

Practical Abhidhamma Course

Draft Version (January 2016)



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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa

This course is for Theravāda¹ Buddhists with inquiring minds who want an introduction² to the Abhidhamma with minimal Pāli.³ It includes eight talks (four shorter talks and four longer talks), an audio recording of each talk, handouts to accompany the talks and a document. The recordings, handouts and the document can be downloaded from <http://practicalabhidhamma.com/>.

Some people may prefer to listen to the recordings with the handouts in front of them⁴. Others may find they absorb more by reading the document⁵ with the handouts in front of them (the document includes a transcript of the talks). For those interested in a lot more information, the document includes footnotes⁶ and links⁷ to online resources such as Suttas, stories from the Dhammapada Commentary and Wikipedia articles. At the end of every section, the document includes a Question & Answer portion.

The talks will cover selected topics from the Abhidhamma that are most practical and relevant to daily life. Though it is called a “Practical Abhidhamma Course,” it is also a practical Dhamma⁸ course using themes from the Abhidhamma.

The Dhamma and the Abhidhamma are **not** meant for abstract theorizing; the Dhamma and the Abhidhamma are meant for practical application. I hope you approach this course not only to learn new facts, but also to consider how you can improve yourself spiritually.⁹

¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theravada>

²Additional details can be found in the following texts (these texts are referenced in footnotes):

“**A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma**” (*Abhidhammattha Sangaha*) Bhikkhu Bodhi (http://store.pariyatti.org/Comprehensive-Manual-of-Abhidhamma-A--PDF-eBook_p_4362.html)

“**Path of Purification**” (*Visuddhimagga*) Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>)

“**Buddhist Dictionary**” Nyanatiloka (Ñāṇatiloka) (<http://urbandharma.org/pdf/palidict.pdf>)

“**Cetasikas**” Nina van Gorkom (<http://archive.org/details/Cetasikas>)

“**The Buddhist Teaching on Physical Phenomena**” Nina van Gorkom (<http://archive.org/details/TheBuddhistTeachingOnPhysicalPhenomena>)

“**The Conditionality of Life (Outline of the 24 conditions as taught in the Abhidhamma)**” Nina van Gorkom (<http://archive.org/details/TheConditionalityOfLife>)

When publications of the Pali Text Society are referenced, page numbers refer to the English translation.

³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali>

⁴When listening to the talks for the first time, you may have an impression of “information overload”, like trying to take a drink from a fire hose! ☺ If so, you may want to listen to the talks a second time or read the document.

⁵The pdf document can also be annotated so you can add your own notes.

⁶These footnotes are not merely an academic convention, they are my invitation to you to explore further.

⁷When viewing this document on a laptop or a tablet, the links are active; clicking on a link shows the referenced website.

⁸In this context, “Dhamma” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharma>) means both the Buddha’s teachings (capitalized “Dhamma”) and the Ultimate Realities of the Abhidhamma (lower case “dhamma”).

⁹The Commentary speaks of a three-step progression: study (*pariyatti*), practice (*paṭipatti*) and realization (*paññedha*).

1 Introduction

Welcome to this Practical Abhidhamma Course. This first talk provides context; it will introduce the Abhidhamma as part of the Buddhist canon and will discuss its historical development.

During this talk you should have the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta¹⁰ printout and Handout 1 in front of you. Please use the version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta provided¹¹ as I will be referencing the paragraph numbers from this version.

Handout 1 has three diagrams. The top diagram shows the “Structure of the Buddhist Canon,” the middle diagram shows “Topics in the Suttas and Abhidhamma,” and the bottom diagram is a “Timeline.”

Structure of the Buddhist canon

Let’s start by looking at the top diagram showing the structure of the Buddhist canon.

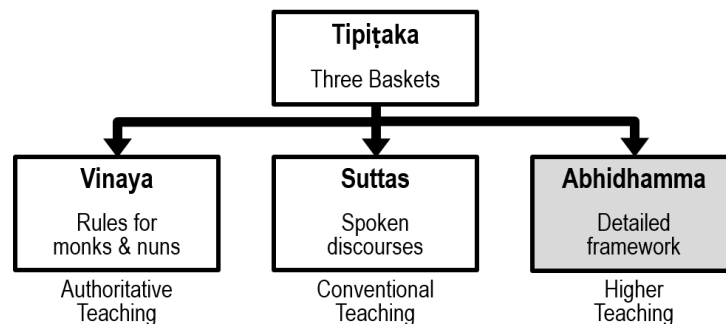


Figure 1: The Pāli Tipiṭaka consists of three collections.

*Tipiṭaka*¹² is a Pāli word. In Pāli, *Ti* means three and *Ṭaka* means basket, so *Tipiṭaka* is literally “three baskets” meaning “three collections.” The first collection is the Vinaya – the rules for monks and nuns. The second collection is the Suttas – the spoken discourses given by the Buddha and his disciples using conventional language. The third collection is the Abhidhamma – providing a detailed framework covering all the teachings. *Abhi* is a Pāli prefix meaning “higher”¹³ and so Abhidhamma literally means higher teachings.

Let me help you to visualize the size of the *Tipiṭaka*.¹⁴ The printed *Tipiṭaka* fills a bookshelf one metre in length. The Suttas make up about half of the *Tipiṭaka*, the Abhidhamma makes up about one third of the *Tipiṭaka* and the Vinaya makes up about one sixth of the *Tipiṭaka*.

¹⁰http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satipatthana_Sutta

¹¹The original (without paragraph numbers) can be downloaded from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.nysa.html>. I chose this translation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta because of the number of end-notes.

¹²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tipitaka>

¹³In “The Expositor” (*Atthasālinī*) page 3, Buddhaghosa explains that the prefix “*Abhi*” also indicates that the Abhidhamma “exceeds and is distinguished from the Dhamma (the Suttas).”

¹⁴In the world’s largest book (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World's_largest_book), the entire *Tipiṭaka* is written in Pāli using Burmese script on the front and back of 729 marble slabs (total of 1458 “pages”); 222 “pages” of Vinaya, 820 “pages” of Suttas and 416 “pages” of Abhidhamma.

Over the past 60 years, 11 monks in Myanmar have memorized the entire *Tipiṭaka*.¹⁵ The first of these monks¹⁶ got into the Guinness Book of Records for reciting 16,000 pages of the *Tipiṭaka*. Amazing! I have become so dependent on technology that sometimes I can't even remember my wife's phone number!

Vinaya

The first part of the *Tipiṭaka* is the Vinaya.¹⁷ In the Vinaya, the Buddha used his authority to lay down rules and procedures for monks and nuns. The community of monks and nuns, the Sangha,¹⁸ would not have survived for 2,600 years without a body of rules and procedures to keep them strong.¹⁹

The Vinaya includes 227 major rules for monks and 311 major rules for nuns.²⁰ There are also hundreds of supplementary rules. There are a different number of rules for monks and for nuns because rules were established only when incidents were brought to the attention of the Buddha.²¹ Each individual rule focuses on harmonious interactions between monastics²² and blameless interactions with laypeople.²³ As a complete set, the rules create an environment that is conducive to spiritual development.

The Vinaya is like a legal text. It describes the origin of each rule and gives many examples of how each rule is to be applied, what constitutes an offence and what does not; information that helps the Sangha to interpret the rules properly.²⁴

Suttas

Now let's talk a bit about the Suttas,²⁵ the discourses given by the Buddha and his disciples. The Sutta *Piṭaka* contains more than 10,000 Suttas²⁶, which are called conventional teaching because they talk about people, places and events; conventional terms not found in the Abhidhamma.

¹⁵These monks are given the title "*Tipiṭaka dhara*": <http://www.myanmarnet.net/nibbana/tipitaka/tpdkdhra.htm>

¹⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mingun_Sayadaw

¹⁷http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vinaya_Pitaka

¹⁸<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sangha>

¹⁹The Buddha excelled not only as a teacher (in the Suttas), but also as an administrator (in the Vinaya).

²⁰This group of major rules is called the *Pāṭimokkha*, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patimokkha>). The Sangha recite the *Pāṭimokkha* twice a month during the *Uposatha* ceremony (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sila/uposatha.html>).

²¹The Buddha was pragmatic; he modified rules and procedures as circumstances changed.

²²This story from the Commentary stresses the importance of harmonious interactions between monastics: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=006>

²³According to the Vinaya, Volume 1, page 37–38, the Vinaya rules are meant to: 1) Protect the Community 2) Insure the Community's comfort 3) Ward off ill-meaning people 4) Help well-behaved monks and nuns 5) Destroy present defilements 6) Prevent future defilements 7) Benefit non-followers 8) Increase the number of followers 9) Establish the Discipline 10) Observe the rules of restraint.

²⁴This material is found in Volume 1 of the Vinaya (*Sutta Vibhāṅga*).

²⁵http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutta_Pitaka

²⁶The Dīgha Nikāya has 34 Suttas, the Majjhima Nikāya has 152 Suttas, the Saṃyutta Nikāya has 2,904 Suttas (according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's counting), the Aṅguttara Nikāya has 8,122 Suttas (according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's counting) and the Khuddaka Nikāya includes hundreds of Suttas.

Suttas	Deepening one's perspective on the world		Dependent Origination
	The way to a fortunate rebirth		Four Noble Truths / Noble Eightfold Path
	The happiness visible in this present life		Teachings conducive to the holy life and the attainment of Nibbāna
Abhidhamma	Processes		
	Conditions		
	Consciousness (Citta)	Mental Factors (Cetasika)	Matter (Rūpa)

Figure 2: Block diagram showing topics in the Suttas and Abhidhamma.

The diagram in the middle of the handout shows the Suttas to be like the tip of the iceberg. The Suttas are what is visible. Below the water line, supporting all of the Suttas, is the unifying framework of the Abhidhamma.

Each Sutta is targeted at a specific audience to address a specific set of questions. To understand a specific Sutta, it is important to know the context in which it was given.²⁷ We can broadly classify the Suttas into two categories: Suttas delivered to laypeople²⁸ and Suttas delivered to monks.

Suttas given to laypeople

For laypeople who were primarily interested in happiness visible in this present life, the Buddha gave simple, pragmatic teachings. In Buddhist countries, a popular topic for Dhamma talks is a Sutta²⁹ that lists 38 blessings, such as not associating with fools, generosity, respect and patience. Another popular Sutta³⁰ gives practical advice to a layperson regarding the reciprocal responsibilities between parents and children, teachers and students, etc. These topics are popular because they are immediately relevant to daily life and obviously lead to happiness in this present life.

Some laypeople were more spiritual and wanted to know the way to a fortunate rebirth. To address these concerns, there are Suttas that explain kamma³¹ and ethics.³² Kamma and ethics will be discussed repeatedly during this course.

²⁷This contextual information, the background story for the Sutta, is often provided in the Commentary.

²⁸The structure of “The happiness visible in this present life/The way to a fortunate rebirth/Deepening one’s perspective on the world” is from Bhikkhu Bodhi’s book, “In the Buddha’s Words” (<http://www.pacificbuddha.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/In-the-Buddhas-Words.pdf>).

²⁹Sn 2.4: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangala_Sutta
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.04.nara.html>

³⁰DN 31: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigalovada_Sutta
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>

³¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma>

³²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>

There were also laypeople who were not ready to renounce but wanted to deepen their perspective on the world. Deepening one's perspective on the world means "seeing things as they truly are," with **Understanding**.³³ For many, the most challenging aspect of "seeing things as they truly are" is *anattā*, or non-self. The ego constantly distorts perceptions, thoughts and opinions to put an artificial Self at the centre of its universe. This reminds me of a joke... a man goes into a book store looking for a book on Buddhist practice. He is directed to go to the "non-self" help section.

Suttas given to monks and nuns

When talking to monks and nuns, the Buddha was addressing people who had already renounced and committed their lives to spiritual development.

