

# **A Critique of the Binary: Ultimate vs. Relative Truth**

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## **The Trap of Knowing Without Seeing**

The Buddhist Abhidhamma represents one of humanity's great attempts at philosophical system-building — ambitious, comprehensive, and unafraid to map the totality of existence. It is a remarkable project worth of admiration. Yet systems of this kind raise an unavoidable question: what exactly are its ideas (“its truths”) meant to illuminate?

Philosophical truths are not merely descriptions of the world; they are attempts to make sense of experience for the beings who live within it. In the West, since at least Socrates, philosophy has largely oriented its enquiry toward human life — what it means to live well, to know oneself, and to act rightly. This is quite parallel to what the Buddha himself was emphasising.

The Abhidhamma shares this concern, but its ambition reaches further — perhaps comparable to a system like Sāṅkhya — in that it seeks to explain the totality of existence, not merely the human portion of it. This is admirable. But it also creates a peculiar danger.

## **The Map and the Territory**

The first danger is, that one can easily be tempted to think that knowing the system means knowing reality — that if we have the

map, we have the territory. This is evidently not true. The map is an outline of the territory. Yet the Abhidhamma, taken at face value, can encourage precisely this confusion.

Consider: if you study the system sincerely and accept its framework as given, you will almost inevitably arrive at certain conclusions. For instance, that the important thing to know is what the world is composed of — its ultimate constituents — rather than what the world means for the being who experiences it. That the study of Abhidhamma categories is more essential than the study of your own lived experience. That consciousness is best understood through tables and typologies — even though memorising how many cetasikas (mental factors) accompany each citta (type of consciousness) may tell you remarkably little about how your own mind actually works.

The system, taken straightforwardly, leads you there. This is not necessarily anyone's fault, but a danger that has to be understood.

## **The Problem of Momentariness**

This tendency is compounded by the doctrine of momentariness. Momentariness, together with its counterpart in matter (the kalāpa theory), declares that the world is ultimately made up of tiny, discrete instances — mind-moments flashing past too fast to be perceived, particles too small to be observed.

This creates two problems. First, it can make the map appear closer to reality than the territory itself. A chart of minute mental events can seem more "real" than the prolonged, messy experience of actually living through a crisis, a relationship, or a moral dilemma.

Second, and more subtly, it undermines the very kind of attention that deeper understanding requires. If everything is momentary, what need is there for the sustained, patient concentration that allows us to understand prolonged phenomena — grief, love, ethical development, the slow unfolding of insight? Momentariness, taken literally, can quietly nullify the relevance of the kind of attention that meditation itself is meant to cultivate.

## **When Philosophy Becomes System**

Then there is the two truths idea itself. According to the Abhidhamma tradition, ultimate truth constitutes precisely the items of Abhidhamma study: particles, mind-moments, mental factors, lists of different consciousnesses. Relative truth is basically everything that anyone actually experiences.

This formulation is crucial to understand. The truths of the Abhidhamma are not presented as philosophical truths — as ideas that illuminate experience from a particular vantage point — but as statements of fact. The distinction is not between timeless truths and truths that hold only in particular circumstances. It is between this precise, limited set of doctrines on the one hand, and everything else on the other — however philosophical, however stripped of circumstantial conditioning.

This can make the system appear more like a dogma than a philosophy. And it carries a hidden reductionist bias: smaller equals more fundamental, more abstract equals more real. This is essentially a materialist assumption smuggled into Buddhist thought.

It is worth noting that in the Pali suttas themselves, the word "paramattha" — ultimate — appears almost exclusively in con-

nection with Nibbāna. It points to the highest goal, the end of suffering, the unconditioned. It does not describe a layer of reality hidden beneath the one we experience every day. The commentarial tradition shifted the meaning considerably.

## **What Is Lost**

What gets lost in all of this is human experience itself. If ultimate truth is abstract and technical, then your actual life — your relationships, your ethics, your psychological growth — becomes "merely conventional," merely relative, not quite worth serious philosophical attention. The primary declaration of the Abhidhamma becomes "what there is" — an inventory of constituents — rather than the more philosophical and spiritually relevant question: "What is the meaning of what is experienced?"

This perspective, I suspect, springs from a kind of excessive extroversion — a looking outward at the furniture of the universe while neglecting the being who is doing the looking. The idea that something can be ultimate for everyone and anyone, everywhere and always, ignores a basic philosophical reality: that the questioning consciousness must always be taken into consideration. What you can see depends on what you are. What counts as "ultimate" depends on where you stand.

And yet — lest this sound like mere relativism — it is worth noting an irony. A purely subjective view, where everything is just "my perspective," could only be fully true for a being who had no personal kamma left at all, and hence was no longer aware of anything particular. For the rest of us, our kamma — personal and shared — shapes what we can see, and what we can see deter-

mines what is true for us. This is not relativism. It is realism about the conditions of knowing.

## **A Different Model**

What if this framework is wrong? What if truth isn't binary at all, but for instance hierarchical and developmental?

