

Practical Abhidhamma Course

Version 1.0 (February 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

The eight lessons in this course 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 Dhamma⁴ course using themes from the Abhidhamma.

The Dhamma and the Abhidhamma are **not** meant for abstract theorizing; they 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.⁵

This document includes many diagrams and footnotes with links to online resources such as Suttas, stories from the Dhammapada Commentary and Wikipedia articles. The footnotes are not merely an academic convention, they are my invitation to you to explore further. When viewing this document on a laptop or a tablet, the links are active; clicking a link shows the online website. The document also includes Questions & Answers for each lesson. You may find it convenient to print the appendices so you can refer to them while reading the document. This document can be downloaded from <http://practicalabhidhamma.com/>.

Acknowledgements

Ayyā Medhānandī Bhikkhunī suggested that I prepare this Practical Abhidhamma Course after a talk I gave at Sati Sārāṇīya Hermitage (<http://satisaraniya.ca/>). I am very grateful to the Venerables who reviewed the draft and corrected inaccuracies. Many of the questions came from my friends/students. Oli Cosgrove proofread the document and improved the writing style. My son Dion helped with aesthetics and all things digital (L^AT_EX, Inkscape, and the website).

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>

⁴In 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”).

⁵The Commentary speaks of a progression: study (*pariyatti*), practice (*paṭipatti*) and realization (*paṭivedha*).

1 Introduction

Welcome to this Practical Abhidhamma Course. This first lesson provides context by introducing the Abhidhamma as part of the Buddhist canon.

Structure of the Buddhist canon

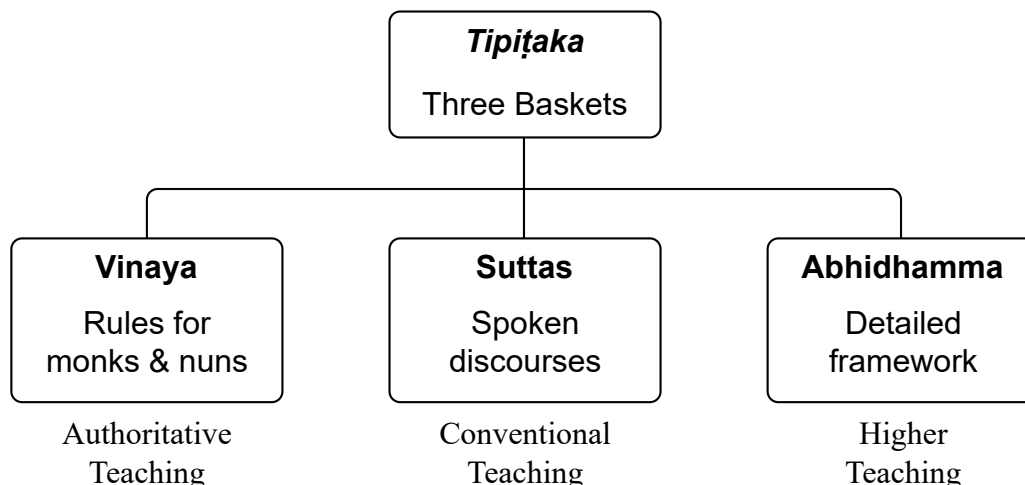


Figure 1: The *Tipiṭaka* consists of three collections: *Vinaya*, *Suttas*, and *Abhidhamma*.

Let's start by looking at the "Structure of the Buddhist Canon" diagram in Figure 1.

Tipiṭaka is a Pāli word; in Pāli, *Ti* means three and *ṭiṭaka* means basket, so *Tipiṭaka* is literally "three baskets" meaning "three collections."⁶ The first collection is the *Vinaya*, the rules for monks and nuns. The second collection is the *Suttas*, the spoken discourses that were given by the Buddha and his disciples using conventional language. The third collection is the *Abhidhamma*; it provides a detailed framework covering all the teachings. *Abhi* is a Pāli prefix meaning "higher" and so *Abhidhamma* literally means higher teachings.⁷

Let me help you to visualize the size of the *Tipiṭaka*.⁸ 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*.⁹

⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tipitaka>

⁷In "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*)."

⁸In 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*.

⁹Each of the books in the *Vinaya*, *Suttas* and *Abhidhamma* have Commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atthakatha>) and many have Subcommentaries (*Tīkā*: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subcommentaries,_Theravada). The Commentaries were compiled about 1500 years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna* (this is discussed in the next lesson) and the Subcommentaries were prepared later. Most of the Commentaries and Subcommentaries have not been translated into English. A Pāli version of the *Tipiṭaka*, Commentaries and Subcommentaries can be downloaded from the Vipassana Research Institute site: <http://www.tipitaka.org/cst4>

Over the past 60 years, 11 monks in Myanmar have memorized the entire *Tipiṭaka*.¹⁰ The first of these monks got into the Guinness Book of Records for reciting 16,000 pages of the *Tipiṭaka*.¹¹ 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.¹² 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,¹³ would not have survived for 2,600 years without a body of rules and procedures to keep them strong.¹⁴

The Vinaya includes 227 major rules for monks and 311 major rules for nuns.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Each individual rule focuses on harmonious interactions between monastics¹⁷ and blameless interactions with laypeople.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

¹⁰These monks are given the title “*Tipiṭaka dhara*”: <http://www.myanmarnet.net/nibbana/tipitaka/tpdkdhra.htm>

¹¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mingun_Sayadaw

¹²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vinaya_Pitaka

¹³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sangha>

¹⁴The Buddha excelled not only as a teacher (in the Suttas), but also as an administrator (in the Vinaya).

¹⁵This 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>).

¹⁶The Buddha was pragmatic; he modified rules and procedures as circumstances changed.

¹⁷This story from the Commentary stresses the importance of harmonious interactions between monastics: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=006>

¹⁸According 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.

¹⁹This material is found in Volume 1 of the Vinaya (*Sutta Vibhaṅga*).

Suttas

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

Figure 2: Topics in the Suttas and Abhidhamma.

Now let's talk about the Suttas, the discourses given by the Buddha and his disciples.²⁰ The Sutta *Piṭaka* includes more than 10,000 Suttas.²¹ These are called conventional teaching because they talk about people, places, and events; conventional terms not found in the Abhidhamma.

Each Sutta is targeted to a specific audience to address a specific set of questions. To understand a Sutta, it is useful to know the context in which it was given.²² We can broadly classify the Suttas into two categories: Suttas delivered to laypeople²³ and Suttas delivered to monastics.

Suttas delivered to laypeople

For laypeople who were interested in happiness visible in this present life, the Buddha gave simple, practical teachings. In Buddhist countries, a popular topic for Dhamma talks is a Sutta that lists 38 blessings, such as not associating with fools, generosity, respect and patience.²⁴ Another popular Sutta gives advice regarding the reciprocal responsibilities between parents and children, teachers and students, etc.²⁵ These topics are popular because they are relevant in daily life and obviously lead to happiness in this present life.

²⁰http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutta_Pitaka

²¹The total is far more than 10,000 Suttas: the *Dīgha Nikāya* has 34 Suttas, the *Majjhima Nikāya* has 152 Suttas, the *Samyutta Nikāya* has 2,904 Suttas (according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's count), the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* has 8,122 Suttas (according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's count) and the *Khuddaka Nikāya* includes hundreds of Suttas.

²²This contextual information, the background story for the Sutta, is often provided in the Commentary.

²³The 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>).

²⁴Sn 2.4: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangala_Sutta
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.04.nara.html>

²⁵DN 31: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigalovada_Sutta
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>

Some laypeople were more spiritual and wanted to know the way to a fortunate rebirth. To address these concerns, there are Suttas that explain kamma²⁶ and ethics.²⁷ Kamma and ethics are two of the central themes of this Practical Abhidhamma Course.

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**.²⁸ 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.

Reminds me of a joke: a man goes into a bookstore looking for a book on Buddhist practice. He is directed to go to the "non-self" help section.

Suttas delivered to monastics

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

The Buddha 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*.²⁹

In another Sutta, 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*.³⁰ The Buddha's graphic analogy of removing a poisoned arrow reminds us of the urgency of our own spiritual development.

The Four Noble Truths³¹ are the principles of the Buddha's teaching and the Noble Eightfold Path³² is the Buddha's practical teaching on how to experience *Nibbāna*. These are the essence of the Buddha's teachings. Dependent Origination³³ 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.

²⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma>

²⁷<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>

²⁸In this document, words that are capitalized and in bold font are either Mental Factors or *rūpas*. **Understanding** is a Mental Factor that will be discussed during the lesson on Consciousness.

²⁹SN 56.31: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.031.than.html>

³⁰MN 63: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.063.than.html>

³¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths

³²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path

³³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/dependent_origination

Abhidhamma

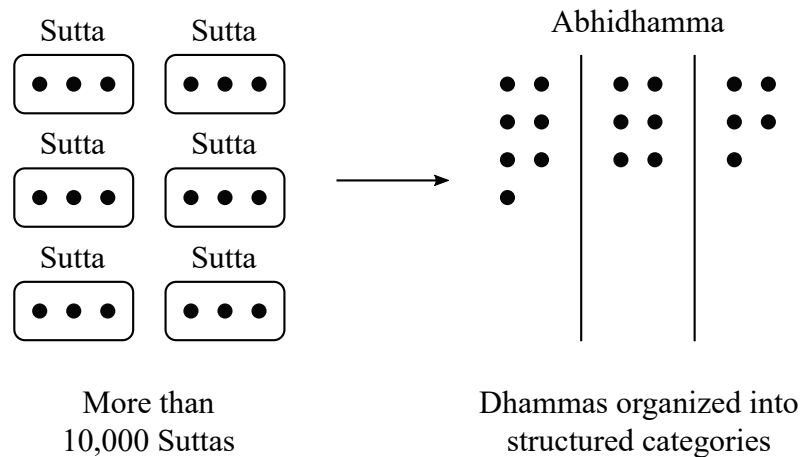


Figure 3: The Abhidhamma organizes key terms (dhammas) from more than 10,000 Suttas into structured categories according to the Theravāda doctrine.

The third part of the *Tipiṭaka* is the Abhidhamma.³⁴

A monk 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 limitation³⁵ except the goal of liberation from suffering.”³⁶

In other words, the Abhidhamma is a framework or an ecosystem. It tries to consolidate content from all of the Suttas into a complete 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.³⁷ In none of the Suttas is the discussion of the five aggregates more than half a page. The Abhidhamma includes an analysis of the five aggregates that is 88 pages long.³⁸ 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 these conventional topics. 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.

³⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhidhamma_Pitaka

³⁵The Abhidhamma is limited in scope as it excludes things not related to the goal of liberation from suffering.

³⁶Correspondence with Jotinanda Bhikkhu.

³⁷<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skandha>

³⁸“The Book of Analysis” (*Vibhaṅga*), pages 1–88.

Ultimate Realities

Conditioned (Arise briefly because of conditions and then fall away)	Mind (<i>Nāma</i>)	Consciousness (<i>Citta</i>)
		Mental Factors (<i>Cetasika</i>)
	Matter (<i>Rūpa</i>)	Matter (<i>Rūpa</i>)
Unconditioned		<i>Nibbāna</i>

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

The Buddha 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.”³⁹ According to the Commentary, in this Sutta the Buddha is acknowledging two ways of communicating; in a conventional way using names and in a way using Ultimate Realities. The Abhidhamma focuses on Ultimate Realities.

The Abhidhamma classifies everything as being either an Ultimate Reality or a concept.⁴⁰ According to the Abhidhamma, the four Ultimate Realities are Consciousness (*citta*), Mental Factors (*cetasika*), Matter (*rūpa*) and *Nibbāna*.⁴¹ Consciousness and Mental Factors experience things; together, they are the mind (*nāma*). Consciousness and Mental Factors experience objects, whereas *rūpas* do not know anything.

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 matter 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.

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.

³⁹DN 9: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.09.0.than.html#milk>

⁴⁰In 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?).

⁴¹Ultimate Realities are not explicitly mentioned in the seven books of 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 (written about 1000 years ago).

According to the Abhidhamma, names and ideas are concepts. Wikipedia defines a concept as “a generalization of experience or the result of a transformation of existing concepts.”⁴² “Person” is a concept, “house” is a concept but what is experienced through the senses is not a concept. The **Hardness** that is experienced, and the mind that experiences it, are examples of Ultimate Realities.

Consciousness (*Citta*)

Let’s look at the topics in the Abhidhamma starting with “Consciousness,” or *citta* in Pāli.⁴³

The Suttas have various words for the mind, such as *citta*, *mano*, *viññāṇa*, and *nāma*.⁴⁴ There is significant overlap in how these words are defined and used in the Suttas.⁴⁵ In many Abhidhamma texts, the word *citta* sometimes refers to the Ultimate Reality of Consciousness and sometimes refers to the combination of Consciousness with its accompanying Mental Factors. When reading Abhidhamma texts, you need to look at the context to know if *citta* means Consciousness or the combination of Consciousness with its accompanying Mental Factors. In this course, I refer to the combination of Consciousness with its accompanying Mental Factors as a “Mind Moment.”⁴⁶

According to the Commentaries, what is conventionally called the mind is actually a sequence of Mind Moments. Each Mind Moment arises based on conditions, performs its function and then falls away again. The lesson 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*)

The next topic in the Abhidhamma is “Mental Factors,” or *cetasika* in Pāli.⁴⁷

The Mental Factors give the Mind 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**.

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 there is **Attachment** or **Aversion**, helps us to better understand the nature of **Attachment** and **Aversion**.⁴⁸ The lesson on Mental Factors will define each Mental Factor and explain which Mental Factors arise in specific Mind Moments.

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

⁴³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citta>

⁴⁴http://ahandfulofleaves.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/citta_mano_vinnana_a-psychosemantic-investigation_ucl_1965_johansson.pdf

⁴⁵The Suttas (SN 12.61: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.061.than.html>) explain that we often take mind (*citta*), intellect (*mano*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as being Self.

⁴⁶The original Abhidhamma texts use the term “*dhamma*” for the combination of consciousness and Mental Factors and in the translation of these texts, the word “state” is used. In the past, I have used the term “Mental State” for this combination, but this created confusion for people whose introduction to the Abhidhammattha Sangaha was Venerable Nārada’s translation, because he used “Mental State” as a translation for “*cetasika*”. I now use the term “Mind Moment” (*cittakkhaṇa*) for this combination of consciousness and Mental Factors, but you should not interpret this as a measure of time (unfortunately, the Commentaries do use the term *cittakkhaṇa* as a measure of time).

⁴⁷[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mental_factors_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mental_factors_(Buddhism))

Details can be found in “Cetasikas” (see Footnote 2 for link).

⁴⁸**Delusion** is needed to conceal the true nature of the object and only then can **Attachment** or **Aversion** arise; this fact is captured in the expressions, “love is blind” and “blind hatred.”

Matter (*Rūpa*)

The next topic in the Abhidhamma is “Matter,” or *rūpa* in Pāli.⁴⁹

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**.

Conditions

In Figure 2, “Conditions” sits on top of Consciousness, Mental Factors, and Matter. Conditions explain how these Ultimate Realities can be related to each other; they are natural laws.⁵⁰ Everything arises because of multiple conditions, so this can get very complex. During the lesson on Conditions, I will focus on two conditions with the most practical applications.⁵¹ The lesson will provide a practical understanding of kamma and natural decisive support conditions.

Processes

The final topic is Processes. The lesson on processes will explain seeing without a seer, thinking without a thinker, and the death and rebirth process.⁵² Its focus will be on how an understanding of processes impacts practice. In my opinion, when discussing processes, 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 because each book has a distinctive style and unique approach.⁵³

The first book⁵⁴ is a systematic listing of Mind Moments and Matter. The Mental Factors in each Mind Moment are listed and defined.

The second book⁵⁵ is a set of essays.⁵⁶ Many of the essays first analyze a topic using quotations from the Suttas, then analyze the same topic from the perspective of the Abhidhamma, and then analyze the same topic in a “question and answer” section.

⁴⁹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruupa>

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

⁵⁰Details can be found in “The Conditionality of Life” (see Footnote 2 for link).

⁵¹Other conditions will be identified in footnotes, but not described in the lessons.

⁵²See Visuddhimagga XVI.90 (see Footnote 2 for link).

⁵³When reading the seven books of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*, I get the impression that each book was written by different people at different times, and that each book was built up over time.

⁵⁴*Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhammasangani>) translated by the Pali Text Society as “A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics.” Buddhaghosa’s Commentary, *Atthasālinī* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atthasalini>) has been translated by the Pali Text Society as “The Expositor.”

⁵⁵*Vibhaṅga* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibhanga>) 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.”

⁵⁶Examples of essay topics include: aggregates, bases, elements, truth, controlling faculties, dependent origination, foundation of mindfulness, right striving, basis of accomplishment, enlightenment factors, jhāna, etc.

The third book⁵⁷ builds on the material in the first two books with a focus on aggregates, sense-bases, and elements.⁵⁸ 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 lessons.

The fourth book⁵⁹ deals with classifications of persons, arranged numerically from one-fold to ten-fold. The presentation and much of the content mirrors the Suttas,⁶⁰ leading some scholars to suggest that this is an early Abhidhamma text.

The fifth book⁶¹ 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, about 250 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*.⁶²

The sixth book⁶³ includes pairs of philosophical questions such as Does X imply Y? and Does Y imply X?

The seventh book⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ 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,⁶⁷ but the objectives of the two are different; Buddhism is focused on spiritual development, so the similarities tend to be superficial.

⁵⁷ *Dhātukathā* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhatukatha>) translated by Pali Text Society as “Discourse on Elements.”

⁵⁸ Aggregates (*khandha*), sense-bases (*āyatana*) and elements (*dhātu*) are overlapping classifications from the Suttas.

⁵⁹ *Puggalapaññatti* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puggalapannatti>) translated by Pali Text Society as “Designation of Human Types.”

⁶⁰ Specifically, the *Anguttara Nikāya*.

⁶¹ *Kathāvatthu* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathavatthu>) translated by Pali Text Society as “Points of Controversy.” Buddhaghosa’s Commentary has been translated by the Pali Text Society as “The Debates Commentary.”

⁶² The *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*.

⁶³ *Yamaka* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamaka>) not translated by Pali Text Society. The Pāli word *yamaka* means “pairs.”

⁶⁴ *Paṭṭhāna* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patthana>) partially translated by Pali Text Society as “Conditional Relations.”

⁶⁵ The 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.

⁶⁶ For example, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* lists more than 120 ways of classifying Mind Moments.

⁶⁷ My 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.”

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. Ethics⁶⁸ (what is morally right) and epistemology⁶⁹ (what is right knowledge) are useful aspects of philosophy described in the Abhidhamma.

Another topic that is central to the Abhidhamma is what philosophers call “ontology;” the definition of what is real.⁷⁰ 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.”⁷¹

The Abhidhamma provides a simple model of how the mind works

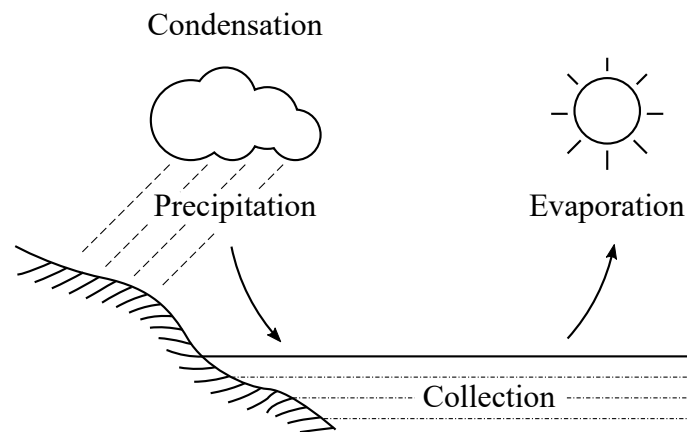


Figure 5: The Water Cycle provides a simple model for a complex natural process.

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.⁷² 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 the weather was to develop simple models such as the Water Cycle.⁷³ This model of condensation-precipitation-collection-evaporation is simple enough to be studied today by schoolchildren.

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.⁷⁴ 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.

If we want to fix something that is broken, we first need a basic understanding of how it works. If we want to fix our “broken mind,” we need a simple model of how the mind works.