The Buddha³⁴ once picked up a handful of leaves and asked the monks, "Which is more, the leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest?" The Buddha compared what he had understood to the leaves in the forest while what he has taught he compared to the leaves in his hand. The Buddha then gave the criteria that he used to select what to teach: things conducive to the holy life and things leading to *Nibbāna*.

In another Sutta,³⁵ a monk asked the Buddha many theoretical questions such as "Is the cosmos eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite?" The Buddha told the monk that he was like a man wounded with a poisoned arrow who refused to have the arrow removed until he knew the name and height of the archer who shot the arrow, the type of bow that was used, the type of feathers on the arrow and many other details. The wounded man would die from the poison before finding all these answers. The Buddha explained that he did not teach things such as "Is the cosmos eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite" because these things are not conducive to the holy life and do not lead to *Nibbāna*. The Buddha's graphic analogy of removing a poisoned arrow reminds us of the urgency of our own spiritual development.

The Four Noble Truths³⁶ are the principles of the Buddha's teaching and the Noble Eightfold Path³⁷ is the Buddha's practical teaching on how to experience *Nibbāna*. These are the essence of the Buddha's teachings. Dependent Origination³⁸ is the natural set of laws that cause beings to be bound to continuous rebirth. The topics of things conducive to the attainment of *Nibbāna*, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path and Dependent Origination are closely interrelated and are the central themes of many of the Suttas given to monks and nuns.

³³ Words that are capitalized and in bold font are Mental Factors or *rūpas*.

³⁴ SN 56.31: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.031.than.html>

³⁵ MN 63: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html>

³⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths

³⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path

³⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/dependent_origination

Abhidhamma

The third part of the *Tipiṭaka* is the Abhidhamma.³⁹

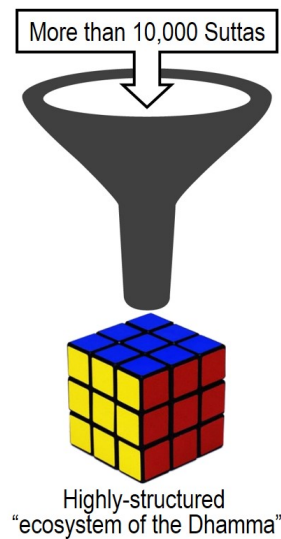


Figure 3: The Abhidhamma compresses more than 10,000 Suttas into a highly-structured framework or “ecosystem of the Dhamma” according to the Theravāda doctrine.

A monk⁴⁰ recently wrote to me, “The Abhidhamma describes the underlying system upon which the Suttas are based. The Suttas were taught by the Buddha based on the mental disposition of the listeners and in a specific context. Because of this limitation, each Sutta can offer only a small window into the Buddha’s teaching; a window that gives one aspect of the Buddha’s teaching from one particular point of view. If we were to piece all these small windows together, strip away the context and repetitions, systematically analyze and place them into proper categories, draw out implications and elaborate them based on principles already found in the Suttas, we would eventually arrive at a complete picture of the entire ‘ecosystem’ of the Dhamma. This is the Abhidhamma view, unconstrained by any limitation⁴¹ except the goal of liberation from suffering.”

In other words, the Abhidhamma is a framework or an ecosystem. It tries to consolidate content from all of the Suttas into a “big picture,” according to the Theravāda doctrine.

The Abhidhamma is more detailed and precise than the Suttas. For example, there are many Suttas which mention the five aggregates.⁴² In none of the Suttas is the discussion of the five aggregates more than half a page. The Abhidhamma⁴³ includes an analysis of the five aggregates that is 88 pages long. So with all this detail, why is the Abhidhamma smaller than the Suttas? A lot of content in the Suttas relates to people, places, things and events. The Abhidhamma does not mention conventional topics such as people, places, things or events. It uses precise, technical terms – some taken from the Suttas and some created in the Abhidhamma – to create a comprehensive structure to open the door to a better understanding of the Suttas.

³⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhidhamma_Pitaka

⁴⁰Correspondence with Jotinanda Bhikkhu.

⁴¹Limitation of scope to exclude things not related to the goal of liberation from suffering.

⁴²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skandha>

⁴³“The Book of Analysis” (*Vibhaṅga*), pages 1–88.

Ultimate Realities

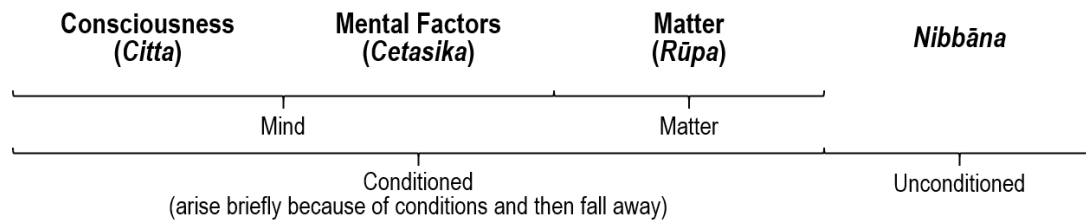


Figure 4: The four Ultimate Realities: Consciousness, Mental Factors, Matter and Nibbāna.

The Buddha⁴⁴ described names as “the world’s designations, the world’s expressions, the world’s ways of speaking, the world’s descriptions, with which the Buddha expresses himself but without grasping to them.” According to the Commentary, the Buddha is acknowledging two ways of communicating; in a conventional way using names and in a way using Ultimate Realities (the Abhidhamma communicates using Ultimate Realities).

The Abhidhamma⁴⁵ classifies everything as either an Ultimate Reality⁴⁶ or as a concept.⁴⁷ According to the Abhidhamma, the four Ultimate Realities are Consciousness (*citta*), Mental Factors (*cetasika*), Matter (*rūpa*) and *Nibbāna*. Consciousness and Mental Factors experience things; together, they are the mind (*nāma*). The other two Ultimate Realities, Matter and *Nibbāna*, are experienced by the mind.

Consciousness, Mental Factors and Matter are conditioned; they arise based on conditions, exist for a brief instant and then cease to exist. It may seem that they are continuous but actually, many individual moments of Consciousness, Mental Factors and Matter arise in sequence. The Consciousness and Mental Factors that experience *Nibbāna* are conditioned but *Nibbāna* itself is “unconditioned;” *Nibbāna* does not depend on conditions to come into existence.

What we call mind and body are temporary combinations of different Ultimate Realities, which arise because of conditions, and then fall away immediately. They are succeeded by new Ultimate Realities, which fall away again.

Wikipedia defines concept as “a generalization from experience or the result of a transformation of existing concepts.” “Person” is a concept, “house” is a concept and any form of label or idea is a concept. What is experienced through the senses is not a concept. In meditation, the idea of breathing is an example of a concept, but the temperature that is experienced, and the mind that experiences the temperature, are both examples of Ultimate Realities.

Attachment is an example of a Mental Factor, an Ultimate Reality. In Pāli, it is called *lobha* and in other languages it has a different name. The name is a concept that changes whereas the underlying Ultimate Reality, that to which the name points, is universal.

⁴⁴DN 9: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.09.0.than.html#milk>

⁴⁵Ultimate Realities are not explicitly mentioned in the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*. The structure of “*citta*, *cetasika*, *rūpa* and *Nibbāna*” was introduced in the Abhidhammāvatāra (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhidhammavataara>), an Abhidhamma summary written around the time of Buddhaghosa. The Abhidhammāvatāra refers to this list as the “four most superior dhammas, the four shining truths.” *Citta*, *cetasika*, *rūpa* and *Nibbāna* were designated as Ultimate Realities (*paramattha dhamma*) five centuries later in the Abhidhammattha Sangaha (about 1000 years ago).

⁴⁶In the Abhidhamma, Ultimate Realities are used both from an ontological perspective (what is real?) and from an epistemological perspective (what is the object of right knowledge?).

⁴⁷<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concept>

Consciousness (*Citta*)

Let's start with the block labelled "Consciousness," or *citta*⁴⁸ in Pāli.

The Suttas have multiple words for mind, such as "*citta*," "*mano*," "*viññāṇa*" and "*nāma*." There is significant overlap in how these words are defined and used⁴⁹ in the Suttas.⁵⁰ In the Abhidhamma, only the word "*citta*" is used, and it refers to the Ultimate Reality of Consciousness. The Commentaries refer to a combination of Consciousness with its accompanying Mental Factors as a "Thought Moment." The Pāli term for "Thought Moment" is "*cittakkhaṇa*," which many writers shorten to "*citta*." In this course, I will consistently use the term "Thought Moment," but if you encounter the word "*citta*" in another text, you need to determine the meaning through the context.⁵¹

According to the Commentaries, what is conventionally called the mind is actually a sequence of Thought Moments. Each Thought Moment arises based on conditions, performs its function and then falls away again. The talk on Consciousness will describe a map of the mind from the lowest states of mind such as hatred and lust, to the highest meditative states and attainments.

Mental Factors (*Cetasika*)⁵²

The next block is labelled "Mental Factors," or *cetasika*⁵³ in Pāli.

The Mental Factors give the Thought Moment its individual character. Mental Factors include activities such as **Energy, Delusion, Attachment, Faith and Compassion**.

Various terms found in the Suttas such as "craving," "greed," "covetousness" and "lust" are all represented in the Abhidhamma by a single Mental Factor; **Attachment**. The Abhidhamma focuses on the presence or absence of a Mental Factor in a Thought Moment, not on the intensity of the Mental Factor within the Thought Moment.

Mental Factors arise together and support each other. Understanding this relationship can provide practical insights. For example, understanding that **Delusion** is always working in the background whenever **Attachment** or **Aversion** arises, helps us to better understand the nature of **Attachment** and **Aversion**. The talk on Mental Factors will define each Mental Factor and explain which Thought Moments include which Mental Factors.

⁴⁸<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citta>

⁴⁹The Suttas (SN 12.61: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.061.than.html>) explain we often take mind (*citta*), intellect (*mano*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as being Self.

⁵⁰http://ahandfulofleaves.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/citta_mano_vinnana_a-psychosemantic-investigation_ucr_1965_johansson.pdf

⁵¹This term is challenging to translate. In the Abhidhammattha Sangaha (most people's first introduction to the Abhidhamma), the term "*citta*" is used and many translators have left this word untranslated. I am not comfortable with using the term "*citta*" to mean both the ultimate reality of consciousness and the combination of consciousness with Mental Factors. The original Abhidhamma texts use the term "*dhamma*" for this combination and in the translation of these texts, the word "state" is used. Previously, I used the term "Mental State" for this combination of consciousness and Mental Factors, but this created confusion in people whose introduction to the Abhidhammattha Sangaha was Venerable Nārada's translation, because Venerable Nārada used "Mental State" as a translation for "*cetasika*". In this Practical Abhidhamma course, I use the term "Thought Moment" for this combination of consciousness and Mental Factors, but you should not think of this as a measure of time.

⁵²Details can be found in "Cetasikas" (see Footnote 2).

⁵³[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mental_factors_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mental_factors_(Buddhism))

Matter (*Rūpa*)⁵⁴

The next block is labelled “Matter,” or *rūpa*⁵⁵ in Pāli.

How you describe something depends on what your objective is. For example, you may view a glass of water as something to drink when you are thirsty, a chef may view a glass of water as a cooking ingredient, and a scientist may view a glass of water as H₂O. All are correct. The suitable perspective depends on how water is to be used.

The Buddha’s teachings focus on spiritual development, so the Buddhist focuses on understanding how matter is experienced. For example, from a perspective of spiritual development, a glass of water has **Hardness, Heat, Odour and Taste**.

Conditions⁵⁶

The block called Conditions sits on top of the three previous blocks: Consciousness, Mental Factors and Matter. Conditions explain how these ultimate realities can be related to each other. Everything arises because of multiple conditions. This can get very complex. During my talk on Conditions, I will focus on two conditions with the most practical applications⁵⁷ The talk will provide a practical understanding of kamma condition and of natural decisive support condition.

