

The *Abhidhamma*: Traditional Buddhist Psychology

The term “*Abhidhamma*” refers both to the development of meditation theory and practice after the Buddha’s death and to the literature stemming from this development. It evolved from practitioner’s attempts at systematizing the Buddha’s teachings into a standard format that can be applied universally and by refining the subtler points of the *Dhamma* (the Buddha’s teaching) into a comprehensive system of understanding human experience. The *Abhidhamma* seeks to systematize experience by breaking it down into its constituent physical and mental events. It does this by categorizing all possible events and detailing the many ways those events can interact and influence each other. As an evolution of the teachings found in the suttas, the *Abhidhamma* provides a detailed exploration of the 5 aggregate system of describing the body and mind (form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness) and the conditional processes of the 12 links of dependent origination (ignorance, formations, consciousness, mentality/physicality, the 6 senses bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging/death). Although the *Abhidhamma* and its vast commentarial literature portray a complex, if not exhaustive view of the body and mind, it is best used as a map for understanding meditative experience. However, understanding the *Abhidhamma* is not necessary for finding peace, relieving suffering or realizing awakening.

Additional resources:

Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, A: The Abhidhamma Sangaha of Acariya Anuruddha, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993). The Introduction is available online at: www.accesstoinsight.org

Dhamma and Abhidhamma: The nature and origins of Buddhist scholasticism and the dharma theory. Piya Tan, essay can be downloaded at www.dharmafarer.org.

The Abhidhamma 4 recorded talks by Bhikkhu Bodhi on Dharma Seed: www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/33

The Visuddhimagga — The Path of Purification: The Classic Manual of Buddhist Doctrine and Meditation. Chaps. 14-17. Online edition at Access to Insight, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, Trans.: www.accesstoinsight.org

The Real Practice of Mindfulness, article by Andrew Olendzki on mindfulness as described by the *Abhidhamma* system. Online at www.thebuddhadharma.com.

Outline of Abhidhamma

The Abhidhamma is a body of literature that emerged shortly after the lifetime of the Buddha, comprising the third of the “three baskets” (*Tipitaka*) of the early Buddhist canon. The word also refers broadly to a body of thought whose roots are in the psychological teachings and meditation practices of the *suttas* (the discourses) and whose branches reach far into the mature philosophical discussions of the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions.

The Abhidhamma is essentially an attempt to systematize the Buddha’s teachings about the dynamics of moment-to-moment experience as it unfolds in the stream of consciousness. The following pages offer a brief outline of some of the main components of the system. More detail of the Pali version presented here can be found in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s excellent *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (BPS/Pariyatti).

In summary, the Abhidhamma describes how 28 physical phenomena co-arise with 52 mental factors, manifesting as 89 types of consciousness, which unfold in series of 17 mind moments, governed by 24 types of causal relation. One of its methods is to take a single thought-moment of experience, accessible by means of (rather advanced capabilities of) insight meditation, and then identify the characteristics of that moment of consciousness. Numerous things might be discerned about it:

1) Consciousness (*citta*). Each mind moment will manifest as one of the 89 forms of consciousness enumerated on this list. It will be consciousness taking place on a certain sphere or level of existence, from the mundane sense-oriented sphere, through the higher form and formless spheres accessible by the purification practices of absorption (*jhāna*), all the way to the non-ordinary states of consciousness associated with the attainment of awakening. In addition, this moment of consciousness will be known to be either wholesome, unwholesome or neutral in terms of its karmic effect on subsequent moments. Finally, each moment will be classified either as a karma-producing mind moment, the result of previous karma-producing moments, or as a purely functional moment that is neither. The moment of consciousness under review will be seen to be only one of the 89 possibilities; the next moment is sure to be different.