⁶⁸<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>

⁶⁹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology>

⁷⁰<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology>

⁷¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Power_of_Now

⁷²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_modelling

⁷³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_cycle

⁷⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weather_forecasting

Researchers have used brain scanners⁷⁵ to examine the part of the brain that filters incoming 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.”⁷⁶

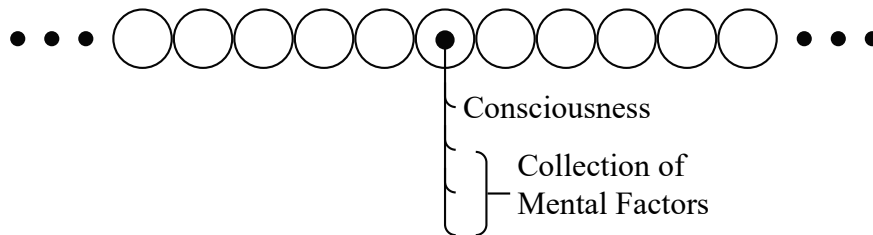


Figure 6: The Abhidhamma models the mind as a series of Mind Moments, like a “stream of consciousness.” Each Mind Moment arises, performs its function and then falls away. The falling away of one Mind Moment is a condition for the arising of the subsequent Mind Moment. Each Mind Moment includes Consciousness and a collection of Mental Factors.⁷⁷

The Suttas⁷⁸ describe how the concept of Self is triggered by sense data, and during the lesson 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;⁷⁹ precepts are rules of training.⁸⁰ 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 spend just 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 lot of commitment, and the rewards are much greater than becoming a skilled pianist.

⁷⁵http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single-photon_emission_computed_tomography

⁷⁶<http://www.andrewnewberg.com/books/why-god-wont-go-away-brain-science-the-biology-of-belief>

⁷⁷Each Mind Moment conditions the next Mind Moment through proximity (*anantara*), proximity decisive support (*anantarūpanissaya*), contiguity (*samanantara*), absence (*natthi*), and disappearance (*vigata*) conditions. Consciousness and the associated Mental Factors condition each other through conascence (*sahajāta*), conscence support (*sahajātanissaya*), conascence presence (*sahajātātthi*), mutuality (*aññamañña*), association (*sampayutta*), and non-disappearance (*avigata*) conditions. See Visuddhimagga XV.36 and chapters 5, 6, 7 and 17 of “The Conditionality of Life” (see Footnote 2 for links).

⁷⁸MN 1: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.001.than.html>

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

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

⁸⁰The literal translation of *sikkhāpada* is factor (*pada*) of training (*sikkhā*).

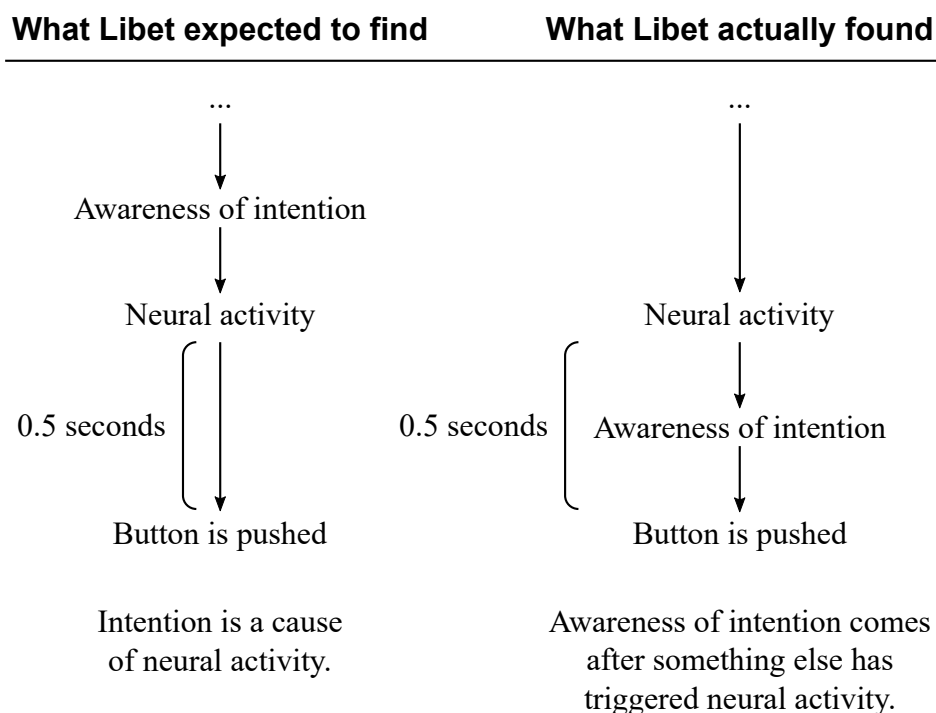


Figure 7: Libet's experiment challenges the concept of "free will."

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." In the 1970s, when Benjamin Libet⁸¹ 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 the 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.⁸² This means that the idea of a "Self that is making decisions" arises after decisions have already been made.⁸³

"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 who decides 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.

⁸¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Libet

⁸²Over the past 30 years, these results have been repeatedly confirmed with increasingly sophisticated equipment.

⁸³An interesting article: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/02/science/02free.html?_r=0

Application of Abhidhamma to spiritual development

Here is a quote from a modern writer 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 periods devoted to formal 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.”⁸⁴

When it comes to meditation, the Abhidhamma supports your practice by providing the yogi and the teacher with a common vocabulary to describe experiences. Abhidhamma without meditation is theory without practice; in my opinion, this brings little benefit.⁸⁵ 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. In my opinion, the best approach is meditation supported by an understanding of Abhidhamma. **Mindfulness** and **Understanding** do not arise only when sitting on a cushion. In my opinion, integrating **Mindfulness** and **Understanding** into our daily activities is a very important part of the practice.

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 needs to be steady, settled, unified and composed.⁸⁶ The details of each grain of sand are the characteristics of the Ultimate Realities.⁸⁷

⁸⁴This 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).

⁸⁵This story from the Commentary highlights the benefit of practice over mere theory: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=019>

⁸⁶The terms “steady, settled, unified and composed” are used in the Suttas to describe *samatha* (see MN 20: <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.020.than.html>). This analogy shows how *samatha* can support the development of insight (*vipassanā*).

⁸⁷Initially the specific characteristics of the Ultimate Reality will appear (i.e. **Attachment** is “sticky”), but eventually the general characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* can appear.

Linkage to *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta

Please take a quick look through the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta provided in the Appendix.⁸⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote: “This is one of the most important Suttas in the Pāli Canon, containing the most comprehensive statement of the direct way⁸⁹ to the attainment of the Buddhist goal.”⁹⁰

In my opinion, all Buddhist meditators should have some familiarity with this Sutta.⁹¹ On first reading, this Sutta is not easy to understand. The detailed explanation of this Sutta given in the Commentary is difficult to understand unless you have a foundation in Abhidhamma.⁹² The Abhidhamma is useful to understand the Commentaries and to better appreciate the Theravāda interpretation of the Suttas.

I just mentioned that integrating **Mindfulness** and **Understanding** into our daily activities is an important part of the practice. Please look at paragraph 12 of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta.⁹³ You can see that **Mindfulness** and application of the Abhidhamma should be applied during all daily activities, not just during periods of formal meditation.

In many of the lessons, I will explain points from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta using the Abhidhamma topic that we are discussing at that time. So 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.

⁸⁸http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satipatthana_Sutta

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

⁸⁹“The direct way” is Bhikkhu Bodhi’s 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 can be interpreted as indicating directness of the path rather than exclusivity of the path.

⁹⁰From his translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

⁹¹The Commentary explains that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta is intended for all meditators, not just monks.

⁹²The Commentary and Subcommentary are given in “The Way of Mindfulness” by Soma Thera: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wayof.html>

⁹³For 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.

Summary of Key Points

- 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 Mind 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 meditation practice by providing the yogi and the teacher with a common vocabulary to describe experiences.
- The Abhidhamma helps us to understand the Commentaries and this helps us to appreciate the Theravāda interpretation of the Suttas.

Finally, in my opinion, the most important thing to remember from this lesson 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.

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 noon⁹⁴ 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, "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 has 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.

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 to interpret 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 Ph.D. 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."⁹⁵

⁹⁴This Vinaya rule (and many others) do not apply when the monastic is sick.

⁹⁵The Abhidhamma and the Commentaries have been subject to centuries of scrutiny.

Should I study the Abhidhamma before I start learning meditation?

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 are obsessed with technical details of the Abhidhamma and neglect basic practice.

In my opinion, you should start learning meditation before you study the Abhidhamma just as one should spend 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 not to 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 ideas in the Abhidhamma.

There is a story of a conversation between Ajahn Chah and an Abhidhamma teacher.⁹⁶ 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.

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.

Does the Abhidhamma discuss topics other than Ultimate Realities?

The Ultimate Realities are the building blocks of the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma discusses conditions as relationships between Ultimate Realities. It discusses processes as sequences of Ultimate Realities. The Abhidhamma (and the Visuddhimagga) describe Dependent Origination using Ultimate Realities and conditions.

⁹⁶See section on "Buddhist Psychology" in http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books2/Ajahn_Chah_A_Still_Forest_Pool.htm

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;” you should study both of them. 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, you will also want to refer to the Commentaries to gain a better understanding of the Suttas’ more subtle points. The Commentary often uses the Abhidhamma to explain doctrine, so the Abhidhamma can be useful in understanding the Commentaries to the Suttas.

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, fluorescent, coloured, and bayonet...⁹⁷

⁹⁷Some Abhidhamma scholars tend to avoid answering questions directly and instead recite long lists of categories. I do not consider myself to be an Abhidhamma scholar, I consider myself to be an Abhidhamma practitioner.

