

# An Introduction to the Dhamma

May this gift of Dhamma, dedicated to Sister Sudhamma (Pauline Ofner, 1927 – 1979 ) who introduced the donors to the Path, along with constant reminders to “Be mindful Now”, be a blessing to all.

“Better than a thousand useless words, is one useful word hearing which, one attains peace.”

DHAMMPADA 100

## PREFACE

The Abhidhamma is the higher teaching of the Buddha. It contains the essentials of the Buddha Dhamma without the need for conventional terminology. It deals directly with those elements which constitute the exact nature of our existence, and all questions of a conventional nature are left aside. This should not deter one from plunging into the Abhidhamma however. Once begun, the Abhidhamma can lead us on to a better understanding of the practise of insight (vipassana).

A study of the Abhidhamma can be of immense value to us in coming of terms with the nature of life and understanding it in the way of momentary events. It is made clear that life exists as moments only. The past moments have gone, they cannot be made to come back. The future has not yet come, so it does not yet exist. The present moment is now and is all that really exists. Through the study of Abhidhamma the moments of life are analyzed into their respective factors of consciousness, mental factors and the objects of consciousness. Wholesome moments are distinguished from unwholesome moments in such a way that we can understand the difference between the two and thus enables us to develop more wholesome in life. The Abhidhamma enables us to see the difference between all the different moments of life – to

know that the moment of seeing is different from the moment of hearing, that hearing is different from thinking about what we hear, that tasting is not the same moment as smelling, that even the taste is not the same as the tasting, and so on. The Abhidhamma assists us to understand this momentariness of life. Life is but a moment, conditioned by past moments, arising for an instant then passing away again to be followed by the next moment's arising. Two consecutive moments are never the same.

These two essays have been published in book form to assist those interested in the Buddha's teachings to attain a general understanding of the Abhidhamma and to aid in encouraging those who wish to pursue further this part of the Buddha word. This volume contains two essays of a general nature, a suggested reading list for further study and an appendix of the paramattha dhammas (absolute realities). Then a series of addresses around the world for obtaining information and assistance.

The first essay was written as an introduction to the topic of Abhidhamma for a tertiary Comparative Religious Study class in Adelaide, South Australia. The second essay was written as introductory article for a Dhamma publication in Holland. They both hope to provide a general knowledge of the Buddha's teaching as contained in the Abhidhamma-Pitaka of the Pali Canon.

We should apply ourselves to the study of all parts of the Buddha's teaching contained in the Pali Canon- to the Vinaya (the books of discipline for the Sangha), to the Suttas (the books of discourses) and to the Abhidhamma. Our own clarification of the teachings through reading, wise consideration and contemplation will be of much benefit to us and to all others who come into contact with us. As we understand more and more the Buddha's teaching, we will be more kind, more considerate and more harmless (in the true sense of causing no harm) to all our fellow beings. It is hoped that this small introductory book will help to develop that understanding.

Dhamma Study Group,  
New Year,  
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Bangkok.

# Abhidhamma Notes

By

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## What is Abhidhamma ?

Abhidhamma is a word from the Pali language, the language in which the Theravadin records of the teachings of the Buddha have been recorded and passed down to the present day. The word is composed of the two parts, 'abhi' meaning 'higher' or 'greater' and 'dhamma' which means 'reality' or 'truth' (it can be loosely translated as to mean 'everything which is real'). So the word 'Abhidhamma' means the 'higher truth' or 'the higher teaching'.

The Abhidhamma itself is a collection of seven books of teachings. It is the third of the three sections of the Pali Canon (the collected teachings of the Buddha in the Pali language). The three sections are:-

1. The Vinaya Pitaka – the rules of discipline for monks and nuns of the Sangha (the order).

2. The Suttana Pitaka – the collections of discourses, stories and verses delivered by the Buddha and his disciples.

3. The Abhidhamma Pitaka – the philosophical and analytical summation of the teachings.

The Abhidhamma consists of seven books. These books are named as follows:-

1. The Dhammasangani – the enumeration of all mental and material phenomena.

2. The Vibhanga – the book of treatises of all phenomena.

3. The Dhatukatha- the discussion of the groups, bases and elements of existence.

4. The Puggalapannatti- the description of individual types of persons.

5. The Kathavatthu- the discussion of points of controversy with schismatic sects.

6. The Yamaka- the book of pairs of questions.

7. The Patthana- the book of origination, conditionality and dependence of all the phenomena of existence (this is the largest and the most important Abhidhamma work).

