraph (§6), both in the sutta and its commentary, and is prompted by three considerations: (1) the existing widely used English translations (by Horner, and Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi)¹ of the summary passage are clearly problematic; (2) the existing dictionary entries for *abhabba* (*PED*, *CPD*) and *bhabba* (*PED*) are likewise problematic; and (3) the text of the PTS edition of the commentary on this passage is unsatisfactory.

At the heart of the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta* is a karmic puzzle set out in what I have indicated as §2 above with reference to four types of person (M III 209,20–210,8):

1. The person who follows the ten unskilful courses of action and is then reborn in a hell realm;
2. the person who follows the ten unskilful courses of action and is then reborn in a heavenly realm;
3. the person who abstains from the ten unskilful courses of action and is then reborn in a heavenly realm;
4. the person who abstains from the ten unskilful courses of action and is then reborn in a hell realm.

In §§3–5 the text of the sutta systematically considers each of the four scenarios *in order* three times giving us interpretation of non-Buddhist ascetics, the Buddha's assessment of their interpretation, and finally the Buddha's own analysis. It thus seems likely that the summary statement that constitutes §6 is similarly meant to relate to each of the four scenarios *in order*. The summary statement reads as follows:

¹ I. B. Horner, *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, 3 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1954–1959), III (1959), p. 262; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), p. 1065.

atthi kammaṃ abhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsaṃ. atthi kammaṃ abhabbaṃ bhabbābhāsaṃ. atthi kammaṃ bhabbañ c' eva bhabbābhāsañ ca. atthi kammaṃ bhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsaṃ

Horner translates this as :

There is the deed that is inoperative, apparently inoperative; there is the deed that is inoperative, apparently operative; there is the deed that is operative, apparently operative; there is the deed that is operative, but apparently inoperative.²

It is not at all clear how this can be made to map coherently on to the four types of person set out in the sutta in *any* order. To take just the first case, a man committing the ten courses of unskilful action and then being reborn in hell would initially seem best described as a case of operative unskilful *kamma* that also appears operative, since the man does something bad and it appears that as a consequence he is reborn in hell. Of course, as the sutta proceeds it becomes apparent that it wants precisely to point out that appearances are deceptive: when someone is seen committing the ten courses of unskilful action and then seen reborn in hell, we should not assume that his rebirth in hell is the result of committing the particular actions he was seen committing. Nonetheless it is not at all clear, to me at least, what would be meant by describing this as an example of a deed “that is inoperative, apparently inoperative”. In fact, the sutta goes on to suggest that when someone is reborn in hell after a life in which he has been observed following the ten courses of unskilful action, it is in consequence of a bad action done by him *either* before *or* after these actions; *or* it is because at the time of death he adopted some wrong view. As for the ten unskilful courses of action he has been observed following in this life (*idha*), he experiences the results of these either in this life (*diṭṭhe va dhamme*) or in future existences :

When a person who here in this life harms living creatures, takes what is not given, ... and has mistaken views is, at the breaking up of the body, after death, reborn in a state of misfortune, an unhappy destiny, a state of affliction, hell, then either previous or subsequent [to these

² Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*, III, 262.

actions] he has done a bad act whose result is to be experienced as painful; or else at the time of death he has taken on and adopted some mistaken view. Therefore, at the breaking up of the body, after death he has been reborn in a state of misfortune, an unhappy destiny, a state of affliction, hell. And in so far as here in this life he harms living creatures, takes what is not given ... and has mistaken views, he experiences the result of that either in this very life or when he is reborn in further future existences.³

Thus from the sutta's perspective we have in the case of the first person an example of a *kamma* that appears operative (this bad action appears to cause rebirth in hell), but is not operative in this particular case (some other bad *kamma* has caused his rebirth in hell).

Similar problems arise when we try to apply the other summary statements translated in this way to the other categories. They simply do not fit however we try. In fact from the sutta's point of view the *kammas* all four men are seen doing are inoperative in so far as they are not the *kammas* that are the direct cause of the rebirth subsequently seen by the ascetics and brahmins.

Despite this a number of publications have followed Miss Horner's translation and stated that the Buddha in this sutta offers an analysis of *kamma* precisely in terms of *kamma* that is (1) inoperative, and apparently inoperative, (2) inoperative, but apparently operative, (3) opera-