Processes

The final block in the diagram is Processes. This talk will explain seeing without a seer, thinking without a thinker, and the death and rebirth process⁵⁸. Its focus will be on how an understanding of processes impacts practice. In my opinion, understanding the impact on practice is more important than the technical details.

Books of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*

I will now summarize the seven books of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*. These do not form a cohesive set. Each book has a distinctive style and approach not found in the other books.⁵⁹

The first book⁶⁰ is a systematic listing of Thought Moments and Matter. The Mental Factors in each Thought Moment are listed and defined.

The second book⁶¹ is a set of essays. Many of the essays first analyze a topic using quotes from the Suttas, then analyze the same topic from the perspective of the Abhidhamma, and finally analyze the same topic in a “question and answer” section.

The third book⁶² builds on the material in the first two books with a focus on aggregates,

⁵⁴Details can be found in “The Buddhist Teaching on Physical Phenomena” (see Footnote 2).

⁵⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruupa>

⁵⁶Details can be found in “The Conditionality of Life” (see Footnote 2).

⁵⁷Other conditions will be identified in footnotes, but not described in the talks.

⁵⁸See Visuddhimagga XVI.90 (see footnote 2).

⁵⁹When reading the seven books of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*, I get the impression that each book was written by different people at different times and each book was built up over time.

⁶⁰*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, translated by the Pali Text Society as “A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics.” Buddhaghosa’s Commentary, *Atthasālinī*, has been translated by the Pali Text Society as “The Expositor.”

⁶¹*Vibhaṅga*, translated by Pali Text Society as “The Book of Analysis.” Buddhaghosa’s Commentary, *Sammohavinodanī*, has been translated by the Pali Text Society as “Dispeller of Delusion.”

⁶²*Dhātukathā*, translated by Pali Text Society as “Discourse on Elements.”

sense-bases and elements.⁶³ For the items listed in the first book, the third book asks, “With how many aggregates is this item associated?” “With how many sense-bases is this item associated?” and “With how many elements is this item associated?” We will discuss aggregates, sense-bases and elements in later talks.

The fourth book⁶⁴ deals with classifications of persons, arranged numerically from one-fold to ten-fold. The presentation and much of the content mirrors the Suttas,⁶⁵ leading some scholars to suggest that this is an early Abhidhamma text.

The fifth book⁶⁶ is in the form of a debate on points of doctrine between the orthodox Theravāda view and opposing views. According to the Commentary, this book was composed at the conclusion of the Third Council, more than 200 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*.⁶⁷

The sixth book⁶⁸ includes pairs of philosophical questions: Does X imply Y? and Does Y imply X?

The seventh book⁶⁹ describes the conditions that relate Ultimate Realities to each other. It is called the “Great Book” because it is larger in size than the first six books combined.⁷⁰

The Abhidhamma as science and philosophy

The Abhidhamma can be seen as the practical science of the mind – psychology without the psyche (no Self). It analyzes the mind into its component parts and classifies these parts into different categories.⁷¹ It gives us useful models and new ways of looking at the mind. The Abhidhamma has a precise set of specialized terminology used to describe different aspects of the mind. Analysis, classification, models, specialized terminology; sounds a lot like science, doesn’t it? Some writers try to draw parallels between Buddhism and modern science,⁷² but the objectives of the two are different; Buddhism is focused on spiritual development, so the similarities are superficial.

The Abhidhamma also covers aspects of philosophy. I know what you are thinking: “Philosophy is not practical.” But the Abhidhamma is not meant for abstract theorizing; the Abhidhamma can change your perspective on life. Ethics⁷³ (what is morally right) and epistemology⁷⁴ (what is right knowledge) are useful aspects of philosophy described in the Abhidhamma.

⁶³Aggregates (*khandha*), sense-bases (*āyatana*) and elements (*dhātu*) are overlapping classifications from the Suttas.

⁶⁴*Puggalapaññatti*, translated by Pali Text Society as “Designation of Human Types.”

⁶⁵Specifically, the *Ānguttara Nikāya*.

⁶⁶*Kathāvatthu*, translated by Pali Text Society as “Points of Controversy.” Buddhaghosa’s Commentary has been translated by the Pali Text Society as “The Debates Commentary.”

⁶⁷The *Kathāvatthu* quotes from the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *Vibhaṅga* and *Paṭṭhāna*, but makes no reference to the *Dhātukathā* or *Puggalapaññatti*. In addition, some of the schools that the *Kathāvatthu* Commentary associates with certain heretical views in the *Kathāvatthu* did not exist at the time of Aśoka. This suggests a gradual compilation of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*.

⁶⁸*Yamaka*, not translated by Pali Text Society. The Pāli word *yamaka* means “pairs.”

⁶⁹*Paṭṭhāna*, partially translated by Pali Text Society as “Conditional Relations.”

⁷⁰The Pāli edition of the *Paṭṭhāna* in Burmese script is 2500 pages long and the Pāli edition in Thai script is 6000 pages long; some (but not all) of the repetitive sections are expanded in the Thai version.

⁷¹For example, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* lists more than 120 ways of classifying Thought Moments.

⁷²My bookshelf includes titles such as “Quantum Theory and Buddhism,” “Darwin’s Origin of Species according to the Buddha” (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_evolution) and “Buddhist Theory of Causation and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity.”

⁷³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>

⁷⁴<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology>

Another topic that is central to the Abhidhamma is what philosophers call “ontology;”⁷⁵ the definition of what is real. This is practical because understanding what is real helps us to see things as they truly are and to recognize **Delusion** (mental blindness). Appreciating what is real and what is an illusion helps bring us back to the present moment. This is similar to what Eckhart Tolle calls “The Power of Now.”⁷⁶

The Abhidhamma provides a simple model of how the mind works

How can we develop an understanding of something as complicated as the mind?

Science tackles the challenge of starting to understand complicated things by developing simple models.⁷⁷ Let’s use weather as an example. Weather is far less complicated than the mind, but even today’s most powerful supercomputers are unable to predict the weather accurately. The first step that science took to understand weather was to develop simple models such as the Water Cycle.⁷⁸ This model of condensation-precipitation-collection-evaporation is simple enough to be studied today by schoolchildren.

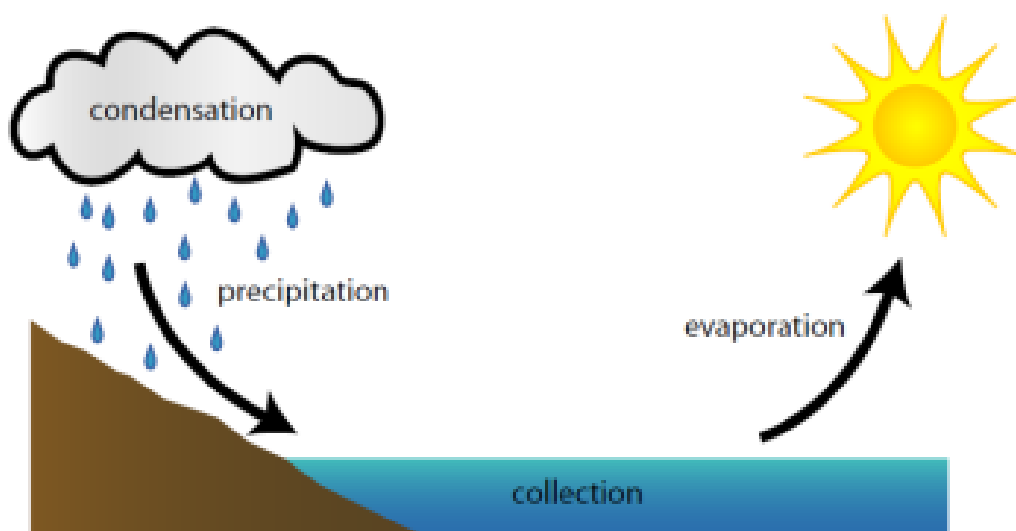


Figure 5: The Water Cycle provides a simple model for a complex natural process.

Because we have the simple model of the Water Cycle, we know that weather is a natural phenomenon even though we do not understand it very well.⁷⁹ Because we know that weather is a natural phenomenon, we do not waste our time and resources performing rituals to try to please Weather Gods as our ancestors did. When people don’t understand things, their first reaction is to imagine a controlling entity such as a Weather God. The mind is complex and we don’t understand it, so we imagine a controlling entity called a Self and place this Self at the centre of our universe. The Abhidhamma provides a simple model of how the mind works.

Researchers⁸⁰ have used brain scanners⁸¹ to examine the part of the brain that filters incom-

⁷⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology>

⁷⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Power_of_Now

⁷⁷http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_modelling

⁷⁸http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_cycle

⁷⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weather_forecasting

⁸⁰<http://www.andrewnewberg.com/books/why-god-wont-go-away-brain-science-the-biology-of-belief>

⁸¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single-photon_emission_computed_tomography

ing data from the senses. This part of the brain also organizes the incoming sense data around an imagined Self. Normally, this part of the brain is extremely active. Researchers found that when a Buddhist is in deep meditation, the blood flow to this part of the brain is dramatically reduced. During these periods, when sense data is not filtered and not organized around an illusion of a Self, the Buddhist meditator experiences a “higher reality” which he describes as “oneness with the universe.” The same pattern can be seen in the brain of a Christian nun when she is deep in prayer. She describes the experience as “being in the presence of God.”

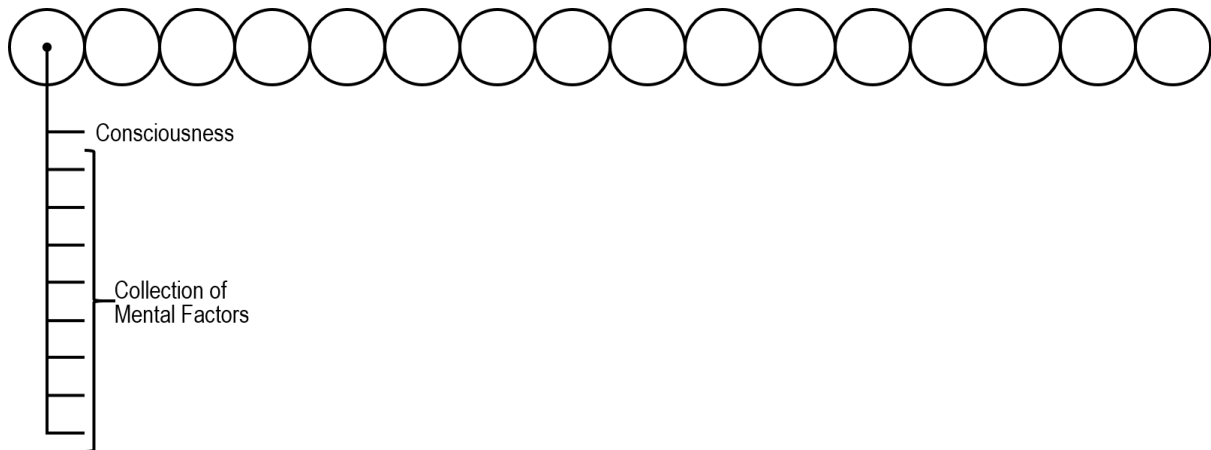


Figure 6: The Abhidhamma models the mind as a series of Thought Moments. Each Thought Moment arises, performs its function and then falls away. The falling away of one Thought Moment is a condition for the arising of the subsequent Thought Moment. Each Thought Moment includes Consciousness and a collection of Mental Factors.

The Suttas⁸² describe how the concept of Self is triggered by sense data, and during the talk on processes, we will explore the simple model from the Abhidhamma that explains how seeing happens without a seer, and how thinking happens without a thinker.

Just as the Water Cycle provides a simple model of how weather arises naturally without a controlling entity, the Abhidhamma provides a simple model of how sensing and thinking arise naturally without a Self. With this insight we will not waste time and energy on controlling the mind, and can instead focus on training the mind.

