

Origin of the Abhidhamma

‘Abhi’ mean higher, ‘Dhamma’ mean teaching. Therefore, Abhidhamma is the higher teaching of the Buddha.

This profound knowledge was discovered by the Buddha in the 4th week after his enlightenment, while he was still dwelling near the Bodhi Tree and as he sat in a Jewel House or Ratanaghara. This Jewel House was not literally a house made of precious stones, but was the place where he contemplated the seven books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

He contemplated first the Dhammasangani, but while investigating the first 6 books, his body did not emit rays. However, upon coming to the seventh and last book Patthana, when he began to contemplate the twenty-four universal conditional relations, rays of six colours: blue, yellow, red, white, orange and the mixture of all five - streamed from the Buddha's body.

It is believed that the Buddha did not preach the Abhidhamma to everyone. He preached it first to His mother and the Devas at Tavatimsa heaven. Before he went to the Tavatimsa heaven, the Buddha performed the Twin-Miracle or Yamaka Patihariya, to subdue Niganthas and Titthiyas, the two proud Naked Ascetics at the Gandabba Mango Tree in Savatthi.

The Twin-Miracle means that the Buddha issued forth flames of fire and volumes of water simultaneously from all parts of his body. In the 45 years of his ministry, he only performed this miracle twice, the other time to subdue the pride of Sakya Clan.

And after this event, the Buddha found that the earlier Buddha had, after the performance of this miracle, visited heaven. So he too went to Tavatimsa (2nd heaven) to preach the Abhidhamma to the assembly of Devas or gods there. According to this tradition, just prior to His 7th annual rains retreat on the Esala full moon day, the Blessed One ascended to the Tavatimsa heaven.

There seated on the Pandukambala stone at the foot of the Paricchattaka tree, for the three months of the rainy season, he taught the Abhidhamma to the Devas who had assembled from the ten thousand world-systems.

In gratitude to his mother, he made her the chief recipient of the teaching. His mother, Mahamaya Devi, had been reborn as a Deva in the Tusita heaven (4th heaven) after giving birth to Lord Buddha and died on the 7th day. So she descended to Tavatimsa to listen this teaching.

The reason why the Buddha taught the Abhidhamma in the Deva world rather than in the human world, it is because, in order to give a complete picture of the Abhidhamma, it has to be expounded from the beginning to the end, to the same audience, in a single session.

Since the full exposition of the Abhidhamma requires three months, only Devas and Brahma can receive it in unbroken continuity, for they alone are capable of remaining in one posture for such a length of time.

However, to sustain his body each day, the Buddha would descend to the human world to go on alms-round in the northern region of Uttarakuru. During his absence, the Buddha created a figure of Himself and put it in his place to continue the preaching. After collecting his alms-food, he would go to the shore of Anotatta Lake to partake his meal. After his meal, he would rest for a while at Candanavana nearby.

It was at that time that Venerable Saripputta went there and to attend to him. This was done daily and the Buddha gave him the summary of the discourse of the Abhidhamma that he preached for that day.

After the Buddha left Candanavana and ascended to the Tavatimsa to continue his teaching, Venerable Sariputta went back to his 500 disciples and expounded the same discourses in detail to them.

And those 500 disciples in turn related this teaching to their disciples and they also did likewise. In this way, the Abhidhamma has come down to us by an unbroken tradition of teachers and disciples.

What is the Abhidhamma?

After his Enlightenment, the Buddha taught for 45 years before His Parinibbana. Three months after His Parinibbana, the First Council rehearsed and reinforced his teachings which are contained in 3 groups or baskets called the Tipitaka :

1. The Vinaya (Book of Discipline for the Monks)
2. The Suttanta (Book of Discourses)
3. The Abhidhamma (Higher Doctrine)

The aim of all three parts of the Tipitaka is to enable the development of the way leading to the eradication of all defilements.