2 Historical Development of the Abhidhamma

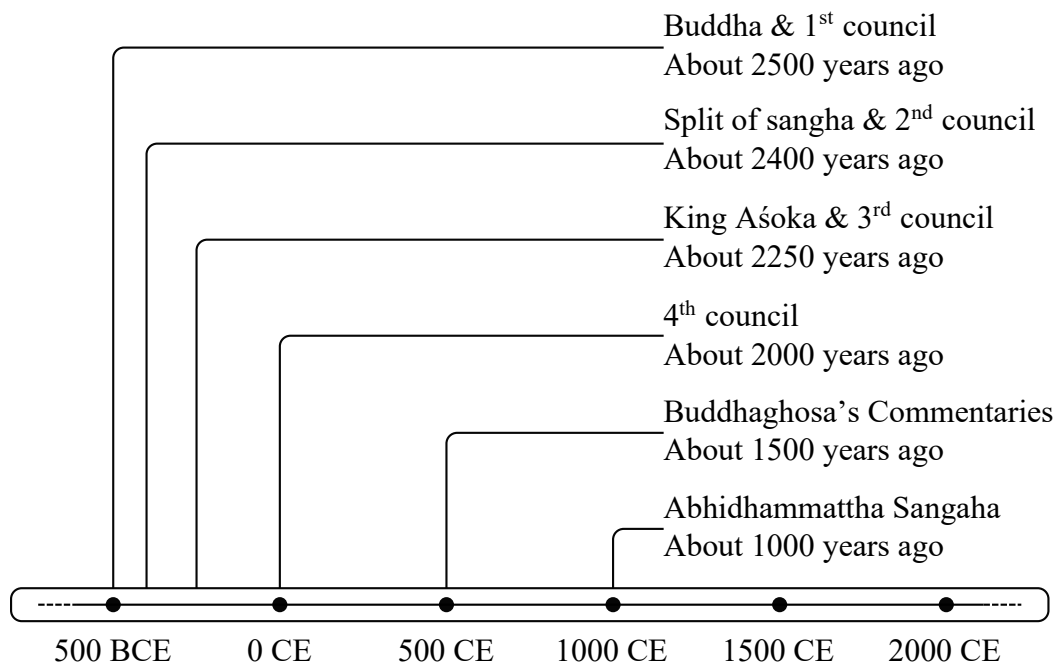


Figure 9: Timeline showing key events in the development of the Abhidhamma. In my opinion, the Abhidhamma probably started to take its current form in the period between the 2nd council (about 2400 years ago) and the 3rd council (about 2250 years ago).

Welcome to the second lesson of this Practical Abhidhamma Course. In this lesson, we'll discuss the historical development of the Abhidhamma.

When we listen to a Dhamma talk or read a Dhamma book, we are often given information from four historical periods. The oldest source of information is the Suttas and Vinaya. These generally date to about 2500 years ago. The next oldest source, almost as old as the Suttas and Vinaya, is the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma was more or less complete about 2250 years ago. The Commentaries are the third source; they were compiled about 1000 to 1500 years ago. Modern writers are the fourth source.

Each of these four sources (Suttas and Vinaya, Abhidhamma, Commentaries and modern writers) has a distinctive flavour that is a result of the historical time period when it was developed. For example, the Suttas were an oral tradition and are characterized by simple sentence structure, lots of repetition, stock descriptions, and numerical lists.

Each of these four sources builds on what came earlier. Even the Suttas build on the beliefs prevalent at the time of the Buddha. For example, in the Suttas, the Buddha criticized the caste system and the doctrines of other teachers.

When I give Dhamma talks, it is important to me that my audience is aware of my sources of information. In my talks I will say, "The Buddha said..."⁹⁸ or "In the Abhidhamma..."⁹⁹ or "In the Commentary..." or "In my opinion..."⁹⁹ This contextual information allows my audience to differentiate between the core teachings of the Buddha and later additions. Later additions can be very useful, but they should be understood as being later additions.

⁹⁸"In the Abhidhamma" means in the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*; the Abhidhammattha Sangaha is a Commentary.

⁹⁹I have tried to follow the same practice in this Practical Abhidhamma Course.

We will look at the historical development of the Abhidhamma from two perspectives; first based on the traditional accounts from the Commentaries, and then based on the current thinking of scholars. Scholars consider the traditional accounts from the Commentaries to include a mixture of fact and legend. Some of these traditional accounts may have been added by reciters to make the material more interesting to listeners.¹⁰⁰

Traditional account from the Commentaries

Let's start with the traditional account of the Abhidhamma from the Commentaries.

According to the Commentaries,¹⁰¹ during the first week after gaining enlightenment, the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree enjoying the bliss of *Nibbāna*. During the second week, he stared at the Bodhi tree for one week without blinking, as a mark of respect. During the third week, he practised walking meditation. During the fourth week after enlightenment, the Buddha envisioned the Abhidhamma. He started by reflecting on the first book and went through each book in sequence.

When the Buddha came to the fifth book, he reflected only upon the table of contents and on the list of controversies he knew would arise in about 250 years when it would be time to write this book.¹⁰²

When the Buddha reached the seventh book of the Abhidhamma, Conditional Relations, he had finally found a topic worthy of his great intellect and he began emitting rays of blue, yellow, red, white, orange and dazzling light.

In 1885, a Buddhist flag¹⁰³ was designed using these colours; it was accepted as the international Buddhist flag for all schools of Buddhism in 1952. So when you see the multicoloured Buddhist flag, think about its inspiration, the Buddha reflecting on the Abhidhamma!



Blue: Loving kindness, peace and universal compassion.
Yellow: The Middle Path – avoiding extremes, emptiness.
Red: The blessings of practice – achievement, wisdom, virtue, fortune and dignity.
White: The purity of the Dhamma – leading to liberation, outside of time or space.
Orange: The Buddha's teachings – wisdom.
Dazzling: The combination of all the colours.

Figure 10: According to the commentary to the Abhidhamma, blue emanated from the Buddha's hair and eyes; Yellow from the Buddha's skin and eyes; Red from the Buddha's flesh, blood and eyes; White from the Buddha's bones, teeth and eyes; Orange and dazzling emanated from different parts of the Buddha's body.

¹⁰⁰Background stories to the Dhammapada: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/index.php>

¹⁰¹"The Expositor" (*Atthasālinī*), pages 16–18.

¹⁰²According to the *Dīpavamsa*, page 119, the Third Council was 218 years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*.

¹⁰³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_flag



Figure 11: Burmese depiction of the Buddha teaching Abhidhamma in Tāvātimsa heaven.

In the seventh year after his enlightenment, the Buddha spent three months teaching Abhidhamma.¹⁰⁴ To teach the entire Abhidhamma, the Buddha spoke continuously, 24 hours a day, for three months.¹⁰⁵ No human audience could listen to such a long talk, so the Buddha taught Abhidhamma in one of the heavens,¹⁰⁶ as had many of the previous Buddhas.¹⁰⁷ He delivered this lecture to many celestial beings including his mother, who had died shortly after the Buddha was born. Each day the Buddha came down to earth to collect food. While on earth, he left a “hologram” of himself in heaven to continue teaching. Each day when he visited earth, the Buddha met with Sāriputta and said, “In the past 24 hours, I covered the following topics...” With his great wisdom, Sāriputta was able to fill in the gaps and structured the Abhidhamma texts as we have them today. Sāriputta then taught the Abhidhamma to his 500 students.¹⁰⁸

So there are three versions of the Abhidhamma: the complete version that the Buddha taught to the celestial beings, the short summary version that the Buddha passed along to Sāriputta, and the medium-length version compiled by Sāriputta that we have today.

According to the Commentary, the Abhidhamma was recited by Ānanda at the First Council,¹⁰⁹ and the fifth book, which contrasts the orthodox Theravāda view with views of other Buddhist schools, was added at the Third Council.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴During the *vassa* period (rainy season) when monks are not allowed to travel.

¹⁰⁵Story in the Commentary: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=181>

¹⁰⁶In Tāvātimsa heaven; three months in the human realm is equivalent to less than four minutes in Tāvātimsa heaven. One day in Tāvātimsa heaven is equivalent to 100 years of human time (See the story from the Commentary: <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=048>).

¹⁰⁷The Buddhavamsa (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhavamsa>) lists names of the 27 Buddhas preceding Gotama and gives a brief biography for 24 of these Buddhas. All of these 24 Buddhas started their ministry with the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.harv.html>), but only 9 of these 24 Buddhas went to Tāvātimsa heaven to preach the Abhidhamma.

¹⁰⁸At the time of a previous Buddha, Sāriputta’s 500 students had been bats who lived together in a cave. Monks recited the Abhidhamma in this cave and the bats enjoyed the sound. The monks were therefore quick to appreciate the Abhidhamma when they heard it again from Sāriputta.

¹⁰⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Buddhist_council

¹¹⁰http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Buddhist_council

According to scholars

Now let us consider the view of scholars.

The word “Abhidhamma” does occur a few times in the Suttas, but not in a way that suggests it is referencing a set of texts. For example, a forest-dwelling monk is instructed to “apply himself to the higher Dhamma (Abhidhamma) and the higher discipline (Abhivinaya).”¹¹¹ Since the word “Abhidhamma” is paired with “Abhivinaya” and since there is no text called “Abhivinaya,” it is unlikely that in this context the word “Abhidhamma” refers to a set of texts. In addition, this Sutta focuses on the practice of a forest-dwelling monk, not a scholastic monk based in a monastery. My interpretation of this Sutta is that the forest-dwelling monk should reflect on the “essence of the Dhamma” and the “essence of the Vinaya” when alone in the forest.

The Suttas list nine ways of presenting the Dhamma, and this list does not include the Abhidhamma.¹¹² Though there may have been no collection of texts¹¹³ called Abhidhamma during the time of the Buddha, there were many Suttas in which the Buddha analyzed things using methods from the Abhidhamma. For example, the Buddha defined “the all” as “eye and **Visible-forms**, ear and **Sounds**, nose and **Odours**, tongue and **Tastes**, body and tactile objects, intellect and ideas,”¹¹⁴ saying nothing was excluded from this list.

Shortly before his *parinibbāna*, the Buddha was asked who would be his successor. The Buddha replied, “Be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge.”¹¹⁵

If the Dhamma was to be the guide, it needed to be clear, and the Suttas sometimes give apparently conflicting information. For example in one Sutta, an argument broke out between two of the Buddha’s disciples over how many types of **Feelings** were taught by the Buddha.¹¹⁶ One disciple said that the Buddha taught two types of **Feeling**, and the other disciple said that the Buddha taught three types of **Feeling**. When this was brought to the Buddha, he said that both disciples were correct because sometimes he talked about two types of **Feeling**, three types, five types, six types, 18 types, 36 types and sometimes 108 types of **Feeling**.¹¹⁷ The Buddha explained that he analyzed **Feeling** depending on the context.