³ M III 214,6–16: *tatr' ānanda yvāyaṃ puggalo idha pāṇātipātī adinnādāyī — pe — micchādīṭṭhī, kāyassa bhedaṃ paraṃ marañā apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ nirayaṃ upapajjati, pubbe vā 'ssa taṃ kataṃ hoti pāpakammaṃ dukkhavedanīyaṃ, pacchā vā 'ssa taṃ kataṃ hoti pāpakammaṃ dukkhavedanīyaṃ, maraṇakāle vā 'ssa hoti micchādīṭṭhī samattā samādinā. tena so kāyassa bhedaṃ paraṃ marañā apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ nirayaṃ upapajjati. yañ ca kho so idha pāṇātipātī hoti adinnādāyī hoti — pe — micchādīṭṭhī hoti tassa dīṭṭhe va dhamme vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti upapajja vā apare va pariyāye. For the reading *upapajja vā apare va pariyāye* see Oskar von Hinüber, “The ‘Threefold’ Effect of Karma”, *Selected Papers* (Oxford: PTS, 2005), 39–51 (48–49). For a defence of a threefold division of *kamma* in the present context, see Anālayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-Nikāya*, 2 vols (Taipei: Dharma Drum, 2011), II, 779–80 (n. 118).*

tive, and apparently operative, and (4) operative, but apparently inoperative. One publication elaborates on these terms and categories with the suggestion that it is following the interpretation of the commentary.⁴ As we shall see, the understanding of the commentary is rather different. As for the sutta itself, it seems clear that the terms *bhabba/abhabba* cannot be being used in the sense of “operative/inoperative” here.

At this point let us turn to the available dictionaries. If we start with *PED* we are told (s.v. *bhabba*) that *bhabba* has two basic meanings (1) “able, capable, fit for”, and, referring to our passage, (2) “possible”; specifically “apparently possible” is offered as a translation of *bhabba-ābhāsa* in the present context. As for *abhabba* (s.vv. *abhabba, bhabba*), we are told that *abhavya* in Sanskrit has a different meaning (though we are not told what that is) and that in Pali it means “impossible, not likely, unable”. *CPD* (s.v. *abhabba*), follows *PED*’s lead, noting that the term is equivalent to Sanskrit *abhavya* “in different meaning”; it then gives three basic meanings for Pali (a) “unable, incapable”, (b) “unqualified”, and (c) “inoperative or hopeless”, citing only the passage under discussion for the last (M III 215,15–16). Turning to *BHSD* (s.vv. *abhavya, bhavya*), we are again informed that *bhavya* means “able, capable”, and *abhavya* “unable, incapable, impotent”, although they do not have these senses in Sanskrit (but once more we are not told what the Sanskrit meanings are).

It is apparent that the characteristic usage of (*a*)*bhabba* and (*a*)*bhavya* in Pali and Buddhist Sanskrit is in the sense of “(un)able” or “(in)capable” followed by a dative or infinitive used to describe a person as (un)able to do something or (in)capable of doing something. This particular usage seems not to be found in Sanskrit, though both MW and Böhtlingk & Roth (without citing examples) list meanings for *bhavya* that approach

⁴ James P. McDermott, “Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism”, in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. by Wendy Doniger O’Fraherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 165–192 (p. 177). See also Peter Masefield, “The Mahākammavibhaṅgasutta: An Analysis”, *Vidyodaya Journal of Arts, Science, and Letters*, 5 (1976), 75–83.

it: “suitable, fit, proper” and “entsprechend, angemessen”. What seems less certain is that other usages in Sanskrit (such as “right, good, excellent, handsome, beautiful, pleasant, gracious, favourable, auspicious, fortunate”) must necessarily be excluded for Pali, although it must be acknowledged that these other usages seem relatively late in Sanskrit.⁵

What is clear, however, is that the meaning “(un)able” or “(in)capable” does not fit the present context of the summary paragraph of the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta*. In translating *bhabba/abhabba* as “operative/inoperative” Miss Horner seems to be following the lead of the 1936 article on *abhabba* in *CPD* composed by Dines Andersen, Helmer Smith, and Elof Olesen (*CPD* I xxxix). Yet, as we have already seen, this does not make much sense, nor does *PED*’s suggestion of “(im)possible”.

What does Buddhaghosa’s commentary have to say on the matter? It tells us that here “the term *a-bhabba* means ‘deprived of fortune, unskilful’ (*abhabban ti bhūtivirahitaṃ akusalaṃ*).⁶ Here the commentary takes *a* in the sense of “without” and the root *bhū* in the sense of “to thrive or prosper” (see MW, s.vv. *bhū*, *bhūta*, *bhūti*). In fact it seems clear that the commentary is here taking *abhabba* in a sense that is quite normal for *abhavya* in classical Sanskrit: “inauspicious” or just plain “not good”. What is more, it is immediately apparent that the way the commentary understands the term (*a*)*bhabba* as equivalent to (*a*)*kusala* in the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta*’s summary statement has the virtue of mapping perfectly intelligibly on to the four scenarios set out in the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta*:

1. The person who performs bad actions and is then reborn in a lower realm illustrates action that is unfortunate and appears unfortunate.

