

# Dhamma and Abhidhamma

## The nature and origins of Buddhist scholasticism and the dharma theory

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### 1 The Buddha's teaching method

**1.0 STATUS OF THE ABHIDHAMMA.** The first council (Rājagaha) mentions only the Teaching and the Discipline (*Dhamma, vinaya*), without mentioning any Abhidhamma (Cv 11 = V 2:284-293). Even the word *abhidhamma* rarely occurs in the Pali Canon, and where it does, it occurs only as *abhi-dhamme*, a non-technical term simply meaning “in relation to the teaching [Dharma].”<sup>1</sup>

According to Frauwallner, the Abhidhamma was probably composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the early Buddhist sects, each had their own Abhidharma Piṭaka, often at variance with one another.<sup>3</sup> We shall here examine the nature and origin of the Pali Abhidhamma.

**1.1 “BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGICAL ETHICS.”** The basic teaching method of the Buddha and his immediate saints is best described as wholesomely *ad hominem* (a rare occasion when this expression is used in a positive sense), that is, they present the liberating truth sometimes by way of heuristic dialogues or by way of parables, stories and even paradoxes, specially tailored for the spiritual liberation of the listener or audience. These didactic approaches are clearly unlike the formal, even comprehensive, style of a classroom lecture or academic discourse, or the Abhidhamma.

During the two centuries after the Buddha's passing, some of the best monastic minds worked towards a comprehensive and precise systematization of the teachings of the Buddha and the first-generation saints. The philosophical systems are at first only bare matrices or indices (*māṭikā*) of the True Teaching; even their subsequent systematic elaborations are devoid of stories and symbolic language. It is essentially a technical guide, almost scientifically precise, and a catalog of numerical lists and doctrinal descriptions. It came to be called the Abhidhamma.

The Abhidhamma has been called “**Buddhist psychological ethics**”<sup>4</sup> for important reasons. Firstly, it is not just scholastic philosophy, but is really a tool for understanding true reality. Secondly, the Abhidhamma sees all existence as mental processes. As unawakened beings, we tend to see things in a *subjective* way, that is, we experience the world according to the coloured glasses of our views, desires and ignorance, rooted in latent habitual tendencies. Looking at the world as mental processes is to examine it in an *objective* manner. Thirdly, from the Sutta tradition, “psychological” refers to an understanding of mental processes, while “ethics” refers to the restraint and training of our actions and speech so that they are conducive to mindfulness practice and spiritual liberation.

**1.2 THE TWIN PURPOSE OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING.** Even in the Buddha's time, Jainism and Brahmanism believed that God and soul were eternal: these beliefs were based on **eternalism**. To them, there were two kinds of souls: *the personal soul*, which was impure, and *the universal soul*, which was eternal. To get rid of the personal soul, they tortured the body, which was after all (in their view), an accumulation of karma, and a prison for the soul. Once they had “purified” their body or destroyed it, their personal soul posthumously reunited with the universal soul, or go to heaven. As such, these eternalists often devote themselves to self-mortification.

On the other extreme end of the religious scale, there was **annihilationism**, the belief that *this is our only life, and that there is no afterlife*. There is neither heaven nor hell. So a nihilist's main objective is to enjoy life here and now. This philosophy and lifestyle are usually associated with the materialists, who live their lives for the sake of sense-indulgence.

The Buddha declares that *self-mortification* is “painful, ignoble, useless” (*dukkha anariya an-attha*), and that *self-indulgence* is “lowly, common, worldly, ignoble, useless” (*hīna gamma pothuj-*

<sup>1</sup> See Otto von Hinüber, “Vinaya und Abhidhamma,” 1994c: 1109; also see *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: 66 (§133).

<sup>2</sup> *Abhidharma-Studien IV. Der Abhidharma der anderen Schulen*, WZKS 15, 1971b:106.

<sup>3</sup> See Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: II.3.

<sup>4</sup> CAF Rhys Davids' tr of Dhs title, London: Pali Text Society, 1974.

*janika anariya anatta*). Self-mortification, however, is not condemned as “lowly, common, worldly” because it may be painful but does not break the moral precepts.

The Buddha uses two basic methods to counter these two extreme wrong views. He teaches that self-mortification (arising from the wrong view of eternalism) can be overcome through the analysis (*vibhaṅga*) of reality, and that self-indulgence can be overcome by synthesis (*paccaya*).

Technically speaking, the two approaches of the Abhidhamma—analysis and synthesis—are used to counter the two extremes of wrong views prevalent in the world since even before the Buddha’s times. While the analytical method (*vibhaṅga* or *vinibbhoga*) is effective in refuting and healing those prone to self-mortification or to eternalism, the synthetical method (*paccaya*) answers the challenge of self-indulgence and annihilationism (including materialism and nihilism).<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Analysis and synthesis

**2.1 THE SEVEN BOOKS.** The Abhidhamma employs two methods or discourses: analysis and synthesis. By analysis (*vibhaṅga* or *vinibbhoga*) is meant the scrutiny of reality by dismantling it into its components so that we better understand its real nature. The main model used here is that of *the five aggregates*: what we take to be self is really comprised of five interacting dharmas, namely, form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, all operating without any abiding entity.<sup>6</sup> By synthesis (*paccaya*) is meant the examining the interdependent nature of causality and conditionality, how phenomena occur through many causes with many results, and so on. The main model here is that of *dependent arising*.<sup>7</sup>

Of the seven books of the Theravāda Abhidhamma, the first five deal with the *analysis* of reality. The sixth, **the Paṭṭhāna**, deals with the *synthesis* of reality, that is, the nature of conditionality. The seventh, **the Kathāvatthu**, is a very late work which deals with neither method, but is a *polemical* work, refuting outside views that the early Theravādins rejected. It was written by Moggalīputta Tissa, president of the Council of Paṭālīputra (c 350 BCE), when it was canonized.<sup>8</sup>

1. Dhamma,saṅgaṇī	– list of dharmas	}	analysis
2. Vibhaṅga	– analysis of dharmas		
3. Puggala Paññatti	– facts and conventions		
4. Dhātu,kathā	– elements of existence		
5. Yamaka	– pairs of dharmas	}	synthesis
6. Paṭṭhāna	– causal relationships		
[7. Kathāvatthu	– a late polemical work]		

(1) **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** = Dhs [“Enumeration of Phenomena”] translated as *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics* by CAF Rhys Davids, London, 1923. An exhaustive catalogue of the ultimate constituents of existence.

(2) **Vibhaṅga** = Vbh [“Explanation; Commentary”] translated as *The Book of Analysis* by U Thitila, London, 1969. A self-contained study, dealing in turn with the following: aggregates, sense-bases, elements, truths, faculties, dependent origination, stations of mindfulness, supreme efforts, means to accomplishment, factors of enlightenment, the noble eightfold path, absorption, illimitables, training rules, analytical knowledges, kinds of knowledge, minor points (numerical list of defilements, and “the heart of the doctrine” (*dhamma,hadaya*), a psycho-cosmic topography of the Buddhist universe.

(3) **Dhātu,kathā** = Dhk [“Discourse on Elements”] translated as *Discourse on the Elements* by U Narada, London, 1962. Written in catechism style, it discusses all phenomena with reference to the three schemata of aggregates, sense-bases, and elements.

(4) **Puggala,paññatti** = Pug [“Concepts of individuals”] translated as *Designation of Human Types* by BC Law, London, 1924. It begins with a general enumeration of types of concept. Most of

<sup>5</sup> On the extreme views of eternalism and of annihilationism, see eg **Kaccā(ya)na S** (S 12.15/2:16 f) = SD 6.13.

<sup>6</sup> See SD 17.

<sup>7</sup> See SD 5.16.

<sup>8</sup> See Otto von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: 643-75 (§II.3).

the work gives formal definition of different types of individuals in an ascending numerical manner (like the *Āṅguttara*).

(5) **Kathā,vatthu** = Kvu [“Objects of Discourse”] a polemical work by Moggalī,putta Tissa (218 years after the Mahā Parinibbāna), translated as *Points of Controversy* by Shwe Zan Aung and C.A.F. Rhys Davids, London, 1915.

(6) **Yamaka** = Yam [“Pairs”] no English translation. It attempts to resolve ambiguities and defining the precise usage of technical terms.

(7) **Paṭṭhāna** = Paṭ [“Treatise”] translated as *Conditional Relations* by U Narada, London, vols 1 (1969), 2 (1981). He also compiled a *Guide to Conditional Relations* by, London, 1 (1979). The most important book of the Abhidhamma, traditionally designated the “Great Treatise” (*mahā,pakaraṇa*). It applies 24 modes of conditionality to all the phenomena of existence in all their conceivable permutations.