The books of the Abhidhamma then, analyze in minute detail the mental states and material states that comprise what we call our life and what we call the world. In the Abhidhamma analysis there is no mention made of persons, places or objects. This is because they do not exist in the ultimate sense. They are only mere conventional names and labels for the purposes of identification and communication. In reality, all that exists is only material phenomena and mental phenomena. The Pali word for mentality is 'nama' and the word for materiality is 'rupa'. That which we call a person, place or thing is in fact just different types of mental and material phenomena occurring one after another with extreme rapidity and giving the appearance of a coherent and lasting whole. Through the examination of the Abhidhamma it is made clear that there are no coherent and lasting wholes, just many different moments of reality following on one after another and that what we call 'the world' is in fact a succession of these momentary phenomena.

Just as the word 'chariot' is but a mode of expression for axle, wheels, chariot-body, pole and other constituent members, placed in a certain relation to each other, but when we come to examine the members one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is no chariot. And just as the word 'house' is but a mode of expression for wood and other constituents of a house, surrounding space in a certain relation, but in the absolute sense there is no house. And just as the word 'fist' is but a mode of expression for the fingers, the thumb, etc., in a certain relation, but when we come to examine the parts one by one we discover that in the absolute sense there is no fist; in exactly the same way the words 'living being' and 'ego' are but a mode of expression for the presence of the five attachment groups but when we come to examine the elements of being one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is no living being there to form a basis for such figments as 'I am' or 'I'; in other words that in the absolute sense there is only mentality and materiality (nama and rupa).

(from 'The Path of Purity by Buddhaghosa)

The Abhidhamma also divides all the phenomena of consciousness into moral or skillful types, immoral or unskillful types, types which are the direct result of past causes and neutral types which produce no effect. Through this examination of consciousness one establishes also a moral and harmonious

way to live so as to benefit oneself and others in the course of life. Ultimately through Abhidhamma one comes to understand reality as it is so that ignorance of the true nature of reality can be eliminated forever and there is no more cause for going on.

## The History of the Abhidhamma.

The seven books of the Abhidhamma were written down in print in approximately 25 B.C. Previous to this the entire Pali Canon had been committed to memory in verse form by groups of monks from 70 years after the Buddha's death in 547 B.C. Of the seven books, the first, second and seventh are the oldest and were recited as they stand today at the Second Council of Arahants held in the first quarter of the 4th Century B.C. The third, fourth and sixth were completed by the time of the Third Council of Arahants in about 250 B.C. and the fifth book (the Points of Controversy) dates from the third Council. They were introduced to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) through the arrangement of the son of King Asoka, ruler of all India, shortly after the Third Council. From that time on they were considered completed and not subject to alteration in any way. Unaltered copies of the entire Canon have existed in Sri Lanka until the present day.

The teachings of the Abhidhamma it is said were first taught to the Buddha's mother and residents of some of the heavenly realms during a period of three months in the seventh year after the Buddha's enlightenment. The Buddha also taught the Abhidhamma to Sariputta, one of his chief disciples and the man renowned as the second only to the Buddha's. Sariputta in turn taught the Abhidhamma to the monks under his instruction, whose role it was to memorize and master it. In this way the seven books of the Abhidhamma have come down to us intact.

## The Teaching of the Abhidhamma

To attempt to deal with the entire teachings of the Abhidhamma in such a small space is a difficult task. So only a short outline will be attempted here.

There are two kinds of absolute realities (paramattha dhammas). They are mental phenomena (nama) and physical or material phenomena (rupa). Nama experiences something. Rupa does not experience

anything. When we see, for example, then seeing is a type of nama; it experiences the object of seeing which is colour, visible object or visible data. Visible data is a type of rupa. It does not experience anything (this being the characteristic of rupa). The same goes for all of our five senses – seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling all experience an object. The object of the experience (e.g., visible data) is rupa, which does not experience anything. We can then understand that seeing and visible data are not the same thing. The same goes for hearing and sound, tasting and flavour, etc. Also, each type of nama and rupa are different from each other. Seeing is not hearing. They do not occur together, they occur at different moments, although we are under the impression that they do occur together. The same follows for the rest of the five senses. Further, each type of nama or rupa cannot occur by itself, they can only exist in conjunction with other types of nama and rupa.