⁵ MW suggests that *bhavya* is found in these senses in Kāvya, the Purāṇas, Kathāsaritsāgara, etc.

⁶ Ps V 20.5. So E^e and C^e; B^e and S^e read *bhūtivirahitaṃ*; MW (s.v. *bhūta*) lists “well-being, welfare, prosperity”, too, as possible meanings.

2. The person who performs bad actions and is then reborn in a heavenly realm illustrates action that is unfortunate but appears fortunate.
3. The person who abstains from bad actions and is then reborn in a heavenly realm illustrates action that is both fortunate and appears fortunate.
4. The person who abstains from bad actions and is then reborn in a lower realm illustrates action that is fortunate but appears unfortunate.

We can note here that the more recent translation of the Majjhima-nikāya by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi solves the problem and produces a coherent translation by translating *abhabba* in the usual Pali sense of “incapable” and supplying “of good”: thus *abhabba* is taken as meaning “incapable [of good]” and *bhabba* as “capable [of good]”. In a footnote, however, the commentary’s explanation of (*a*)*bhabba* as “(un)skilful” is characterised as “suspect”, with the suggestion that “*bhabba* (Skt *bhavya*) may simply mean “potent, capable of producing results,” without implying any particular moral valuation”.⁷ Yet by adding “of good” to “incapable” their translation takes a “particular moral valuation” as implied here and so in effect their translation nonetheless follows the commentarial explanation of (*a*)*bhabba*.

Is the commentary right to understand (*a*)*bhabba* in the sense of “(un)fortunate” or “(in)auspicious” here in accordance with the Sanskrit usage? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that here — as qualifying *kamma* in the statement as it has come down to us — *abhabba* must indeed mean something like “bad” and *bhabba* something like “good”: this is simply the sense required in order to get anything intelligible out of the summary statement.

It is worth noting at this point, however, that the Chinese and Tibetan translations of what are likely to have been Sarvāstivādin recensions of this sutta seem to reflect a rather different form of the final

⁷ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, pp. 1065, 1347 (n. 1234).

summary statement.⁸ In his comparative study of the Majjhima-nikāya Anālayo provides a useful overview of how these two translations relate to the Pali recension. In particular he notes that in the summary statement the Chinese translation includes a simile which, although absent from the Pali *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta*, is found elsewhere in the Pali Nikāyas.⁹ He does not comment further, but in the present context it is worth considering the wording of the summary statement as it appears in the Chinese translation in full:

Further, there are four kinds of person: (1) there is the kind of person who does not have [the capability] and appears to have it, (2) the kind who has it and appears not to have it, (3) the kind who does not have it and appears not to have it, (4) the kind who has it and appears to have it.

Ānanda, it is as if there were four kinds of fruit: (1) there is the kind that is unripe but appears ripe, (2) the kind that is ripe and appears unripe, (3) the kind that is unripe and appears unripe, (4) the kind that is ripe and appears ripe.

Similarly, Ānanda, there are four kinds of person analogous to these fruit: (1) there is the kind of person who does not have [the

⁸ The Chinese translation is discourse 171 in the Chinese translation of the Madhyama Āgama (T. 26) made by Saṃghadeva in 398 C.E. and is usually thought to be a Sarvāstivāda recension. The Tibetan translation is found in Śamathadeva's *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*, a work composed any time between the fifth and eleventh centuries and taking the form of a compendium of mostly canonical sūtra passages cited in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*; this also appears to belong to the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda school; see Peter Skilling and Paul Harrison, "What's in a Name? Sarvāstivādin Interpretations of the Epithets 'Buddha' and 'Bhagavat'", in *Buddhism and Jainism: Essays in Honour of Dr. Hojun Nagasaki on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Committee for the Felicitation of Dr. Hojun Nagasaki's Seventieth Birthday (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 2005), pp. 700–675 (pp. 700–698); Sāmaṇerī Dhammadinnā, "A Translation of the Quotations in Śamathadeva's *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā* Parallel to the Chinese *Samyukta-āgama* Discourses 8, 9, 11, 12, 17 and 28", *Dharma Drum Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 11 (2012), 63–96 (pp. 66–70).