**2.1 THE SARVĀSTIVĀDA ABHIDHARMA.** The other dominant Indian school of Buddhism, **the Sarvāstivāda** (mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), also have their own set of seven books of the Abhidharma, compiled in Buddhist Sanskrit. They were most influential in the northwest of India, that is, in Kashmir and Gandhāra (present day Afghanistan). Their Kashmiri branch was also known as the Vaibhāṣika, while the Gandhārī branch was known as the Mūla,sarvāstivāda or Sautrāntika. Interestingly, while the Theravadins attributed their Abhidhamma works to *the Buddha himself*, the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma books each had *their own author*, and are preserved in Chinese translations. We also have some records of other ancient Buddhist schools, found only in the texts that have come down to us, such as:

The Sārīputrābhidharma,śāstra, a Dharma,guptaka work; and

The Abhidharma,samuccaya, by Asaṅga (a Yogācārin scholar monk).

The Dharmaguptaka school is descended from the Theravāda, while the Yogācāra is a Mahāyāna school.<sup>9</sup>

	<b>Theravāda</b>		<b>Sarvāstivāda</b>
1.	Dhamma.saṅgaṇī	1.	Jñāna,prasthāna (T1543-1544) by Katyāyānī,putra
2.	Vibhaṅga	2.	Prakaraṇa,pāda (T1541-1542) by Vasumitra
3.	Puggala Paññatti	3.	Vijñāṇa,kāya (T1539) by Devaśarman
4.	Dhātu,kathā	4.	Dharma,skandha (T1537) by Śāriputra
5.	Yamaka	5.	Prajñapti,śāstra (T1538) by Maudgalyāyana
6.	Paṭṭhāna	6.	Dhātu,kāya (T1540) by Pūrṇa
7.	Kathā,vatthu	7.	Saṅgīti,pariyāya (T1536) by Mahā Kauśṭhila <sup>10</sup>

**Table 2.1 The Seven Texts of two best known Abhidharma traditions<sup>11</sup>**

### 3 Early Buddhist analysis

The most important trend that has come down to us from the earliest Buddhist times is the quest to analyse the empirical being and its relationship to the external world. The early teachings are singlemindedly aimed at various levels of liberation, thus:

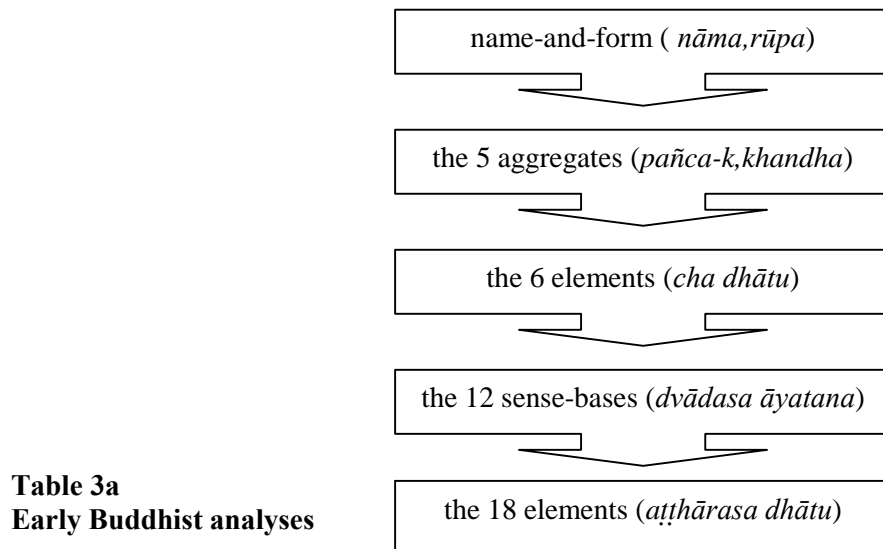
- Liberation of the body and speech      through moral virtue;
- Liberation of the mind                      through mental cultivation;
- Liberation of views                            through wisdom.

<sup>9</sup> See Sujata 2004ab.

<sup>10</sup> Attr to Śāriputra in the Chinese trs, but to Mahā Kauśṭhila (Mahā Koṭṭhita) by the Tibetan trs; see Takakusu 1905-5:99.

<sup>11</sup> See Takakusu, “On the Abhidharma literature of the Sarvāstivādins,” JPTS 1904-5:66-146.

The Buddha awakened to true reality, which is like being a turtle (an amphibian), having been on land returns to the sea to describe to the fishes how land looks like.<sup>12</sup> Initially, he gives ad hoc teachings to individuals and groups, depending on their needs, circumstances and levels of understanding. In due course, these teachings evolved into sets of doctrines.<sup>13</sup> Where such teachings are in terms of “ideas” (*dhamma*), they are often by way of “analysis” (*vibhaṅga*). We can identify at least five such modes of analysis, summarized thus:<sup>14</sup>



**Table 3a**  
**Early Buddhist analyses**

The first analysis, into name and form (*nāma,rūpa*), is the most elementary in the sense that the empirical being is divided into the two main components of the mental and the physical aspects, that is, as mind and body. In a more specific sense, “name” (*nāma*) refers to feelings, perception, volition, contact (sense-stimulus) and attention,<sup>15</sup> and “form” (*rūpa*) refers to the four elements.

The second analysis is in terms of the five aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*), that is to say, form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. They are discussed in such texts as **the Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta** (M 109),<sup>16</sup> **the (Dve) Khandha Sutta** (S 22.48)<sup>17</sup> and **the Khajjanīya Sutta** (S 22.79).<sup>18</sup>

The third analysis is that of the 6 elements (*cha dhātu*), that is, earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness. The main purpose of the six-element teaching is to show that there is no self either inside or outside the 5 aggregates that make up the empirical being. Our being is a dynamic mind-body phenomena of such impermanence that we cannot own it, or identify with it, or take it as the self: doing so would only be self-delusion, or at best a virtual reality world. We should train ourselves by reflecting, “None of the aggregates belong to me” (*n’etam mama*), “I am not the aggregate” (*n’eso ham asmī*), “It is not my self” (*n’eso me attā*).<sup>19</sup> The 6 elements are also taught in **the (Rāhula)**

<sup>12</sup> Cf the parable of the turtle and the fish (untraced).

<sup>13</sup> **Geoffrey Samuel**, in *Civilized Shamans*, interestingly notes that “The Buddha’s teachings were an adaptation of the shamanic training for the new urban social context. This helps also to explain the combination of ‘mystical’ techniques and of social concern that is so striking in those teachings.” (1993:370).

<sup>14</sup> This is a numerical discourse, using the Aṅguttara method: the best known set is the 10 questions of **the Kumāra,pañha** (Khp 4/2). See Karunadasa 1996:3-10 (on which this section is based).

<sup>15</sup> See (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2/2:3 = SD 5.15), where it is defined in this specific manner (as also is the case of the formula *viññāṇa,paccayā nāma,rūpaṃ*). See also SD 17.2a(2).

<sup>16</sup> M 109/3:15-18 = SD 17.11.

<sup>17</sup> S 22.48/3:47 = SD 17.1a.

<sup>18</sup> S 22.79/3:86 f = SD 17.9.

<sup>19</sup> **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda** (M 62.3/1:421); **Soṇa S 1** (S 22.49/3:49). **Mahā Hatthi,padopama S** (M 28.7) gives a more concise statement: “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (M 28.7/1:185), which represents respectively the three kinds of mental proliferation (*papañca*) of self-view

**Dhātu Sutta** (S 18.9),<sup>20</sup> **the (Uppāda) Dhātu Sutta** (S 26.9),<sup>21</sup> and a detailed analysis in **the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140).<sup>22</sup>

The fourth analysis is that of the twelve sense-bases (*dvādasā āyatana*), that is, the 6 internal sense-faculties and the 6 external sense-objects, namely, the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind, and form, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind-objects. The 12 sense-bases are taught or listed in such texts as **the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22)<sup>23</sup> and **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10),<sup>24</sup> **the Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28),<sup>25</sup> **the (Metteyya) Pārāyana Sutta** (A 6.61),<sup>26</sup> and **the Mahā Pañha Sutta 1** (A 10.27).<sup>27</sup> The purpose of the twelve-element teaching is to show that consciousness is neither a soul nor an extension of any such entity, as it is said in **the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38): “consciousness is dependently arisen, since, without a condition, there is no arising of consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> There is no independently existing consciousness, that is, it cannot exist in its own right.