Nama (mentality) is divided into 3 kinds. Two kinds of nama are conditioned and the third kind is unconditioned. The four kinds of absolute realities are then:

1. consciousness (citta)
2. mental factors or mental formations (cetasikas)
3. materiality (rupa)
4. nibbana

Nibbana is the one kind of unconditioned reality. It is not matter, it is not a place where one goes, it has no form or shape or solidity, it is not something that one unites with. It is a mental phenomena, but it is different from consciousness and mental factors. It is unconditioned. That means that there are no causes which make it arise. It does not begin and it does not end. It does not experience anything, but it can be the object of experience. It is experienced by supra-mundane consciousness, i.e., the consciousness that contains fully developed wisdom. It is also important to note that it cannot be understood intellectually. It can only be directly experienced when wisdom has been sufficiently developed.

The other kinds of nama and rupa are all conditioned, i.e., they all arise because of past and present causes. They are all conditioned by one another.

Citta (consciousness) is of 89 different types. Cittas are divided into four categories:

1. Moral or skillful consciousness (kusala citta) – 21 types
2. Immoral or unskillful consciousness (akusala citta) –12 types
3. Resultant consciousness (vipaka citta) –36 types
4. Inoperative consciousness (kiriya citta) –20 types

Moral consciousness is divided according to whether it is accompanied by pleasant or indifferent feeling, with wisdom or without wisdom and prompted or unprompted. The other 13 types of moral consciousness are nine of the meditative states and four of the consciousness which experience nibbana. Examples of the first 21 would be moments of generosity toward other beings, moments of restraint from lying, killing or stealing, moments of respect for wise people, moments of insight into the true nature of things or moments of meditative absorption practicing tranquility meditation.

There are 12 types of immoral or unskillful consciousness. They are also divided according to which feeling they are accompanied by, whether they arise with or without wrong views (of reality) and whether they are prompted or unprompted. Those types of immoral consciousness arising with attachment are accompanied by pleasant or indifferent feeling while the two arising with aversion (either prompted or unprompted consciousness) are accompanied by unpleasant feeling. There are two types of ignorance accompanied by indifferent feeling, one with doubt and one with restlessness. Examples of immoral consciousness would be when we get angry, when we are bored, when we are depressed, when we are absorbed in beautiful things, when we kill or steal or lie to people or when we are restless.

They are 36 types of resultant consciousness (i.e. the result of previous skillful or unskillful deeds). When we see, hear, taste, smell or touch pleasant or unpleasant object it is result. Also there are again 9 types of resultant consciousness experienced in the meditative states, and 4 types which arise at the moments of experiencing nibbana.

They are finally 20 types inoperative consciousness. In operative means that they have no effect in terms of cause and result. They occur in the sense-door and in thought processes of enlightened beings and again in 9 of the meditative states.

Citta is the chief mental phenomena of experience. So in seeing, for example, the function of the moment of seeing (citta) is to see the object. Citta is the chief experiencer.

The other category of nama is the cetasikas (or mental formations). These mental factors arise accompanying each moment of experience (each citta). There is not one moment of experience occurring without at least some of them. Their function is to add to the experience each in their own way. Each cetasika or mental factor has its own special characteristic by which it is recognized and function which it performs. For example, the characteristic of conceit is haughtiness and self-praise is its function.

There are 52 different types of cetasikas. Some examples of them are feeling, perception (or memory), contact, intention, attention, effort, interest, desire- to- do, restlessness, attachment, conceit, hate, envy, awareness, confidence, detachment, balance of mind, concentration, kindness, compassion. They arise with each moment of consciousness in groupings of certain types. For example, kindness and hate cannot occur together at the same moment, restlessness and balance of mind cannot occur together, compassion and conceit cannot occur together, etc. There are seven of these mental factors which occur with every moment of consciousness: - they are contact, feeling, perception (or memory), intention, concentration, psychic life and attention. They are called the universal cetasikas. There are 6 particulars (i.e. they occur with particular states of consciousness), there are 14 immoral factors, 19 beautiful factors, 3 abstinences, 2 illimitables (compassion and sympathetic joy) and one further factor, wisdom and knowledge.

The final category of absolute realities is material phenomena or rupa. There are 28 classes of rupa, 16 being classified as subtle and 12 as gross. There are the four great elements:-

1. element of earth, or solidity
2. element of water, or cohesion
3. element of fire, or temperature
4. element of wind, or motion

The four great elements always arise with those rupas which are known as the derived rupas. The derived rupas are the physical sense-organs of eye-



sense, ear-sense, taste-sense, etc., and the sense-objects of color, sound, smell and flavor. Other examples of rupa are the male or female characteristic, heart-base, nutritive essence (food), space, lightness, bodily intimation, speech intimation, etc. All that matter consists of is these 28 different types of rupa in different combinations.