⁹ Anālayo, *Comparative Study*, II, 775–81.

capability] and appears to have it, (2) the kind who has it and appears not to have it, (3) the kind who does not have it and appears not to have it, (4) the kind who has it and appears to have it.¹⁰

There seems little doubt that underlying what I have rendered as “does not have the capability” (無有) and “has it” (有) are Middle Indian or Buddhist Sanskrit forms corresponding to *abhavya* and *bhavya* respectively: 有 (“to have, there is”) seems precisely chosen here to render a derivative of the root *bhū* in the sense of possessing the capability or capacity for something.¹¹ But what is striking about the Chinese parallel is that it is the “person” that is qualified as (*a*)*bhavya* rather than the “action” as in the Pali version. The use of (*a*)*bhavya* in the sense of “(in)capable” to describe a person seems more in accord with Pali and Buddhist Sanskrit usage. But the simile of the ripe and unripe fruit found in Pali in the Aṅguttara-nikāya and in the Puggala-paññatti uses quite different terminology: *āma* (unripe) and *pakka* (ripe):

Monks, there are these four kinds of mango. Which four? The kind that is unripe which looks ripe, the kind that is ripe which looks unripe, the kind that is unripe which looks unripe, the kind that is ripe which looks ripe. These are the four kinds of mango. In exactly the same way, monks, there are found in the world four kinds of person similar to these mangoes. Which four? The kind that is unripe which

¹⁰ T 26, 1.708c21–26: 復次有四種人。或有人無有似有。或有似無有。或無有似無。或有似有。阿難。猶如四種棗。或棗不熟似熟。或熟似不熟。或不熟似不熟。或熟似熟。如是。阿難。四種棗喻人。或有人無有似有。或有似無有。或無有似無有。或有似有。

¹¹ I am grateful to Eric Greene for his advice on the rendering of this passage. Thich Minh Chau has summarized this passage; see his *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya: A Comparative Study* (Saigon: Saigon Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies, 1964; repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), p. 199. He supplies “results” rather than “capability” (“some have no results but apparently have results”); this seems to me to make less sense in context; but how we choose to render the term does not affect the issue of the underlying Indian terminology.

looks ripe, the kind that is ripe which looks unripe, the kind that is unripe which looks unripe, the kind that is ripe which looks ripe.¹²

These four kinds of person are then further explained with reference to those who either do or do not give the appearance of practising in the proper manner and who either do or do not understand suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation.

Like the Chinese translation, the Tibetan translation reflects a version of the sutta in which the summary statement describes persons (*puruṣa*) rather than actions (*karman*):

Ānanda, there are these four persons. What four? (1) One who is unsuitable for growth but appears suitable, (2) one who is suitable for growth but appears unsuitable, (3) one who is unsuitable and also appears unsuitable for growth, (4) one who is suitable and also appears suitable. This is what is said.¹³

Once again there seems no reason to doubt that underlying what I have rendered as “(un)suitable for growth” (*gsor mi rung ba*) are middle Indian Buddhist Sanskrit forms corresponding to *abhavya* and *bhavya*.

As Anālayo notes, the order of the four scenarios that set up the karmic puzzle that the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta* and its parallel recensions address is different in the Chinese and Tibetan translations

¹² A II 106: *cattār' imāni bhikkhave ambāni. katamāni cattāri? āmaṃ pakkavaṇṇi, pakkam āmavaṇṇi, āmaṃ āmavaṇṇi, pakkam pakkavaṇṇi. imāni kho bhikkhave cattāri ambāni. evam evaṃ kho bhikkhave cattāro 'me ambūpamā puggalā santo saṃvijjamānā lokasmim. katame cattāro? āmo pakkavaṇṇi, pakko āmavaṇṇi, āmo āmavaṇṇi, pakko pakkavaṇṇi. Cf. Pp 44–45.*

¹³ D 4094, ju, 268, r5–6 = *The Tibetan Tripitaka: Taipei Edition*, 72 vols, editor in chief A.W. Barber (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), XLII, 268: *kun dga' bo gang zag ni bzhi po 'di dag ste | bzhi gang zhe na | gsor mi rung ba rung bar snang ba dang | gsor rung ba mi rung bar snang ba dang | gsor mi rung ba la gsor mi rung bar snang ba dang | gsor rung ba la gsor rung bar snang ba dang | zhes gsungs so |* (I am grateful to Ulrich Pagel for his advice on this passage.)

from that in the Pali.¹⁴ This different order maps intelligibly on to the order of the persons set out in the summary statement:

1. The person who performs bad actions and is then reborn in a heavenly realm (= second scenario in the Pali version) corresponds to the person who does not have the capability (Chinese) and is unsuitable for growth (Tibetan) yet appears to have the capability and be suitable.
2. The person who abstains from bad actions and is then reborn in a lower realm (= fourth scenario in the Pali version) corresponds to the person who does have the capability (Chinese), is suitable for growth (Tibetan) yet appears not to have the capability and be unsuitable.
3. The person who performs bad actions and is then reborn in a lower realm (= first scenario in the Pali version) corresponds to the person who does not have the capability (Chinese), is unsuitable for growth (Tibetan) and also appears not to have the capability and be unsuitable.
4. The person who abstains from bad actions and is then reborn in a heavenly realm (= third scenario in the Pali version) corresponds to the person who does have the capability (Chinese), is suitable for growth (Tibetan) and also appears to have the capability and be suitable.