Questions such as these could be brought to the Buddha while he was alive, but after his *parinibbāna*, the need to systematize and structure his teachings became an important priority. The Abhidhamma was needed to provide a unifying structure that integrated the content from all of the Suttas.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹MN 69: <http://awake.kiev.ua/dhamma/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/2Majjhima-Nikaya/Majjhima2/069-gulissani-e1.html>

¹¹²MN 22: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.022.than.html#watersnake>
The nine ways of presenting the Dhamma: dialogues (*sutta*), narratives of mixed prose and verse (*geyya*), explanations (*veyyakaraṇa*), verses (*gāthā*), spontaneous exclamations (*udāna*), quotations (*itivuttaka*), birth stories (*jātaka*), amazing events (*abbhutadhamma*), question and answer sessions (*vedalla*).

¹¹³There were no written texts at the time of the Buddha; just different types of “memorized collections.”

¹¹⁴SN 35.23: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.023.than.html>; the Pāli terms translated as “intellect” and “ideas” are “*mano*” and “*dhammā*” (*dhammā* is the plural of *dhamma*).

¹¹⁵DN 16: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html#island>

¹¹⁶MN 59: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.059.nypo.html>

¹¹⁷SN 36.22: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.022.nypo.html>

¹¹⁸It is possible that the earliest Abhidhamma texts were technical Commentaries on the Suttas (“about the Dhamma” rather than “higher Dhamma”); this is the character of the *Vibhaṅga* (a Theravāda Abhidhamma text), the *Dharmaskandha* and *Saṅgītiparyāya* (Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma texts).

When it was reported to the Buddha that the leader of the Jain religion had passed away, and there was an immediate split among his followers arguing over points of Jain doctrine, the Buddha said that to avoid a similar problem in the Buddhist Sangha, the monks should recite together, “setting meaning beside meaning, expression beside expression.”¹¹⁹ Later, Sāriputta led the monks in a joint recitation of more than 200 categories of terms from the Buddha’s teaching, totalling almost 1000 items.¹²⁰

The compilation of long lists of terms from the Buddha’s teachings appears to have started during his lifetime.¹²¹ For its first 500 years, Buddhism was a purely oral tradition, and this led to “memory aids” such as standard descriptions, repetition and extensive use of lists; for example, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* is a huge collection of lists.

In the Suttas, these lists were sometimes referred to as “*Mātikās*,”¹²² and the Suttas refer to monks “who have memorized the Dhamma, the Vinaya, and the *Mātikās*.”¹²³ The first book of the Abhidhamma starts with an extensive *Mātikā* that summarizes the entire Abhidhamma.¹²⁴ These lists, some of which date back to the time of the Buddha, provide a structure that combines content from many Suttas and are probably a forerunner of the Abhidhamma.¹²⁵

The Vinaya records the events of the First Council¹²⁶ and the Second Council.¹²⁷ The Vinaya does not mention the recitation of the Abhidhamma during the First Council; it just says that Ānanda recited the five *Nikāyas*.¹²⁸ The Second Council occurred about 100 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, so the Vinaya was open to additions until at least this time. Since the Vinaya did not mention the Abhidhamma being recited at the First Council, even after 100 years of additions, it is unlikely that the Abhidhamma had been formalized by the time of the Second Council.

The Second Council¹²⁹ was convened because of a disagreement over rules in the Vinaya.¹³⁰ The main disagreement was whether the handling of money was allowed, but there were also other disagreements.¹³¹

¹¹⁹DN 29: <http://suttacentral.net/en/dn29>

¹²⁰DN 33: <http://suttacentral.net/en/dn33>

¹²¹The list of lists in DN 33 was spoken by Sāriputta, but the Buddha also summarized his teachings as a list of lists (see MN 77: <http://suttacentral.net/en/mn77>) which was later called 37 requisites of Enlightenment (*Bodhipakkhiyadhamma*): 4 foundations of **Mindfulness**, 4 right efforts, 4 roads to power, 5 spiritual faculties, 5 spiritual powers, 7 factors of enlightenment and Noble Eightfold Path. See http://store.pariyatti.org/Requisites-of-Enlightenment-The--PDF-eBook_p_4646.html

¹²²“*Mātikās*” is sometimes translated as “Matrix.”

¹²³MN 33: <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.033.than.html#fords>

¹²⁴<http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Abhidhammatika/Abhidhammatika.pdf>

¹²⁵The *Samgītiparyāya*, a very early Sarvāstivāda Abhidhamma text, is a Commentary on the *Sangīti* Sutta (DN 33) referenced in the previous footnotes.

¹²⁶See Vinaya Volume 5, pages 393–406.

¹²⁷See Vinaya Volume 5, pages 407–430.

¹²⁸To explain why the Vinaya does not mention the Abhidhamma being recited at the First Council, the Commentary included the Abhidhamma in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (the collection of “shorter works”).

¹²⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Buddhist_council

¹³⁰Scholars believe that the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghika may be closest to the version before the split of the Sangha; in other words, the Theravāda School may have added rules to the Vinaya.

¹³¹An interesting quote from the introduction to a recently published book, “The First and Second Buddhist Councils: Five Versions,” contrasts how different Buddhist schools interpret the rules that led to the Second Council: “For the second point, *dvāṅgula kappā*, the Theravāda interprets it as taking food after mid-day; more precisely, when the shadow of the sun is two digits wide. The Tibetan version of the Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya takes it to mean “taking food (which remains from the previous meal) with two fingers,” likewise the Chinese version of the Mahīśāsaka and Dharmagupta Vinaya.”

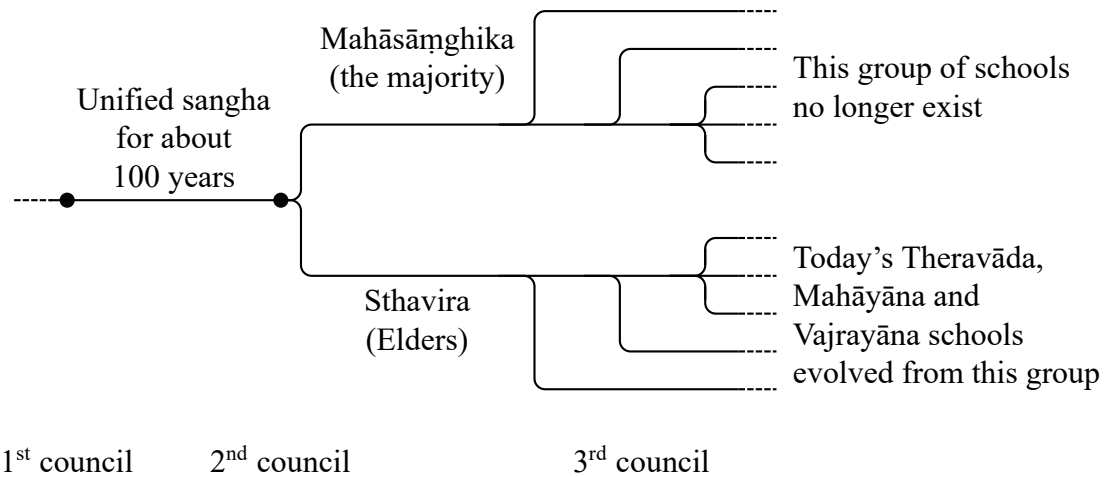


Figure 12: Today's Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools trace their roots back to the Sthavira branch.

Soon after the Second Council, there was a split of the Sangha into two groups: the majority of the monks were in one group¹³² and the other group called themselves the “Elders.”¹³³ Soon after this initial split of the Sangha, the majority group of monks split into many schools, and the Elders also split into many schools. By the time of the Third Council, about 150 years later, there were at least 18 schools. Many of these lasted for hundreds of years. Today's Theravāda, Mahāyāna¹³⁴ and Vajrayāna¹³⁵ schools evolved from the Elders group.

When the Chinese pilgrim monk Xuanzang¹³⁶ returned to China in 645 AD, he carried more than 600 texts representing seven different Buddhist schools, including texts from the Mahāsāṃghika schools. Many of these texts were translated into classical Chinese. About 100 years ago, a complete collection of these texts was taken to Japan.¹³⁷ They have recently been digitized, and scholars are able to do a detailed analysis.¹³⁸ Comparing these ancient texts from other schools with the Theravāda *Tipiṭaka* allows us to draw three conclusions:

- The basic teachings in the Suttas and Vinaya from different schools are very similar, suggesting that they originated some time before the Second Council.¹³⁹
- The content and organization of the Suttas are quite different for different schools, suggesting this was not finalized until some time after the Second Council.¹⁴⁰
- Abhidhamma texts from different schools are completely different, suggesting that Abhidhamma texts were finalized some time after the Second Council.

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

¹³³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sthavira_nikaya

¹³⁴<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahayana>

¹³⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana>

¹³⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuanzang>

¹³⁷It is called the “Taishō Tripiṭaka” because it was brought to Japan during the Taishō period (1912–1926). The Taishō Tripiṭaka has 100 volumes: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TaishoTripiṭaka>

¹³⁸Ven. Anālayo's two volume, “A Comparative Study of the *Majjhima Nikāya*” is an excellent example:

<http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/compstudyvol1.pdf>

<http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/compstudyvol2.pdf>

¹³⁹Some of the traditional accounts found in the Commentaries also appear in the literature of other schools, suggesting that some of the source material upon which the Commentaries are based predates the Second Council.

¹⁴⁰http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/StudiesintheOriginsofBuddhism_Pande.pdf

Xuanzang's travelogue¹⁴¹ records that he studied the Abhidhamma from different schools. Unfortunately, the original Abhidhamma texts from the other schools, except for one,¹⁴² have been lost. Having a separate Abhidhamma would have been very important to each school because each school was characterized by its difference in doctrine. Having their own Abhidhamma was important for three reasons. First, their Abhidhamma would reflect the points of doctrine that differentiated them. Second, their Abhidhamma would be used to train new monks on points of doctrine. Third, they could draw upon their Abhidhamma when engaging in debates with other religionists, Buddhist or otherwise.

