

## Tables and Charts in the Buddha's Discourses: Analyzing the Structure of *Suttas*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The mentioning of the repetitive style of *Suttas* seems to be a *sine qua non* whether in introductions to their translations or in overviews of Pāli literature. Particularly, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi in the introduction to his translation of *Majjhima-nikāya* states that repetitions might be divided in three main types:

1. narrative repetitions, originating from the oral style of *Suttas*;
2. stock formulas, such as the formulas of the four *jhānas* and the three true knowledges;
3. identical methods of exposition applied to a series of doctrinal terms belonging to a fixed set.<sup>2</sup>

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi gives two examples of the third type, namely “the formula for insight that is attached to each of the exercises in the *Satipphāna-sutta* (MN 10.5) and the exposition on three characteristics applied to each of five aggregates (MN 22.26)”. Later he also claims that this type of repetition is likely to be a part of Buddha's own pedagogical method.

The third type of repetition becomes especially interesting given that a series of doctrinal terms may be not only a subject of exposition, but also a method of exposition itself. Sometimes parts of *Suttas* in which this type of repetition is used involve even three or more sets of Dhammas and become even more complex with the addition of specific data for each of the combinations of elements belonging to the sets.

In our opinion, information in these expositions perfectly suits the modern methods of data visualization, such as tables and diagrams. These methods, in their turn, may contribute into a better understanding of some types of *Sutta* texts. In the present article we will try to analyze their structure and represent them visually as tables.

But prior to that we will try to give a brief overview of the previous attempts to visualize *Sutta* material as well as some other notable modern visualizations of the Buddhist doctrines. This overview, however, definitely does not claim to be an exhaustive coverage of the material, but rather merely brings attention to some interesting, - in our point of view, - examples of visual representation in Buddhism.

### **Visual Representation of Information in Modern Buddhism and Buddhist Studies**

Most probably the first modern attempts to present the material of the Pāli Canon in a more visual form than just a textual one were tables representing various sets of *Abhidhamma* material. In particular, tables are present in “*Guide through Abhidhamma-piṭaka*” by Nyanatiloka Mahathera,<sup>1</sup> - although most probably this was not the first usage of the table format for rendering *Abhidhamma* doctrine. The dry style of *Abhidhamma* texts could be by itself conducive to creating systematic schemas,<sup>2</sup> while the *Sutta* style masks its structures in the narrative. Quite original research with the use of tables was done by Toporov and Elizarenkova, who used linguistic approaches to analyzing *Abhidhamma* material.<sup>3</sup>

One of the modern examples of an extensive use of tables for expressing *Abhidhamma* models is *The Workings of Kamma* by Pa Auk Tawya Sayadaw.<sup>4</sup>

Visualizations for *Sutta* material probably originated later and are not met as often as visual representation of the *Abhidhamma*, nevertheless there are some notable examples of this approach.

Bhikkhu Bodhi in his anthology *In the Buddha's Words*<sup>5</sup> designs a table based on three *Suttas* of the *Samyutta-nikāya*. Here for each of the 5 aggregates he names its content, condition and simile. Another table covering internal and external sense bases as well as consciousness is found several pages later.<sup>6</sup> Ven. Bodhi has also used table format in hand-out materials for his *Majjhima-nikāya* course.<sup>7</sup> Tables are present in his introductions to his translations of *Samyutta-nikāya suttas* as well<sup>8</sup>