

The Development of the *Abhidhamma* Literature

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I. The Origin of *Abhidhamma*

Abhidhamma is the Higher Teaching of the Buddha. It presents the quintessence of his profound doctrine. The *Dhamma*, embodied in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, is the conventional teaching, and the *Abhidhamma* is the ultimate teaching. However, traditional views regarding the origin and authenticity appear to have been questioned both in the Buddhist tradition itself and also in recent critical studies. Some scholars have said that the *Abhidhamma* is not the exact words of the Buddha himself. So far, the original meaning of the term *Abhidhamma* is still a matter of much dispute. Hence, in this paper I wish to examine the origin and development of the term “*Abhidhamma*” in the canonical texts. The word *Abhidhamma* is not found either in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* or *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, but it appears once or twice in the *Dīgha-nikāya* and *Majjhima-nikāya*.¹ Although the term *Abhidhamma* is not found in the *Pāli Nikāyas* in the sense of a separate literary collection Ācariya Buddhaghosa attempts in his *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* commentary to the *Dīgha-nikāya* to show that the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* existed from the time of the first council.² However, the appearance of the term *Abhidhamma* in the *Mahavagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* connected with instructions relating to monastic life does not contain the special meaning given to it in later works. Here, the words *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya*³ are not referring to a deeper philosophical analysis, but to “what pertains to the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*,” the teaching of which distinction is observed to be a primary requisite in any teacher monk. There isn’t any reference here to a profound study or expression of a philosophical theory.⁴ Again, we should pay attention to the word *Abhidhamma* and also the word *Abhivinaya* in the *Pāli Nikāyas* and *Āgamas* in Chinese texts to try to understand clearly the conception of *Abhidhamma*. They are as follows:

Abhidhamma and *Abhivinaya* in *Gulissāni-sutta*:⁵

Sir, concentration on *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya* should be made by a monk who is living in the forest. There are those who will question a monk who is living in the forest concerning *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya*. If a monk who is living in the forest, on being asked a question on *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya*, cannot explain, there will be those who speak about him and say: 'What is the good of this venerable one who is living alone in the forest doing as he pleases, but who, on being asked a question on *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya*, cannot explain?' Hence, concentration on *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya* should be made by a monk who is living in the forest.

A Chinese version of the above *Sutta* in the *Madhyamāgama-sūtra*, reads as follows:⁸

Monks, when a monk living in a forest joins a Buddhist community, he must study to discuss *Abhivinaya* and *Abhidhamma*. Why? Because, when you are joining the Buddhist community, somebody will come up to discuss of *Abhivinaya* and *Abhidhamma* with him. Monks, if he cannot discuss of them in the Buddhist community, he will be called to account by them like this: 'In spite of the fact that he cannot discuss of *Abhivinaya* and *Abhidhamma*, why does he join the Buddhist community?' It is clear that he will be called to account, if he cannot discuss of *Abhivinaya* and *Abhidhamma*. Therefore, monks, when a monk living in a forest joins the Buddhist community, he must study to be able to discuss of these doctrines.

The above mentioned term of *Abhidhamma* is to be distinguished from *Dhamma* and the term *Abhivinaya* is likewise to be distinguished from *Vinaya*. Both the latter are general terms for teachings and disciplines taught by the Buddha.

Abhidhamma and *Abhivinaya* in a dialogue between the Buddha and the disciple, Subhūti⁷ is as follows:

Again, Subhūti, a monk delights in *Dhamma*, the utterance of it is dear to him, and he delights exceedingly in *Abhidhamma* and *Abhivinaya*. Insofar as a monk is such, Subhūti, this also is the harvest of belief in a believer.

Abhidhamma and *Abhivinaya* is further elaborated in the *Mahāgosinga-sutta*.⁸

In this connection, Venerable Sāriputta, two monks are talking on *Abhidhamma*; they question one another; in answering one another's question they respond and do not fail; and their talk on *Dhamma* goes forward. By a monk of such a type, Venerable Sāriputta, would the *Gosīṅga* sal-wood be illuminated?"