Training is building up natural habits in the mind. The mind is like a little puppy dog, it cannot be controlled but it can be trained. Buddhism teaches the gradual training of the mind;⁸³ precepts are rules of training.⁸⁴ When we approach our spiritual development as a gradual training exercise, we then know that it requires lots of energy, lots of repetition, lots of patience and that it takes time.

If you want to train yourself to play the piano well, you can’t just spend a few minutes on it from time to time. You have to commit to regular practice, energy, repetition, patience and time. The training associated with spiritual development requires a similar commitment (but the rewards are much greater than becoming a skilled pianist).

⁸²MN 1: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.001.than.html>

⁸³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gradual_training

MN 107: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.107.horn.html>

⁸⁴The literal translation of *sikkhāpada* is “factor (*pada*) of training (*sikkhā*).”

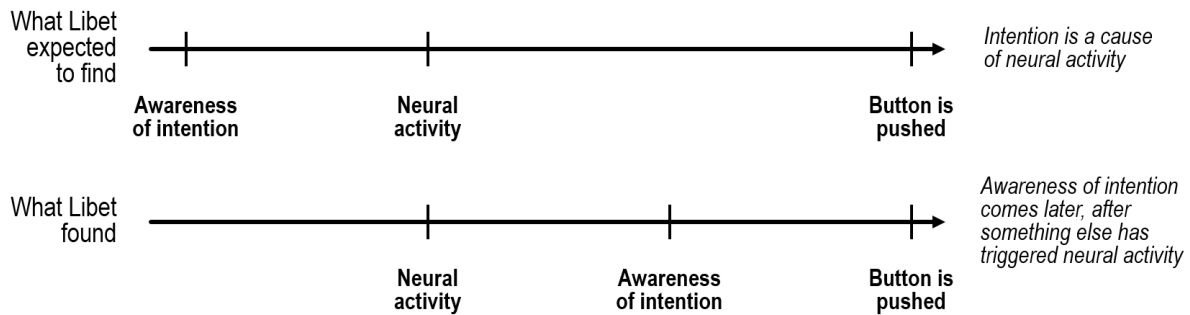


Figure 7: Libet's experiment challenges the concept of Free Will.

Buddhism says there is deciding without a decider, and this challenges the notion of Free Will. Science is also starting to challenge the notion of Free Will. When Benjamin Libet⁸⁵ studied the electrical activity of the brain, he asked a person to push a button whenever they wanted. The data showed that it took about half a second for the electrical activity in the motor control centre of the brain to be transmitted to the finger pushing the button. Then Libet had the person indicate when they were aware of their intention to push the button. Libet expected the awareness of intention to come **before** the electrical activity but the data showed the opposite; the awareness of intention came **after** the electrical activity had already started. This means that the idea of a “Self that is making decisions” arises after decisions have already been made.⁸⁶

“There is an I who decides” is an illusion, a justification and a rationalization that happens after a decision has already been made. Many find this disturbing because if my brain makes decisions before I am aware of the decisions being made, then how can I have Free Will? Is my fate determined? To Buddhists, the question of Free Will does not arise because there is no Self to have Free Will, so to use a Zen approach, you have to “un-ask the question.” A “Self with Free Will” is an illusion and a “Self whose fate is determined” is also an illusion. If Self is an illusion, if Free Will is an illusion, and if determinism is an illusion, how can there be moral responsibility? The answer is the natural law of kamma.

Application of Abhidhamma to spiritual development

Here is a quote from a modern writer⁸⁷ that summarizes the application of Abhidhamma to spiritual development: “The question is raised whether the Abhidhamma is essential for Dhamma practice. The answer to this will depend on the individual who undertakes the practice. People vary in their levels of understanding, their temperaments and spiritual development. Ideally, all the different spiritual faculties should be harmonized, but some people are quite contented with devotional practices based on faith, while others are keen on developing penetrative insight. The Abhidhamma is most useful to those who want to understand the Dhamma in greater depth and detail. It aids the development of insight into the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. It is useful not only for the periods devoted to formal

⁸⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Libet

⁸⁶ An interesting article: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/02/science/02free.html?_r=0

⁸⁷ This passage appears in both “The Abhidhamma in Practice” by Dr. N. K. G. Mendis (<http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh322.pdf>) and “What Buddhists Believe” by Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda (http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/whatbelieve.pdf).

meditation, but also during the rest of the day when we are engaged in various mundane chores. We derive great benefit from the study of the Abhidhamma when we experience absolute reality. In addition, a comprehensive knowledge of the Abhidhamma is useful for those engaged in teaching and explaining the Dhamma. In fact, the real meaning of the most important Buddhist terminologies such as Dhamma, *Kamma*, *Samāsāra*, *Sankhāra*, *Paṭiccasamuppāda* and *Nibbāna* cannot be understood without a knowledge of Abhidhamma.”

The Abhidhamma supports *vipassanā* practice by providing the yogi and the teacher with a common vocabulary to describe experiences. However, Abhidhamma without meditation is theory without practice; it brings little if any benefit.⁸⁸ Theory without practice is like the spoon in a bowl of soup; the spoon is immersed in the soup but cannot experience the flavour. Meditation without Abhidhamma is practice without theory; it brings benefits, but in my opinion, progress may be slower because misunderstanding and **Doubt** may creep in. The best approach is meditation supported by an understanding of Abhidhamma. Mindfulness does not only arise when sitting on a cushion. We should try to integrate **Mindfulness** and **Understanding** into our daily activities.

Here is an analogy to illustrate the application of Abhidhamma. Imagine that you have never seen a beach before and then you see one from a distance. From a distance, the beach looks homogeneous. It takes energy to get there, but finally you are next to the beach. Now you can see that the beach is made of up an uncountable number of grains of sand. Next you get down on your knees and take out a powerful magnifying glass. At first, your hand is shaking so you cannot get the magnifying glass to focus. When your grip is steady, settled, unified and composed, you can focus the magnifying glass. You can see the details of each grain of sand. In this analogy, the grains of sand are the Ultimate Realities and the energy to move closer to the beach is the effort to look at Ultimate Realities. The mind is steady, settled, unified and composed.⁸⁹ The details of each grain of sand are the characteristics of the Ultimate Realities.⁹⁰

Linkage to *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta

Please take a quick look through the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta. Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote:⁹¹ “This is one of the most important Suttas in the Pāli Canon, containing the most comprehensive statement of the direct way⁹² to the attainment of the Buddhist goal.” Buddhists, particularly meditators,⁹³ need to be familiar with this Sutta. On first reading, this Sutta is not easy to understand. The detailed explanation of this Sutta given in the Commentary⁹⁴ is difficult to understand unless you have a foundation in Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma is needed to understand the Commentaries and

⁸⁸This story from the Commentary highlights the benefit of practice as compared to mere learning: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=019>

⁸⁹The terms “Steady, settled, unified and composed” are used in the Suttas (such as MN 20: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.020.than.html>) to describe *samatha*.

⁹⁰Initially the specific characteristics of the Ultimate Reality will appear (i.e. **Attachment** is “sticky”), but eventually the general characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* appear.

⁹¹From his translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

⁹²“The direct way” is a translation of “*ekāyana magga*,” in the version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta provided, this phrase has been translated as “the only way” (see paragraph 2 and paragraph 74). This phrase should be interpreted as indicating directness of the path rather than exclusivity of the path.

⁹³The Commentary explains that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta is intended for all meditators, not just monks.

⁹⁴See “The Way of Mindfulness” by Soma Thera: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>

better appreciate the Theravāda interpretation of the Suttas.

Please look at paragraph 12 of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta.⁹⁵ You can see that **Mindfulness** and application of the Abhidhamma should be applied during all daily activities, not just during periods of formal meditation.

Many times during these talks, I will explain points from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta using the Abhidhamma topic that we are discussing at that time. By the end of this Practical Abhidhamma course, you will have a better understanding of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta, and of how the Abhidhamma helps you to a better understanding of the Suttas.

Summary of Key Points

Here is a summary of key points from the Introduction:

- The Theravāda Buddhist canon consists of three collections:
 - The Vinaya are the rules and procedures established by the Buddha to ensure harmonious interaction between monastics, and blameless interactions between monastics and laypeople.
 - The Suttas are the discourses delivered by the Buddha and his key disciples. Some Suttas were delivered to laypeople to address lay concerns. Other Suttas were delivered to help monastics with their spiritual development.
 - The Abhidhamma describes the underlying system upon which the Suttas are based. The Suttas were taught by the Buddha based on the mental disposition of the listeners and in a specific context. Because of this limitation, each Sutta can offer only a small window into the Buddha’s teaching; a window that gives one aspect of the Buddha’s teaching from one particular point of view. If we were to piece all these small windows together, strip away the context and repetitions, systematically analyze and place them into proper categories, draw out implications and elaborate them based on principles already found in the Suttas, we would eventually arrive at a complete picture of the entire “ecosystem” of the Dhamma. This is the Abhidhamma view, unconstrained by any limitation except the goal of liberation from suffering.
- The Abhidhamma classifies everything as being either a concept or as one of the four Ultimate Realities: Consciousness, Mental Factors, *Rūpa* (Matter) and *Nibbāna*.
- The Abhidhamma takes a scientific approach that analyzes the mind, categorizes Thought Moments, and provides a simple model of how the mind works; how there can be seeing without a seer and thinking without a thinker. In other words, how the mind can function without a Self.
- The Abhidhamma supports *vipassanā* practice by providing the yogi and the teacher with a common vocabulary to describe experiences.

⁹⁵For some reason, the translator omitted a phrase from paragraph 12 regarding applying clear comprehension during defecating and urinating. In my opinion, this is an important phrase because it reinforces the idea that clear comprehension is to be applied during **all** daily activities.

- The Abhidhamma is needed to understand the Commentaries and to better appreciate the Theravāda interpretation of the Suttas.

Finally, in my opinion, the most important thing to remember about this introduction is that the Abhidhamma is an important part of Theravāda Buddhism. The Abhidhamma gives us a better understanding of the Suttas by providing a framework that integrates all of the Buddha's teachings.

This concludes the first talk.

Questions & Answers

How much does a layperson need to know about the Vinaya?

The rules of the Vinaya apply to monastics, not to laypeople. Out of respect for monastics, laypeople should try to avoid situations where the monastic may break a Vinaya rule. The three most common Vinaya rules that may impact a layperson are 1) Monastics are not allowed to take solid food after solar noon⁹⁶ 2) Monastics are not allowed to handle money, and 3) Monastics should not be alone with a member of the opposite sex.

Different monastics interpret these Vinaya rules in different ways. In the afternoon, some monastics will drink only water, while other monastics may consider cheese, chocolate or coffee to be allowable. Some monastics will touch money directly, some monastics may accept money in an envelope or on a tray, and some monastics have a lay attendant (called a *kappiya*) who can accept money on their behalf.

As there is variation in practice, you should ask the monastic if you are unsure what is allowable. For a detailed explanation of the Vinaya from the perspective of a layperson, see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/ariyesako/layguide.html>

Since there are more than 10,000 Suttas, how should I approach such a large collection to get the most benefit?

Bhikkhu Bodhi's anthology of discourses titled "In the Buddha's Words" (<http://www.pacificbuddha.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/In-the-Buddhas-Words.pdf>) is an excellent starting point.

I highly recommend the "Access to Insight" website (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>), which has translations of more than 1000 Suttas. The website's section, "Befriending the Suttas" (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/befriending.html>) gives excellent advice. The website also includes an index of Suttas according to subject (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/index-subject.html>) that makes it easy to find Suttas on a specific topic.

My friend says that I should study the Suttas rather than spend time studying the Abhidhamma. How should I respond?