In sum then we have three versions of this discourse on the “analysis of karma”. As Anālayo’s comparative study indicates, the core contents of the three versions are substantially the same. Yet when we come to the final summary statement we in effect have just two distinct recensions: one (the Theravāda) where (*a*)*bhabba* is used to qualify actions and one (the Sarvāstivāda) where the same terminology is used to qualify persons. The former usage appears problematic in meaning, the latter straightforward. On the other hand, a summary statement referring to

¹⁴ Anālayo, *Comparative Study*, II, 779.

good and bad actions seems to fit the contents of the discourse better than a summary statement in terms of persons capable and incapable of progress on the path. In both cases the final summary statement is secondary to the main contents of the discourse: it does not add to the substance, and its function is likely to be essentially mnemonic. Given the terminology of *bhavya/abhavya* and its usage in Pali and Buddhist Sanskrit, perhaps the most likely evolution is the initial addition of a summary statement referring to persons as capable and incapable, which is subsequently adapted to refer to actions as good or bad.



The commentary offers just one explanation of the meaning of *(a)bhhabba* in the summary statement, but it continues by offering two quite distinct ways of taking the fourfold summary statement, based not on different interpretations of *(a)bhhabba*, but on different interpretations of the second member of the compound *(a)bhhabbābhāsa*. In the case of the first explanation the text of the PTS edition presents some difficulties, principally connected with following the logic of where to read *akusala/kusala* and *abhabba/bhabba*. Horner's critical apparatus suggests some confusion over these terms in the editions she used, with some editions reading *kusala* where others read *akusala* and some *bhabba* where others read *abhabba*. In preparing her edition Miss Horner used no manuscripts it seems, but relied on three printed editions which she lists in the following order: C^e 1926, B^e 1921, and S^e 1920.¹⁵ The relevant portion of her edition reads as follows, with the words subject to variation highlighted in bold:

abhhabbābhāsan ti abhabbaṃ **abhāsati** abhibhavati paṭibhātī ti attho.
bahukasmim̐ hi akusalakamme āyūhite balavakammaṃ dubbala-
kammaṃ vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ

¹⁵ Ps V iii cites: (1) S^e = 3 vols, ed. Dhammadhaja (Bangkok: Mahāmakuṭarāja-vidyālaya, 1920); (2) C^e = vol. 2 ed. Dhammakitti Siri Dhammananda (Colombo: Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch, 1926); (3) B^e = ed. anonymous (Rangoon: Maṇḍine Piṭaka Press, 1921).

abhabbam abhabbābhāsan nāma. **akusalaṃ** pana āyūhitvā āsanne **kusalaṃ** kataṃ hoti taṃ **kusalassa**¹⁶ vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *abhabbam bhabbābhāsan* nāma. bahumhi kusale āyūhite pi balavakammaṃ dubbalakammassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ bhabbāñ c' eva bhabbābhāsañ ca. kusalaṃ pana āyūhitvā āsanne **akusalaṃ** kataṃ hoti taṃ akusalassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *bhabbam abhabbābhāsaṃ*. api ca upaṭṭhānākāreṇa p' ettha attho veditabbo. idaṃ hi vuttaṃ hoti: abhabbato ābhāsati upaṭṭhātī ti abhabbābhāsaṃ. (Ps V 20,5–18)

Comparing C^e 1926 with the PTS edition, it becomes apparent that Miss Horner generally simply reproduces the text and variants of the Ceylonese edition. This edition establishes its text with reference to several Sinhalese manuscripts and cites variants from the same Siamese and Burmese printed editions mentioned by Horner, adding occasional references to variants in its manuscript sources.

With reference to *abhabbābhāsa*, the commentary first gives the following in explanation of the second term of the compound: *abhabbam abhāsati abhibhavati paṭibāhatī ti attho*. Horner notes no variant but she is here as elsewhere following C^e 1926, which does note (p. 970, n. 22) the variant *ābhāsati* found in both S^e 1920 and B^e 1921. Whatever the correct reading, the commentary's understanding of the *abhāsati/ābhāsati* is unambiguous: the verb is taken in this context to mean “overpowers” (*abhibhavati*) in the sense of “prevents” (*paṭibāhati*). What is not clear is how the commentary gets here. The relevant dictionary entries (*PED*, *CPD*, *DOP*, s.v. *ābhāsati*) give no indication that *ābhāsati* can be used transitively in the sense of “to overpower, prevent”. In fact, both *CPD* and *DOP* refer to the present passage as illustrative of the meaning “appears, looks like”, with *CPD* adding the transitive meaning “to illuminate”. *DOP*, however, has in addition an entry for a verb *abhāsati*, where it cites only this passage and suggests a possible derivation from

¹⁶ It seems likely that Miss Horner in fact intended to read *akusalassa* here as this is what C^e 1926 reads, and, like C^e 1926 (p. 970, n. 26), Miss Horner cites (p. 20, n. 8) S^e 1920's *kusa*° as the variant.