The fifth analysis is that of the eighteen elements (*aṭṭhārasa dhātu*), that is, the 6 sense-faculties, their corresponding sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses, namely:

Sense-faculty	Sense-object	Sense-consciousness
(1) eye	(7) form	(13) eye-consciousness
(2) ear	(8) sound	(14) ear-consciousness
(3) nose	(9) smell	(15) nose-consciousness
(4) tongue	(10) taste	(16) tongue-consciousness
(5) body	(11) touch	(17) body-consciousness
(6) mind	(12) mind-object	(18) mind-consciousness

**Table 3b The 18 elements**

These 18 elements are taught, for example, in the following suttas: **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33),<sup>29</sup> **the Bahu,dhātuka Sutta** (M 115),<sup>30</sup> and **the (Nānatta) Dhātu Sutta** (S 14.1).<sup>31</sup>

In similar fashion each analysis is used to explain certain features of sentient existence. It is, in fact, with reference to these five kinds of analysis that Buddhism frames its fundamental doctrines. The very fact that there are at least five kinds of analysis shows that none of them can be taken as final or absolute.<sup>32</sup> Each represents the world of experience in its totality, yet represents it from a pragmatic standpoint determined by the particular doctrine which it is intended to illuminate.

The Abhidhammic doctrine of *dhammas* developed from an attempt to draw out the full implications of these five types of analysis. It will be seen that if each analysis is examined in relation to the other, it is found to be further analyzable.

(Karunadasa 1996:4 f; emphasis added)

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(*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), craving (*taṇhā*) and conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f), or as “graspings” (*gāha*), namely, view (*diṭṭhi*), craving, conceit. (MA 2:111, 225)

<sup>20</sup> S 18.9/2:248 f.

<sup>21</sup> S 26.9/3:231.

<sup>22</sup> M 140.11-19/3:240-243 = SD 4.17.

<sup>23</sup> D 22.15/2:302 = SD 13.2.

<sup>24</sup> M 10.40/1:61 = SD 13.3.

<sup>25</sup> D 28.4/3:102 = SD 14.14.

<sup>26</sup> A 6.61/3:399-401.

<sup>27</sup> A 10.27.11/5:52.

<sup>28</sup> M 38.3-8/256-260 = SD 7.10.

<sup>29</sup> D 33.2.2(1)-(3)/3:243.

<sup>30</sup> M 115.4-9/3:62 f = SD 29.1.

<sup>31</sup> S 14.1/2:140.

<sup>32</sup> That is to say, each is not the only or final means to awakening. (P)

#### 4 How the dharma theory arose

In the 5 types of early Buddhist analysis, the first, that of name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*), when further analysed becomes the second analysis, that of the 5 aggregates (*khandha*), where the name-group (*nāma,kāya*) of the first is analysed into feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Now, *khandha* means “aggregates or group,” showing that it can be further analysed, that is, into the 6 elements (*dhātu*), where the form-group (*rūpa,kāya*) of name-and-form is analysed into 4 primary elements (*mahā,bhūta*), namely, earth, water, fire and air. The six-element analysis is further analyzable, in that consciousness (*viññāṇa*) has four aspects.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the 12 sense-bases (*āyatana*) are further analysed into the 18 elements (*dhātu*), with the addition of their respective consciousnesses, to show how sense-stimuli and sense-experience arise, leading to suffering, or to liberation. Even here, consciousness is not the final process or item in the analysis. For, although consciousness is listed as sixfold here, its invariable components, such as feeling and perception, are not separately mentioned. As such, it will be seen that none of the five analyses can be considered as exhaustive or final, as each is further analyzable, and each analysis flows into the other.

Apparently, according to **Karunadasa**, following this line of thought—that there is no total or final analysis of existence—the Abhidhammikas<sup>34</sup> went on

to evolve still another mode of analysis which in their view is not amenable to further analysis. This new development, which is more or less common to all the systems of Abhidhamma, is the analysis of the world of experience into what came to be known as *dharmas* (Skt) or *dharmas* (Pāli). (1996:5; emphasis added)

While in the Suttas, the word *dhamma* has a variety of meanings, depending on the context, in the Abhidhamma, however, the term assumes a technical meaning referring to those items of “realities” in the final analysis, that is, physical and mental events.

One of the earliest mention of the dharma theory or theory of moments is found in **the Sammo-ha,vinodanī**, the Vibhaṅga Commentary, where it states that the Abhidhamma analyses matter or materiality into moments (*khaṇa*), and that this method is *not* found in the Suttas. It explains that, in **the Suttas**, matter is classified as past, future or present (*atītānāgata,paccuppanna*) in accordance with the division of life into birth and death (*bhavana paricchinnam*). All matter before birth is “past” matter, all matter after death is “future” matter, and all matter between birth and death is “present” matter. In **the Abhidhamma**, however, the division is made on the basis of moments (*khaṇena paricchinnam*). Each moment comprises three phases of “arising” (*uppāda*), “presence” (*thiti*) and “ceasing” (*bhaṅga*). All matter that has passed over these three phases is termed past matter; all matter that has not yet reached these three phases is future matter; and matter that is in the process of passing through the three phases is present matter. (VbhA 7)<sup>35</sup> **Gethin** helpfully summarizes the discussion here:

The relationship between Dharma and dharmas might be stated as follows. Dharma is the way things ultimately are; it is also the Buddha’s teaching since this is in accordance with the way things ultimately are. Physical and mental events are the ultimate building blocks of the way things ultimately are; thus to understand the Buddha’s teaching and see Dharma is to see things in terms of dharmas. (1998:209)

The word *dhamma* is perhaps the most basic technical term of the Abhidhamma. While it has been variously rendered as “state,” “phenomena,” “principle,” etc, none of these conveys its precise Abhidhamma meaning (which I take as “an instance of one of the fundamental physical or mental events that interact to produce the world as we experience it”), and I have preferred to leave it untranslated and preserve the resonances with *dhamma* in the sense of the

<sup>33</sup> The consciousness element (*viññāṇa,dhātu*) here represents the whole of the mental side of existence, ie the 4 non-material aggregates.

<sup>34</sup> See Sarachchandra 1994:42.

<sup>35</sup> See also Vism 292, 473; and Sarachchandra 1994:42-44.

truth realized by the Buddha and conveyed in his teachings. To adapt a well known saying of the Nikāyas, he who sees Dhamma sees *dhammas*. (Gethin 2002:xix)

**Dharmas**, like atoms, are the building blocks of the physical world, but on a higher level of understanding mind and matter are closely interrelated. As such, dharmas are also the building blocks of the the senses and sense-objects and of the mind and mind-objects. According to the Theravāda Abhidhamma, 81 types of dharmas are conditioned (*saṅkhata*), that is, what comprises the conditioned world from the lowest hells to the highest heavens. The 82<sup>nd</sup> dharma is the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), namely, nirvana.

**Conditioned dharmas** fall into three broad groups: consciousness (*citta*), mental concomitants or associated mentality (*cetasika*), and form or physical phenomena (*rūpa*). Together with the only unconditioned dharma, nirvana (*nibbāna*), they form the tetrad of ultimate reality (*paramattha sacca*) of the Abhidhamma tradition. Let us now briefly examine how the Abhidhamma has become what it is today.

## 5 The seven weeks after the Great Awakening

According to the commentarial account of the seven weeks after the Great Awakening, during the fourth week, the Buddha spends his time meditating and reflecting on the Abhidhamma. Let us briefly look at the sequence of events to better understand the context of the fourth week.<sup>36</sup>

WEEK 1. **The Bodhi Sutta 1** (U 1.1) says that the newly-awakened Buddha sits in meditation under the Bodhi tree for the whole of first week, enjoying the bliss of liberation.<sup>37</sup>

WEEK 2. Then for the whole of the second week, the Buddha reflects on dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) in the direct order (*anuloma*): *When this (condition) exists, this (effect) is; through the arising of this (condition), this (effect) arises.*<sup>38</sup> This explains the real root-cause of existence.