## **Truth as a Moving Horizon**

Here is a different way to look at it. What counts as "ultimate truth" for you depends on what kind of being you are and what stage of development you have reached. If you live in a world where you know nothing beyond your immediate sensory experience, then the world of your senses is ultimate truth for you. It would be better for you to think of the earth as flat and the sun rising and setting on your horizon — because that is the world that presents itself to you, and working within that framework, you can learn genuine things about how your world operates.

Only as you mature — as you refine your attention and deepen your understanding — what was once "ultimate" becomes merely a stepping stone. The flat earth gives way to a sphere. The sun does not rise; the earth rotates. What was once ultimate becomes relative, and a broader truth takes its place.

This does not mean the flat earth was "false." It was true enough for where you were. It was ultimate for that stage. You outgrew it — not because it was wrong, but because you developed the capacity to see more.

Learning in this way, turning your sense perceptions into knowledge, with time you will find you less and less require "sparks" of

sense perception from without. Slowly a fire gets kindled within, that keeps going by itself without easily dying out. You require less and less a sun that daily rises on your horizon, as you yourself become more and more sun-like. Slowly the light that is within starts illuminating the worldly forms without. And as the fire of that knowledge becomes more and more refined, it becomes ever more capable of embracing a wider and wider scope of truth.

## **Different Truths for Different Beings**

Now extend this principle beyond human development. Consider that there might be different kinds of beings, with different perceptual capacities, operating in different realms of existence.

Traditional Buddhism recognises this: humans, devas, brahmas of varying subtlety, and beings in lower realms. Each experiences reality differently. Each has access to different domains of truth.

Here is what I suspect: what we call "ultimate truth" in the Abhidhamma might actually be a patchwork of truths ultimate for different classes of beings.

Take particle physics, for example. Scientists study the behaviour of subatomic particles, quantum fields, the fabric of spacetime, and treat these as "fundamental" — more real than organisms, more ultimate than human psychology. But consider another possibility: what if particle physics is simply the experiential domain of a particular class of beings — say, the first category of arūpa brahma? What if physicists, using their instruments, are essentially tuning into a perceptual range that is natural for those beings, but not particularly relevant for human liberation?

Meanwhile, a deva — whose natural domain is emotion, beauty, pleasure — might find human psychology more "ultimate" than particles. And a human trying to end suffering might find ethics and intentional action more fundamental than either.

None of these perspectives is absolutely more "ultimate" than the others. They are just different domains, relevant to different kinds of beings.

There may well be transpersonal wisdom — truths that transcend our ordinary human perspective. But as long as we have not transcended our personal kamma, what could be the use of it? Transpersonal truth becomes meaningful only when you have matured into the capacity to recognise it. Until then, it is just someone else's report.

## The Hierarchy of Natural Laws

In my own work, I have found it exceedingly useful to map experience according to the five niyāma — the natural laws that govern different domains of existence:

- **Utu Niyāma** — Physical law: matter, elements, the environment.
- **Bīja Niyāma** — Organic law: the life-faculty. Birth, growth, eating, aging, dying. This is where most of human biological life sits.
- **Citta Niyāma** — Psychological law: emotions, thoughts, mental states. The foundational domain for devas and brahmas.
- **Kamma Niyāma** — Volitional law: ethics, intention, will. The capacity to act and shape your future. This essentially belongs to consciousness.

- **Dhamma Niyāma** — Spiritual law: the pull toward awakening, the path of liberation.

Human life is not just one of these. It is distributed across all of them. Your body operates under bīja niyāma. Your emotions under citta niyāma. Your ethical choices under kamma niyāma. Your spiritual aspiration under dhamma niyāma.

And none of these is more "ultimate" than the others in an absolute sense. They are just different levels of organisation, different ways reality manifests.

For most human beings, working with bīja, citta, and kamma niyāma — understanding your biology, your emotions, your ethics — is more relevant than trying to perceive the particle-level operations of utu niyāma. And this makes them philosophically speaking a more "ultimate" concern.

## **Group Kamma and Shared Truth**

There is another dimension to consider: the role of shared kamma in shaping what counts as truth.

Human beings share a great deal of kamma in common. We share a biological form, a range of sensory capacities, a set of emotional and cognitive tendencies. This shared kamma creates a shared world — and within that shared world, certain truths become "ultimately fundamental" for all members of the group.

The law of gravity, for instance, is not ultimate in some cosmic, being-independent sense. But it is ultimate for all beings who share the kamma of having a physical body on this earth. It is ultimate within its domain.

Similarly, the truth of suffering — that craving leads to pain, that clinging creates bondage — may not be ultimate for a being who has transcended craving entirely. But for human beings, whose shared kamma includes a deep tendency toward craving, it is as ultimate as any truth can be.

What counts as "ultimately true" for a group is shaped by the kamma that group shares. Change the group, change the kamma, and you change what is ultimate.

## **Two Paths Beyond: Roots and Flowers**

Through breaking out of the spell of certain group kamma — either through meditation or through scientific enquiry — we can discover truths that transcend our ordinary shared perspective.

But these discoveries take two very different forms.

The first is the path of roots: digging deeper into what underlies our shared experience. This is largely the scientific approach. Through careful observation and analysis, we discover truths that are more fundamental — not just true for all humans of a particular group, but for all humans, or all living things, or all matter. In this direction, ultimate truth is what always was. We are uncovering the foundations.