Sanskrit *abhyaśnoti*, which would give us the required sense of “to overpower”. If we are to stick with the reading *ābhāsati*, there seem to be two ways to understand the move the commentary makes. MW (s.v. *ābhāsati*) records the usage of the causative *ābhāsayati* in the sense of “to shine upon, illuminate” and hence “to throw light upon, exhibit the falsity of anything”. The sense of “exhibit the falsity of something” might underlie the commentary’s interpretation. Alternatively, we could understand the commentary as taking the prefix *ā* in the grammatical sense of *abhivīdhi* (inclusion) or more simply in the general sense of *abhi*. Either way, *ābhāsati* seems to be understood in the sense of “shines over” with the implication of taking the place of whatever it shines over.

Let us now turn to the question of the pattern of *kusala-/akusala-abhabba-/bhabba-* in this passage.¹⁷ If we translate the commentary’s explanation of the second and third scenarios following the text as presented in C^e 1926 (and E^s 1938) using the commentary’s first explanation of the meaning of *ābhāsa*, it is clear that we have a problem:

But when one has accumulated **unskillful** *kamma* and then does something **skillful** close [to the time of one’s death], that [skillful act] can prevent the result of the unskillful¹⁸ act and create the opportunity for its result; this is [*kamma* that is] *unfortunate that prevents the fortunate* ... But when one has accumulated **skillful** *kamma* and then does something **unskillful** close [to the time of one’s death], that [unskillful act] can prevent the result of the unskillful [*sic*] act and create the opportunity for its result; this is [*kamma* that is] *fortunate that prevents the unfortunate*.

Describing a skillful act done close to the time of the death of someone who has accumulated unskillful *kamma* as “the unfortunate that prevents the fortunate” makes no sense. We can retrieve some semblance of sense if we take the phrase as referring instead to the accumulated unskillful *kamma*, but then we need to take *ābhāsa* in the sense of “appear”: the accumulated unskillful *kamma* is unfortunate *kamma* that

¹⁷ Cf. Ps V 20, notes 8, 9, 10, 11.

¹⁸ Taking *akusalassa* as what Horner intended to read; see note 16.

appears fortunate because it is superseded by the skilful act done close to the time of death. But to take *ābhāsa* in the sense of “appear” is to ignore what the commentary has just said about how it wants to understand the term in this first explanation. This is enough to suggest that the text of C^e 1926 is simply muddled here and does not pay attention to what the commentary is saying. That impression is reinforced by the manner in which this edition goes on to talk again of preventing the result of an *unskilful* act. Moreover the critical apparatus of C^e 1926 indicates that the manuscripts on which it is based did not present a consistent pattern of *akusala-* and *kusala-*.

It is quite clear that if we take up the meaning of *ābhāsa* suggested by the commentary here, as we must, logic requires the pattern of *akusala-* and *kusala-* found in S^e 1920 and the more recent B^e 1957, and that the passage as presented in E^e, following C^e 1926, makes no sense. I have not had access to B^e 1921, but it is worth noting that Horner’s account of the manner in which it differs from S^e 1920 (and therefore B^e 1957) is open to question. Her note 13 (Ps V 20) indicates that B^e 1921 omits five lines of the text as presented in E^e, while her notes 10 and 11 indicate that where at Ps V 20,12 we have *abhabbaṃ bhabbābhāsan* B^e 1921 had *bhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsan*. In other words Horner tells us that B^e 1921 reads here as follows:

abhabbābhāsan ti abhabbaṃ ābhāsati abhibhavati paṭibhātī ti attho. bahukasmim̐ hi akusalakamme āyūhite balavakammaṃ dubbala-kammasa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *abhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsan* nāma. **akusalaṃ** pana āyūhitvā āsanne kusalaṃ kataṃ hoti taṃ kusalassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ **bhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsan** nāma. [...] api ca upaṭṭhānākāreṇa p’ ettha attho veditabbo. idaṃ hi vuttaṃ hoti: abhabbato ābhāsati upaṭṭhātī ti abhabbābhāsaṃ.

But if this is how B^e 1921 reads, then it seems likely that Horner has identified a lacuna in that edition in the wrong place, and that the text should be understood as reading:

abhabbābhāsan ti abhabbaṃ ābhāsati abhibhavati paṭibhātī ti attho. bahukasmim̐ hi akusalakamme āyūhite balavakammaṃ dubbala-

kamassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ abhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsan nāma. [...] akusalaṃ pana āyūhitvā āsanne **kusalaṃ** kataṃ hoti taṃ kusalassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ **bhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsan** nāma. api ca upaṭṭhānākārena p' ettha attho veditabbo. idaṃ hi vuttaṃ hoti: abhabbato ābhāsati upaṭṭhāti ti abhabbābhāsaṃ.