In my opinion, it should not be "either the Suttas or the Abhidhamma." In my opinion, you should study both the Suttas and the Abhidhamma. Each Sutta focuses on a specific message or set of messages. The Abhidhamma consolidates information from all of the Suttas into a coherent structure, so that deeper insights can be extracted when reading a specific Sutta. As you see in this course, there are many references to Suttas. The Suttas are the primary source of the Buddha's teachings.

If you are going to study the Suttas seriously, then you will also want to refer to the Commentaries to better understand the more subtle points from the Suttas. The Commentary often uses the Abhidhamma to explain doctrine, so an understanding of Abhidhamma can be useful in understanding the Commentaries to the Suttas.

⁹⁶This Vinaya rule (and many others) do not apply when the monastic is sick.

Some monks say that there are inconsistencies between the Abhidhamma and the Suttas. What is your opinion?

The Abhidhamma represents a consolidation of the Suttas according to the orthodox Theravāda doctrine. Could there be other ways of consolidating the Suttas? Absolutely. Are there other ways of interpreting the Suttas that are not perfectly aligned with the orthodox Theravāda doctrine? Absolutely. In almost all cases, these apparent inconsistencies in no way impact the central tenets of Buddhism, so I do not consider them to be important.

I once met a senior monk with a PhD who said, “I have developed my own understanding of the Suttas based on my experience and I do not accept the Abhidhamma or the Commentaries.” After listening to him for a while, I replied respectfully, “Venerable Sir, your understanding may be correct, but I am unable to judge. If I follow your understanding, then I have only one source of information - you. If I stay with the interpretation of the Suttas according to the Abhidhamma and Commentaries, I have many sources of information, many books and many teachers.”⁹⁷

Should I study the Abhidhamma before I start learning meditation? Do I need to study the Abhidhamma before I start learning meditation?

In my opinion, you should start learning meditation before you study the Abhidhamma; just as one should time in the kitchen before studying a cookbook. Knowing some Abhidhamma is definitely not a prerequisite for a yogi, nor is it a prerequisite for a meditation teacher.

It is important to not allow the Abhidhamma to influence your meditation. When I enter the meditation hall, I leave the Abhidhamma at the door. I want to focus on what I am experiencing in the present moment and I don't want the Abhidhamma to create expectations. Thinking about the practice is only thinking, it is not the practice. The practice is beyond words, beyond concepts, beyond the Abhidhamma.

There is a story of a conversation between Ajahn Chah and an Abhidhamma teacher.⁹⁸ The teacher asked Ajahn Chah if he agreed that studying Abhidhamma was important. Ajahn Chah replied “Yes, very important.” The teacher asked Ajahn Chah if his students learn Abhidhamma and he replied “Oh yes, of course.” The teacher asked where they started, which books and which studies were best. Ajahn Chah replied, “Only here.” pointing to his heart, “Only here.”

In my opinion, students of Ajahn Chah can supplement the excellent teachings of Ajahn Chah with some practical understanding of Abhidhamma.

You have shaved your head! Are you planning to take up the robes?

No. I have decided to start competitive swimming. I read that shaving the head reduces friction and can cut hundredths of a second off my lap time.

I suggest that you start by losing weight, spending some time in the pool and working on basic strokes.

Figure 8: Some people obsess with minute details of the Abhidhamma and neglect basic practice.

⁹⁷The Abhidhamma and the Commentaries have been subject to centuries of scrutiny.

⁹⁸See section on “Buddhist Psychology” in http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books2/Ajahn_Chah_A_Still_Forest_Pool.htm

This course focuses on the practical aspects of the Abhidhamma. I have omitted technical details that some people may find interesting but, in my opinion, are not practical. **Nevertheless, this “Practical Abhidhamma course” provides a solid foundation in the Abhidhamma should you wish to dive into more detail and study the Abhidhammattha Sangaha. My advice is to master the Abhidhammattha Sangaha before tackling the seven original Abhidhamma texts.**

Have you heard any jokes about Abhidhamma scholars?

How many Abhidhamma scholars does it take to change a light bulb? There are 20W light bulbs, 40W light bulbs, 80W light bulbs, 100W... 200W... There are 6V light bulbs, 12V light bulbs, 120V light bulbs, 240V light bulbs... There are incandescent bulbs, fluorescent bulbs... There are clear light bulbs, pearled light bulbs, coloured light bulbs... There are screw-in light bulbs, bayonet light bulbs... There are 20W light bulbs that are 6V, there are 20W light bulbs that are 12V... 120V... 240V... There are 40W light bulbs that are 6V... 240V... 80W... 100W... 200W... There are 20W light bulbs that are 6V incandescent... There are 200W light bulbs that are 240V, florescent, coloured, and bayonet...⁹⁹

⁹⁹Some Abhidhamma scholars tend to avoid answering questions directly and instead recite long lists of categories.

2 Realms of Existence

Welcome to the sixth talk of this Practical Abhidhamma Course. We will now discuss the Realms of Existence.¹⁰⁰ The Realms of Existence are mentioned in the Suttas but Buddhist philosophy and practice are in no way related to beings from non-human Realms of Existence.

Sometimes the supernatural beings mentioned in the Suttas are used as literary devices to deliver a strong message to an ancient Indian audience. For example, when a Sutta says¹⁰¹ that the king of the Gods, who was well known by non-Buddhists, comes to ask the Buddha questions or pays respect to the Buddha,¹⁰² this implies that the Buddha is superior to gods from other belief systems.¹⁰³

During this talk, we will be referring to Handouts 6 and 7. You should also have Handout 2 available for reference. Handout 6 lists each of the 31 Realms of Existence divided into four groups: The “Woeful States” (realms 1–4), the “Happy Destinations” (realms 5–11), the “Fine Material Plane” (realms 12–27) and the “Immaterial Plane (realms 28–31). For each realm, Handout 6 lists the name of the realm, the cause of rebirth into this realm, the Life-continuum Thought Moment for beings in this realm, and the lifespan for beings in this realm. Handout 6 also lists the possible destination realm in the next life, after expiring from this realm. For example, looking at realm 31, a non-saint who expires from this realm may be reborn into the Happy Destinations (realms 5–11) or back into realm 31. A saint (Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmi or Anāgāmi) who expires from this realm will always be reborn back into realm 31.

Handout 7 combines information from Handouts 2 and 6. Handout 7 shows which Thought Moments can arise in each realm. The rows in Handout 7 are numbered 1–89, corresponding to the numbering of the Thought Moments in Handout 2. The columns in Handout 7 are grouped according to “Woeful States,” “Happy Destinations,” “Fine Material Plane” and “Immaterial Plane.” Where appropriate, types of beings (non-saints and saints) are shown. A grey square indicates that this Thought Moment arises in these realms, and a dark diagonal indicates that these are commonly arising kamma-creating Thought Moments in these realms. For example, for beings in the Woeful States, only Thought Moments 1–29 and Thought Moments 31–38 can arise. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moments for beings in Woeful States are 1–12.

¹⁰⁰http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_cosmology_of_the_Theravada_school

“The Four Planes of Existence in Theravāda Buddhism:” <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh462.pdf>, More details in Chapter 5 of “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma” (see Footnote 2 for link).

¹⁰¹DN 21: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.21.2x.than.html>

¹⁰²<http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=206>

¹⁰³Buddhism “imported” gods from the Vedic culture and sometimes changed their personalities. For example, in the Vedas, Yama was the feared god of death and in the Suttas, Yama compassionately tries to minimize a person’s time in hell by asking them to reflect on signs that they have seen (MN 130: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.130.than.html#yama>). As another example, in the Vedas, Māra was the messenger of death (Yama) and in the Suttas, Māra is the personification of temptation.

Woeful States

	Name	Cause of rebirth into this Realm	Life-continuum	Lifespan	Destination Non-saints	Saints
4	Asura	-				
3	Peta (Hungry Ghosts)	-				
2	Animal	Behaving like an animal	19	Indefinite	1–11	-
1	Hell	Five heinous deeds				

Figure 9: A portion of Handout 6, focusing on the Woeful States. For all Woeful States, one Cause of rebirth into this Realm is “Completed” unwholesome kamma.

The Woeful States include four realms: Hell, Animal, Peta¹⁰⁴ and Asura.¹⁰⁵ The cause of rebirth in the Woeful States is “completed” unwholesome kamma from a previous existence. There are many types of unwholesome kamma but the Suttas¹⁰⁶ identify those that can cause rebirth in the Woeful States as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, idle talk, covetousness, ill will and **Wrong view**.

The Abhidhamma Commentary¹⁰⁷ lists conditions that must be met for kamma to be “completed,” to be sufficiently weighty to be able to cause rebirth in the Woeful States. For example, for killing to be a “completed” kamma, there must be life, knowledge of that life, intent to kill, effort to kill and consequential death. We will discuss the details during our talk on kamma.

According to the Suttas,¹⁰⁸ there are five deeds that guarantee a rebirth in hell in the next life: killing one’s mother, killing one’s father, killing an Arahāt, wounding a Buddha and causing a split in the Sangha. Performing any of these five heinous deeds will also make it impossible to attain sainthood in the same life. For example, at the end of a Sutta¹⁰⁹ spoken to King Ajātasattu, the Buddha explained that if King Ajātasattu had not killed his own father, King Bimbisāra, then King Ajātasattu would have been able to attain sainthood after listening to that discourse given by the Buddha.

In another Sutta, the Buddha explained that behaving like an animal will lead to rebirth in the animal realm, and the belief that behaving like an animal could lead to a fortunate rebirth is a **Wrong view**; this **Wrong view** could lead to rebirth in Hell.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴Peta are often called hungry ghosts; they share our world but are invisible to most people.

¹⁰⁵Asura are a type of demon; they do not share our world or interact with humans.

¹⁰⁶See AN 10.177: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.177.than.html> and MN 41: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.041.nymo.html>

¹⁰⁷Details can be found in the Atthasālinī, pages 128–134.

¹⁰⁸AN 5.29: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.129.than.html>

¹⁰⁹DN 2: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.02.0.than.html>

¹¹⁰MN 57: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.057.nymo.html>

A being's lifespan in a Woeful State depends on the weightiness of their kamma. A being in a Woeful State is reborn into realm *I* to realm *II*. There are stories of an animal reborn as a Deva,¹¹¹ but most of the time, beings in the Woeful States are reborn back into the Woeful States because while in a Woeful State, the mind is consumed by **Attachment**, **Aversion** and **Delusion**, and these thoughts create more unwholesome kamma.

Saints are never reborn into the Woeful States and it is not possible to become a saint while in a Woeful State. Handout 6 indicates this by leaving the column blank.

¹¹¹In *Vimānavatthu* 852–88, a frog dies listening to the Buddha's voice and is reborn into realm 7.

Attachment-rooted	1	●	Sense Sphere	Wholesome	31–38	○
	2	●			39	
	3	●			40	
	4	●			41	
	5	●		Resultant	42	
	6	●			43	
	7	●			44	
	8	●			45	
Aversion-rooted	9	●		Functional	47–54	
	10	●				
Delusion-rooted	11	●	Fine Material Sphere	Wholesome	55–59	
	12	●		Resultant	60–64	
Past unwholesome resultant	13	○		Functional	65–69	
	14	○	Im-material Sphere	Wholesome	70–73	
	15	○		Resultant	74–77	
	16	○		Functional	78–81	
	17	○	Supramundane	Sotāpanna	82	
	18	○		Sakadāgāmī	83	
	19	○		Anāgāmī	84	
Past wholesome resultant	20	○		Arahat	85	
	21	○		Sotāpanna	86	
	22	○		Sakadāgāmī	87	
	23	○		Anāgāmī	88	
	24	○		Arahat	89	
	25	○				
	26	○				
	27	○				
Functional	28	○				
	29	○				
	30					

Figure 10: A portion of Handout 7, reformatted to focus on Thought Moments in the Woeful States. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moments are 1–12.