According to the above, the *Mahāgosinga-sutta* mentions that an elder had "a talk pertaining to the doctrine" (*Abhidhammakathā*).⁹ There is nothing in these *Suttas* to indicate that the word is being used in the specific meaning of the system of philosophy collected in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*; whereas its use in the *Gulissāni-sutta* is once more linked with that "pertaining to the discipline" (*abhivinaya*).¹⁰

In addition, according to *Atthasālinī*, it is said that the Buddha first preached the *Abhidhamma* to the Tāvātimsa gods, while living among them on the Paṇḍukambala stone at the foot of the Paricchattaka tree in the Tāvātisa heaven during his visit to his mother who was there. Subsequently, he preached it to Sāriputta who used to meet the Buddha when he came down to Manasasarovara for his alms food. Then Sāriputta handed it down to Bhaddaji and by the succession of disciples it reached Revata and others, and it took its final form at the third council held during the reign of King Asoka.¹¹ Regarding this tradition of statements, Oskar von Hinüber, however, has doubts about the origin and development of *Abhidhamma* literature, particularly about the belief that it was preached by the Buddha. He remarks that "If the later *Abhidhamma* was to be considered as the word of Buddha, it was imperative to find some place where it could have been spoken, as is usual in the *Suttantas* and *Vinaya* texts alike. Of course, there was and could not possibly be any tradition on place names, and consequently the displacement into heaven was a wise move, with no local Buddhist community being able to object, because it was not mentioned in the occasion (*nidāna*)."¹² Such a statement is not entirely acceptable without any real examination and Nevertheless, the statement made by E. Lamotte, where he says that, in *Abhidharma*, they do not mean to designate any scriptural code, but simply the "Special *Dharma*", i.e. the doctrine pure and simple, without the intervention of literary developments or presentation of individuals.¹³ The

Atthasālinī says: "The textual order of the *Abhidhamma* originated with Sāriputta; the numerical series in the Great Book (*Paṭṭhāna*) was also determined by him. In his way the elder, without spoiling the unique doctrine, laid down the numerical series in order to make it easy to learn, remember, study and teach the *Dhamma*."¹⁴

The *Atthasālinī* relates that in the fourth week after Buddha's enlightenment, while still dwelling in the vicinity of the *Bodhi* tree, he sat in a jewel house in the northwest direction. The jewel house does not mean a house made of the seven jewels but his contemplation of the seven books. And while he contemplated the contents of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, his body did not emit rays; and similarly with the contemplation of the next five books. But when, coming to the Great Book (*Paṭṭhāna*), he began to contemplate the twenty-four universal conditional relations of root, object, and so on, his omniscience certainly found its opportunity therein. For as the great fish *Timiratipīṅgala* finds room only in the great ocean 84,000 *yojanas* in depth, so his omniscience truly finds room only in the Great Book. Rays of six colours - indigo, golden, red, white, tawny, and dazzling - issued from the Teacher's body as he was contemplating the subtle and abstruse *Dhamma* by his omniscience which had found such opportunity.¹⁵ Unlike the Theravāda tradition, the Sarvāstivāda School, however, has presented the development of the seven treatises of the *Abhidharma* canon and have divided them into several periods. Pu Kuang in his commentary of the *Abhidharmakośa* assigns the seven books of the *Abhidharma* to four periods:

1. The first period: the *Saṅgītiparyāyapādaśāstra*, the *Dharma-skandhapādaśāstra* and the *Prajñaptipādaśāstra* were composed during the time of the Buddha.
2. The second period: the *Vijñānakāyapādaśāstra* was written during the hundred years after the demise of the Buddha.
3. The third period: the *Prakaraṇapādaśāstra* and *Dhātukāya-pādaśāstra* were written at the beginning of the fourth century after the demise of the Buddha.
4. The fourth period: the *Jñānaprasthānaśāstra* was composed at the end of the fourth century after the demise of the Buddha.¹⁶

Nevertheless, K. Mizuno has divided them into three periods as early, middle and late.¹⁷ There is a vast difference between K. Mizuno's account and what is revealed in the Chinese *Tripitaka*. I do not know from where he has derived his information or

how much value could be attributed to it or whether it is acceptable. There isn't any other definition in the Chinese *Tripitaka*, except the commentary of the *Abhidharmakośa*, so it is the only information we can examine. The comparative table is as follows:

| Periods | Chinese <i>Tripitaka</i> | K. Mizuno |
|---------|--|---|
| First | <i>Samgītiparyāyapādaśāstra</i> <i>Dharmaskandhapādaśāstra</i> <i>Prāñāptipādaśāstra</i> (Composed during the time of the Buddha) | <i>Samgītiparyāyapādaśāstra</i> <i>Dharmaskandhapādaśāstra</i> <i>Prāñāptipādaśāstra</i> (Early) |
| Second | <i>Vijñānakāyapādaśāstra</i> (Composed during the 100 years after the demise of the Buddha) | <i>Vijñānakāyapādaśāstra</i> <i>Dhātukāyapādaśāstra</i> (Middle) |
| Third | <i>Puṇanāpādaśāstra</i> <i>Dhātukāyapādaśāstra</i> (Composed at the beginning of the fourth century after the demise of the Buddha) | <i>Puṇanāpādaśāstra</i> <i>Jñānaprasthāna</i> (Late) |
| Fourth | <i>Jñānaprasthāna</i> (Composed at the end of the fourth century after the demise of the Buddha) | |

At the heart of the *Abhidhamma* philosophy is the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, one of the divisions of the Pāli Canon recognized by *Theravāda* Buddhism as the authoritative recension of the Buddha's teachings. The teachings are profound, deep and subtle in nature. It is called a basket of higher expositions or "a basket of transcendental doctrine." *Abhidhamma* is the higher teaching of the Buddha, sometimes referred to as the ultimate teaching. It is called the higher teaching of the Buddha in the *Atthasālinī*, because it excels and is distinguished by several qualities from the other *Dhamma*. For instance, in the *Suttanta*, the five aggregates are classified partially and not fully. In *Abhidhamma* they are classified fully by the methods of *Suttanta* - classification, *Abhidhamma*- classification and catechism. Hence, in the *Suttanta* knowledge is partially classified, not fully. But, in *Abhidhamma* there is a detailed classification of knowledge.¹⁸ Thus it is to be understood that *Abhidhamma* exceeds and is distinguished from the *Dhamma*.¹⁹ Buddhaghosa, however, identified the significance between the *Sutta Piṭaka* and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. He further remarks

that the *Sutta Piṭaka* was taught primarily concerning popular ethics by the Buddha, who was skilled in popular ethics, and is called teachings of general philosophical theory; and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, was taught concerning general things in their ultimate sense by the Buddha, who was skilled in ultimate truths and, is called the teaching in ultimate truths.²⁰

Finally, from the statements given above, it is quite clear that according to the *Atthasālinī*, Śāriputra was conveying the *Abhidhamma* to the disciples. All seven *Abhidhamma* canonical texts were presented by the Buddha himself.²¹ The Buddha first preached it to the gods in the Tāvātimsa heaven; it was studied and transmitted through Śāriputra.²² In addition, the *Sarvāstivāda* tradition, however, accepts that the *Abhidharma* canonical works were contributed by the disciples. But both schools have unanimously maintained that the Buddha is the actual author; the contributors simply accumulated and rearranged his scattered teachings.²³

II. The Origin of Mātikā

Around the *Nikāya* period we find a rather interesting term being used in the literature. It is the term called *mātikā* (S. *māṭṛkā*). What does *mātikā* mean exactly? The *mātikās* are the 'list', 'tabulated summary', 'a heading' or 'table of contents'²⁴ of those ideas which are significant in the canonical teaching and the monastic code of rules. Perhaps, the idea of *mātikās* came into existence when Buddhists tried to facilitate transmission of the simple collection of discourses of the Buddha to the future and began to arrange the main points of his teaching in a systematic form to make it easier to memorize.²⁵ These *mātikās* were subsequently worked into the texts of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*²⁶. However, the term *māṭṛkā* is not distinctly mentioned in the *Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma* texts, but such lists of topics played a principal role in the development of the Pāli *Abhidhamma* texts.²⁷

There are several passages in Buddhist scriptures that show that the term *mātikā* was similarly synonymous with the word *Abhidhamma*. Here, I would like to present some parallel passages regarding the term *mātikā* in the Theravāda tradition as well as Chinese texts. They are as follows:

In the Pāli *Nikāyas* and *Vinaya* literature the compound *mātikādhara* occurs as the

third term in the sequence “versed in the truths (*dhammadhara*), versed in the regulations of the order (*vinayadhara*) and versed in the summaries of the doctrines and the law (*mātikādhara*).” This forms part of a regular description of the fulfilled monk, “...he is one who has heard much (*bahussuto*), one who has proficiency in what has been handed down (*āgatāgamo*), versed in the *Dhamma*, versed in the *Vinaya*, and versed in the *mātikā*.²⁸