The second is the path of flowers: growing beyond our current form into something new. A flower, after all, represents the highest possibility of a plant, a peak of development that not all plants reach. It symbolizes what we might become. This is largely the contemplative or religious approach. Through meditation, ethical refinement, and the cultivation of higher states of consciousness, we do not just dig deeper into what is — we catch a

glimpse of what we might become. In this direction, ultimate truth is what should become of what already is.

Both paths are valid. Both can lead beyond the ordinary. But they are fundamentally different in character. The scientist discovers what was always there beneath the surface. The contemplative becomes something that was not there before.

## **You Cannot Skip Steps**

Here is the practical implication: you cannot skip developmental stages. Without sufficient experiential grounding, highly abstract analyses of momentary consciousness may risk becoming disconnected from direct observation.

If you have not yet worked through your attachment to pleasure and aversion to pain, trying to perceive kalāpas is a distraction. You are reaching for someone else's truth before you have matured into your own.

Metaphysics is only useful when it maps onto your actual experience. When you can feel mental factors arising. When you can see the relationship between intention and result. When you have refined your attention enough that the categories the Abhidhamma offers actually help you see more clearly.

Otherwise, it is just vocabulary. Ideas floating in the head with no anchor in lived reality.

And when people are excessively concerned with what is "ultimate truth" — when that question dominates their practice — it may suggest something uncomfortable: that they are too unaware of their own individual situation, too engaged with external factors, too busy cataloguing the universe to notice the being who is doing the cataloguing.

## **Liberation as Completion, Not Accumulation**

So what does this mean for liberation?

Liberation does not mean climbing all the way up some ladder of ultimate truths. It does not mean you need to perceive like an arūpa brahma or master every domain of the Abhidhamma.

Liberation means becoming fully rounded at your own level — complete according to your own standards, with nothing left unresolved.

Think of it like this: you have a certain scope of being. A certain range of experience, a certain set of capacities. Liberation means you have integrated that scope completely. You have seen through the patterns that cause suffering at your level. You have completed yourself.

If you know less, you need less to be whole. If you have expanded into more, you need to integrate more. But the principle is the same: completion, not accumulation.

Now, I am not saying you cannot transcend human life. The Buddha clearly taught that you can. To become an anāgāmī, a brahma's perspective seems to be a natural requirement — a trans-human view in which the pull of the sensory world has lost its grip. But even that is not about acquiring more knowledge. It is about maturing your consciousness so that a broader domain becomes accessible to you.

And you do that not by memorising tables, but by refining your attention, deepening your ethics, and working honestly with your own experience.

## **The Fire Within**

There is a symbolic image worth returning to: the fire of knowledge.

At first, you need external sparks — Teachers, texts, sense impressions. You are dependent on what comes from outside to illuminate your world. But as you work with those sparks — as you think, reflect, meditate, live ethically — a fire gets kindled within. Slowly it grows. It needs less and less fuel from outside. It starts burning on its own. Eventually, you become sun-like. The light that is within starts illuminating the world without.

This is what makes metaphysics come alive. Not because you have memorised more, but because you have matured the capacity to see what the teachings were pointing at all along.

And as that fire within becomes more refined, it becomes capable of embracing more and more — eventually, even infinity itself.

## **A Toolkit, Not a Dogma**

So where does this leave the Abhidhamma?

Personally, I still love the aspiration of the Abhidhamma — the attempt to map the totality of existence, to create a comprehensive framework for understanding reality. That is a noble project.

Nevertheless I myself reject its rigidity. The insistence on momentariness. The fixed number of mental factors. The binary split between ultimate and relative. The assumption that smaller equals more fundamental.

The Abhidhamma is a toolkit, not a dogma. It is a collection of maps for different domains, different stages, different kinds of beings. Use the parts that help you see more clearly. Leave the rest

until you have matured into them — or set them aside entirely if they are not relevant to your path.

The Buddha was not too concerned with teaching a fixed metaphysical system. He taught a method for maturing your consciousness. The teachings are developmental scaffolding. They shift as you shift. What is ultimate today becomes relative tomorrow — and that is not a failure. That is growth.

## **Conclusion: Learning to Look**

So here is what I am proposing.

Stop treating truth as binary. Start treating it as developmental.

Stop assuming that ultimate truth is abstract, technical, and disconnected from your life. Start recognising that your life — your biology, your emotions, your ethics — is its own legitimate domain of truth.

Stop trying to skip steps. Start working with what you can actually see. Stop memorising categories. Start refining your attention until those categories become recognisable in your own experience. And above all, stop asking "What is the ultimate truth?" and start asking: "What aspects of truth are accessible and transformative at my present stage of understanding?"

Because that is what the Buddha actually taught. Not a map of the universe, but a method for growing your capacity to see. The teachings do not give you ultimate truth. They give you a way to mature into it. And that maturation has no final resting place. It just gets subtler, richer, more intimate.

The measure of truth is not complexity. It is clarity. And the measure of your progress is not how much you know. It is how clearly you see.