The Commentaries say that at the end of the first week, the Buddha, to dispel the devas' doubt about his awakening, rises into the air and displays the twin wonder (*yamaka pāṭihāriya*), where from fire and water shoot out from his pores, dancing around his body, forming a magnificent mandorla around himself.<sup>39</sup> Technically, this miracle is an example of the Buddha's *transfiguration*.<sup>40</sup>

The same Commentaries continue by saying that the Buddha then *stands* in meditation, gazing with unblinking eyes at the Bodhi tree, grateful for its having sheltered him during his struggle for awakening. This spot came to be called **the Shrine of the Unblinking Eye** (*animisa,cetiya*).<sup>41</sup> While it is possible that the Buddha is actually gazing with open eyes fully focussed on the Bodhi tree, this is unlikely if we go by the nature of dhyanic experience. It is more likely that he begins by gazing at the Bodhi tree as his meditation object, and following that he goes into dhyana which would account for his ability to keep to a single still posture of standing for a full week.

WEEK 3. During the third week, says **the Bodhi Sutta 2** (U 1.2), the Buddha sits under the Bodhi tree, reflecting on dependent arising in the reverse order (*paṭiloma*): *When this (condition) is not, this (effect) is not; through the ending of this (condition), this (effect) ends.*<sup>42</sup> This explains the utter destruction of conditions for suffering.<sup>43</sup>

According to the Dhammapada Commentary, during the third week after the Awakening, the Buddha mindfully paces up and down on "**the Jewelled Walk**" (*ratana,caṅkamaṇa*) near the Bodhi tree. The Buddha had made this promenade using his psychic power to convince some skeptical devas that he has actually attained bodhi (awakening). According to the Dhammapada Commentary, it is while meditatively walking up and down on the Jewelled Walk that the Buddha performs the twin wonder (week 2). This wonder, it explains, is induced by the fire kasina and the water kasina. (DhA 3:241 f)

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see **The First Seven Weeks** = SD 63.1.

<sup>37</sup> U 1.1/1.

<sup>38</sup> *Imasmim sati idaṃ hoti; imass 'uppādā idaṃ uppajjati.*

<sup>39</sup> MA 2:184; UA 51; BA 8; J 1:77.

<sup>40</sup> See **Miracles** = SD 27.5 (2) (The transfiguration).

<sup>41</sup> MA 2:184; UA 52; BA 8; J 1:77.

<sup>42</sup> *Imasmim asati idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.*

<sup>43</sup> U 1.2/2.

WEEK 4. **The Bodhi Sutta 3** (U 1.3) continues by saying that in the fourth week, the Buddha reflects dependent arising in all its modes. After a day deep in dhyanic bliss, he reflects on **dependent arising** in *the direct mode* during the first watch (6.00-10.00 pm); during the second watch (10.00-2.00 am), he reflects on it in *the reverse mode*; and during the last watch (2.00-6.00 am), he reflects on it in *both direct and reverse modes*.<sup>44</sup>

**The Vinaya** account (V 1:1 f) gives the same account, but all three episodes are conflated into a single episode, all apparently occurring in the same first week (since no intervening events are mentioned).<sup>45</sup> Both the Udāna and the Vinaya then continues with the episode of the *humhuṃka* brahmin's visit. Both **the Vinaya** (V 1:2) and **the Nigrodha Sutta** (U 1.4) go on to say, “[T]hen, at that time, the Blessed One had been sitting in one posture, cross-legged, experiencing the bliss of liberation.” When he has emerged from his meditation, a certain brahmin of the *humhuṃka* birth<sup>46</sup> (the Buddha's first human visitor) visits him. The Buddha gives him a short teaching, and both the accounts end right there. (The Commentaries put this episode in the 5<sup>th</sup> week.)

Evidently, while the Udāna takes as the “dependent arising” episodes as occurring over three weeks, the Vinaya account takes it as occurring in the same night of the Awakening. As the Vinaya Piṭaka is generally regarded as *younger* than the Suttas, and as such it is likely that the Udāna version is the *older*. However, it is also possible that these two versions have come down from two different older sources (with the Vinaya source as the younger one). The popular “seven-week” tradition as we have it today generally follow Vinaya and Commentarial version of the “dependent arising” episode.

According to the Commentaries, during the 4th week, the Buddha sits meditating on the Abhidhamma<sup>47</sup> in **the Jewelled House** (*ratana,ghara*), created by the devas, which is later called the Jewelled Shrine (*ratana,cetiya*).<sup>48</sup> Traditionally, it is said that here the Buddha reflects on **the paṭṭhāna** (“conditional relations”), which is also the name of the 7<sup>th</sup> and last book of the Theravāda Abhidhamma. The Commentaries actually say that the Buddha spends the whole week “thinking out the Abhidhamma Piṭaka in detail, including the entire Paṭṭhāna with its infinite methods.”<sup>49</sup>

The term *paṭṭhāna* is pre-commentarial, when it is used in the sense of “the Paṭṭhāna method,” especially in reference to the fourth chapter of the Netti-p, pakaraṇa, which attempts to categorise all suttas into a sixteenfold system, starting with those dealing with mental defilements.<sup>50</sup> As such, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi, *paṭṭhāna* here has nothing to do with the Paṭṭhāna of later Abhidhamma.<sup>51</sup>

As a text, **the Paṭṭhāna** is a book of “causation or conditionality,” dealing with the 24 modes of relations (*paccaya*) amongst mental and material states. While the other Abhidhamma texts take the analytical approach, this is the only Abhidhamma text that takes the *synthetical* approach. It is also important to note that what the Buddha is meditating on here in the *method* of Abhidhamma, not the

<sup>44</sup> U 1.3/3 f.

<sup>45</sup> Two possible explanations obtain here: (1) The V account is based on an older source; (2) The commentarial episodes of weeks 3-4 were added later. The Vinaya, in this connection, has 4 sections: (1) the Talk on Awakening (*bodhi,kathā*, V 1:1 f); (2) on the Ajapāla (*ajapāla,kathā*, V 1:2 f); (3) on the Mucalinda (*mucalinda,kathā*, V 1:3); (4) on the Rājāyatana (*rājāyatana,kathā*, V 1:3 f); followed by Brahmā's entreaty leading up to the teaching of the First Discourse.

<sup>46</sup> Be Se: *hum,humka,jātiko*; but V (PTS) has *huhumka.jātiko*. See V:H 4:3 n3, U:W 3 n1, & esp JPTS 1897-1901:42. On *hum* meaning disapproval, see Vism 3.53/96 (but no brahmin is mentioned), 3.89/105 (said to be the waking sound of one of lustful temperament), Vimati,vinodanī Ṭikā:Be 2:85; on meaning either approval or acceptance, VvA 77. Masefield also notes: “whilst on *humhuṃka* meaning one uttering the sound *hum hum*, cp the mantra *Om maṇi padme hum*, etc” (UA:M 13 n18). A similar episode is found at Mvst 3:325.

<sup>47</sup> In the Nikāyas, *abhidhamma* means “concerning the Dharma,” often in combination with *abhiviniya* (V 1:64 = 181; M 1:472, 2:239; A 1:289, 5:24), but in post-canonical usage it is used as tt to mean “Higher Doctrine,” ie the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, the 3<sup>rd</sup> collection.

<sup>48</sup> VA 5:957; MA 2:184; UA 52; BA 290; J 1:78; DhsA 13-15.

<sup>49</sup> *Tattha pallānkena nisīditvā Abhidhamma,piṭakam, visesato c'ettha ananta,nayam samanta,paṭṭhānam vicinanto sattāham vītināmesi*, VA 5:957; MA 2:184; UA 52; BA 9; J 1:78; ApA 82. The last adds, “But the Abhidhammikas say that the jewelled house does not refer to a house built of seven types of gems, but a place where he masters (*sammasita*) the seven books of the Abhidhamma” (J 1:78): MA actually lists these titles (MA 2:184). On *ananta,nayam samanta,paṭṭhāna* or *ananta,naya,samanta,paṭṭhāna*, see JPTS 1915:28 f.

<sup>50</sup> See UA:M 190 n496. Cf Nett:Ñ 173-250.

<sup>51</sup> See UA:M 190 n496.

Seven Texts,<sup>52</sup> which were compiled very much later (between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Councils).