Accordingly, *Anguttara-nikāya* remarks, “Herein, monks, from time to time he frequents the company of monks of wide knowledge, who know *Dhamma* by heart (*dhammadhara*), who know *Vinaya* by heart (*vinayadhara*) and who know summaries by heart (*mātikādhara*). Face to face with those elder monks I heard it; face to face did I receive it. This is *Dhamma*, this is *Vinaya* and this is the Buddha's teaching.”²⁹ *Mātikā*, however, according to Buddhaghosa, was in the context of *mātikādhara* as referring to the two *pātimokkhas* or the bare lists of rules for fully ordained monks and nuns extracted from their *Vinaya* context in the *Suttavibhanga*.³⁰ To be sure, the word *mātikā* is used at this point by the commentarial tradition and obviously from that relationship, in the early period. So, it is quite reasonable to accept that the *Sutta* and *Vinaya* also had its topics or table of contents listed in the same way as the *Abhidhamma*.

On the other hand, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-nikāya-vinaya-saṃyukta- vastu*³¹ states, now I shall recite to myself the *mātrkā*, that is to say the four foundations of mindfulness (*catuḥ-saṃṛty-upasthāna*), the four right efforts (*catuḥ-samyak-prahāṇa*), the four bases of power (*catvāraṣṭhi-pāda*), the five faculties (*pañcendriyāṇi*), the five strengths (*pañca-balāni*), the seven factors of awakening (*saptabodhyaṅgāni*), the eightfold noble path (*aṣṭāṅgamārga*)...here then *mātrkā* means the summarized *dharma* in the *Sūtra* and the *Vinaya*. Therefore, this is *Sūtra*, this is *Vinaya*, and this is the *Abhidharma*.³² And this same identification is also found in the *Aśokarājavadāna*³³ and *Aśokarājasūtra*.³⁴ *Mātrkā* as the *Abhidharma* is also mentioned in *Yogācāryabhūmiśāstra*³⁵, *Āryaśāsanaprakaraṇa*,³⁶ *Ta-shan-chi-sin-lun-yi-shu*,³⁷ *Ta-shan-yi-zhang*,³⁸ and *Ta-shan-fa-wan-yi-lin-zhang*.³⁹

However, according to the above, the term *mātikā* is not found in the seven canons of the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* texts; instead, the term *Abhidharma* is used. In terms

of the several definitions mentioned above, we can obviously come to understand that the terms *mātikā* or *mātrkā* were playing an important role in the development of what came to be called *Abhidhamma* literature later, as admitted in the traditional Buddhist literature itself. Hence, most of the modern scholars agree that the term *mātikā* was the origin of what developed into the *Abhidhamma* later. T. W. Rhys Davids,⁴⁰ H. Kern,⁴¹ M. Winternitz,⁴² A. B. Keith,⁴³ B. C. Law,⁴⁴ N. Dutt,⁴⁵ H. Akira,⁴⁶ E. Lamotte,⁴⁷ E. Frauwallner,⁴⁸ P. S. Jaini,⁴⁹ A. K. Warder,⁵⁰ K. R. Norman,⁵¹ H. Nakamura,⁵² J. Bronkhorst,⁵³ R. M. L. Gethin,⁵⁴ R. Gombrich,⁵⁵ and O. von Hinüber⁵⁶ have unanimously maintained that, the early *Abhidhamma* literature was designated as *mātikā*. However, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition maintains that *Abhidhamma* was a later development, but its *mātikā* was taught by the Buddha and hence the whole *Abhidhamma* canon has been considered to be the teaching of Buddha himself. Whatever the original contents of the *mātikās* may have been, there is no doubt that it formed the core of the *Abhidhamma* literature, in both *Theravāda* and *Sarvāstivāda*. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and *Vibhaṅga*, especially deal with the *Dhammas* on the lines advocated by the *Mātikās*. But, the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* works have not exactly come down to us in their original form of *mātrkā*s. However, from the analysis of the later *Abhidharma* literatures like *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, *Abhidharmāmita*, *Abhidharmakośa*, and *Abhidharmadīpa*, it is certain that the primary works too had *mātrkā*s as their basis.⁵⁷

III. The Term *Abhidhamma*

The great Buddhist commentator, Ācariya Buddhaghosa, explains the word *Abhidhamma* in the *Atthasālinī* as meaning 'that which exceeds' and is distinguished from the *Dhamma* (the *Suttas*). The prefix "*Abhi*" is used in the sense of preponderance and distinction.⁵⁸ Even so this *Dhamma* is called *Abhidhamma*, because it has certain distinguishing and extra qualities in comparison with the *Dhamma*.