The Vinaya contains rules for the monks to help them live the "pure" life leading to the goal of Enlightenment. In the Suttanta, the Buddha expounded his teachings about the realities of life and the practice leading to the end of suffering. He taught the Suttanta to different people, in different ways and is the conventional part of his teaching.

The Buddha taught Abhidhamma for the first time to His former mother, Mahamaya, who came down from Tusita Heaven to Tavatimsa Heaven to listen to this teaching. The Buddha subsequently related this entire teaching to Sariputta, over a period of 3 months.

The Abhidhamma is referred to as the Higher Doctrine because it expounds the make-up of the so-called "being" to its most basic forms of "mind and "matter" which are further microscopically analysed into their constituents.

Events connected with the process of birth and death are explained in detail. Intricate points of the Buddha's teaching are clarified and the path to Enlightenment is set forth in clear terms. Details of fundamental units of matter, material, forces, relationship of mind and matter (Pathana) and the exposition of the Law of Dependant Origination make the Abhidhamma unique without any parallel in any philosophy or teaching.

The Abhidhamma gives a systematised knowledge of mind and matter. It investigates these two composite factors of the "being" to help one understand oneself and see things as they truly are. A philosophy has been developed on these lines. Based on this philosophy, an ethical system has been evolved to realise the ultimate goal of Nibbana.

The Abhidhamma deals with realities and a practical way of noble living and this knowledge enables one to understand the real significance of the profound teachings of the Buddha.

It is therefore referred to as the ultimate teaching (Paramattha Desana) in the exposition of the Buddha's Dhamma. The Abhidhamma consists of 7 books in its entirety.

The Seven Books of the Abhidhamma

1. Dhammasangani : Classification of Dhammas
2. Vibhanga : The Book of Divisions
3. Dhatukatha : Discussion with reference to Elements
4. Puggalapannatti : Designation of Individuals
5. Kathavatthu : Points of Controversy
6. Yamaka : The Book of Pairs
7. Patthana : The Book of Causal Relations

1. Dhammasangani

Also known as "Classification of Dhammas", this book is divided into 4 chapters :

- i. Citta – Consciousness
- ii. Rupa – Matter
- iii. Nikkhepa – Summary
- iv. Atthuddhara - Elucidation

It comprises the essence of the Abhidhamma in its purest and most concentrated form devoting to the explanation of the first triplet, Kusala Dhamma, Akusala Dhamma, and Abyakata Dhamma.

2. Vibhanga

The Vibhanga or "Divisions" contains 18 divisions of which the first 3 divisions, Khanda (Aggregates), Ayatana (Sense-spheres) and Dhatu (Elements) are the most important. Most of the divisions consists of explanations of the Suttanta, Abhidhamma and a summary of the doctrine in the form of questions and answers.

3. Dhatukatha

This book, "Discussion with reference to Elements", consists of 14 chapters and discusses whether Dhammas are included or not included in, associated with, or dissociated from, Aggregates (Khanda), Bases (Ayatana) and Elements.

4. Puggalapannatti

This book known as "Designation of Individuals" contains 10 chapters and resembles the Suttanta in its explanations. Instead of dealing with various Dhammas, it deals with various types of individuals beginning from single individuals to pairs and so on.

5. Kathavatthu

The author of this book, also known as "Points of Controversy", is Venerable Moggalliputta Tissa Thera who lived during the time of King Asoka. He presided at the Third Council held during the 3rd century B.C. and this work was included in the Abhidhamma Pitaka at the Council. It deals with 216 controversies and is divided into 23 chapters.

6. Yamaka

Called "The Book of Pairs", it deals with subjects by grouping questions and their converse together as follows :

Are all wholesome Dhammas wholesome roots? And are all wholesome roots wholesome Dhammas?