Understanding the environment during the development of the Abhidhamma is important. Starting around the time of the Buddha, a new way of thinking called atomism became popular in India.¹⁴³ According to atomism, things are built up from a set of irreducible components. In India, this approach of atomism was applied to the analysis of matter, to the analysis of mind and even to the analysis of language. It is possible that atomism was one of the factors that caused the writers of the Abhidhamma¹⁴⁴ to compile lists of Ultimate Realities based on the general overlapping categories found in the Suttas such as aggregates, bases, and elements.¹⁴⁵

Atomism is an example of how the non-Buddhist external environment may have influenced the development of the Abhidhamma. Debates within the internal Buddhist community may have also impacted its development. The infallibility of the Arahats¹⁴⁶ was an early controversy between Buddhists.¹⁴⁷ The Theravāda school needed to support its doctrine that the mind of an Arahats was special, and this may have influenced the list of Mind Moments in the Theravāda Abhidhamma, which includes many Mind Moments reserved only for Arahats.¹⁴⁸

Earlier, I described each of the seven books in the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*. Each of the books has a distinct style, suggesting that they were written by different authors at different times. Even if we put aside the fifth book, which is acknowledged to have been written about 250 years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, some of the remaining Abhidhamma books are closely tied to the Suttas,¹⁴⁹ suggesting that they are earlier works, while some books are purely philosophical, suggesting that they are later works. The later works often address topics not mentioned in the Suttas. In other words, scholars can trace a development in style and a development in content between the older Abhidhamma books and the later Abhidhamma books.

¹⁴¹“Journey to the West:” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey_to_the_West, published 900 years later, was very loosely based Xuanzang's travelogue.

¹⁴²Thanks to Xuanzang, we do have a complete set of original Abhidharma texts from the Sarvāstivāda School. “The Theravāda Abhidhamma,” by Y Karunadasa includes a comparison of the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Abhidhamma, suggesting ways in which the two schools may have influenced each other. From secondary sources, we can surmise the content of the Abhidharma of other schools.

¹⁴³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomism>

¹⁴⁴Just to give an indication of the differences between schools: the Theravāda school has 1 *citta* (arising in 89 or 121 combinations, Mind Moments), 52 *cetasika*, 28 *rūpas* and 1 unconditioned element. The Sarvāstivāda (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarvastivada>) school had 1 *citta*, 60 *cetasika*, 11 *rūpas* and 3 unconditioned elements. The Sautrāntika (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sautrantika>) school had 6 *citta*, 29 *cetasika*, 8 *rūpas* and 1 unconditioned element. The Yogācāra (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yogachara>) school had 8 *citta*, 75 *cetasika*, 11 *rūpas* and 6 unconditioned elements. Each of these schools used the same set of Suttas, but analyzed them in a different way, according to their own doctrines.

¹⁴⁵The “Discourse on Elements” (*Dhātukathā*), the third book of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*, cross references the list of Ultimate Realities with the categories of aggregates, bases and elements.

¹⁴⁶For the standard description of the Arahats found in the Suttas, see AN 6.55: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.055.than.html#stock1>

¹⁴⁷The “Points of Controversy” (*Kathāvatthu*) raises many points supporting the infallibility of the Arahats.

¹⁴⁸Mind Moments 30, 47–54, 65–69, 78–81 and 89 are reserved for Arahats (See lesson 3 for details).

¹⁴⁹Such as the *Vibhaṅga* and *Puggalapāṇṇatti*.

3rd Council (about 2250 years ago)

About 250 years after the death of the Buddha, King Aśoka ruled most of India.¹⁵⁰ King Aśoka was Buddhist, but he also supported the other religions of the day.¹⁵¹ The number of Buddhist monks increased greatly, bringing new ideas into Buddhism. The Buddha's teachings were at risk of being distorted, so a senior monk, Moggaliputta Tissa, convened a Third Council to define the Theravāda doctrine clearly and refute the doctrines of the other Buddhist schools. These “Points of Controversy” became the fifth book of the Abhidhamma *Piṭaka*. Traditionally, this is the last addition to the Abhidhamma and scholars believe the rest of the Abhidhamma was more or less complete by this time.

According to the Commentary, after teaching the Abhidhamma in heaven, the Buddha returned to earth at Sankassa.¹⁵² Aśoka erected a pillar at this location; the traditional account of the Buddha teaching the Abhidhamma in heaven was already established by the time of Aśoka.

4th Council (about 2000 years ago)



Figure 13: These were the kinds of books created during the 4th council and they are still created today.

Moggaliputta Tissa sent out missionaries after the Third Council and this is how Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka at the Mahāvihāra.¹⁵³ For more than 200 years, the Mahāvihāra was the only Buddhist school in Sri Lanka. About 2000 years ago, the Sri Lankan King decided to introduce a new Buddhist school from India, the Abhayagiri¹⁵⁴ School. The Mahāvihāra now had competition and no longer had royal support. This was one of the factors contributing to the Fourth Council,¹⁵⁵ when the Mahāvihāra monks went to a cave away from the royal capital to write their version of the *Tipiṭaka* texts on palm leaves. Once the *Tipiṭaka* had been committed to writing it was more difficult to change, so it is likely that the *Tipiṭaka* that we have today was more or less finalized by the time of the Fourth Council.¹⁵⁶

Reminds me of a joke: after 2000 years of copying the Buddhist texts, they realized that early on somebody had made a mistake and forgotten the “R”; the original word was “celebrate.”

¹⁵⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashoka>

¹⁵¹ The following interesting article contrasts the traditional Theravāda view of Aśoka with the contents of what Aśoka wrote in his edicts: <http://www.shin-ibs.edu/documents/bForum/v5/07Norman.pdf>

¹⁵² <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=181>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankassa>

¹⁵³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anuradhapura_Maha_Viharaya

¹⁵⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhayagiri_vihara

¹⁵⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Buddhist_council

¹⁵⁶ The Fifth Council (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth_Buddhist_council) and the Sixth Council (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth_Buddhist_council) were held in Myanmar in 1871 and 1954. They involved a recitation and confirmation of the *Tipiṭaka*.

Buddhaghosa's Commentaries (compiled about 1500 years ago based on much older material)

When the Chinese pilgrim monk Faxian¹⁵⁷ visited Sri Lanka in 400 AD, he observed that the Abhayagiri School had 5000 monks, another school closely related to the Abhayagiri School¹⁵⁸ had 2000 monks while the Mahāvihāra School had 3000 monks. In other words, 70 percent of the monks in Sri Lanka were not from the Mahāvihāra School. The monks from the Mahāvihāra School were feeling threatened.¹⁵⁹ They were using Pāli while their competitors were using Sanskrit. They were seen as conservatives who had nothing new to offer while their competitors were introducing new Mahāyāna practices from India.¹⁶⁰

Based in the Mahāvihāra, Buddhaghosa¹⁶¹ wrote the Visuddhimagga.¹⁶² Wikipedia describes the Visuddhimagga as a complete and coherent explanation of the *Tipiṭaka* using the “Abhidhamma method.” Buddhaghosa also compiled Commentaries¹⁶³ for most of the texts in the *Tipiṭaka*, based on Sinhalese materials accumulated in the library of the Mahāvihāra.¹⁶⁴

For the Mahāvihāra School, the Commentaries served three purposes. First, they reintroduced Pāli as an important language, not a dead language. Second, they presented the Mahāvihāra doctrine and reinforced the importance of the Abhidhamma. Third, they presented all the accumulated traditional accounts to capture the interest of the lay community. Actually, most of the stories about the life of the Buddha taught in Sunday Schools today are not from the Suttas, but are traditional accounts from the Commentaries.¹⁶⁵

Abhidhammattha Sangaha (about 1000 years ago)

The Abhidhammattha Sangaha is a very concise summary of the Abhidhamma and its Commentaries written in Sri Lanka about 1000 years ago. The Pāli text is only 46 pages long but it summarizes many thousands of pages of material. It was designed for young monks to memorize, without understanding. Once the monks were older, they would study the original Abhidhamma texts using what they had memorized in the Abhidhammattha Sangaha as a foundation.

¹⁵⁷<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faxian>

¹⁵⁸The Jetavana School (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jetavanaramaya>).

¹⁵⁹Around 1200 AD the Mahāvihāra gained royal support and were able to eliminate the competing schools.

¹⁶⁰The competition also had a popular meditation manual called the Vimuttimagga, “The Path of Freedom”: (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimuttimagga>). Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga was the Theravāda replacement for the Vimuttimagga. The Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga have the same general structure of *Sīla*, *Samādhi* and *Paññā*, but the Vimuttimagga is more practical while the Visuddhimagga is comprehensive and scholarly.

¹⁶¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhaghosa>

¹⁶²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visuddhimagga> (Path of Purification, see Footnote 2 for link).

¹⁶³The Visuddhimagga was written first and is referenced in many places in the Commentaries. The Visuddhimagga and the Commentaries provide background stories to the Suttas, word by word analysis of the Suttas, definitions and etymological information for important terms. The Visuddhimagga and the Commentaries are strongly influenced by the Abhidhamma. The Visuddhimagga was written and the Commentaries were compiled about 1000 years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna* and in a cultural environment that was different from when the Buddha taught. This book is a modern scholar's attempt to interpret the Buddha's teachings in their original context: http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/WhattheBuddhaThought_Gombrich_2009.pdf

¹⁶⁴Buddhaghosa considered himself to be a compiler and translator of earlier material (not an author) and rarely offered his own views. Everything that he wrote would have been reviewed by the elders of the Mahāvihāra to confirm that it was aligned with the Theravāda doctrine.

¹⁶⁵The Suttas do not contain a lot of biographical material. For details of what is in the Suttas, see http://store.pariyatti.org/Life-of-the-Buddha-The--PDF-eBook_p_1412.html

Today, most introductory Abhidhamma courses use the Abhidhammattha Sangaha as their textbook. Twenty years ago, Bhikkhu Bodhi¹⁶⁶ compiled a translation with explanatory notes and charts from Abhidhamma scholars called, “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma.”¹⁶⁷ With the explanatory notes and charts added, the book is 400 pages long. If, after listening to my Practical Abhidhamma Course, you want to dive deeper into the technical details of the Abhidhamma, I highly recommend this book.¹⁶⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi’s book is quite technical and detailed. If you are looking for a book that is a bit lighter, I recommend “Abhidhamma in Daily Life” by Nina van Gorkom.¹⁶⁹

Abhidhamma today

Let’s look at Abhidhamma today. The Abhidhamma is viewed very differently in the three major Theravāda countries: Myanmar,¹⁷⁰ Sri Lanka,¹⁷¹ and Thailand.¹⁷²

In Myanmar, Abhidhamma has been studied actively for 900 years.¹⁷³ Two hundred fifty years ago, the government was holding exams on Abhidhamma for monks and laypeople.¹⁷⁴ To give you an idea of how popular Abhidhamma is in Myanmar today, in 2005 almost 14,000 laypeople took the basic Abhidhamma exam at 124 government-run centres. Of all of the Theravāda countries, Abhidhamma is most widely studied in Myanmar. Novice monks start studying the Abhidhamma from the age of 13. The Burmese Sayādaws, particularly the meditation teachers, are extremely knowledgeable in Abhidhamma and frequently reference the Abhidhamma during their talks on meditation.