The term "*Abhidhamma*" is a prepositional compound formed out of "*Abhi*" and "*Dhamma*" and this fact clearly suggests that its origin and emergence are subsequent to that of *Dhamma*. The term has obviously been coined to indicate a difference between what it denotes and the *Dhamma*. According to Buddhaghosa,

"*Abhi*" when prefixed to *Dhamma* conveys the sense of "supplementary *Dhamma*" and "special *Dhamma*".⁵⁹ In addition, Buddhaghosa says that the preposition "*Abhi*" can convey five meanings, they are: growth, proper attributes, reverence, clear differentiation and excellent worth.⁶⁰

According to the *Atthasālinī*, *Abhidhamma* means the higher doctrine because it enables one to achieve one's deliverance, or because it exceeds the teachings of the Sutta Piṭaka and Vinaya Piṭaka. Since the Vinaya Piṭaka was taught generally with authority by the Buddha who was fit to assume authority, it is said to be a teaching of authority; since the Sutta-Piṭaka was taught generally regarding popular ethics by the Buddha, who was skilled in popular ethics, it is called teaching of popular philosophy; and since the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, was taught generally concerning things in the ultimate sense by the Buddha, who was skilled in ultimate truths, it is called the teaching of ultimate truths. As a distinction is made with regard to the method of treatment it is called *Abhidhamma*.⁶¹

The term *Abhidhamma* is mentioned in the following passage of the *Kinti-sutta*. "Monks, those *Dhammas* taught to you by me out of insight, that is to say the four bases of self-possession (*satipaṭṭhānas*), the four right exertions (*sammappadhānas*), the four bases of power (*iddhipādas*), the five faculties (*indriyas*), the five strengths (*balas*), the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhaṅgas*), the excellent eight factors of the way (*maggangas*) - all together, in harmony (*samagga*), in agreement (*sammodamāna*) and without contention (*avivādamāna*), you should train yourselves in all of these. But when you, monks, all together, in harmony, in agreement and without contention train yourselves in these, there might be two monks speaking differently about *Abhidhamma*."⁶²

In the Chinese tradition, "*Abhidhamma*" translates as "facing *dharma*,"⁶³ "incomparable *dharma*,"⁶⁴ and "great *dharma*."⁶⁵ According to the commentary of the *Ekottara-āgama*, *Abhidhamma* is the great *dharma*. It is called great because it is great knowledge of the four truths and destroys wrong view, ignorance and delusion. And the eight forms of intelligence, ten forms of wisdom and the right view of purity help to surmount the obstacles of the three realms of sentient beings. Therefore it is called the peerless *dharma*.⁶⁶

Furthermore, *Mahāvibhāṣā-sūtra*⁶⁷ gives the meaning of the term *Abhidharma*, in terms of various definitions, as follows:

1. According to the *Ābhidharmikas*:

It is called *Abhidharma* because it is able to investigate and discriminate the characteristics of phenomena of all *dharma*s; it is able to reflect on the various natures of phenomena and penetrate the *dharma*s; it is able to perceive and realize phenomena with regard to all *dharma*s; its *dharma* is very profound and reaches the very foundation; various sacred eyes of wisdom are of the noble ones come is very profound and reaches the very foundation; various sacred eyes of wisdom are of the noble ones come to be purified; it is able to reveal the hidden and subtle nature of the *dharma*s; the expounded *dharma* is not inconsistent; it can conquer all the heretical doctrines.

2. According to Vasumitra:⁶⁸

It is called *Abhidharma* because it is always able to investigate the nature and characteristics of the *Dharma*s that are expounded in the *Sūtras*; it explains the twelve causes and effects of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the inherent nature of phenomena; it helps us to understand the four noble truths thoroughly; it studies and practices the law of the noble eightfold path; it enables one to realize *nirvāṇa*; it arranges the *Dharma*s in various ways by means of profound doctrines.

3. According to the Bhadanta:⁶⁹

It is called *Abhidharma* because it collects, arranges and discriminates such problems as defilement, purity, bondage, emancipation, degeneration and elevation, by means of sentences, phrases and words.

4. According to the Pārśava:⁷⁰

It is called *Abhidharma* because it is ultimate, excellent and providing unerring wisdom.