7. Patthana

"The Book of Causal Relations" is the most important, voluminous and profound of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. It shows the profound wisdom and penetrative insights of the Buddha. It deals with the 24 modes of causal relations, the Triplets and Couplets which comprise the essence of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. The profoundness of the contents is such that rays of light emitted from the Buddha when he contemplated the 24 Causal Relations during his rehearsal of the Abhidhamma.

Similarities and Differences - Sutta and Abhidhamma Pitaka

The Buddha's entire teaching was recorded in "Three Baskets" or the "Tipitaka" namely :

1. The Vinaya (Book of Discipline for the Monks)
2. The Suttanta (Book of Discourses)
3. The Abhidhamma (Higher Doctrine)

Each of the three baskets has its specific focus on groups of people, appeal to different intellectual capacities, methods of practice and understanding, to arrive at the same goal of Enlightenment.

While the Abhidhamma is said to be the higher teachings of the Buddha, this is not to suggest that the Sutta Pitaka is defective or that the Abhidhamma proclaims some new revelations or doctrine unknown to the Sutta. Nor it intended only for a small circle of disciples or followers.

Both the Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma are grounded upon the Buddha's unique doctrine of the 4 Noble Truths, and all the principles essential to the attainment of enlightenment are already expounded in the Sutta Pitaka.

When a distinction is drawn between the 2 methods, this is based on what is most characteristic of each Pitaka. To some degree the two methods overlap. Thus, in the Suttas we find strictly philosophical terminology of aggregates, sense bases, elements, etc. which come within the Abhidhamma method. Within the Abhidhamma we find sections, even a whole book (the Puggalapannatti), that employs conventional terminology, thus coming within Suttanta method.

Although the Abhidhamma covers subjects similar to the Sutta Pitaka there is a difference between the two. This difference is not so much the subjects but rather their arrangement and treatment.

Unlike the Sutta Pitaka, the Abhidhamma is not a record of discourses and discussions occurring in real-life settings. They are instead treatises in which the principles of the doctrine have been methodically organized, minutely defined, with great attention to details, arranged and classified.

In the Suttas, doctrinal categories such as the 5 aggregates, the 12 sense bases, the 18 elements and so forth, are only partially classified. In the Abhidhamma they are fully classified, according to different schemes of classification, some common to the Sutta Pitaka, others unique to the Abhidhamma.

The other major area of difference concerns the methods. The discourses contained in the Suttas were expounded by the Buddha under diverse circumstances, to listeners with different capacities for comprehension.

They were presented in the way to be most effective in guiding the listener in the practice of the teachings and in arriving at a penetration of its truth.

To achieve this end, the Buddha freely employed skillful means to make the doctrine intelligible to his listeners. He uses similes and metaphors; he exhorts, advises and inspires. He was able to direct the mind of his audience to certain directions and adjusted the presentation of the teachings to awaken positive responses.

For this reason the Suttanta method of teaching is described as Pariyaya-Dhammadesana, the figurative or embellished discourse on the Dhamma.

In contrast, the Abhidhamma is intended to make known as complete and directly as possible, the totalistic system that underlies the Suttanta exposition and upon which the individual discourses draw. The Abhidhamma take no account of the personal inclinations and cognitive capacities of the listeners, and it makes no concessions to particular pragmatic requirements.

It reveals the truths of reality in an abstract, formalistic manner, utterly devoid of literary embellishments and pedagogical expedients. Thus, the Abhidhamma method is described as the Nipariyaya-Dhammadesana, the literal or unembellished discourse on the Dhamma.

This difference in technique between the 2 methods also influences their respective terminologies.

In the Suttas, the Buddha regularly makes use of conventional language (Voharavacana) and accepts Conventional Truth (Sammuti Sacca), truth expressed in terms of entities that do not possess ontological ultimacy but can still be legitimately referred to them.

Thus, in the Sutta Pitaka the Buddha speaks of 'I' and 'You', of 'Man' and 'Woman', of living beings, persons and even 'Self' as though they were concrete realities.