Switching to Handout 7 and scanning the first column, we can see that only Thought Moments 1–29 and Thought Moments 31–38 can arise. The commonly arising kamma-creating Thought Moments are Thought Moments 1–12, the Danger Zone. Jhāna and supramundane Thought Moments are not possible for beings in the Woeful States.

Hell¹¹² is the lowest realm and hell-beings are subject to painful suffering. The Buddha

¹¹²[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naraka_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naraka_(Buddhism))

explained¹¹³ that when a being arrives in Hell or moves between Hells, he is met by a compassionate judge¹¹⁴ who asks, “Did you not see a baby, an old person, a sick person, a condemned person, a dead person? Did these sights not create in you a sense of urgency to do good?” The hell-being then experiences a series of increasingly nasty hells until the unwholesome kamma that caused rebirth in hell has exhausted its result.

Based on the kamma that caused rebirth as animals in Realm 2, some animals, such as household pets, have a relatively easy life and some animals have a difficult life. The Buddha mentions¹¹⁵ that beings can be born from an egg, from a womb, from moisture or spontaneously. Animals can be born from an egg, from a womb or from moisture. Beings born into realms other than the animal realm and human realm are born spontaneously.

The *Tipiṭaka* includes a book¹¹⁶ dedicated to stories of Peta and the kamma that resulted in rebirth into Realm 3. One of the Suttas in this book¹¹⁷ explains that there are Peta that depend on food and drink offered by relatives living in the human realm. The Buddha explained¹¹⁸ that only deceased relatives who have been reborn into the Peta realm are able to receive offerings dedicated to them. There are also other types of Peta that are unable to receive offerings; they always suffer from hunger and thirst.

When the Suttas¹¹⁹ list realms, they do not include Realm 4, the Asura realm. The Asura realm was added by the Commentaries¹²⁰. The Asuras mentioned in the Suttas¹²¹ refer to a rebellious class of Deva in Realm 7, not to inhabitants of the Asura realm. According to the Commentaries, the inhabitants of realm 4 are a class of Peta. The Commentaries describe the Asura realm as being in darkness; the Asuras fight when they come into contact with each other.

¹¹³MN 130: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.130.than.html>

¹¹⁴The God of death, King Yama: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama_\(East_Asia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama_(East_Asia)), who is from Catumahārājika Heaven, asks these questions to create a sense of spiritual urgency to generate wholesome kamma and thereby reduce the time that the hell-being must spend in hell.

¹¹⁵MN 12: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.012.ntbb.html>

¹¹⁶Petavatthu: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petavatthu>

¹¹⁷Pv 1.5: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/pv/pv.1.05.than.html>

¹¹⁸AN 10.177: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an10/an10.177.than.html>

¹¹⁹MN 97: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.097.than.html>

¹²⁰Visuddhimagga XIII.93 (see footnote 2).

¹²¹AN 9.39: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an09/an09.039.than.html>

Happy Destinations

	Name	Cause of rebirth into this Realm	Life- cont.	Lifespan	Destination	
					Non-saints	Saints
11	Gods wielding power of creation of others	3-rooted superior kamma → being with		9216 mil. years		
10	Gods delighting in creation	life-continuum of 39, 40, 43, 44 (3 roots)		2304 mil. years	Being with life- continuum of	
9	Heaven of the contented Gods	3-rooted superior kamma or 2-rooted	39, 40, 43, 44	576 mil. years	39, 40, 43, 44 →	
8	Heaven of the Yāma Gods	superior kamma → being with		144 mil. years	1–22, 28–31	5–21 23–31
7	Heaven of the 33 Gods	life-continuum of 41, 42, 45, 46 (2 roots)		36 mil. years	Being with life- continuum of	
6	Heaven of the Four Great Kings	2-rooted inferior kamma → being with	27, 39–46	9 mil. years / Indefinite	27, 41, 42, 45, 46 → 1–11	
5	Human ☺	life-continuum of 27 (0 roots)		Indefinite		

Figure 11: A portion of Handout 6, focusing on the Happy Destinations.

The Happy Destinations include seven realms; the human realm and six Deva realms.

Handout 6 indicates that if the rebirth-linking kamma from the previous existence is “3-rooted superior kamma,” then the Life-continuum Thought Moment in the Happy Destinations will be one of **39, 40, 43** or **44**. As can be seen in Handout 2, these four Life-continuum Thought Moments have three roots including the root of **Understanding**.

What is “3-rooted” kamma? As seen in Handout 2, kamma generated by Thought Moments **31, 32, 35** or **36** is 3-rooted because these Thought Moments are associated with **Understanding**. On the other hand, kamma generated by Thought Moments **33, 34, 37** or **38** is 2-rooted kamma because these Thought Moments are not associated with **Understanding**.

What differentiates “superior” kamma from “inferior” kamma are the Thought Moments shortly before and shortly after the wholesome kamma-creating Thought Moment. For a kamma to be “superior,” there must be a wholesome Thought Moment shortly before, and a wholesome Thought Moment shortly after, otherwise the kamma is “inferior.” If I make a donation reluctantly, unwholesome reluctance arises shortly before the donation and the kamma is “inferior.” If I make a donation and then regret it, unwholesome regret arises shortly after the donation and the kamma of the donation is “inferior.” If I prepare the donation with joy, donate and then share the merit of the donation, the donation is supported before and after by other wholesome

Thought Moments and the kamma is “superior.” In the Suttas,¹²² the Buddha encouraged his son to reflect before, during and after an action; the Buddha encouraged his son to create superior kamma.

As shown in Handout 6, if the rebirth-linking kamma from the previous existence is “3-rooted superior kamma,” then the Life-continuum Thought Moment in the Happy Destinations will have three roots. If the rebirth-linking kamma from the previous existence is “3-rooted inferior kamma” or “2-rooted superior kamma,” then the Life-continuum Thought Moment will have two roots. If the rebirth-linking kamma from the previous existence is “2-rooted inferior kamma,” then the Life-continuum Thought Moment will have no roots.

Beings in Realms 7–11 will have 3-rooted Life-continuum Thought Moments, while beings in the Human Realm or Realm 6 may have Life-continuum Thought Moments with 0, 2 or 3 roots. Beings with 3-rooted Life-continuum Thought Moments can be reborn into the Sensuous Plane, the Fine Material Plane or the Immaterial Plane. Beings whose Life-continuum Thought Moment has 0 or 2 roots will be reborn into the Sensuous Plane.

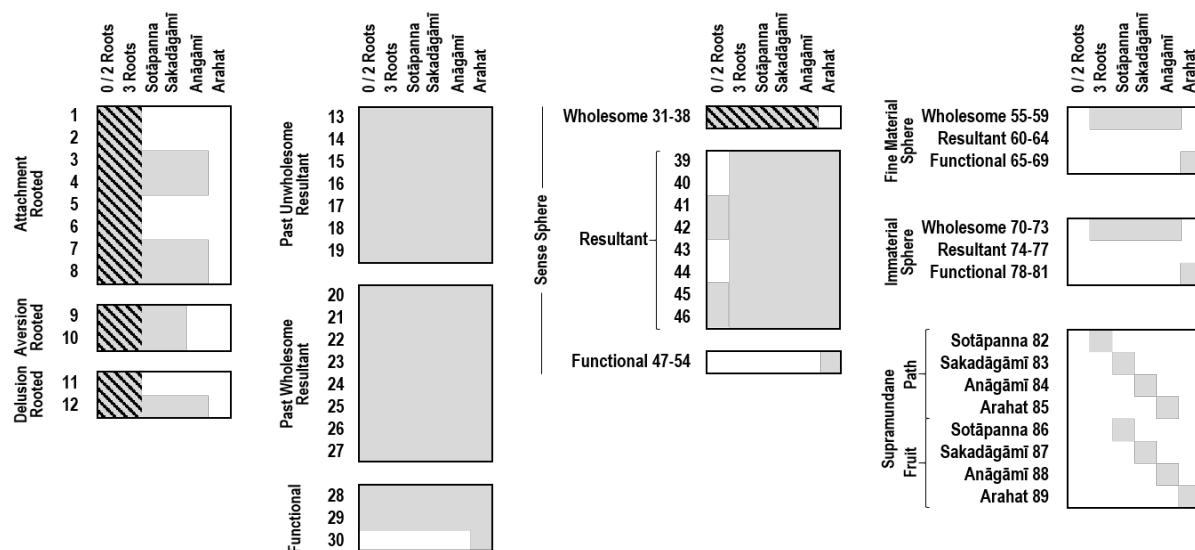


Figure 12: A portion of Handout 7, reformatted to focus on Thought Moments in the Happy Destinations. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moments for non-saints (0, 2 or 3 roots) are 1–12 and 31–38. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moments for saints are 31–38.

As can be seen from Handout 7, beings whose Life-continuum Thought Moments have 0 or 2 roots cannot experience jhāna (Thought Moments 55–59, 70–73), nor can they attain sainthood (Thought Moment 82), but 3-rooted beings can experience jhāna and attain sainthood. For non-saints, the commonly arising kamma-creating Thought Moments include both Thought Moments 1–12, the Danger Zone and Thought Moments 31–38, the Faultless Zone.

A Sotāpanna cannot experience Thought Moment 11, which is associated with **Doubt**, or Thought Moments associated with **Wrong view** (Thought Moments 1, 2, 5 and 6). **Attachment to Wrong view** has been uprooted in a Sotāpanna. Reminds me of a joke... one becomes a Sotāpanna when your karma runs over your dogma. An Anāgāmī cannot experience **Aversion**-rooted Thought Moments (Thought Moments 9 and 10) and an Arahāt cannot experience any unwholesome Thought Moments. For saints, the commonly arising kamma-creating

¹²²MN 61: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.061.than.html>

Thought Moments are **31–38**, the Faultless Zone.

The lowest of the Happy Destinations is Realm 5, the Human realm. The Pāli word for this realm is “*manussa*” which literally means “abundance of mind.” The Human realm is the perfect place for spiritual development. The minds of beings in the Woeful States are consumed with **Attachment**, **Aversion** and **Delusion**, so there is little opportunity for spiritual development. The minds of Deva are occupied with sensual bliss, so there is little motivation for spiritual development. In the Human realm, suffering, sickness, old age and death can create a sense of spiritual urgency. At the same time, the Human realm has joy and happiness, the teachings of the Buddha are available and exalted states of mind are possible.

The Buddha¹²³ said to some monks, “Imagine the whole world was an ocean and a single piece of wood with a hole was floating on the surface. There is a blind turtle in the ocean that comes to the surface once every 100 years. Is it likely that the turtle would put its head through the hole in the piece of wood?” The monks replied, “It would be a very rare event.” The Buddha replied, “It is also rare event to have a human rebirth at a time that there is a Buddha and the Dhamma shines brightly. Therefore, monks, an exertion should be made to understand the Four Noble Truths!”

Realms 6–11 are Deva realms. Those who can see Devas describe them as brightly shining. The Buddha¹²⁴ encouraged “*Devatānussati*,” the practice of the “recollection of Devas.” This is not worshipping Devas, but rather reviewing the faith, virtuous behaviour, learning, generosity and wisdom of the meditator, and reflecting how these same qualities caused Devas to be reborn into Deva realms. The Buddha¹²⁵ said that Devas, along with parents, family, customers and ascetics are worthy of respect. The Ratana Sutta¹²⁶ is directed to the Devas; the Buddha asks the Devas to protect human beings because human beings share merit with the Devas. Whereas Peta depend on relatives to share food and drink, Devas are happy when they see humans performing meritorious deeds.