WEEK 5. From the narrative viewpoint, the 5th week after the Great Awakening is a very turbulent one. The Buddha spends this week meditating under the **Ajapāla banyan tree** (*ajapāla nigrodha*). According to **the Satta,vassāni Sutta** (S 4.24), Māra appears to the Buddha and invites him to pass away. When Māra fails in his effort, his three daughters, then try six times to seduce the Buddha.<sup>53</sup>

WEEK 6. During the 6th week, the Buddha stays under **the Mucalinda tree** (*Barringtonia acutangula*), enjoying the bliss of nirvana. A sudden storm of torrential rain and violent winds rages throughout the week. At the onset of the storm, the serpent-king Mucalinda emerges from his underground abode and coiling around the Buddha's body seven times, spreads his hood over the Buddha to protect him from the rain, cold, heat, insects, and other discomforts. At the end of the seventh day, the serpent-king uncoils himself. Turning himself into a comely young man, he pays his respects to the Buddha. The Buddha gives him a brief instruction.<sup>54</sup>

WEEK 7. During the 7<sup>th</sup> week, the Buddha meditates under **the Rājāyatana tree** (*Buchania latifolia*). At the end of the seventh day of the seventh week, he emerges from his meditation, completing 49 days of fasting. At the end of the 49-day fast, two merchants, **Tapussa and Bhallika** meet the Buddha, offer him his first meal, and become the first lay disciple (taking the twofold refuge, that is, in the Buddha and the Dharma).<sup>55</sup>

## 6 Canonizing the Abhidhamma

**6.1 IDEA-CENTRED APPROACH.** The Abhidhamma began as an attempt to systematize the Buddha's teachings in terms of ideas (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*), omitting all those teachings that are person-based (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*).<sup>56</sup> For those who are influenced by eternalism or prone to self-mortification, the Abhidhamma answers with the *analytical* method; for those who are swayed by annihilationism or overpowered by self-indulgence, there is the *synthetical* method of the Paṭṭhāna.

Ironically, although the early Abhidhamma teachings are idea-centred (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*), the later Abhidhamma exponents often resort to the otherworldly and miraculous to legitimize themselves. The legitimization by resorting to the otherworldly narratives, especially those of the Buddha's teaching of the Abhidhamma in the heavens [6.3], and that of Sāriputta and the bats [7.2].

Scholars have noted the motive behind such stories [5; 6.1]:

The motive behind this idea is easy to see. If the late Abhidhamma was to be considered as *buddhavacana*, it was imperative to find some place where it could have been spoken, as is usual in the Suttantas and Vinaya texts alike. Of course, there was and could not possibly be any tradition on place names, and consequently the displacement into heaven was a wise move, with no local Buddhist community being able to object, because it was not mentioned in the *nidāna*.  
(Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: 66, §133)

Commentarial tradition also attributes Sāriputta as the compiler of the Abhidhamma as we have it, which was then brought to Sri Lanka by Mahinda (DhsA 32,13-20). The series of names given there seems to be inspired by the Parivāra genealogy. (V 5:3)<sup>57</sup>

Let us now examine the story of the Buddha's teaching the Abhidhamma in the heavens.

**6.2 OTHER-WORLDLY SOURCES.** Towards the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> year of his public ministry, the Buddha is said to have performed the twin wonder (for the second time), this time in response to a challenge by sectarian teachers. This twin wonder is performed from beneath the royal gardener Ganda's mango tree on the Āsāḷha fullmoon day (the first day of the 7<sup>th</sup> rains retreat).

The Buddha, it is said, following the tradition of the past Buddhas, then goes straight to the Tāvātimsa heaven, sits on Shakra's throne, the Paṇḍu,kambala Silāsana, at the foot of the Pāricchattaka

<sup>52</sup> *Satta-p,pakkarāṇa*: see Table 1.2.

<sup>53</sup> S 1:124 f; cf A 5:46, J 1:78 f; DhA 3:195 f. See also **Māra,dhītā S** (S 4.25/1:124-127).

<sup>54</sup> V 1:2.

<sup>55</sup> V 1:3; VA 5:959-961; MA 2:185 f; BA 9; J 1:80 f. For a more detailed discussion, see **The First Seven Weeks** = SD 63.1. For events following this, see **Why the Buddha "Hesitated" to Teach** = SD 12.1.

<sup>56</sup> On the 2 forms of teaching, see MA 1:24; PmA 449; Nett 164 f.

<sup>57</sup> See Otto von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996:22 (§42), 66 (§133).

(coral) tree, and teaches the Abhidhamma to the celestial assembly headed by his mother, Māyā devaputra.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps it is out of filial gratitude to his mother that the Buddha teaches the Abhidhamma to her: no reason is recorded as to why the Buddha chooses to teach the Abhidhamma in Tāvatiṃsa. Moreover, if the Abhidhamma is such a vital system, why did the Buddha not teach it to his numerous wise arhat disciples?

The answer is clear. The Abhidhamma evolved over the post-Buddha centuries as *a systematic tool for meditation* put together by various brilliant Buddhist minds. However, as time passed, what is meant to be a meditation tool, slowly hardened into *a rigorous system of scholastic lists and ethical dogmas* that seem to stand in their own right. Partly as a desperate response to influence of rival scholastic systems, partly due to the decline in contemplative practice, the Theravādins tried to canonize their Abhidhamma system as the third Piṭaka and to legitimize this in various ways.

**6.3 THE TĀVATIṂSA ABHIDHAMMA.** One of the earliest attempts at legitimization of the Abhidhamma was the story of the Buddha's teaching Abhidhamma to Māyā devaputra in Tāvatiṃsa heaven, traditionally said to have occurred during the 7<sup>th</sup> rains retreat.<sup>59</sup> Although the Buddha spent three earth months teaching the Abhidhamma in Tāvatiṃsa, he actually stayed there *for only about 3.6 minutes* in local time!<sup>60</sup> According to the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī Commentary, **the Attha,sālinī**, “For three months infinite and measureless, the discourse went on ceaselessly with the speed of a waterfall (‘sky-river’), or like streams of water bursting forth from water-pots with mouth turned downwards”<sup>61</sup> (DhsA 15).

Still, as a human being, the Buddha's biological clock apparently followed earth time, and he had to attend to his bodily needs accordingly. Each earth day, he would descend to earth to attend to his bodily needs. During his absence, the Abhidhamma teaching was uninterrupted as he left behind his holographic image to continue the discourse.

This is of course a common mode of legitimizing religious teachings—that the teaching is handed from a higher or heavenly source—or, as in the case of **Nāgārjuna**, from an underground source. According to Tibetan sources, Nāgārjuna was so accomplished in doctrine, medicine and alchemy that he was invited by the nāgas (serpent beings who are said to live in the watery underworld) to visit their kingdom. There it is said he discovered the Prajñā,pāramitā Sūtras, which had been lost to the human world since the Buddha's exposition. He returned to the human world with the sutras, and through their magical powers was able to live for many centuries. When he finally died, he was reborn in Sukhāvātī, Amitabha's Western Paradise.<sup>62</sup>

Another good example of religious legitimization is the Tibetan tradition of the “treasure text” or terma (gter ma). A treasure text, such as the Bardo Thotrol (often called The Tibetan Book of the Dead), is said to have been written long ago (usually by Padmasambhava in the 8<sup>th</sup> century), at a time when the Tibetans were not ready to appreciate its meaning and depth. So it was buried away so that it is discovered centuries later by a “treasure discoverer” or tertön (*gter ston*).

Even then it was revealed to its discoverer in the secret *ḍakinī* language, a kind of code that only he was able to decipher and translate into a public language. It was necessary, then, for the discoverer, finding the text at the prophesied moment, to become a kind of embodied ghost writer, translating it in such a way as to make it meaningful for its time, creating a text that is original because it is already a copy.

(Donald S Lopez, Jr, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, Chicago, 1998:85)

It is left to the critical thinker and true practitioner to tease out the significance of all this.

## 7 Sāriputta's role in legitimizing the Abhidhamma

**7.1 SĀRIPUTTA'S TEACHINGS.** Sāriputta, because of his profound wisdom, second only to that of the Buddha's, often plays an important role in the legitimization of the Abhidhamma tradition. After

<sup>58</sup> DhA 3:214; DhsA 13 f.

<sup>59</sup> AA 1:101, 126, 174; DhA 14.2e/3:216-223; BA 146 (of Maṅgala Buddha), 298; ApA 118; DhsA 31, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Moulton 2006:41.

<sup>61</sup> *Tayo māse nīrantaram pavatti,desanā vegena pavattā ākāsa,gaṅgā viya adho,mukha,ṭhapita,udaka,ghāṭā nikkhanta,udaka,dhārā viya va hutvā anantā aparimāṇā ahosi.*

<sup>62</sup> See Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, London & NY: Routledge, 1989:56.

all, it is Sāriputta who is recorded as having delivered the last two suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya, namely, **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33) and **the Das’uttara Sutta** (D 34), both of which are lists of doctrinal terms, mostly without definitions. **The Saṅgīti Sutta**, using a new style later followed by the Aṅguttara, arranges the terms in numerical groups of ones progressively up to tens, serving as an index to the doctrines scattered throughout the Teaching. **The Das’uttara Sutta** consists of groups ten single doctrines, then ten twofold doctrines, and so on up to ten tenfold, aimed to bring out their practical significance (“that greatly help,” *bahu,kāra*).