Whenever we see, hear, taste, smell or touch an object, that experience, as was mentioned before, is resultant- consciousness (vipaka-citta). It is the result of a deed performed at some time in the past. The area of cause and result (kamma and vipaka) is most important in Abhidhamma. To sort out experience into cause and result can cast our lives into a much clearer perspective.

The Buddha enumerated ten types of moral and skillful action and ten types of immoral or unskillful action through body, speech or mind. Moral action, whenever performed, will always bring a pleasant result at some time in the future. Immoral action will always bring an unpleasant result. The ten immoral actions are:-

1. killing
2. stealing
3. sexual misconduct
4. lying
5. slandering
6. rude speech
7. frivolous talk
8. covetousness
9. ill will
10. wrong view

These ten types of action whenever performed, no matter what the justification that we make for them, are always immoral actions and capable of producing an unpleasant result. This means that abortion, mercy-killing, insect destruction, tax-dodging, abusive speech, etc., are all immoral

actions. It is current in this society and has been in many societies throughout history for men and women to justify certain deeds which they consider in their best interests (for example, to take the lives of other people in wars) but in fact, the Buddha pointed out that destruction of other being's lives is never to the welfare of oneself or the other being. The justification for killing is just thinking, but the actual moment of killing is always immoral and never to anybody's benefit. We have unpleasant moments in our lives and we have pleasant moments. We have sickness, disease, accidents, our husbands or wives leave us, people sometimes abuse us, they misrepresent us, our electrical gadgets break down, our bodies wear out, our children leave us. We meet friendly people, we receive gifts, we have a strong baby, we have good eyesight, we have a beautiful partner, we live in a pleasant house with beautiful children. All of these things happen to us because of deeds performed at some time in the past, we don't know when. We live our lives around the pleasant results that we wish to receive. We want a nice house, we want peace and quiet, we want an excellent record collection, we want to see only the best films, we look forward to delicious, well-prepared food. But these things come to us only because of moral deeds we have performed in the past. The only way to receive more of this is not to climb over the next man, not to cheat on tax, not to lie about our qualifications, not to abuse other people, but to be kind, respectful, generous, honest and upright in character. The Buddha taught quite clearly that it is deeds in the past that determine our life situation right now.

There are 10 types of moral actions:

1. generosity
2. restraint (from lying, killing, etc.)
3. mental development (tranquility and insight)
4. respect (for teachers, parents, the Buddha, etc.)
5. service (being helpful)
6. sharing of merit (with beings in other planes)
7. rejoicing in others' merit
8. listening to Dhamma
9. teaching Dhamma

## 10. straightening one's views (understanding)

Some of these ten types of actions are ones that are not very popular these days. Respect for the teachers and parents, and for other's opinions, is something we don't practice very much. Sharing of merit is not practiced at all in western countries today. It is something difficult for us to understand since we don't admit the existence of other realms of beings. The last three types are concerned with the teaching of Buddha-dhamma. When we teach, listen and understand sincerely then this is a moral action.

Kamma (or karma) can also be understood more precisely as the cetasika or mental factors call intention (cetana). There is intention arising with every moment of consciousness as it is a universal mental factor. When intention is strong enough to motivate deeds through body or speech then the intensity of intention (cetana) is stronger. When intention motivates one of the ten types of moral or immoral actions through body, speech or mind then it is called kamma because it is strong enough to produce a result at some time in the future.

Birth and death are dealt with in minute detail in the Abhidhamma. The Buddha taught that life or existence is a cyclic process with beings dying and passing on to other existences according to their moral and immoral deeds. This is different from other teachings containing the principle of rebirth which maintain that a being can never be born into a more unpleasant existence than their present one. The Buddha maintains that life, far from being necessarily progressive, can for many beings be a destructive and downward process. He likens it a wheel turning around and around with no end to it. Beings are ever repeating mistakes or performing deeds due to their ignorance of the way things are which will bring them more and more unhappiness in the future.

The Buddha enumerated 31 planes of existence through which beings continually pass according to their deeds. There are 4 woeful or unhappy planes, the human plane, 6 planes of angels (or devas) and 20 planes of brahmas or gods. Existence in all of these planes has one thing in common, it is temporary, it does not last. A being born into any plane of existence has to eventually pass out of it and be reborn elsewhere. So then heaven is not the end of it all, it is only one plane of existence from which a being must eventually fall again to a lower existence. Life in the heavenly planes is of course exceedingly pleasant and blissful and lasts for a long, long time compared to human existence.