Realm 6, Heaven of Four Great Kings,¹²⁷ is called *Cātummahārājika* and has four divisions, each ruled by its own guardian deity¹²⁸ and inhabited by a different class of demi-Gods. To the East, there are celestial musicians.¹²⁹ To the South, there are gnomes who take care of forests, mountains and hidden treasures.¹³⁰ To the West, there are *Nāgas*, dragon-like creatures.¹³¹ To the North, there are *Yakkhas*.¹³² The Pāli Text Society Dictionary defines a *Yakkha* as a “non-human being (ogre, ghost) that sometimes helps and sometimes hinders humans.” Some modern scholars¹³³ believe that *Yakkhas* were actually humans, members of displaced aboriginal tribes who lived outside Indian society.

Some of the Devas in Realm 6 are earthbound and live on mountains, in pagodas and in public houses like temples. Some of the Devas in Realm 6 live on top of trees; when their trees

¹²³ SN 56.48: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.048.than.html>

¹²⁴ AN 1.301, DN 33, DN 34, AN 6.9, AN 6.10, AN 6.25 (this Sutta explains *Devatānussati*), etc.

¹²⁵ AN 5.58: <http://suttacentral.net/en/an5.58>

¹²⁶ Sn 2.1: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.01.piya.html>

¹²⁷ DN 32: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.32.0.piya.html>

See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Heavenly_Kings

¹²⁸ East: Dhātaraṭṭha, South: Virūḷhaka, West: Virūpakkha, North: Vessavaṇa/Kuvera.

¹²⁹ Gandhabbas: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gandharva>

¹³⁰ Kumbhāṇḍas: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumbhanda>

¹³¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naga>

¹³² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yaksha>

¹³³ See entry in volume 8 of “Encyclopaedia of Buddhism,” published by the Government of Sri Lanka.

are chopped down they have to shift to unoccupied ones. The Devas from Realm 6 who live on the earth and on trees have an indefinite lifespan. The Devas in Realm 6 who have mansions in the sky have a lifespan of 9 million years. The *Tipitaka* includes a book¹³⁴ dedicated to stories of the heavenly mansions of Devas in Realm 6 and Realm 7, and the kamma that resulted in the rebirth into these realms.¹³⁵

Realm 7 is the Heaven of the 33 Gods; in Pāli, it is called *Tāvatiṃsa*. Realm 6 and Realm 7 share a common space. *Sakka*,¹³⁶ is the King of Realm 7, and the four Kings of Realm 6 are among *Sakka*'s retinue. According to the Commentary,¹³⁷ there was a group of thirty-three men who collectively dedicated their efforts to the happiness and well-being of other people. They passed their whole life with such wholesome actions that after death they were reborn into Realm 7.

Except for Realm 6 and Realm 7, Devas of higher realms are invisible to Devas of lower realms and Devas cannot travel to realms higher than their own but can descend into a lower realm at will. The Buddha taught the Abhidhamma in *Tāvatiṃsa* Heaven in gratitude to his mother. The Buddha chose *Tāvatiṃsa* to teach the Abhidhamma because *Tāvatiṃsa* is accessible to Devas of all realms; lower as well as higher heavens. The Buddha wanted his sermon to benefit not only his mother, but also Devas of other realms who could benefit from his teachings.

The Devas of Realm 8 live without hardship, and the Devas of Realm 9 can always enjoy the pleasures of life. In Pāli, Realm 9 is called *Tusita* heaven. All Bodhisatta are reborn into the Human Realm from Realm 9 to become a Buddha, and the Buddha's mother, who died seven days after giving birth to the Buddha, was reborn into Realm 9. The Devas of Realm 10 use their minds to create objects of sense-pleasure. The Devas of Realm 11 don't even have to bother creating objects of sense-pleasure; others create the objects of sense-pleasure for them and these Devas simply enjoy them.

Māra lives in Realm 11. *Māra* tries to disrupt spiritual progress by causing distractions, either by interrupting the meditation of the Buddha or monks, or by interfering with the Buddha's preaching. *Māra* is the personification of unwholesome Thought Moments.¹³⁸ Once *Māra* is recognized, he has no choice but to retreat. In other words, when the light of **Understanding** is directed onto *Māra*, *Māra* loses his power and disappears.¹³⁹

Fine Material Plane

As shown in Handout 6, the Fine Material Plane includes 16 realms: three related to the first jhāna, three related to the second or third jhāna, three related to the fourth jhāna and seven related to the fifth jhāna. The cause of rebirth into the Fine Material Plane is the attainment of a jhāna, Thought Moment **55–59**, in a previous life. After a very long lifespan, a non-saint is reborn into one of the Happy Destinations or higher. Once a saint has been reborn into the Fine

¹³⁴Vimānavatthu: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimanavatthu>

¹³⁵The grandeur of the mansion (described in the Vimānavatthu) depends on the kamma of the owner.

¹³⁶[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakra_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakra_(Buddhism)) sometimes also called Indra.

¹³⁷<http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=030>

¹³⁸The 10 armies of *Māra* are listed in Sn 3.2: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.3.02.than.html>

¹³⁹SN 4.8: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn04/sn04.008.than.html>

SN 4.13: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn04/sn04.013.than.html>

SN 4.19: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn04/sn04.019.than.html>

SN 4.20: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn04/sn04.020.than.html>

		Name of realm	Cause of rebirth into this realm	Life-continuum Thought Moment	Lifespan	Destination in next life	
						Non-saint	Saint
27	Pure Abodes	Highest Pure Abode	Understanding	64	16,000 Great aeons	-	None
26		Clear-sighted Abode	Concentration		8,000 Great aeons	-	27
25		Beautiful Abode	Mindfulness		4,000 Great aeons	-	26, 27
24		Serene Abode	Energy		2,000 Great aeons	-	25-27
23		Durable Abode	Faith		1,000 Great aeons	-	24-27
22	Gods without consciousness		Dispassion toward perception	63	500 Great aeons	5-11	-
21	Gods of great reward				500 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	21, 23-31
20	Gods of steady aura		Highest Degree		64 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	20-21, 23-31
19	Gods of infinite aura		Medium Degree		32 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	19-21, 23-31
18	Gods of minor aura		Minor Degree		16 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	18-21, 23-31
17	Gods of radiant luster		Highest Degree	3 rd Jhāna 62 2 nd Jhāna 61	8 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	17-21, 23-31
16	Gods of infinite luster		Medium Degree		4 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	16-21, 23-31
15	Gods of minor luster		Minor Degree		2 Great aeons	5-22, 28-31	15-21, 23-31
14	Great Brahmās		Highest Degree	60	1 Incalculable aeon	5-22, 28-31	14-21, 23-31
13	Ministers of Brahmā		Medium Degree		1/2 Incalculable aeon	5-22, 28-31	13-21, 23-31
12	Retinue of Brahmā		Minor Degree		1/3 Incalculable aeon	5-22, 28-31	12-21, 23-31

Figure 13: A portion of Handout 6, focusing on the Fine Material Plane.

Material Plane, they can only be reborn back into the Fine Material Plane or higher, until they become an Arahāt.

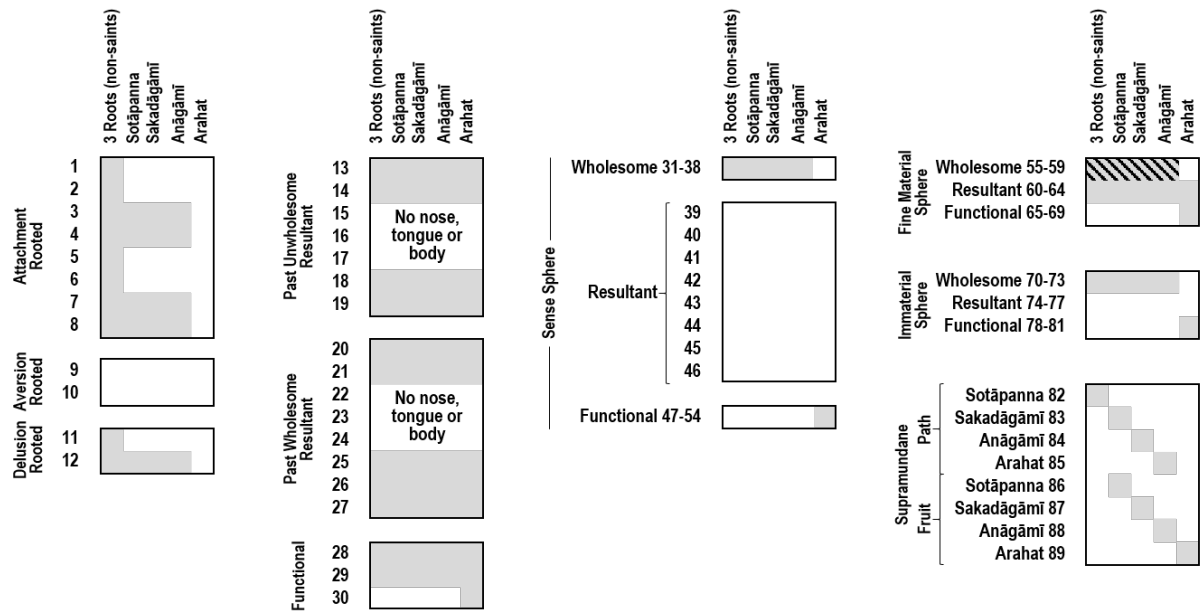


Figure 14: A portion of Handout 7, reformatted to focus on Thought Moments in the Fine Material Plane. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moments are 55–59.

Handout 7 shows that the Thought Moments in the Fine Material Plane are similar to those arising in the Happy Destinations for 3-rooted non-saints and for saints. There are two exceptions; there is no **Aversion** in the Fine Material Plane, and beings in the Fine Material Plane lack the “coarse” senses of smelling, tasting and tactile sense. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moment for beings in the Fine Material Plane will be the Fine Material Sphere jhāna corresponding to that realm (Thought Moment 55–59).¹⁴⁰

There is an interesting Sutta in which the Buddha categorizes the types of **Wrong views**.¹⁴¹ In this Sutta, the Buddha explains how the **Wrong view** of a “Creator God” arises. The Buddha explains that the world goes through cycles of contracting and expanding, and that when the world starts to expand after the “big bang,” beings from another world-system are reborn into Realm 14 as a “Great *Brahmā*” in the newly formed world. After a while, the Great *Brahmā* in Realm 14 gets lonely and wishes for companionship. This is a condition for beings from other world-systems to be reborn into Realm 12 and Realm 13 to accompany the Great *Brahmā* in Realm 14.

When this happens, the Great *Brahmā* is convinced that he is the All-seeing, All-powerful Creator God and the Supreme Being. He believes this because he arose first in this world and the other beings arose because he wanted them to arise. The beings in Realm 12 and Realm 13 are also convinced that the Great *Brahmā* is the Creator God. These beings have shorter lifespans than the Great *Brahmā*, and they are reborn in progressively lower realms: the Deva realms, the Human realm and the Woeful States. As they progress to these lower realms, many retain this memory of the Great *Brahmā* as being the All-seeing, All-powerful Creator God. The Buddha explained that this is why many humans believe in a Creator God.

In another Sutta,¹⁴² a monk with the ability to visit the heavenly realms has a philosophical

¹⁴⁰For example, the most common kamma-creating Thought Moment for beings in Realms 12–14 will be 55.

¹⁴¹DN 1: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.01.0.bodh.html>

¹⁴²DN 11: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.11.0.than.html>

question. When he visits Realm 6, the Devas say they do not know the answer and suggest that he ask the Devas in Realm 7. The Devas in Realm 7 cannot answer and direct him to Realm 8. This happens repeatedly until the monk asks the Great *Brahmā* in Realm 14. The Great *Brahmā* says, “I am the All-seeing, All-powerful Creator.” The monk replies, “That is not what I asked” and repeats his question. Again, the Great *Brahmā* avoids the question and says, “I am the All-seeing, All-powerful Creator.” A third time, the monk repeats his philosophical question. Finally, the Great *Brahmā* takes the monk aside and says, “The beings in the lower realms believe there is nothing that I do not see, nothing that I do not know. That is why I answered you as I did. In fact, I do not know that answer to your question but I could not admit this in the presence of the other beings. The Buddha will know the answer to your question.”