5. According to Ghosaka:⁷¹

It is called *Abhidharma* because, through it, one who seeks emancipation, following the right practice, completely understands that this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering, and this is the cessation of suffering, this is the path leading to the cessation, the preparatory process, the penultimate path, the process of emancipation, the special higher process, the noble paths and the noble fruits.

6. According to the Dharmaguptakas:⁷²

It is called *Abhidharma* because of the predominance of *dharma*.

7. According to the Mahīśāsakas:⁷³

It is called *Abhidharma* because its wisdom ably illuminates the *dharma*.

8. According to the Dārṣṭāntikas:⁷⁴

Nirvāṇa is supreme amongst all *dharma*s and the *Abhidharma* is next to it and therefore it is called *Abhidharma*.

9. The Śābdavāda:⁷⁵

“*A*” indicates abandon and “*bhī*” indicates discrimination. It [*Abhidharma*] can abandon fetters, bad predispositions, trivial stains, the out burst of bias, and discriminates aggregates (*skandha*), abodes (*āyatana*) elements (*dhātu*) and, dependent origination (*pratityasamutpāda*), truths (*satya*), spiritual nutriment (*āhāra*), the fruition of the path (*āramanyaphala*), factors of supreme knowledge (*bodhipakṣyadharmas*), etc. And therefore it is called *Abhidharma*.

10. Buddhapālita:⁷⁶

“*Abhī*” means appearance and this *Abhidharma* draws all the good and causes various factors of supreme knowledge (*bodhipakṣyadharmas*) to appear. Therefore it is called *Abhidharma*.

11. Buddhadeva:⁷⁷

“*Abhī*” means predominance and this *Abhidharma* is called *Abhidharma* because it is predominant.

12. Vāmalabdha:

“*Abhi*” means veneration and this *Abhidharma* is called *Abhidharma* because it is venerable and honorable.

The above verbal definitions of *Abhidharma* are given in the *Mahāvibhāṣa-sūtra*. On the other hand, Vasubandhu defines and explains it in his *Abhidharmakośaśāstra*.⁷⁸ *Abhidharma* means ‘facing the dharma,’ and designates *nirvāṇa* and the four truths as the law of the ideal. That which confronts this *dharma* is *Abhidharma* and in its primary sense it is pure and immaculate wisdom, anterior to pure immaculate wisdom, and *Abhidharma* books themselves are called *Abhidharma*. This immaculate wisdom includes innate wisdom, wisdom consisting in learning and hearing, wisdom consisting in thought, wisdom acquired by practice.

On the other hand, *Āryavasumitrabodhisattvasaṅgītīśāstra*, however, represents six explanations of the term “*Abhidharma*”. They are as follows:⁷⁹

1. It enables one to distinguish the meaning of *dharma*s as presented in the *Sūtras*.
2. It enables one to practice the Four Noble Truths.
3. It is through the cultivation of it that one attains *nirvāṇa*.
4. It enables one to realize the twelve sections of dependent origination and dependently originated phenomena.
5. It illuminates the meaning of the Noble Eightfold Path.
6. It is that which analyzes and describes the cause of the various factors instrumental in the complete cessation of defilements.

In *Mahayāna Sūtrālaṅkāra*, Asaṅga suggests four different interpretations of the term “*Abhidharma*”, which are:⁸⁰

1. It is called ‘*Abhidharma*’ because it leads to *nirvāṇa* by conveying instructions on truths (*satya*), factors of supreme knowledge (*bodhipakṣyadharmas*), the gate of emancipation (*vimokṣamukha*).
2. It is called ‘*Abhidharma*’, as it constantly points out the discrimination infinitude between the material (*rūpa*) and non-material (*arūpa*)

constituents of each individual *dharma* analyzing it to its minutest elements with illustrations.

3. It is called '*Abhidharma*', for it overcomes the opposition by questions of dispute.
4. It is also called '*Abhidharma*', as it helps us in understanding properly the essence of the *sūtra*.