Both these suttas have been delivered late in the Buddha’s public ministry, after the death of the Jain founder, Mahāvīra, as a result of which the Jain community fell into disarray. Understandably, the Saṅgīti Sutta “should be recited together by all, in concord and without dissension, so that the holy life would last long for the welfare and happiness of gods and humans” (D 33.1.7).<sup>63</sup> The Das’uttara Sutta, on the other hand, opens with a clear statement of its practical purpose: “The Das’uttara I shall proclaim: a teaching for the attainment of nirvana and the ending of suffering, the release from all bondage” (D 34.1.2).<sup>64</sup>

The Sarvāstivādins held the Saṅgīti Sutta is high esteem, and included it in their similarly named Abhidharma text, **the Saṅgīti,pariyāya** [Table 2], attributed to Sāriputra in the Chinese translations, but to Mahā Kauṣṭhila (Mahā Koṭṭhita) by the Tibetan translations.<sup>65</sup> The Dharma,skandha, too, is attributed to Sāriputra. The systematic arrangement of these two Suttas, anyway, is a foretaste of what is to come in the Abhidhamma. The sets of ten items (*dasa,dhamma*), for example, are treated in the Saṅgīti Sutta in much the same way as **the Puggala Paññatti** does with the “set of ten individuals” (*dasa,puggala*).

**7.2 SĀRIPUTTA AND THE BATS.** From the Dhammapada Commentary,<sup>66</sup> we learn that while the Buddha is teaching the Abhidhamma in Tāvātimsa, he attends to his bodily needs in keeping with earth time. So when meal-time approaches, leaving behind his hologram form (*nimitta,buddha*) to continue teaching, he would go down to the northern continent, Uttara,kuru, to collect alms and then retire to the shores of Lake Anotattā deep in the Himalayas, and there in a rich man’s pavilion, have his meal.

Sāriputta visits the Buddha there and attends to him.<sup>67</sup> The Buddha tells him the progress of the Abhidhamma teaching and to relay the teaching thus far to the 500 monks under Sāriputta’s tutelage. Then the Buddha returns to the heavens to resume his Abhidhamma teaching personally.

These 500 monks have left home out of faith on seeing the Buddha perform the twin wonder at Gaṇḍa’s mango tree. Listening to Sāriputta (relaying the teachings from the Buddha), they in due course mastered all the Seven Books (*satta-p,pakaraṇa*) of the Abhidhamma. It is said that in the time of Kassapa Buddha (the previous dispensation) they were small bats (*khuddaka,vagguli*).

Once, as they hung from the ceiling of a mountain-cave (*pabbhāre*), they heard two monks reciting the Abhidhamma as they walked up and down in meditation, and ‘held to the sound of their voices as a mental sign’ (*sare nimittam aggahesum*), that is, they were entranced by the chanting voices. The bats, of course, could not understand what they were hearing, but were simply captivated by the voices. When they passed away, they were reborn in the heavens, enjoying divine bliss for two Buddha periods.

Then they are reborn into distinguished families in Sāvattihī in our Buddha’s time. There, seeing the Buddha perform the twin wonder, their faith ripens and they renounce the world. During the three months of the rains, as the Buddha teaches the Abhidhamma in the heavens, and they, receiving the same teachings through Sāriputta, in due course, master the Seven Books.<sup>68</sup> At the end of the Buddha’s discourse, eight hundred thousand million devas penetrate the truth (*dhammābhisamayo aho-si*),<sup>69</sup> and Māyā devaputra himself becomes a stream-winner.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>63</sup> D 34.1.1/272.

<sup>64</sup> D 33.1.7/211.

<sup>65</sup> See Takakusu, “On the Abhidharma literature of the Sarvāstivādins,” JPTS 1904-5:66-146 (esp 99).

<sup>66</sup> DhA 3:222 f; DhSA 16 f.

<sup>67</sup> This section is mistranslated in DhA:B, which says that Sāriputta went to Tusita heaven.

<sup>68</sup> See SD Epilegomena II(b) B(3).

<sup>69</sup> This probably means that they become lesser stream-winners (*cūla sotāpanna*), MA 2:120; cf Vism 605/29.27. For further discussion on “lesser stream-winner,” see “Laymen Saints” = SD 8.6(14b).

<sup>70</sup> On the story of the bats, see also **Group Karma?** = SD 39.1.

**7.3 ABHIDHAMMA VERSIONS.** According to the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī Commentary, **the Attha,sālinī**, written by **Buddhaghosa**, there are three versions of the Abhidhamma:

- (1) The long version: the one taught by the Buddha in Tāvātīmsa;
- (2) The short version: the one taught by the Buddha to Sāriputta; and
- (3) The medium version: the one taught by Sāriputta to the 500 monks.

It is the third, or medium, version that is said to have come down to us. The Attha,sālinī adds:

The order of the texts of the Abhidhamma originated with Sāriputta. The numerical series in the Great Text (*mahā,pakarāṇa*) [ie the Paṭṭhāna] was also determined by the elder. In this way, the elder, without damaging the Dharma, laid down the numerical series so that it is easy to learn, remember, study and teach it. (DhsA 17)

Buddhaghosa also explains that the table of contents of the fifth book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, **the Kathā,vatthu**, was first laid out by the Buddha himself, but later expanded upon by Moggalī,-putta Tissa at the time of the Third Council [“the Pāṭali,putta Council” of Asoka’s time], as foreseen by the Buddha. Thus, Buddhaghosa legitimizes the inclusion of the Kathā,vatthu as one of the seven books of the Abhidhamma. (DhsA 3-6)

## 8 Other sources of the Abhidhamma

**8.1 HISTORICAL ORIGINS.** The most probable origin of the Abhidhamma is what scholars, such as **AK Warder**, in his *Indian Buddhism*, propose:

It seems very probable that in the earliest period this third section of the *Tripitaka* consisted simply of some set of *Māṭṛkā* [Pali *māṭikā*]<sup>71</sup> headings, possibly propounded by the Buddha himself when giving systematic instruction to his followers, and that this was only later fully elaborated into *Abhidharma* exposition. From the available *Abhidharma* texts it is possible to suggest which were the most original *Māṭṛkā* headings, but it is uncertain how many of all the known headings might have been in the earliest list, or before the schools began to divide. (1970:10 f)<sup>72</sup>

By comparing the available *Abhidharma* texts, however, we are led to the conclusion that already within the first two centuries after the *parinirvāṇa*, and in a great part before the First Schism, a substantial development [of the Abhidhamma] had taken place. (1970:218)

**8.2 COMMENTARIAL TRADITIONS.** One of the most important factors contributing to the Abhidhamma tradition is the Pali Commentaries, some of which reputedly go back to the Buddha’s time.<sup>73</sup> Most of the early commentaries, written in Sinhala, were the source for Buddhaghosa’s commentaries written in Pali during the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Although Buddhaghosa regarded himself simply as a translator and compiler, it is clearly evident that he has occasionally included his own opinions.

Except for **the Milinda,pañhā**, a work of apologetics,<sup>74</sup> and Upatissa’s **Vimutti,magga**, all of Buddhaghosa’s others sources are lost.<sup>75</sup> The main contribution of the *Vimutti,magga* to the Abhidhamma is “the laying out of the names and order of the thought moments in the sense door process” (Robert Moulton 2006:42). The *Visuddhi,magga* expands on this structure by giving the numbers (such as seven impulsion (*javana*) thought-moments), a mind-door process and the mental processes for rebirth, attainments, and so on.

<sup>71</sup> *Māṭṛkā* means “a ‘matrix’ or list of topics, a set of notes giving just the headings of a body of doctrine”

<sup>72</sup> See also Warder 1970:10 f, 218-224. For Warder’s study on the *Māṭṛkā*, see his Intro essay to his ed of the Abhidhamma manual, **Moha,vicchedanī**, London: Pali Text Society, 1961:xix ff, esp xxi.

<sup>73</sup> Eg **Mahā,niddesa** and **Cūḷa,niddesa**.

<sup>74</sup> A 1<sup>st</sup> century north-western Indian work, recording the monk Nāgasena’s answers to the Bactrian king Milinda’s questions by way of apparent dilemmas culled from the Suttas.