World-systems are created and destroyed in a cyclical pattern over an extremely long time-frame called an “incalculable aeon.” The four phases can be described as “big bang,” “expanding universe,” “contracting universe” and “big crunch.” The lifespan of a Great *Brahmā* matches with the lifespan of a world-system, one “incalculable aeon.” A Great *Brahmā* comes into existence when a world-system arises and after an incalculable aeon, the world-system is destroyed up to and including Realm 14 where the Great *Brahmā* resides. According to the Commentary,¹⁴³ the realms up to Realm 14 are destroyed seven times in a row by fire, and then realms up to Realm 17 are destroyed by water. Once Realm 17 has been destroyed by water seven times, the realms up to Realm 20 are destroyed by wind. This cycle of 64 destructions of world-systems then repeats itself. The lifespans of beings in Realm 15 and above are measured in “great aeons;” a “great aeon” is four times the duration of an “incalculable aeon.”

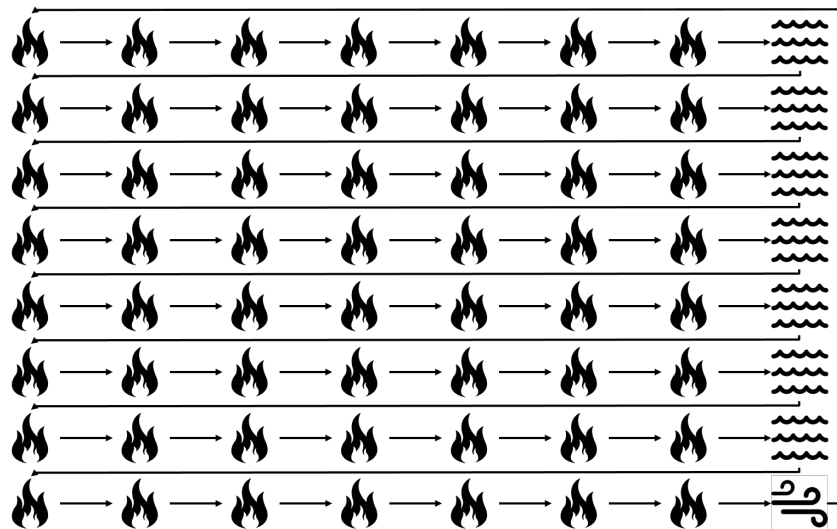


Figure 15: World-systems are destroyed up to Realm 14 by fire seven times in a row and then destroyed up to Realm 17 by water. This pattern repeats itself seven times and for the eighth repetition, the world-system is destroyed up to Realm 20 by wind and the cycle repeats.

Beings who attain the fifth jhāna together with a dispassion toward perception can be reborn into Realm 22. For their entire lifespan here, the beings have no mind, only form; they are like statues. When their lifespan in Realm 22 expires, kamma from a previous rebirth causes them to be reborn into some other realm.

¹⁴³See Commentary to AN 4.156.

Only Anāgāmi are born into Realms 23–27. Once reborn into these Pure Abodes, the Anāgāmi will continue to be reborn into the Pure Abodes until they become an Arahāt. Anāgāmi who have attained the fifth jhāna will be reborn into Realms 23–27 according to their dominant faculty: **Faith, Energy, Mindfulness**, concentration or **Understanding**. Anāgāmi who have not attained the fifth jhāna can be reborn in any realm in the Fine Material Plane or the Immaterial Plane. Anāgāmi cannot be reborn into the Sensuous Plane as they have eradicated any **Attachment** to sense objects.

Immaterial Plane

	Name of realm	Cause of rebirth into this realm	Life-continuum Thought Moment	Lifespan	Destination in next life	
					Non-saint	Saint
31	Neither perception nor non-perception	Thought Moment 73	77	84,000 Great aeons	5-11, 31	31
30	Nothingness	Thought Moment 72	76	60,000 Great aeons	5-11, 30, 31	30, 31
29	Infinite consciousness	Thought Moment 71	75	40,000 Great aeons	5-11, 29-31	29-31
28	Infinite space	Thought Moment 70	74	20,000 Great aeons	5-11, 28-31	28-31

Figure 16: A portion of Handout 6, focusing on the Immaterial Plane.

As shown in Handout 6, the Immaterial Plane includes four realms, named after the four formless jhānas. The cause of rebirth into the Immaterial Plane is the attainment of the corresponding jhāna, Thought Moment **70–73**, in a previous life.¹⁴⁴ After an exceptionally long lifespan, a non-saint is reborn in one of the Happy Destinations or back in the Immaterial Plane. If a saint is reborn into the Immaterial Plane, he continues to be reborn into the Immaterial Plane until he becomes an Arahāt.

Handout 7 shows that the Thought Moments in the Immaterial Plane are similar to those arising in the Fine Material Plane. One exception is that none of the Thought Moments associated with sensing can arise in the Immaterial Plane, as beings in the Immaterial Plane are pure mind with no body and no senses. Without senses, beings in the Immaterial Plane are unable to see the Buddha or hear the Dhamma. To explain how mind exists without a supporting body, the Commentary uses the analogy of a bar flung into the air. For a certain period, the bar remains in the air without support. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moment for beings in the Immaterial Plane will be the Immaterial Sphere jhāna corresponding to that realm (Thought Moment **70–73**).¹⁴⁵

Summary of Key Points

Here is a summary of key points regarding Realms of Existence:

- The Realms of Existence are found in the Suttas but Buddhist philosophy and practice have no relevance to beings from non-human Realms of Existence.

– I view the Realms of Existence as a literary device that enhances the Suttas.

¹⁴⁴For example, attaining Thought Moment **70** in a previous life is required to be reborn into Realm 28.

¹⁴⁵For example, the most common kamma-creating Thought Moment for beings in Realm 28 will be **70**.

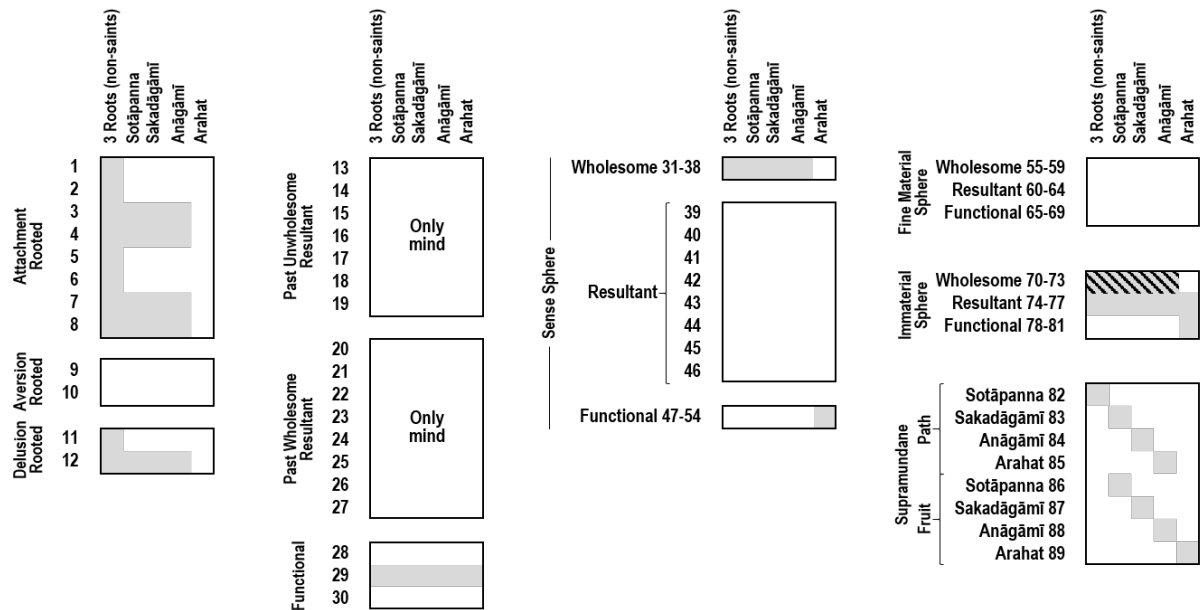


Figure 17: A portion of Handout 7, reformatted to focus on Thought Moments in the Immaterial Plane. The most common kamma-creating Thought Moments are 70–73.

- The Woeful States include four realms: Hell, Animal, Peta and Asura.
 - Unwholesome kamma can cause rebirth into the Woeful States.
 - Saints are never reborn in Woeful States and beings in Woeful States cannot become saints.
 - Beings in Woeful States cannot attain jhāna.
- Human rebirth (Realm 5) is the lowest among the Happy Destinations.
 - Human realm is the ideal place for spiritual development.
 - Past wholesome rebirth-linking kamma can have either 3 or 2 roots (with or without **Understanding**) and can be either “superior” or “inferior” (supported or unsupported before and after).
 - * Past 3-rooted superior rebirth-linking kamma produces present 3-rooted life-continuum in realms 5–11 (can achieve sainthood or jhāna).
 - * Past 3-rooted inferior rebirth-linking kamma or past 2-rooted inferior rebirth-linking kamma produces present 2-rooted life-continuum in realms 5 or 6 (cannot achieve sainthood or jhāna).
 - * Past 2-rooted inferior rebirth-linking kamma produces present rootless life-continuum in human realm (congenitally disabled).
- The Deva realms (Realms 6–11) are also Happy Destinations.
 - Deva realms include the earth-bound Devas, *Sakka* (king of Devas) and *Māra* (personification of temptation who disappears when recognized).

- The *Brahmā* realms (Realms 12–31) are the result of jhāna meditation.
 - *Brahmā* realms include “the Great Brahmā” (Creator God whose lifespan is the duration of a universe) and the Pure Abodes.
 - Beings in *Brahmā* realms spend most of their time in jhāna.
 - Beings in realm 12–27 have no nose, tongue or body (eyes and ears only), beings in realm 28–31 are mind-only.

Finally, in my opinion, the most important thing to remember about Realms of Existence is that supernatural beings are like spices in a meal. They add flavour, but are not essential to the nutritional value of the meal. Belief in supernatural beings is not a requirement for following the Buddha’s path.

This concludes the sixth talk.

Questions & Answers

Is there a correlation between our present Thought Moment and Realms of Existence?

Yes, there is a clear correlation. A mind that is consumed by anger is burning, painful and unpleasant, as if the mind is in the hell realm. A mind that is consumed by **Delusion** is working on instinct without **Understanding**, as if the mind is in the animal realm. A mind that is consumed by **Attachment** suffers from insatiable hunger, like the mind of hungry ghosts. A mind that is quarrelsome and argumentative is dark, like the mind of an Asura. The mind that is wholesome shines brightly, as the Devas shine. The meditating mind is deeply absorbed and stable, like *Brahmas*.

Do the heaven and hell realms really exist or are they metaphorical? Is belief in these realms important to spiritual development?

I do not have a strong opinion as to whether the heaven and hell realms really exist or are metaphorical. I consider many of the details, especially those found in the Commentaries, to be legendary. In my opinion, belief in rebirth does not require belief in heaven and hell realms.

Shortly before his *parinibbāna*, the Buddha was asked if there were saints in any other religious tradition.¹⁴⁶ The Buddha replied that any religious tradition that included the Noble Eightfold Path could have saints. To me, this means that spiritual development involves the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path does not include any supernatural elements and does not depend on belief in heaven and hell realms.

Does performing the 10 wholesome actions and observing the five precepts guarantee that one will not be reborn into woeful states?

Performing the 10 wholesome actions and observing the five precepts does not provide a guarantee, but does increase one's chances of a favourable rebirth. Even if performing the 10 wholesome actions and observing the five precepts does not condition favourable rebirth in the next life, the wholesome kamma generated will have a positive impact in this life, in the next life and in future lives.

¹⁴⁶DN 16: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html#para-5-60>