The Abhidhamma methods of exposition, however, rigorously restricts itself to terms that are valid from the standpoint of Ultimate Truth (Paramattha Sacca), their characteristics, their functions and their relations.

Thus, in the Abhidhamma, all such conceptual entities provisionally accepted in the Sutta Pitaka for the purpose of meaningful communications are resolved into their ontological Ultimates, into bare mental and material phenomena that are impermanent, conditioned, and dependently arisen.

Similarities

1. Both the Suttas and Abhidhamma are inexhaustible sources of inspiration and encouragement to the practice of the Buddha's teaching leading to the eradication of wrong views and the ending of defilements.
2. Both teach realities of life and expound the Truths which when fully understood and realized, lead to the extinction of suffering, Dukkha, ending of re-birth and the attainment of Nibbana.
3. Both stress on right self effort to achieve progress on one's quest for Enlightenment through right actions and livelihood, and avoiding wrong views and practices that lead to continued suffering and rebirths.
4. Understanding, practice and self-realization are the hall-marks of both Pitakas. Dependence on oneself to attain the goal of Enlightenment is an absolute necessity although good friends and teachers are very helpful in aiding one's progress towards this goal.
5. Teachings in both baskets stress on the concept of "no-soul" or Anatta. Delusion of the concept of the "soul" is the primary cause of continued rebirth and suffering.
6. Benefits of morality, compassion, loving-kindness and all good actions are clearly explained in both Pitakas.
7. The concepts of cause and effect, Kamma, Rebirth, Law of Dependant Origination, the Four Noble Truths are well explained in both baskets.

Differences

1. While the Buddha used conventional terms such as men, animals, trees, etc. during the deliverance of His sermons and the expounding of His teachings in the Sutta Pitaka, such terms were avoided in the Abhidhamma. Instead, terms like interaction of forces and combinations of these forces were put in place of these living and non-living things.

Hence, while the Buddha refers to living and non-living things as a "whole", He microscopically analysed these groups into their very basic components much as a scientist analyses a table into atoms, protons, electrons, etc.

The Suttas uses the language of Conventional Reality (Sammuti Sacca), whereas the Abhidhamma uses the language of Ultimate reality (Paramattha Sacca).

2. While the Sutta explains certain teachings, e.g. Cause and Effect, and Rebirth on a superficial level, the Abhidhamma explains in detail how the thought processes resulting

from an action give rise to the resultant action, and the thought processes associated with it.

3. The Sutta was preached by the Buddha to lay-disciples and monks while the Abhidhamma was taught by the Buddha to His mother, Maha Maya, and the Devas in Tavatimsa Heaven. He subsequently related the Abhidhamma to His Chief Disciple, Sariputta, who then elaborated them into 6 books.
4. While the Sutta is taught in a conventional manner where one can relate to events, happenings, and things in our every day life, the Abhidhamma deals in a more abstract approach encroaching into the intellectual understanding of man. Therefore, the Suttas relate to different levels of understanding whereas the Abhidhamma does not take the intellectual capacities of the listeners.
5. In the Suttas, the 5 aggregates, 12 sense bases, 18 elements, etc. are only partially classified. These are fully classified in the Abhidhamma.
6. Pariyaya-dhammadesana - the figurative or embellished discourses on the Dhamma are used in the Suttas. Nipariyaya-dhammadesana - the literal or unembellished discourse on the Dhamma are used in the Abhidhamma.
7. Terms used in the Suttas are not ontological (essence of the nature of being) ultimates. Uses conceptual thoughts as in I, you, man & woman. The terms used in the Abhidhamma are ontological ultimates. Uses irreducible components of existence of the mind and matter.

The above highlight the important aspects of the qualities of each Pitaka, their similarities and differences, and their underlying strengths and focuses.

Conventional Truth (Sammuti Sacca) and Ultimate Truth (Paramattha Sacca)

According to the Abhidhamma, there are 2 kinds of realities or truths :-

- Conventional Truth or Sammuti Sacca; and
- Ultimate Truth or Paramattha Sacca.