<sup>75</sup> On the sources of the Pali Commentaries, see EW Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 1946: 10-23. The **Vimutti,magga** by Upatissa (3<sup>rd</sup> cent, possibly 1<sup>st</sup> cent, Lanka) See S Jayawardhana, *Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1994:175-177 & Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: V2.2.

While Buddhaghosa was working on his Commentaries in Lanka, **Buddhadatta** (5<sup>th</sup> cent?) was developing a condensed version of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka as a study guide, in Kāñcī (modern Conjeeveram on the Coromandal Coast in south India). His **Abhidhammâvatāra**<sup>76</sup> is a short work of only 1415 stanzas in 24 chapters with prose sections in between, summarizing the essence of the Abhidhamma for the student to commit to memory. Buddhadatta, for example, conflated the repetitive groupings (dhyana factors, faculties, path factors, wholesome roots, etc) of the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, largely taken from the Suttas. Using this method, he comes up with a condensed list of 52 mental factors (*cetasika*).

This same structure is later used by **Anuruddha** (12<sup>th</sup> century) in his **Abhidhamm’attha Saṅgaha**,<sup>77</sup> which supersedes the Abhidhammâvatāra in popularity. It keeps to the Abhidhammâvatāra’s framework of 52 mental factors, 28 types of matter, and nirvana as “realities,” as distinct from “concepts.”

**Robert Moul**, in his instructive article, advises those interested in the Abhidhamma to do as follows:

One should view the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha as it was intended—as a starting point in the study of the Abhidhamma. Having grasped an overview of the subject from the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha, one should then proceed to study the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and it will then be clear what materials in the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha were “later additions.” These later additions are not necessarily wrong or embellishments, but they can be viewed as non-core teachings. Though non-core teachings may be interesting to discuss, they should not distract us from the important themes contained in the Tipiṭaka. (2006:43)

## 9 Miraculous memes

Another important way that the Abhidhamma is promoted is through “Abhidhamma talk” or “the Abhidhamma meme.” A **meme** is an idea, statement or story that continues to be replicated (not necessarily faithfully) by believers.<sup>78</sup> A good description of how a faith-inclined Abhidhammist might behave is found, for example, in **the Jaṭilā Sutta** (S 3.11). King Pasenadi, seeing “seven matter-hair ascetics, seven Jain ascetics, seven naked ascetics, seven loin-clothed [single-robed] ascetics, and seven wanderers” passing by, declares to the Buddha, “Bhante, they are amongst those in the world who are arhats or who have reached the path of arhathood!” The Buddha replies that it is not easy for one who is not an arhat to recognize one, and that one can only really know another in the following ways.<sup>79</sup>

(1) **Through living together with another**, another’s moral virtue (*sīla*) can be known, but even then only after some time, by one who is attentive and wise.

(2) **Through dealing with another**, another’s honesty (*soceyya*) can be known, and but even then only after some time, by one who is attentive and wise.

(3) **Through adversities**, another’s fortitude [emotional strength] (*thama*) can be known, but even then only after some time, by one who is attentive and wise.

(4) **Through discussing with another**, another’s wisdom (*paññā*) can be known, but even then only after some time, by one who is attentive and wise.

(S 3.11/1:77-79) = SD 14.11

The Abhidhamma memes, besides the traditional teachings, are of two main forms: *stories of remarkable self-control over one’s body and mind*, and *miraculous stories about teachers and practi-*

<sup>76</sup> “Descent into the Abhidhamma.” A work in mixed verse and prose, “the earliest surviving manual attempting to sum up the contents of the Abhidhamma” (Hinüber 1996 §341). *Buddhadatta’s Manuals* I (with Rūpv), ed AP Buddhadatta, London: PTS, 1915. See Norman, “Pāli Literature,” 1983:130-132]; S Jayawardhana, *Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1994:5-7; & Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996 §340-343.

<sup>77</sup> “Compendium of Abhidhamma Topics,” the most important introductory manual on the Abhidhamma. Edd Childers, Goonesekera & TW Rhys Davids, JPTS, 1884:1-48. Ed H Saddhātissa, Oxford: PTS, 1989 (with Abhs MT).

<sup>78</sup> See **Memes** = SD 26.3.

<sup>79</sup> S 1:78 f = U 65 f. This brief exposition is elaborated in **Thānāni S** (A 4.192 = 2:187-190) = SD 14.12.

tioners. An Abhidhammist might claim to be able to see lucidly the inner workings of the body or to have attained some profound level of insight, or that a certain teacher could levitate or perform various miracles or is an “arhat.” Such stories, of course, abound in all religions, and such stories help to reinforce the faith of followers and attract new converts. These stories often work because they cannot be critically examined, and are at best taken on faith.

Furthermore, there may be *the tendency of an emotionally immature person or an attention-hungry person or someone with a personal problem to turn to religion*, even to Abhidhamma, as an external locus of control.<sup>80</sup> As if by way of serendipity, such a one then discovers the place and power that the Abhidhamma holds in the minds of believers. To assume a religious aura or power, one then only needs to memorize the Abhidhamma memes and replicate them in the right circles. It is easier to convince oneself of such near-miraculous transformation if one is not so familiar with the Dharma.

In a similar manner, such a mastery of the Abhidhamma may turn one into a **tulku** (*sprul sku*) of sorts. The term technically refers to certain individuals of Tibetan Buddhism, said to reincarnate over a number of generations. As a rule, a child who is recognized as a tulku would be taken away from his biological family and groomed in the lamasery. If the tulku turns out to be a wise and compassionate teacher, the system works and all is well; but often enough there are serious problems and painful scandals attending people attributed with so much power and charisma.<sup>81</sup>

Once when a certain lama was asked what if they had chosen the *wrong* candidate for tulkthood, his reply is very instructive: Bring me any young child, say of three, we can, under the proper conditions, easily groom him into one!<sup>82</sup> This is clearly understandable because Tibet, in her pre-occupation days, was a theocracy, where the high lamas were royalty who ruled the country, and the Potala had its own prison and police (like the Vatican palace in mediaeval Europe).

During my years as a Theravāda monk in Malaysia, especially during the three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I noticed an interesting phenomenon where the religious-minded young male singles with some kind of lack of social skills or unresolved emotional issues turning to Abhidhamma. In one of the most interesting cases, this young man became good enough in Abhidhamma theory as to be allowed to hold his own classes in the largest Sinhala Buddhist mission and most influential foreign mission in the country, but later he turned to New Age interests, such as Spirituality, energyworks, the occult, divination (such as tarot card reading), and reiki. He was recorded as declaring that he is “a Buddhist by faith, and a Spiritualist at heart.”<sup>83</sup>

If it is possible for Abhidhamma to be misused by an individual, the problem becomes bigger when it affects a group. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century especially, there was a worrying trend amongst some Abhidhammists in southeast Asia: they tend to form closed circles, firstly, by the conviction (explicit or implicit) that they have discovered “the ultimate truth,” and secondly, by the fear (perhaps triumphalism) that those “with wrong views” should be politely avoided. This exclusivism often turns an Abhidhamma group into an exclusive or elitist religious leisure club with cultish and triumphalist tendencies. The final truths are decided by an Abhidhamma guru rather than from the authority of the Suttas or the Dharma. Interestingly, because of the abstruseness of Abhidhamma doctrines, those who really understand it are an exception than the rule, and the ignorant or not-so-knowledgeable would of course have to rely on the teacher rather than the teaching.

<sup>80</sup> On the problem of an external locus of control, see SD 17.6(2.2) on “Ritual and Superstition.”

<sup>81</sup> Eg Chogyam Trungpa Tulku scandal of the 1980s in the US: see Katy Butler, “Encountering the shadow in Buddhist America,” in *Common Boundary*, May-June 1990:14-22 & in *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*, ed Jeremiah Abrams & Connie Zweig, Los Angeles: JP Tarcher, 1991:137-147.

<sup>82</sup> See **Rule by Incarnation** = SD 36.16

<sup>83</sup> I am not against New Age, Reiki or Spirituality, but my curiosity is how a person believed to be good enough in the Abhidhamma (and Suttas) to give classes in them at one of the most influential mission in the country could fall back to the more worldly arts. I leave further discussion on the significance of what I have written to intelligent concerned Buddhists. I’m certainly impressed that the Sasanarakkha generously accommodates such individuals by providing a gentle yet pervading influence, so that as they learn more about the Dharma, they would need less of such “skillful means.” The only danger is when we think that we have nothing more to learn or that the true answer could be found outside of ourselves.

