
Ancient Methods of Knowledge - Abhidhamma and Astrology

(By Bhikkhu Dhammānanda)



*"When I the starry courses know,
And Nature's wise instruction seek,
With light of power my soul shall glow,
As when with spirits spirits speak."*

Since ancient times, human beings have developed various methods for attaining knowledge, intended to help us understand both the universe and ourselves. Systems such as astrology, alchemy, Kabbalah, and the I Ching should not be regarded as entirely different in spirit from the Buddhist Abhidhamma system.

To seek the underlying unity of all religions and to draw out the similarities between different systems has been an important aim for truth-seekers in every age. Here, I can only offer a small key to those ancient mysteries, and to their application and relevance.

*I*n ancient times, when people more often looked up at the stars, these marvellous and inspiring lights at first appeared as bare phenomena. There was no apparent pattern and no clear practical use in observing them.

Perhaps a wise person looked a little longer. In doing so, he began to perceive certain patterns: some stars seemed to share a mysterious connection. They moved in regular ways; they did not change randomly or from day to day. When they did move, they moved together.

Possessing such knowledge already gave a person, especially in the ancient world, an enormous advantage. If he travelled by boat or on land, he could know, “I am still moving in the same direction as yesterday; I am not off course.”

Further, if a person possessed some understanding of the planets and their influence on the earth—especially if he lived in a relatively simple, nature-based society—he could make certain assessments. Noticing, for example, that the moon was in a particular phase and in conjunction with a constellation traditionally associated with Mars, he might infer that people of coarse or violent temperament would be more easily agitated at that time. Travelling alone at night, he could reason, would be especially dangerous; crossing their path then, he might well encounter trouble. In this way, a knowledgeable person could avoid danger, protect himself, and make skillful use of the conditions around him.

Similarly, when a meditator begins his practice, his perceptions of body and mind often appear as bare phenomena—mysterious, inexplicable sensations. Yet if he continues to observe carefully, and has relevant guidance, he may gradually begin to discern patterns.

He may come to understand that when there is a certain of material phenomena, certain unwholesome states are more likely to arise. Conversely, when other material conditions are present, wholesome mental states are more likely to appear.

He may notice, for instance, that when there is a sense of openness and lightness in a particular area of the body, the mind feels clear and bright, and life becomes easier to navigate. When, on other, there is a heavy, obstructive quality in the body the mind feels clouded and troubled, and encounters with the outside world are more likely to turn unpleasant.

Seeing in this way, he is able to cultivate what is suitable and avoid what is unsuitable. By cultivating the suitable and avoiding the unsuitable, he can free himself from many of the seemingly random factors of existence.