2) Mental factors (*cetasika*). There are a total of 52 sub-functions of the mind, called mental factors, which cooperate in various configurations to assist consciousness in the knowing of an object. Among these, 7 arise in all mind moments and are called universals, while 6 others may or may not be present and are thus called occasionals. These 13 mental factors are ethically variable because they can arise in either wholesome or unwholesome states of mind. The next 14 factors are always unwholesome, and their presence renders all moments of consciousness containing them unwholesome. These too can arise in various internal combinations, but the first 4 of them are always present in every unwholesome mind moment. The final 25 mental factors are always wholesome (called beautiful), and any mind moment containing them will become wholesome by their presence. These too can arise in various combinations involving universal and occasional wholesome factors. An important principle of the system is that wholesome and unwholesome factors can never arise together in the same mind moment.

3) Material form (*rūpa*). All the 28 material phenomena are based on the 4 great elements, earth, water, air, and fire (i.e., solid, liquid, gas, plasma), and these four also all arise together in different combinations or saturations. Material phenomena include both the organs and the objects of experience, as well as a number of supporting life functions. A category of non-concrete matter includes various characteristics of material phenomena not construed as things in their own right. With material factors, as with mental factors, there are various rules governing the way they can arise in combination.

4) The mental process (*citta-vīthi*). The Abhidhamma, influenced primarily by later tradition, identifies 17 different functions of mind that unfold one after another over time in the stream of consciousness. From a baseline of unconscious mental activity, the mind responds to a stimulus presenting at a sense door by gradually taking notice and turning attention toward the object, cognizing the object in a moment of seeing, hearing, etc., and then taking a few moments to receive, investigate and determine what is happening. There are then 7 moments of intentional response in which wholesome or unwholesome karma is produced, followed in some cases by a couple of moments of recognition. If the mental process is taking place at the mind door, rather than at a sense door, it is somewhat quicker and cuts out a few steps. After this series, the mind lapses again into an unconscious state until the next stimulation. The details of this process are described (in the later texts) not only for normal mental processes, but also for *jhāna* states, the process of rebirth and liberation.

5) Causal relations (*paccaya*). Not shown on these pages is the list of 24 causal relations governing the relationship between all possible combinations of material phenomena, mental factors, and consciousness. Factors within a single group (e.g., mental, material), within a single mind moment, between different mind moments, between individual and group factors—all these are spelled out exhaustively (and yes, exhaustingly) in the culminating text of the Abhidhamma section of the canon, the *Paṭṭhāna*.

This may all seem rather busy to those of us familiar with a more simple and open approach to meditation, but this science of the mind offers a rigorous description of the landscape revealed by insight meditation, taken to its furthest stages of development. The Buddha seems to best express the crux of the Abhidhamma—the relationship between insight, knowledge, impermanence, dependent origination, awakening, and liberation—when he said of his chief disciple (and probable guiding architect of the Abhidhamma):

“Sāriputta has deep...penetrative wisdom. For half a month Sāriputta had insight into states one by one as they occurred:...known to him those states arose, known they were present, known they disappeared. He understood thus: ‘So indeed, these states, not having been, come into being; having been, they vanish.’ Regarding those states, he abided unattracted, unrepelled, independent, unattached, free, unfettered, with a mind rid of barriers.” *Anupada Sutta* (M 111)

—A. Olendzki

SENSE SPHERE CONSCIOUSNESS**PRODUCES UNWHOLESOME KARMA**

1. Greed-rooted; with mental pleasure; with wrong view; unprompted
2. Greed-rooted; with mental pleasure; with wrong view; prompted
3. Greed-rooted; with mental pleasure; without wrong view; unprompted
4. Greed-rooted; with mental pleasure; without wrong view; prompted
5. Greed-rooted; with equanimity; with wrong view; unprompted
6. Greed-rooted; with equanimity; with wrong view; prompted
7. Greed-rooted; with equanimity; without wrong view; unprompted
8. Greed-rooted; with equanimity; without wrong view; prompted
9. Hatred-rooted; with mental displeasure; with aversion; unprompted
10. Hatred-rooted; with mental displeasure; with aversion; prompted
11. Delusion-rooted; with equanimity; with doubt;
12. Delusion-rooted; with equanimity; with restlessness;