The lower unhappy planes consist of the hell realms in which there is constant suffering, the realm of titans where beings are constantly fighting one another, the realm of unhappy ghosts where beings wander about in empty landscapes without food or drink or wander about (after their death as a human being) following family and friends or homes they once lived in, unable to communicate with the people they knew, and dependent upon those humans who remember them for food and drink. Finally, the animal realm which is all the birds, animals, insect, fish, etc., that we see or don't see about us. We all pass back and forth through these realms continuously from happy to unhappy and back again, round and round without end.

The Buddha also explained that there has been no beginning to this wheel, to the round of births, and there will be no end as long as there is ignorance of the true nature of life.

The world without end is this round of birth and death. No beginning can be seen of those beings hindered by ignorance, bound by craving running through the round of birth and death. Just as if a man should chop up all of the straws, boughs, twigs and leaves in India and piling them together should lay them in a heap, square by square, saying: 'This is my mother, this is the mother of that mother of mine', -still unsupplied would be the mother's of that man. Nay, to supply them all, the straw, boughs, twigs and leaves in this India would come to an end and be used up, ere this were done.

(from the Grouped Discourses, ii, 178)

The details of the death process at the time at which a being dies and takes rebirth elsewhere in another life are as follows. In the last thought process before death a deed performed somewhere in the past surfaces (it can be from this life or any other life) and becomes the object of that thought process. If there is no deed strong enough at that moment, it will instead be a habitual thought pattern of some sort that becomes the object of that last thought process. Then according to our reaction to that deed or thought, whether it be a wholesome reaction or an unwholesome reaction (kusala or akusala) we will be born in a happy realm if it is wholesome or an unhappy realm if it is unwholesome. For example, if we killed somebody during this life and that deed is the object of thought at that last moment and we react to it with regret or aversion then that is an unwholesome reaction. The following moment is called death-consciousness (cuti-citta). That is the last moment of life. The next moment is called birth-consciousness (patisandhi citta) and that is the first moment of life for the new being. When the last process was unwholesome then the rebirth is in an unhappy plane, say as a dog. That patisandhi citta will be the moment of conception in the womb of the mother.

We have no control over this process. We cannot determine where we will be born next. We cannot arrange things so that at our death the right things will occur to us and we will obtain a happy rebirth. Whatever persons surround us or help us they cannot determine our last thought process. It depends upon deeds in the past what happens to us at death. It is further deeds that determine our body, the family we are born into, whether we will be wealthy or not, whether we will die at an early age; everything that we experience is because of deeds in the past. You can see then how important an understanding of moral and immoral deeds is. Without this understanding beings wander through life sometimes doing the most atrocious things to each other. All of this happens through ignorance of the true nature of the law of cause and effect.

The process by which one comes to understand the truth is also explained in the Abhidhamma. There are four stages of enlightenment. These four stages are called, first the stream-winner, second the once-returner, third the never-returner and fourth the fully-enlightened one. At the first stage, a being has eliminated the first three fetters which bind one to the wheel of existence. These three fetters are wrong view (which is an incorrect view of the way things are, i.e., that there is a self, that there really are permanent people and things rather than just momentary physical and mental phenomena), doubt (about the truth of the Dhamma) and adherence to rule and ritual (that there is a method or a technique or something which one performs that will lead one to enlightenment). Streamwinner (sotapanna) means one has entered the stream to final enlightenment and that there are no more conditions to be born in a lower plane than of a human being. A once-returner (sakadagami) lessens his attachment and aversion. He is called once-returner because he can return only once more to the human plane. A never-returner (anagami) eliminates two further fetters, these being sense-desire and aversion. He has no more desire for sense-objects and no more dislike for unpleasant things. The never-returner does not return to the human plane again. If he dies as an anagami he is born into a god realm where he attains final enlightenment. The last stage is the fully enlightened one (the arahant). He has eliminated the last five fetters which bind him to the wheel of existence. There are attachment to existence in the form-god realms, attachment to existence in the formless-god realm, conceit, restlessness and ignorance. Because of the first of these two fetters beings are born into the god realms. When they are eliminated there is no more desire for any existence at all. There are then, ten fetters which bind us to the wheel of existence.