## 10 Proper use of the Abhidhamma

While the Suttas use stories, similes, metaphors and poetic language to inspire the listener, the Abhidhamma, on the other hand,

presents the Buddha's teachings without making concessions to time or place or audience, and in technical terms that are precisely defined to ensure analytical exactitude...it is an attempt to give a comprehensive statement of the Buddha's teachings exclusively in ultimate terms. A useful analogy, I think, for the relationship between the Abhidharma and the Sūtrānta is that of the relationship between a grammar book of a language and the language as spoken and used. In the same way as a grammar book aims at giving a bare account of how a particular language works, its structure and forms of expression, based on observation of the actual use of the language, so the Abhidharma is an attempt to lay bare and describe accurately and precisely, allowing for all circumstances and eventualities, the underlying structure of the Dharma as found in the discourses of the Buddha. (Gethin 1998:207 f)

The Abhidhamma will always be an important part of Buddhism, but its usefulness in facilitating our efforts towards awakening depends on how we use it. A growing number of modern scholars are becoming aware of the utility of the Abhidhamma. **Lance Cousins**, for example, comments that

The aim of this *abhidhamma* analysis [of existence into dharmas] is not really theoretical; it is related to insight meditation and offers a world-view based upon process in order to facilitate insight into change and no-self so as to undermine mental rigidity.

(“Abhidhamma,” in JR Hinnells (ed), *A New Dictionary of Religions*, 1995)

I hope all this does not give an impression of a “modernist” critique or skeptical approach to Abhidhamma, which is clearly not my aim here. The spirit of early Buddhism is that of *inquiry*, both external and internal. The spirit of inquiry in the *external* sense, that is, what can be known or the true sources of knowledge, is crystallized in the teachings of **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65).<sup>84</sup> This insightful pragmatism entails careful experiential analysis by a positive and wholesome mind, wherein the *internal* spirit of inquiry abides.

One of the main issues that moves serious practitioners to reject Abhidhammism is where the Abhidhamma is regarded as the “supreme doctrine” and placed even above the Dharma or Suttas. The Abhidhamma is given the highest place and the Suttas are used only to substantiate the Abhidhamma claims. In fact, properly speaking, the Dharma and Suttas should take priority of place in our spiritual life, and the Abhidhamma should help us understand the Dharma and Suttas better so that we can fine-tune our mindfulness practice and find liberation in this life itself.

The Abhidhamma teachings are at best *theories and views* for those who do not have any level of realization. Such theories and views can only hinder our meditation, when in fact we should simply be letting of all thinking, and to reflect on the impermanence of things. On having attained some level of calm and insight, then the purpose of the Abhidhamma becomes more clear. They can then serve as a syllabus, teaching schedule or resources for expressing our taste of freedom to others who are still only preparing the ingredients for the soup or boiling it.

A vital part of mindfulness training is the constant examination of every mental state as it arises. If we should be distracted by any of them, one way out is to question, “Why?” And we no longer find any reason for being distracted by it: so, why not let it go, and keep letting it go. A simile from **the Vitakka,saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20) fits this context very well:

Bhikshus, just as a man finding no reason for walking fast, walks slowly; finding no reason for walking slowly, stands; finding no reason for standing, sits down; finding no reason for sitting down, lies down—thus giving up an awkward posture for an easy one.

(M 20.6/1:120) = SD 1.6

<sup>84</sup> A 3.65/1:188-193 = SD 21.3.

It is like the opening of a thousand-petalled lotus: petal by petal open revealing the flower's ever more beautiful ever more fragrant interior. When all the lotus petals are open, at the heart of the lotus reveals the true emptiness of profound peace and liberation.

The vital need for spiritual letting-go is echoed in the parables of the water-snake and of the raft given by the Buddha himself in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22). The parable of the water-snake basically warns us against the misuse of Dharma for causing disharmony (such as arguing with and belittling others) or for worldly gains. The parable of the raft clearly points to the fact that the Teaching is not an object for collecting and clinging to, but *a means of spiritual liberation*. Just as we use a raft to cross to the safety of the farther shore, even so we practise the Dharma for the sake of spiritual liberation. The Buddha then declares

Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Dharma, how much more that which is not Dharma!<sup>85</sup> (M 22.14/1:135) = SD 3.13

Understandably, we should also inclusively read this admonition as: “having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Abhidhamma, how much more that which is not Abhidhamma!” Clearly, having understood what is “related to the Dharma” (*abhi-dhamma*), we should then let go of that relationship, for a higher realization. The Abhidhamma is *scholastic philosophy*, and no matter how well it describes mental moments and processes, and atomic particles of matter, we are still but spoons holding the Dharma soup if we fail to use the Abhidhamma raft to cross over to the far shore.

Serious meditation teachers are wont to remind us of urgency of the need for a calm and clear mind, and that there are simple, direct and effective methods of liberating the mind. The basic rule is that we should not clutter up the mind. An insightful and historical anecdote about **Ajahn Chah** reminds us of the simplicity and directness of the spiritual life:

One day, a famous woman lecturer on Buddhist metaphysics came to see Achaan Chah. This woman gave periodic teachings in Bangkok in the abhidharma and complex Buddhist psychology. In talking to Achaan Chah, she detailed how important it was for people to understand Buddhist psychology and how much her students benefited from their study with her. She asked him whether he agreed with the importance of such understanding.

“Yes, very important,” he agreed.

Delighted, she further questions whether he had his own students learn abhidharma.

“Oh, yes, of course.”

And where, she asked, did he recommend they start, which books and studies were best?

“Only here,” he said, pointing to his heart, “only here.” (Kornfield & Breiter 1985:12)

As already mentioned above [3], the Buddha, in the early years of his ministry, gives ad hoc non-technical teachings to individuals and groups, depending on their needs, circumstances and levels of understanding. In due course, these teachings evolved into sets of doctrines. A musical parable would be apt here. The Buddha is like a master musician who teaches his pupils the nature of musical notes, how to compose beautiful music with them, and above all to enjoy the beauty and peace of such music. Although today, many of us may not be such adept composers as the early masters, we can still practise the arpeggios and classic pieces, and appreciate the performances of various experienced artistes, so that we can still enjoy the beauty and peace of such music; or, even compose our own variations on the Buddha's themes, expressing our experience and joy of the Dharma.

The various Abhidhamma traditions apparently tried, as it were, to make a thorough survey and catalogue of the whole range of the musical sounds that the Buddha has produced. Then they tied to classify and analyze them into standardized sets and formulas. The impression we get here is that

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<sup>85</sup> *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag'eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean “good states,” ie calm and insight (*samatha, vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikôpama S** (M 66.26-33/1:455) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṇhāsaṅkhaya S** (M 38.14/1:260 f = SD 7.10) as one of the abandonment of attachment to insight. Bodhi, however, is of the view that “*dhamma* here signifies not good states themselves, but the teachings, the correct attitude to which was delineated just above in the simile of the snake.” (M:ÑB 1209 n255). See Introd.

what the Buddha knows and teaches amounts to just those dry notes and lists of musical terms. The music then ends up more analyzed than played and enjoyed.

Or worse, we must think that it is enough to *just to know* these traditional lists and theories, relegating the Suttas to mere footnotes, and, worst of all, without having tasted, or even preparing to taste, the open mind and spiritual freedom celebrated in the early teachings, we think that to *know* facts is enough, without ever undergoing any spiritual growth.

We have to constantly remind ourselves of the true purpose of the Buddha Dharma. In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) and **the Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86), the Buddha declares the scope and goal of his teaching, thus:

Bhikshus, both before<sup>86</sup> and now what I teach is suffering and the ending of suffering.<sup>87</sup>  
(M 22.38/140) = SD 3.13; (S 22.86/119) = SD 21

As **the Subhāsita Sutta** (S 730) declares:

The speech that the Buddha utters,  
For the security of nirvana's attainment,  
For the making an end to suffering,  
Is truly the foremost speech. (S 730/8.5/1:189)

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<sup>86</sup> Comy: That is, from as early as the first discourse given under the Bodhi tree (S 5:420-424/56.11, V 1:10-12).

<sup>87</sup> Here the Buddha in effect declares that a living being has no self but is a mere aggregate of factors, material and mental events, connected by a process that is inherently *dukkha*, and that nirvana, the ending of *dukkha*, is not the annihilation of being but the termination of that very same *dukkha* process. This statement should read in conjunction with **Kaccāna, gotta S** (S 2:17/12.15 = 3:134 f/22.90 = SD 6.13), where the Buddha says that one with right view, who has discarded all the doctrines of a self, sees that whatever arises is only *dukkha* arising, and whatever ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing. (See M:ÑB 2001:1211 n267)

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