Besides the definition of *Abhidhamma* from the Buddhist texts, scholarly opinion has generally been divided several ways. For instance, "*Abhidhamma*" has been translated as higher doctrine, transcendental doctrine, and metaphysics by R. C. Childers.⁸¹ Mrs. Rhys Davids gave it the meaning beyond *Dhamma* or meaning ultra-*Dhamma*.⁸² *Abhidhamma* as "special *Dhamma*" as stated by both G.P. Malalasekera⁸³ and E. J. Thomas⁸⁴ refers to the mode of teaching found in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* which is so different from the method employed in the *Suttas*. The translation by F. L. Woodward⁸⁵ as "extra doctrine" or "extra discipline" is not warranted owing to its connection with "*Abhivāyana*" which can only mean "pertaining to the discipline". And this applies also to his translations of *Abhidhamma* as "further *Dhamma*" in its connection with "further discipline".⁸⁶ E. M. Hare's translations of "more *Dhamma*" is also joined to the "more discipline", and therefore, refers to the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, even though the commentary tries to explain it in that way. Here also, the reference is not to "more *Dhamma*" but just to "being questioned on what pertains to the *Dhamma* and what pertains to the discipline."⁸⁷ And A. K. Warder points out that the word *Abhidhamma* originally meant "concerning the doctrine."⁸⁸ According to Y. Karunadasa, it is the philosophical systems that emerged from this refined analytical approach to the doctrine and it is collectively called the *Abhidhamma*. *Abhidhamma*.⁸⁹ *Abhidhamma* then has been translated as "higher religion" both by M. Winternitz⁹⁰ and S. C Banerji.⁹¹ According to the above citations, interpretations are offered in different ways to determine the meaning of the term *Abhidhamma*. Whereas, the fundamental idea expounded in all the works is the same, viz., that it is concerned with the attainment of transcendental knowledge, special *Dhamma*, extra doctrine, etc., the goal to which all Buddhists yearn.

At the heart of the *Abhidhamma* philosophy is the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, one of the

divisions of the Pāli Canon recognized by Theravāda Buddhism as the authoritative recension of the Buddha's teachings. This canon was compiled at the three great Buddhist councils held in India in the early centuries following the Buddha's demise:

1. The first, at Rājagaha, was convened three months after the Buddha's *Parinibbāna* by five hundred senior monks under the leadership of the Elder Mahakassapa.
2. The second, at *Vesālī*, a hundred years later.
3. The third, at *Pāṭalīputta*, two hundred years later.

The canon that emerged from these councils, preserved in the middle Indian language now called Pāli, is known as the *Tipiṭaka*, the three baskets or collections of the teachings. The first collection, the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the book of discipline, contains the rules of conduct for the *Bhikkhū* and *Bhikkhūnī* - the monks and nuns - and the regulations governing the *Saṅgha*, the monastic order. The *Sutta Piṭaka*, the second collection, brings together the Buddha's discourses spoken by him on various occasions during his active ministry of forty five years. And the third collection is the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, the "basket" of the Buddha's "higher" or "special" doctrine.

The reason the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* is so deeply revered only becomes clear as a result of a thorough study and profound reflection, undertaken in the conviction that these ancient books have something significant to communicate. When one approaches the *Abhidhamma* treatises in such a spirit and gains some insight into their wide implications and organic unity, one will find that they are attempting nothing less than to articulate a comprehensive vision of the totality of experienced reality, a vision marked by extensiveness of range, systematic completeness, and analytical precision.

From the standpoint of Theravāda orthodoxy the system that they expound is not a figment of speculative thought, not a mosaic put together out of metaphysical hypotheses, but a disclosure of the true nature of existence as apprehended by a mind that has penetrated the totality of things both in depth and in the finest detail. Because it bears this character, the Theravāda tradition regards the *Abhidhamma* as

the most perfect expression possible of the Buddha's unimpeded omniscient knowledge (*sabbāññutañāṇa*). It is his statement of the way things appear to the mind of a Fully Enlightened One, ordered in accordance with the two poles of his teaching: suffering and the cessation of suffering. According to the above definitions, the term "*Abhidhamma*" in both the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda tradition, is held in the highest esteem. Furthermore, this clearly indicates that it is an elaboration and is distinguished from *Dhamma*. From references of this sort, it can be assumed that there is a higher doctrine because it enables one to achieve one's deliverance; it exceeds the teachings of the *Sutta Piṭaka* and *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