What happens to an arahant when he dies? He has eliminated all unwholesome tendencies from his character including the desire to go on being born. Having become enlightened during this life, he will die at the time when his lifespan has expired. Since there is no more desire to go on, when the last moment of life for the arahant finishes it is not followed by another rebirth consciousness. When we die, it is immediately followed by another moment (of the next life); when an arahant dies, that is all. No more experience. No more rebirth. This is called by the Buddha the only true peace.

There are three more aspects which should be discussed- The Law of Dependent Origination, the three basic characteristics of existence and the Four Noble Truths.

Dependent Origination is the Buddha's explanation of how states of existence come to be and how they condition each other. States arise dependent on each other in this way-

Dependent on ignorance arises karmic activities

Dependent on karmic activities arises consciousness

Dependent on consciousness arises mind and matter (nama-rupa)

Dependent on mind and matter arise the six-fold bases (the 5 senses and thinking)

Dependent on the six-fold bases arises contact

Dependent on contact arises feeling

Dependent on feeling arises craving

Dependent on craving arises grasping

Dependent on grasping arises becoming

Dependent on becoming arises birth

Dependent on birth arises decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair

Thus arises the whole mass of suffering.

We can see then that at the root of it all is ignorance. That is defined as ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths state that:

1. Life is unsatisfactory or suffering (dukkha).
2. Suffering arises because of desire.
3. There is a path leading to the cessation of suffering.
4. The path leading to the end of suffering is the Eightfold Path.

When one does not understand these truths directly one is subject to continual rebirth in the wheel of existence. The Eightfold Path which is the way leading to the end of suffering is these eight factors:- Right understanding, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Action, livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

It could be pointed out that the Eightfold Path is often taught as a 'path' which one follows by developing each of the factors piece by piece until there are all perfected. In the Abhidhamma it is made clear that the Eightfold Path is in fact only momentary phenomena like everything else. The Eightfold Path is not a 'whole path' which one follows, but at the moment that a wholesome moment of wisdom (the wisdom that understands the true nature of things) arises then it is accompanied by the Eightfold Path factors as mental factors (cetasikas). Five of these factors accompany every moments of true wisdom. The whole eight occur together only at the moments of enlightenment.

Finally, the Buddha also explained that there are three things characterizing all elements of existence:- this is, they are dukkha (they are unsatisfactory, there is no lasting satisfaction in them), they are anicca (they are impermanent, they do not last even for a moment) and they are anatta (there is not a lasting person, self or something in anything, they are all empty of self).

## What is Happening Right Now?

You may wonder what is the point of all these classifications. Are they of any use to one in coming to understanding the truth of the way things are? When the Abhidhamma enumerates lists of types of consciousness and lists of types

of matter this is so that one can understand that this is all that there really is right now. We sit and we talk and we think and we move about but we do not realize that our sitting and talking and thinking, etc., are in fact conditioned by many different things. When we sit down how do we know that we are sitting? You may say, "Well, it is obvious, isn't it?" But 'sitting' is known because of different experiences through the body-sense and the eye perhaps, and we remember that these experiences when occurring all together are conventionally known as sitting. It is, in fact, a type of (body-sense) consciousness which experiences hardness through the body, seeing which sees and memory which remembers what we are doing. Body-sense, seeing and memory are all types of nama which are conditions. They are each different and each have different functions. Hardness is a type of rupa (matter). It cannot know anything about anything. Hardness is not a seat. 'Seat' or 'chair' are conventionally labels we give to other sets of experience through different senses. None of these experiences is a person sitting. Each is different. Each experience occurs at a different moment. So in reality no 'person' exists who is 'sitting' on a 'chair'. There are just different realities occurring one after another through different senses. This may still not seem clear, but perhaps if we apply this knowledge to all of our life, we can see that pain, for example, is just unpleasant result (of deeds in the past), that the aversion to pain is just nama, that the unpleasant feeling when there is pain is also just nama. When people insult us, it is just sound appearing through the ear. It is only when we see and hear 'things' which we don't like that we have all our problems, worries, strife and woe. To understand Abhidhamma is to understand that there is just seeing, hearing, thinking, touching, tasting, etc., but no person in them. This knowledge as it develops, ultimately brings us release from this unsatisfactory wheel of existence.

To finish, a quote from 'The Path of Purity' by Buddhaghosa, a book recognized as the greatest written summary of the Theravadin teachings in existence today:

As long as a man is vague about the world,  
About its origin, about its ceasing,  
About the means that lead to its cessation,  
So long he cannot recognize the truths.