Today in Sri Lanka, the Abhidhamma is studied as an academic topic.¹⁷⁵ The Abhidhamma is highly respected in Sri Lanka but rarely mentioned by monks in their Dhamma talks. The late chief monk at the Sri Lankan Vihāra where I teach, Dr. K Sri Dhammananda,¹⁷⁶ gave Dhamma talks for 50 years, but I am not aware of him ever talking about Abhidhamma. However, in my early years of teaching,¹⁷⁷ whenever I had a difficult question about Abhidhamma, Chief always had an answer for me.

¹⁶⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhikkhu_Bodhi

¹⁶⁷PDF can be downloaded using the link in Footnote 2. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s book is based on Nārada’s “A Manual of Abhidhamma” (http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/abhidhamma.pdf).

¹⁶⁸A three-volume transcript of lectures given by Sayādaw U Sīlānanda using Bhikkhu Bodhi’s book:

<http://www.abhidhamma.com/Abhid-Lectures-1.pdf>

<http://www.abhidhamma.com/Abhid-Lectures-2.pdf>

<http://www.abhidhamma.com/Abhid-Lectures-3.pdf>

YouTube videos of Abhidhamma Retreats (2013 & 2014) conducted by Bhikkhu Bodhi:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSL1N5caXZM&list=PLgx9_IQQEQyji1DrZK7UDUQp1K7tNIMnW

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFuVmcXTikw&list=PLgx9_IQQEQyin4DqmOKF4pJxByizw65xT

¹⁶⁹<http://archive.org/details/AbhidhammaInDailyLife>

¹⁷⁰http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_Burma

http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bud-myanmar.pdf

¹⁷¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_Sri_Lanka

http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bud-srilanka.pdf

¹⁷²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_Thailand

http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bud-thailand.pdf

¹⁷³“Study of the Abhidhamma amongst the Laity in Myanmar:” <http://atbu.org/node/10>

¹⁷⁴The Abhidhamma increased in popularity about 100 years ago when Ledi Sayādaw started promoting *vipassanā* and Abhidhamma for laypeople.

¹⁷⁵For example, “The Theravāda Abhidhamma” by Y. Karunadasa and “Abhidhammic Interpretations of Early Buddhist Teachings” by G. D. Sumanapala compare Theravāda Abhidhamma with Abhidharma from other schools.

¹⁷⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K._Sri_Dhammananda

¹⁷⁷I have been teaching Abhidhamma for 15 years at the Buddhist Mahā Vihāra in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: <http://buddhistmahavihara.org/>

In Thailand, the Abhidhamma is generally respected but often not studied in detail as it is in Myanmar.¹⁷⁸ This is particularly true within the Thai Forest Tradition.¹⁷⁹ Many western Theravāda monks are ordained in the Thai Forest Tradition and receive little training in the Abhidhamma. I consider this to be unfortunate, because western audiences are scientifically minded and, to quote a lay Burmese Abhidhamma teacher, “Abhidhamma is the Ultimate Science.”¹⁸⁰ I believe that, if properly presented, Abhidhamma would be extremely popular in the West because it is so scientific, and can be applied both to daily life and to meditation practice.

Linkage to *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta

Now let’s relate this historical material to the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta.¹⁸¹

There are two versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta in the Sutta Piṭaka; the version in the Appendix is from the *Majjhima Nikāya*, and there is another version in the *Dīgha Nikāya*.¹⁸² The two versions are virtually identical, except that the version in the *Dīgha Nikāya* adds a long explanation of the Four Noble Truths.

If the Commentaries are correct and all the Suttas were actually finalized at the First Council, we should ask ourselves, “Which version did the Buddha actually teach on that day?”

When Xuanzang returned to China, he took back two versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta from non-Theravāda Buddhist schools. The Theravāda version and the two Chinese versions are quite similar so it is clear they came from a common source that existed before the split of the Sangha.¹⁸³ One difference is that the Chinese versions do not include the aggregates or the Four Noble Truths. If the version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta that existed before the split of the Sangha did include the aggregates and the Four Noble Truths, it is unlikely they would have been deleted by the other schools because these are core teachings.

Therefore, I believe that the aggregates and Four Noble Truths were added to the Theravāda version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta sometime after the split of the Sangha. The aggregates and Four Noble Truths are core teachings of the Buddha, but I believe that their incorporation into the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta was a later addition.

I have picked one part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta to illustrate this point, but evidence of additions, editing, and rearrangement, can be found in many other Suttas as well. In my opinion, the Suttas were not finalized at the First Council; the Suttas evolved over time. My conclusion is that the Theravāda Suttas we have today contain the teachings of the Buddha, but they are **not** the literal, verbatim “word of the Buddha.” Personally, I am not disturbed by this because to me, it is the **teachings** that are important; the words merely point to the teachings.

¹⁷⁸The Thais do incorporate the Abhidhamma into a series of funeral chants called the “Abhidhamma *Pamsukūla*.” This includes 7 brief chants, each chant summarizing one of the books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. These chants are intended to remind the mourners of the doctrines of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

¹⁷⁹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thai_Forest_Tradition

¹⁸⁰The title of Dr. Mehm Tin Mon’s translation of the Abhidhammattha Sangaha with Commentary: http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/abhidhaultsci.pdf

¹⁸¹For an analysis of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta see http://santifm.org/santipada/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/A_History_of_Mindfulness_Bhikkhu_Sujato.pdf and <http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/direct-path.pdf>

¹⁸²DN 22: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.22.0.than.html>

¹⁸³For details, see “A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya,” Volume 1, pages 73–97.

Structure of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta from the Abhidhamma Piṭaka	Structure of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta from the Majjhima Nikāya
The Contemplation of the Body Reflection on the Repulsiveness of the Body The Contemplation of Feeling Types of Feeling The Contemplation of Consciousness Types of Consciousness The Contemplation of Mental Objects Five Hindrances Seven Factors of Enlightenment	The Contemplation of the Body Mindfulness of Breathing Postures of the Body Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension Reflection on the Repulsiveness of the Body Reflection on the Material Elements Nine Cemetery Contemplations The Contemplation of Feeling Types of Feeling The Contemplation of Consciousness Types of Consciousness The Contemplation of Mental Objects Five Hindrances Five Aggregates of Clinging Six Internal and Six External Sense Bases Seven Factors of Enlightenment Four Noble Truths

Figure 14: Comparing the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta from the Abhidhamma Piṭaka (*Vibhaṅga*) and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta from the Majjhima Nikāya suggests that the Abhidhamma version may be earlier and that additions may have been made (from other Suttas) to the Majjhima Nikāya version.

We do not even have to look at other Buddhist schools to find inconsistency in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta. One of the seven books of the Abhidhamma¹⁸⁴ includes an essay that analyzes *Satipaṭṭhāna* from both the Sutta perspective, and from an Abhidhamma perspective. The Abhidhamma text quotes the complete *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta. This version of the Sutta does not include the aggregates or Four Noble Truths under the Contemplation of Mental Objects.

There is an even bigger inconsistency when looking at the Contemplation of the Body. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta from the *Majjhima Nikāya* includes **Mindfulness** of breathing, postures of the body, mindfulness with clear comprehension, reflection on the repulsiveness of the body, reflection on the material elements and nine cemetery contemplations. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta from the Abhidhamma includes only reflection on the repulsiveness of the body.

My conclusion is that from the time that this portion of the Abhidhamma was finalized, and the time that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta from the *Majjhima Nikāya* was finalized, sections were added to include **Mindfulness** of breathing, postures of the body, **Mindfulness** with clear comprehension, reflection on the material elements and nine cemetery contemplations. In other words, I believe that the Abhidhamma and the Suttas were evolving in parallel.

¹⁸⁴“The Book of Analysis” (*Vibhaṅga*), pages 251–270.

Summary of Key Points

- Buddhist teachings come from four periods: the Suttas and Vinaya, the Abhidhamma, the Commentaries and from modern teachers. The teachings of each period build on teachings of the previous periods. To provide context, it is useful to know the period from which a teaching comes.
- According to the traditional account from the Commentaries, the Buddha first taught the Abhidhamma in one of the heavens and then passed a summary to Sāriputta, who compiled the Abhidhamma texts that we have today (except for one book which was authored about 250 years later).
- According to scholars, about 100 years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, when the Sangha split, the main Buddhist doctrines were already fixed, though the Suttas were still subject to editing. At this time, the organization of Suttas into *Nikāyas* was in progress and the Abhidhamma had not been formalized.
 - In my opinion, the Abhidhamma is not the “word of the Buddha,” but I also believe that the Suttas are not the literal, verbatim “word of the Buddha;” in my opinion, the Abhidhamma was evolving while the Suttas were being finalized and this can be seen by comparing the version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta found in the Abhidhamma with the version found in the *Nikāyas*.
- Factors that contributed to the development of the Abhidhamma may include:
 - The need for a systematized structure covering all Suttas to resolve questions and to instruct novice monks.
 - A reaction to the trend among contemporary “atomist” philosophers to identify “ir-reducible components” or Ultimate Realities.
 - The need to organize the content of the Suttas in a way that emphasized the unique doctrines of the Theravāda school.
- Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* and the Commentaries make extensive use of the Abhidhamma; they were written in the fifth century.
- The *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* is a summary of the Abhidhamma and Commentaries, intended for novice monks to memorize; it was written in the tenth century.
- Today, the Abhidhamma is highly esteemed in Myanmar, often treated as an academic subject in Sri Lanka and often not studied in detail in Thailand.

Finally, in my opinion, the most important thing to remember about this lesson is that there are four sources of teachings: Suttas, Abhidhamma, Commentaries and modern teachers. Each builds on the earlier sources. Each of these sources are useful and knowing the source of a specific teaching helps to provide context.