RESULT OF PAST UNWHOLESOME KARMA

13. Unwholesome resultant; with equanimity; eye-consciousness
14. Unwholesome resultant; with equanimity; ear-consciousness
15. Unwholesome resultant; with equanimity; nose-consciousness
16. Unwholesome resultant; with equanimity; tongue-consciousness
17. Unwholesome resultant; with physical pain; body-consciousness
18. Unwholesome resultant; with equanimity; receiving
19. Unwholesome resultant; with equanimity; investigating

PRODUCES WHOLESOME KARMA

31. Beautiful rooted; with mental pleasure; with knowledge; unprompted
32. Beautiful rooted; with mental pleasure; with knowledge; prompted
33. Beautiful rooted; w/ mental pleasure; w/out knowldege; unprompted
34. Beautiful rooted; with mental pleasure; without knowldege; prompted
35. Beautiful rooted; with equanimity; with knowledge; unprompted
36. Beautiful rooted; with equanimity; with knowledge; prompted
37. Beautiful rooted; with equanimity; without knowldege; unprompted
38. Beautiful rooted; with equanimity; without knowldege; prompted

RESULT OF PAST WHOLESOME KARMA

20. Wholesome resultant; with equanimity; eye-consciousness
21. Wholesome resultant; with equanimity; ear-consciousness
22. Wholesome resultant; with equanimity; nose-consciousness
23. Wholesome resultant; with equanimity; tongue-consciousness
24. Wholesome resultant; with physical pleasure; body-consciousness
25. Wholesome resultant; with equanimity; receiving
26. Wholesome resultant; with mental pleasure; investigating
27. Wholesome resultant; with equanimity; investigating
39. Beautiful resultant; with mental pleasure; with knowledge; unprompted
40. Beautiful resultant; with mental pleasure; with knowledge; prompted
41. Beautiful resultant; w/ mental pleasure; w/out knowldege; unprompted
42. Beautiful resultant; with mental pleasure; without knowldege; prompted
43. Beautiful resultant; with equanimity; with knowledge; unprompted
44. Beautiful resultant; with equanimity; with knowledge; prompted
45. Beautiful resultant; with equanimity; without knowldege; unprompted
46. Beautiful resultant; with equanimity; without knowldege; prompted

FUNCTIONAL—ALL

28. Functional; with equanimity; five-door adverting
29. Functional; with equanimity; mind-door adverting
30. Functional; with mental pleasure; smile-producing

CONSCIOUSNESS (CITTA)**FUNCTIONAL—ARAHANTS ONLY**

47. Functional; with mental pleasure; with knowledge; unprompted
48. Functional; with mental pleasure; with knowledge; prompted
49. Functional; with mental pleasure; without knowldege; unprompted
50. Functional; with mental pleasure; without knowldege; prompted
51. Functional; with equanimity; with knowledge; unprompted
52. Functional; with equanimity; with knowledge; prompted
53. Functional; with equanimity; without knowldege; unprompted
54. Functional; with equanimity; without knowldege; prompted

FORM SPHERE CONSCIOUSNESS**PRODUCES WHOLESOME KARMA**

55. 1st jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest; sustained app.; initial app.
56. 2nd jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest; sustained application
57. 3rd jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest;
58. 4th jhana; one-pointed; happiness;
59. 5th jhana; one-pointed; equanimity;

RESULT OF PAST KARMA

55. 1st jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest; sustained app.; initial app.
56. 2nd jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest; sustained application
57. 3rd jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest;
58. 4th jhana; one-pointed; happiness;
59. 5th jhana; one-pointed; equanimity;

FUNCTIONAL—ARAHANTS ONLY

55. 1st jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest; sustained app.; initial app.
56. 2nd jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest; sustained application
57. 3rd jhana; one-pointed; happiness; zest;
58. 4th jhana; one-pointed; happiness;
59. 5th jhana; one-pointed; equanimity;

FORMLESS SPHERE CONSCIOUSNESS**PRODUCES KARMA**

70. Sphere of infinite space
71. Sphere of infinite c'ness
72. Sphere of nothingness
73. Sphere of neither perception
nor non-perception

RESULT OF KARMA

74. Sphere of infinite space
75. Sphere of infinite c'ness
76. Sphere of nothingness
77. Sphere of neither perception
nor non-perception