Understanding the lacuna in this position has the effect of making the pattern of *akusala-/kusala-* and *abhabba-/bhabba-* in Horner's B^e 1921 consistent with that found in S^e 1920 and the more recent B^e 1957. In sum all this allows us to correct Ps V 20.5–18 as follows:

abhabban ti bhūti^vvirahitaṃ akusalaṃ. *abhabbābhāsan* ti abhabbaṃ abhāsati abhibhavati paṭibāhāti ti attho. bahukasmim hi akusala-kamme āyūhite balavakammaṃ dubbalakamassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *abhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsan* nāma. **kusalaṃ** pana āyūhitvā āsanne **akusalaṃ** kataṃ hoti taṃ kusalassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *abhabbaṃ bhabbābhāsan* nāma. bahumhi kusale āyūhite pi balavakammaṃ dubbalakamassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *bhabbañ c' eva bhabbābhāsañ ca*. **akusalaṃ** pana āyūhitvā āsanne **kusalaṃ** kataṃ hoti taṃ akusalassa vipākaṃ paṭibāhitvā attano vipākassa okāsaṃ karoti. idaṃ *bhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsaṃ*.

Let me now offer a full translation of the commentary's first interpretation of the sutta's fourfold summary statement:

The term *a-bhabba* means “deprived of fortune”, unskilful. The expression *abhabbābhāsaṃ* means “it shines over the unfortunate”; what is meant is that it overpowers or prevents it. [In the process of death and rebirth]¹⁹ when someone has accumulated a lot of unskilful *kamma*, a strong *kamma* [sometimes] prevents the result of a weak

¹⁹ It is clear that what follows assumes the Abhidhamma understanding of the process of death and rebirth and the specific role of *kamma* done close to the time of death (*āsanna*); see Vism 601 (XIX 15); Abhidh-av 117 (v. 1244); Abhidh-s 24, Abhidh-s-mhṭ 130–131. For a discussion see Rupert Gethin, “*Bhavaṅga* and Rebirth According to the Abhidhamma”, in *The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. III, ed. by Tadeusz Skorupski and Ulrich Pagel (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994), pp. 11–35 (20–21).

kamma and creates the opportunity for its own result; (1) this is [*kamma* that is] *both unfortunate and also prevents the unfortunate*. But when one has accumulated **skilful** *kamma* and then does something **unskilful** close [to the time of death], that [unskilful act] can prevent the result of the skilful act and create the opportunity for its result; (2) this is [*kamma* that is] *unfortunate that prevents the fortunate*. Even when someone has accumulated a lot of skilful *kamma*, a strong *kamma* [sometimes] prevents the result of a weak *kamma* and creates the opportunity for its own result; (3) this is [*kamma* that is] *both fortunate and also prevents the fortunate*. But when one has accumulated **unskilful** *kamma* and then does something **skilful** close [to the time of one's death], the [skilful act] can prevent the result of the unskilful act and create the opportunity for its result; (4) this is [*kamma* that is] *fortunate that prevents the unfortunate*.

According to the commentary's first interpretation, we thus have the following pattern :

1. *kamma* that is both unfortunate and also prevents the unfortunate
2. *kamma* that is unfortunate that prevents the fortunate
3. *kamma* that is both fortunate and also prevents the fortunate
4. *kamma* that is fortunate that prevents the unfortunate

It is important to register here that the commentary takes this fourfold analysis of *kamma* as applying *not* to the *kamma* that the four persons described in § 2 of the sutta are seen performing (and which is *not* the *kamma* that conditions their rebirth), but to the *kamma* that they perform close to death (which *is* the *kamma* that conditions their rebirth). Applied to the scheme of four persons set out in § 2 of the sutta the first commentarial explanation looks like this :

1. unfortunate *kamma* near death that prevents the unfortunate *kamma* done earlier and results in rebirth in hell (person 1)
2. unfortunate *kamma* near death that prevents the fortunate *kamma* done earlier and results in rebirth in hell (person 4)
3. fortunate *kamma* near death that prevents the fortunate *kamma* done earlier and results in rebirth in heaven (person 3)

4. fortunate *kamma* near death that prevents the unfortunate *kamma* done earlier and results in rebirth in heaven (person 2)

Thus this first commentarial interpretation of the sutta's summary statement does not map on to the order of the four scenarios set out in § 2 of the sutta. The second commentarial explanation is as follows:

The meaning [of *ābhāsa*] can, however, also be understood here in the sense of “appearing”. For what is said is this: *abhabbābhāsa* means that it appears like, it manifests as, the unfortunate. Thus four persons are stated in the manner beginning: “Here in this life, some person harms living creatures ...” Of these, the first person's *kamma* is unfortunate and appears unfortunate: it is unfortunate since it is unskillful, and because he is reborn in hell, it appears to be unskillful and the cause of his rebirth there. The second person's *kamma* is unfortunate but appears fortunate: it is unfortunate since it is unskillful, yet since he is reborn in heaven, it appears to the followers of other traditions to be skillful and the cause of his rebirth in heaven. Exactly the same method [of explanation] applies to the other pair of *kammās*.²⁰

According to the commentary's second interpretation, we thus have the following pattern:

1. *kamma* that is both unfortunate and also appears unfortunate
2. *kamma* that is unfortunate that appears fortunate
3. *kamma* that is both fortunate and also appears fortunate
4. *kamma* that is fortunate that appears unfortunate

²⁰ Ps V 20,17–21,3: *api ca upaṭṭhānākāreṇa p' ettha attho veditaḅbo. idaṃ hi vuttaṃ hoti: abhabbato ābhāsati upaṭṭhāti ti abhabbābhāsaṃ. tatha yvāyaṃ puggalo idha pāṇātipātī ti ādinā nayaṇa cattāro^a puggalā vuttā. tesu paṭhamassa kammaṃ abhabbaṃ abhabbābhāsaṃ taṃ hi akusalatā abhabbaṃ, tassa ca niraye nibbattatā tatha nibbattikāraṇabhūtaṃ akusalaṃ hutvā upaṭṭhāti. dutiyassa kammaṃ abhabbaṃ bhābbābhāsaṃ taṃ hi akusalatā abhabbaṃ. tassa paṇa sagge nibbattatā aññatiitthiyānaṃ sagge nibbattikāraṇabhūtaṃ kusalaṃ hutvā upaṭṭhāti. itarasmim pi kammadvaye es' eva nayo. [^aReading with C^c 1926, S^c 1920, and B^c 1957; E^c (following B^c 1921?) reads *abhabbā*.]*

Again it is important to register that the commentary takes this second fourfold analysis of *kamma* as applying *not* to the *kamma* that the four persons do close to death (the *kamma* that conditions their rebirth), but to the *kamma* that the four persons described in §2 of the sutta are seen performing (which is *not* the *kamma* that conditions their rebirth). This second commentarial explanation maps straightforwardly on to the sutta's summary statement.

1. Unfortunate *kamma* that appears to result in the unfortunate rebirth in hell (person 1)
2. Unfortunate *kamma* that appears to result in the fortunate rebirth in heaven (person 2)
3. Fortunate *kamma* that appears to result in the fortunate rebirth in heaven (person 3)
4. Fortunate *kamma* that appears to result in the unfortunate rebirth in hell (person 4)

Why does the commentary offer these two explanations? The second explanation clearly fits the structure of the sutta more comfortably and involves a more natural interpretation of *ābhāsa*. Should we therefore regard the first explanation as redundant, an example of artificial exegetical excess executed simply because two explanations are always better than one? Clearly the commentary's exegetical purpose is not confined to providing the most plausible historical reading of the sutta. In giving these two explanations the commentary seems not, as is sometimes the case, to be offering alternative explanations (there is no *vā*) with a preference for the latter: the second is an additional explanation, and both explanations seem to be offered as of equal status. The commentary is quite cleverly making the sutta summary serve two purposes. As I have indicated, the two different explanations have different and quite specific perspectives: the first applies to the *kamma* that actually *causes* the rebirth in hell or heaven, the second to the *kamma* that *appears to cause* the rebirth in hell or heaven.

The first explanation may appear forced as a way of reading the canonical text as originally conceived, yet it serves well the commen-

tarial purpose of bringing out what the sutta is trying to say: the sutta is precisely arguing that even though certain ascetics and brahmins may indeed possess the ability to see the rebirth of other beings, they do not possess the ability to connect particular actions with their particular consequences. Thus, even when someone is seen performing unskillful *kamma* in this life and is subsequently seen by such ascetics and brahmins reborn in hell, they make the wrong connection. As already noted, in the words of the sutta:

When a person who here in this life harms living creatures, takes what is not given ... and has mistaken views is, at the breaking up of the body, after death, reborn in a state of misfortune, an unhappy destiny, a state of affliction, hell, then *either* before *or* afterwards he has done a bad act whose result is to be experienced as painful; *or else* at the time of death he has taken on and adopted some mistaken view ... And insofar as here in this life he harms living creatures, takes what is not given ... and has mistaken views, he experiences the result of that either in this very life or when he is reborn in further future existences. (M III 214,6–16)

Thus the first explanation draws attention to and highlights the significance of actions done close to the time of death in a manner that fits well with the understanding of the process of death and rebirth in Theravāda systematic thought.