Questions & Answers

Where does “The Questions of King Milinda” fit into this timeline?

By what name shall I know you, Sir?

My companions call me Nāgasena. But the name and the person to whom the name refers do not really exist.

If Nāgasena and the person do not exist, to whom do people offer alms and who receives these offerings? Since you receive them, you really exist.

Your Majesty, did you come to this monastery on foot or by chariot?

I came by chariot.

*Well then, what is a chariot? Is the horse the chariot?
Is the wheel the chariot? Is the axle the chariot?
Is the carriage the chariot?*

I must answer “No” to all of your questions.

Is there a thing called chariot beside the horse, the wheel, the axle, the carriage, etc.?

There is no chariot beside the horse, the wheels, the axle and the carriage. Just a combination of these things has been named a chariot.

Very well, your Majesty, you should understand Nāgasena as you understood the chariot.

Figure 15: King Milinda meets Nāgasena; the “components of the chariot” are the five aggregates (see also <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn05/sn05.010.bodh.html>).

“The Questions of King Milinda” was written about 2100 years ago.¹⁸⁵ It is included in the Burmese *Tipiṭaka* but not in the Thai or Sri Lankan *Tipiṭaka*.

It is written in the form of a dialogue between King Milinda and a Buddhist Monk, Nāgasena. King Milinda was an actual historical figure, a Greek king who ruled the kingdom of Bactria.¹⁸⁶ In a typical exchange, King Milinda would ask a philosophical question¹⁸⁷ and Nāgasena would then give a reply using an analogy to explain his point clearly.

¹⁸⁵ See <http://www.aimwell.org/milinda.html> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milinda_Panha

¹⁸⁶ The Greek kingdom of Bactria (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bactria>), in modern-day Afghanistan, was established by Alexander the Great. King Milinda (Greek name: Menander I, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menander_I)) extended the kingdom into North India and converted to Buddhism. Milinda and his successors were supporters of Buddhism. The first representations of the Buddha as a human date from this period and even today, paintings and statues of the Buddha show a Greek influence (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Buddhist_art). Interestingly, the Suttas clearly state that the Buddha was bald, but even today all representations of the Buddha show him with a full head of hair! For the first 500 years, the Buddha was represented by an icon such as a stupa, footprint, bodhi tree, or wheel rather than as a human.

¹⁸⁷ The questions posed by King Milinda demonstrate a knowledge of the Suttas and show an influence of the Upaniṣads rather than an influence of Greek philosophy.

According to the traditional account, the Abhidhamma came before the Suttas and the Vinaya, so why isn't the Abhidhamma the first *Piṭaka*?

The *Tipiṭaka* is not organized chronologically. For example, the first Sutta delivered by the Buddha, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.harv.html>) is located near the end of the third *Nikāya*.

Are you suggesting that we prioritize teachings based on the historical period in which they originate?

Some modern teachers such as Mahāsi Sayādaw and Ajahn Chah add significant value to what had been taught previously in the Suttas, Abhidhamma, and Commentaries. However, a few modern teachers misrepresent the earlier teachings (either unintentionally due to ignorance or intentionally due to arrogance).

Not everything presented in Dhamma talks or in Dhamma books comes from the Suttas. Forming a habit of asking oneself, “what is the original source for this idea?” does not mean to be critical or analytical;¹⁸⁸ it simply means to be aware of the context of a teaching. Remember that one of the qualities of the Dhamma is *ehi-passiko*, which means “inviting inspection.”

You mentioned that different schools have different versions of Abhidhamma. How do we know that we are studying the right one?

In my opinion, we should not think in terms of “right” or “wrong,” but rather, how useful the Abhidhamma is in deepening our understanding of the Suttas and in supporting our practice. If history had worked out a bit differently, we might be studying one of the other versions of Abhidhamma today, but as it is, we have the Theravāda version as a living tradition with many resources available. In my opinion, we should focus on the practical aspects rather than on a scholarly perspective.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is becoming popular. Can the Abhidhamma be applied to MBSR?

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction¹⁸⁹ was developed 25 years ago by an American mental health professional.¹⁹⁰ The MBSR program¹⁹¹ is a pure mindfulness exercise, similar in some ways to basic *vipassanā* meditation practice, but without spiritual content (as the name suggests, MBSR is for stress reduction). Even though MBSR does not lead to spiritual development, according to WebMD, depression affects almost one in six people at some point in their lives,¹⁹² so the secular practice of MBSR can help our society.

In my opinion, for the mental health industry to take MBSR to the next level, they will need a framework and standardized, specialized terminology to structure their discussions and analyze the mind in more detail. I believe that many aspects of the Abhidhamma can be repurposed to a secular context to accelerate this progress.

¹⁸⁸ Trying to identify the specific Sutta or source text is being analytical and can be a distraction.

¹⁸⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness-based_stress_reduction

¹⁹⁰ Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Kabat-Zinn

¹⁹¹ Described in <http://www.amazon.com/Full-Catastrophe-Living-Wisdom-Illness/dp/0739358588>

¹⁹² <http://www.webmd.com/depression/ss/slideshow-depression-myths>

What is the relationship between the Visuddhimagga and the Commentaries?

Buddhaghosa wrote the Visuddhimagga and was the compiler/translator of the Commentaries.

According to legend,¹⁹³ Buddhaghosa was born near Bodh Gaya¹⁹⁴ to a Brahmin¹⁹⁵ family. In the Indian caste system, Brahmins were priests who memorized and recited the *Vedas*.¹⁹⁶ As a young man, Buddhaghosa established himself as a famous debater. A Buddhist monk, Revata, decided to convert Buddhaghosa to Buddhism. One day while Buddhaghosa was reciting the *Vedas*, Revata called out, “Who is this man, braying like a donkey?” Buddhaghosa replied, “So, you think that you understand the language of a donkey?” and the debate started! Revata proved that he understood the *Vedas* and pointed out areas where they were wrong. Defeated, Buddhaghosa asked, “So what is your doctrine?” Revata then quoted from the Abhidhamma and Buddhaghosa could not respond. He was deeply impressed by the Abhidhamma. He was converted to Buddhism and that is when he got the name Buddhaghosa. *Ghosa* is Pāḷi for “voice” so the name Buddhaghosa literally means “voice of the Buddha.”

Revata told Buddhaghosa to go to the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka to compile the commentaries that had been collected in Sinhalese and translate them into Pāḷi. Buddhaghosa went to the Mahāvihāra and said to the temple elders, “Please open up your library to me.” The elders replied, “To show that you are worthy, write an essay on the topic of virtue, concentration, and understanding.” So Buddhaghosa composed the Visuddhimagga, an 800-page treatise detailing the Theravāda doctrine that draws heavily on the Abhidhamma.

After Buddhaghosa wrote the Visuddhimagga, the gods made the book disappear, so he had to write it down again. Again the gods made this version disappear, so he wrote the book a third time. Then the gods allowed the previous two versions to be visible and the elders were amazed that all three versions were absolutely identical. A later legend says that Buddhaghosa wrote the Visuddhimagga out three times in one night.

The elders were impressed by the Visuddhimagga and allowed Buddhaghosa access to the library. He compiled commentaries on most of the Vinaya, Suttas, and Abhidhamma. For the commentaries, Buddhaghosa saw himself as a compiler/translator of much older materials, some of which may have originated at the time of the Buddha 1000 years earlier.

Whereas the Visuddhimagga focuses on explaining Theravāda doctrine, the Commentaries focus on explaining the Vinaya, Suttas, and Abhidhamma. The Commentaries include a lot of stories such as the background leading up to a Sutta being delivered. They also discuss grammatical points and word derivations to make sure that the Vinaya, Suttas, and Abhidhamma are clearly understood. When it comes to doctrinal points, the Commentaries often reference the Visuddhimagga; this shows that the Visuddhimagga was written before the Commentaries.

Though Buddhaghosa prepared Commentaries for most of the *Tipiṭaka*, the Commentaries for some portions of the *Tipiṭaka* were compiled later by other authors. In addition, sub-commentaries were written for many of the Commentaries to provide even more detailed explanations.

¹⁹³Chapter XXXVII of the Cūḷavamsa, written 800 years after Buddhaghosa died.

¹⁹⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodh_Gaya

¹⁹⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahmin>

¹⁹⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedas>

What are the main differences between the Abhidhammattha Sangaha and the original seven Abhidhamma texts?

The Abhidhammattha Sangaha is a concise summary written almost 1500 years after the original seven Abhidhamma texts. The main topics of the Abhidhammattha Sangaha are:

- **Mind Moments:** Both the Abhidhammattha Sangaha and the original text (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*) include 89 Mind Moments, though the sequence of presentation is slightly different.
- **Mental Factors:** The Abhidhammattha Sangaha has a fixed list of 52 Mental Factors. The original text (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*) has open-ended lists that include many overlapping terms but do not mention Mental Factors such as **Attention, Determination, Motivation, Compassion, Sympathetic joy** and the three abstinences.
- **Rūpa:** The Abhidhammattha Sangaha has a fixed list of 28 *rūpa* and discusses groups of *rūpa* (*kalāpa*). The original text (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*) has a fixed list of 27 *rūpa* (not including **Heart-base**) and does not discuss groups of *rūpa*.
- **Realms of Existence:** Both the Abhidhammattha Sangaha and the original texts have the same list of realms of existence. The Abhidhammattha Sangaha gives a detailed analysis of Mind Moments leading to rebirth in specific realms. The original text (*Vibhaṅga*) just mentions the lifespan in each realm.
- **Processes:** The Abhidhammattha Sangaha has a detailed description of sense-door processes, mind-door processes, jhāna processes and rebirth processes. The original text (*Paṭṭhāna*) hints at processes and the Commentaries have a very general description of only the sense-door process.
- **Conditions:** The Abhidhammattha Sangaha has a very concise summary of the 24 conditions and introduces sub-categories under some conditions (for example, natural decisive support is introduced as a sub-category under decisive support condition). The original text (*Paṭṭhāna*) has a very detailed description of the 24 conditions.
- **Meditation Subjects:** The Abhidhammattha Sangaha describes the meditation subjects for both *samatha* and *vipassanā*. The original texts do not touch on this subject; it is discussed in some detail in the Visuddhimagga.