Conventional realities are the reference of ordinary conceptual thought (paññati) and the conventional modes of expression (vohāra). They include such entities as living beings, men, women, animals etc.

They are expressed in term of entities that do not possess ultimacy, because the objects which they signify do not exist in their own right as irreducible realities, although can still be legitimately referred to as though they were concrete realities.

Their mode of being is conceptual, not actual. They are products of mental construction (parikappanā), not realities existing by their own intrinsic nature.

Ultimate realities are things that exist by reason of their own intrinsic nature (sabhāva). These are the final irreducible components of existence, as they cannot be any further reduced or subdivided.

They are expressed in term of entities that possess ultimacy, that are impermanent, conditioned, and dependently arisen, empty of any abiding self or substance.

Parama is explained as immutable, abstract or ultimate and Attha mean thing. Therefore, Paramattha mean "Ultimate Thing". Although the term Ultimate is used here, it should not be understood that all Paramattha are eternal or permanent.

As one extracts oil from sesame seed, so one can extract the ultimate realities from the conventional realities. For example 'being' and 'man' and 'women' are concepts suggesting that the things they signify, possess irreducible ultimate unity.

However, when we examine these superficial aspects down to their very basic levels, we arrive at the ultimate components and forces that make up the apparent state of the "thing" being examined. This final state is termed ultimate or abstract reality (Paramattha-sacca).

Thus, when we investigate conventional reality with the analytical tools of the Abhidhamma, we find that they do not possess the ultimacy implied by the concepts, but only a conventional reality as an assemblage of impermanent factors, of mental and physical processes.

As a laymen would refer to water as "water", scientists refer to water as H₂O, consisting of 2 atoms of hydrogen and 1 atom of oxygen.

Similarly, the Buddha in the Sutta Pitaka resorts to conventional usage of terms such as men, women, animal, being, etc., but in the Abhidhamma Pitaka he employs a different approach using abstract terms as elements (Dhatu), bases (Ayatana), etc.

Hence, while the Buddha refers to a personality, a name, a person or being in the conventional approach, the reference to this specific being is lost when He analyses the being to its very basic components, namely forces, qualities and phenomena.

By examining the conventional realities with wisdom, we eventually arrive at the objective actualities that lie behind our conceptual constructs. It is these objective actualities – the Dhammas, which maintain their intrinsic natures independently of the mind's constructive functions - that form the ultimate realities of the Abhidhamma.

Although ultimate realities exist as the concrete essences of things, they are so subtle and profound that an ordinary person who lacks training cannot perceive them. Such a person cannot see the ultimate realities because his mind is obscured by concepts which shape reality into conventionally defined appearances.

Only by means of wise or thorough attention to things (yoniso manasikāra) can one see beyond the concepts and take the ultimate realities as one's object of knowledge. Thus Paramattha is described as that which belongs to the domain of ultimate or supreme knowledge.

There are 4 ultimate or abstract truths (Paramattha-sacca) :

1. Citta or Consciousness
2. Cetasikas or Mental States
3. Rupa or Matter
4. Nibbana

The mundane (lokiya) truths are Citta, Cetasikas and Rupa. Nibbana is the only absolute reality as it is the supramundane (lokuttara) truth.

Citta, Cetasikas, and Rupa are the very basis that make up the human being which is mind and matter. In their most fundamental forms, these realities are mere forces without any substantiality. They have the characteristic of combining in ever changing forms to make up the so-called being.

Nibbana, on the other hand, is the only absolute reality that cannot be comprehended by the common mind. It is a state of supreme bliss comprehended only by the fully enlightened mind and is uncaused, unmade, unborn and unchanging. Hence, it is referred to as supramundane, a state of supreme bliss that is realised by the purified mind.

These truths or realities are thoroughly and explicitly expounded by the Buddha and stand unique among today's philosophies and religions.