IV. The Abhidhamma as the Word of the Buddha

Indeed, it is clear that the *Abhidhamma* canonical text is later than the rest of the canon. And there is no mention in the chronicles of reciting the *Abhidhamma* at the first or second councils; however, the *Mahāvamsa* mentions that the *arahants* who held the second council knew it as the *Tipiṭaka*.⁸² In the commentary on this passage, however, Buddhagosa suggests that the two terms could refer to the two *Piṭakas*, the *Suttanta Piṭaka* and the *Vinaya Piṭakas*, or to all three *Piṭakas* with "*Sutta*" indicating both the *Suttanta Piṭaka* and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.⁸³ However, Tāranātha denied that the *Abhidhamma* was the word of the Buddha himself.⁸⁴ If someone might doubt that the *Abhidhamma* literature is not the exact words of the Buddha himself, then, it is reasonable to doubt that even the *Sutta* and *Vinaya Piṭakas* are not the exact words of the Buddha. Thus, we can notice that some *Suttas* are attributed to disciples and have their setting after the Buddha's death, while many others are also attributed to disciples but are accompanied by an explanation that the Buddha was tired and requested them to explain the *Dhamma*.⁸⁵

However, the *Mahāpadesasutta*, claims another, probably earlier, tradition which expresses the *Tipiṭaka* was not completed or even largely completed at the first council, but developed by a process of the oral tradition.⁸⁶ Anyway, this tradition of the councils represents an important explanation of the authority and development of the *Tipiṭaka*. In terms of the early Buddhist literature, it is a traditional oral literature, a literature that was composed orally and subsequently became arranged in the form of written canonical texts as we observe today. There isn't any single

argument for that. So, we have to ask how *Abhidhamma* literature is different from the *Sutta* and *Vinaya* literatures. According to the scriptures, a council was held shortly after the Buddha's passing to collect and preserve his teachings. It is traditionally believed by Theravādins, that most of the Pāli Canon was recited orally at this time, with only a few later additions. As L.S. Cousins remarks, "The *Sutta* literature shows all the marks of such an approach. It is quite evident that if we compare the Pāli recension of the *Nikāyas* with other surviving versions, the differences we find are exactly those that we might expect to discover between different performances of oral works."⁹⁷

The following three functions could be attributed to the *Abhidhamma* canonical literature on the basis of a close study of the development of it:

1. It was meant to be a thorough and detailed systematization of the teachings contained in the *Suttas*.
2. It was meant to be an authoritative explanation of the traditional doctrinal concepts.
3. It was an attempt to arrange the structure of the teachings more accurately.

Obviously, when the word *apadesa* arises it signifies as the pointing out or citing of someone as a witness or authority in this case for some teaching. The four which are cited are the Buddha, a community with elders, several learned monks and just one learned elder. The traditional position is that the *Abhidhamma* is the absolute teaching, while the *suttas* are adapted to the hearer.⁹⁸

There is undoubtedly a relationship between the *mātikās* and the development of the *Abhidhamma*. The main issue has been the problem of the relationship between the *Abhidhamma* and the actual word of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*). It does not have to be the case that 'the word of the Buddha,' should mean all the words must be preached from the mouth of the Buddha himself. Any doctrinal principle derivable from the fundamentals and the nucleus of the Buddha's teaching may be considered as the word of the Buddha. If the main points do not deviate radically from the essential teachings of the Buddha then it could be regarded as the word of the Buddha himself. From this perspective it might be permissible to say that all the

literature of *Abhidhamma* is “the word of the Buddha” or “a part of the knowledge of the Buddha himself.” In fact, for understanding Truth or *Dhamma*, it is unnecessary even to know whether the teaching comes from the Buddha, or from someone else. All the basic forms, contents and teachings are found in the *Sutta* and *Vinaya* canonical texts as well as in the commentarial works. Indeed, there is no doubt that the fundamental of the *Abhidhamma* literature are closely related to the goal and purpose of the Buddha’s teaching.

Hence, one may say that in the canonical *Abhidhamma*, nothing is outside of the teachings of the Buddha himself, and all the principal processes are associated with the words of the Buddha found in the *Sutta* and *Vinaya* canonical texts. Thus is it to be understood that the *Abhidhamma* transcends and is distinguished from the *Dhamma*. Finally, it is reasonable to say, that the *Abhidhamma* played an important role in the theory of exegesis and the developments in the practice of Buddhism. The hermeneutic of the *Abhidhamma* itself was derived from a practice authenticated frequently in the *Suttas*, and the dogmatic lists known as *Mātikas*. These may occur as mere catechistic or numerical lists; but topical forms or lists defining the limits of canonical *Abhidhamma*, however, are digests or exegetical guides.