FUNCTIONAL—ARAHANTS

78. Sphere of infinite space
79. Sphere of infinite consciousness
80. Sphere of nothingness
81. Sphere of neither perception
nor non-perception

SUPRAMUNDANE CONSCIOUSNESS**PATH**

82. Stream-entry
83. Once-returning
84. Non-returning
85. Arahantship

FRUIT

86. Stream-entry
87. Once-returning
88. Non-returning
89. Arahantship

MENTAL FACTORS (CETASIKA)

ETHICALLY VARIABLE FACTORS

UNIVERSALS

1. Contact *phassa*
2. Feeling *vedanā*
3. Perception *saññā*
4. Volition *cetanā*
5. One-pointedness *ekaggatā*
6. Life faculty *jīvitindriya*
7. Attention *manasikāra*

OCCASIONALS

8. Initial application *vitakka*
9. Sustained application *vicāra*
10. Decision *adhimokkha*
11. Energy *virīya*
12. Zest *pīti*
13. Desire *chanda*

UNWHOLESOME FACTORS

UNIVERSALS

14. Delusion *moha*
15. Shamelessness *ahirika*
16. Fearlessness of wrong *anottappa*
17. Restlessness *uddhacca*

OCCASIONALS

18. Greed *lobha*
19. Wrong view *diṭṭhi*
20. Conceit *māna*
21. Hatred *dosa*
22. Envy *issā*
23. Avarice *macchariya*
24. Worry *kukkucca*
25. Sloth *thīna*
26. Torpor *middha*
27. Doubt *vicikicchā*

BEAUTIFUL FACTORS

UNIVERSALS

28. Faith *saddhā*
29. Mindfulness *sati*
30. Shame *hiri*
31. Fear of wrong *ottappa*
32. Non-greed *alobha*
33. Non-hatred *adosa*
34. Neutrality of mind *tatramajjhataṭṭā*
- 35-6. Tranquillity *passaddhi*
- 37-8. Lightness *lahutā*
- 39-40. Malleability *mudutā*
- 41-2. Wieldiness *kammaññatā*
- 43-4. Proficiency *pāguññatā*
- 45-6. Rectitude *ujjukatā*

OCCASIONALS

47. Right speech *sammā-vācā*
48. Right action *sammā-kammanta*
49. Right livelihood *sammā-ājīva*
50. Compassion *karuṇā*
51. Appreciative joy *muditā*
52. Wisdom faculty *paññā*

MATERIAL PHENOMENA (RŪPA)

CONCRETELY PRODUCED MATTER

GREAT ESSENTIALS

1. Earth element *paṭhavi-dhātu*
2. Water element *āpo-dhātu*
3. Fire element *tejo-dhātu*
4. Air element *vāyo-dhātu*

SENSITIVE PHENOMENA

5. Eye-sensitivity *cakkhu*
6. Ear-sensitivity *sota*
7. Nose-sensitivity *ghāna*
8. Tongue-sensitivity *jivhā*
9. Body-sensitivity *kāyo*

OBJECTIVE PHENOMENA

10. Visible form *rūpa*
11. Sound *saddo*
12. Smell *gandho*
13. Taste *raso*
- (x). Tangible (=earth/fire/air) *poṭṭhabba*

OTHER MATERIAL PHENOMENA

14. Femininity *itthatta*
15. Masculinity *purisatta*
16. Heart-base *hadaya-vatthu*
17. Life faculty *jīvit-indriya*
18. Nutriment *kabaḷikār-āhāra*

NON-CONCRETE MATTER

19. Space element *ākāsa-dhātu*
20. Bodily intimation *kāya-viññatti*
21. Verbal intimation *vacī-viññatti*
22. Lightness *lahutā*
23. Malleability *mudutā*
24. Wieldiness *kammaññatā*
25. Production *upacayo*
26. Continuity *santati*
27. Decay *jaratā*
28. Impermanence *aniccatā*

THE MENTAL PROCESSES (CITTA-VĪTHI)

—Andrew Olendzki

