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DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUTTA AND ABHIDHAMMA APPROACHES TO KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

In early Buddhist thought, the question of knowledge is inseparable from the problem of suffering and liberation. Two major canonical collections—the Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka—present distinct yet complementary approaches to knowledge. The Sutta approach is dialogical, pragmatic, and liberation-oriented. It presents knowledge (ñāṇa) as experiential insight arising from ethical conduct, meditation, and direct realization of reality as impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and non-self (anattā). Knowledge in the Suttas is not primarily theoretical; it is transformative, guiding the practitioner toward awakening through the realization of the Four Noble Truths.

In contrast, the Abhidhamma approach is analytical, systematic, and phenomenological. It seeks to classify and define the ultimate constituents of experience (dhammas), offering a detailed account of mental and material phenomena. Knowledge here is refined into precise categories, such as consciousness (citta), mental factors (cetasikas), and material phenomena (rūpa), analyzed in terms of conditional relations. The Abhidhamma does not replace the Sutta teachings but elaborates them by constructing a comprehensive epistemological and psychological framework.

This essay explores the differences and complementarities between the Sutta and Abhidhamma approaches to knowledge within Buddhist epistemology. It examines their respective methodologies, treatment of truth, analysis of consciousness, and orientation toward liberation (Nibbāna). While the Sutta Pitaka emphasizes practical wisdom gained through lived experience, the Abhidhamma Pitaka deepens that wisdom through rigorous analytical investigation. Together, they represent two dimensions of a unified Buddhist path: one experiential and instructional, the other systematic and philosophical.

Keywords: Sutta Pitaka, Abhidhamma Pitaka, Buddhist Epistemology, Four Noble Truths, Citta, Nibbana

Introduction

Buddhist philosophy places knowledge at the center of spiritual transformation. Unlike speculative metaphysics, early Buddhism treats knowledge as a means to end suffering. The canonical sources of Theravāda Buddhism preserve two principal modes of articulating this



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knowledge: the discursive teachings of the Sutta Pitaka and the systematic analyses of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. Although both collections share the same soteriological aim—liberation from saṃsāra—they differ significantly in style, structure, and epistemological emphasis.

The Sutta Pitaka records sermons, dialogues, and practical instructions attributed to the Buddha and his close disciples. Knowledge in this context is presented as insight (*vipassanā*) arising from moral discipline (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The teachings are often situational and adapted to the capacities of different listeners. Thus, knowledge is framed in relational and pragmatic terms: it is what enables one to understand the Four Noble Truths and progress along the Noble Eightfold Path.

In contrast, the Abhidhamma Pitaka represents a more scholastic development within the early Buddhist tradition. It reorganizes doctrinal material into taxonomies and matrices, seeking to analyze experience into its ultimate constituents (*paramattha dhammas*). Here, knowledge becomes a matter of discriminative understanding: distinguishing wholesome from unwholesome states, identifying causal relations, and clarifying the precise structure of consciousness. The Abhidhamma's method resembles philosophical phenomenology, as it examines the structure of subjective experience in minute detail.

The difference between these two approaches is not a conflict but a shift in perspective. The Suttas prioritize existential transformation and direct realization; the Abhidhamma prioritizes conceptual clarity and analytical precision. Both affirm that ignorance (*avijjā*) is the root of suffering and that knowledge dispels this ignorance. Yet the path to such knowledge is articulated differently—through narrative and exhortation in the Suttas, through classification and abstraction in the Abhidhamma.

This essay investigates these differences under several thematic headings: Buddhist epistemology, the nature of the Sutta and Abhidhamma methodologies, the interpretation of the Four Noble Truths, the analysis of consciousness (*citta*), and the conception of *Nibbāna*. By examining these themes, we gain a clearer understanding of how early Buddhism integrates experiential insight with systematic thought.

Buddhist Epistemology

Buddhist epistemology is fundamentally pragmatic and soteriological. Knowledge is valued not as an end in itself but as a means to liberation. In early Buddhism, valid knowledge arises from direct experience (*paccakkha*), careful reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*), and meditative insight. The Buddha discouraged metaphysical speculation that did not conduce to liberation, emphasizing instead the practical understanding of suffering and its cessation.



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In the Sutta tradition, knowledge is frequently described as “seeing things as they really are” (yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana). This vision is cultivated through ethical living and meditative discipline. The epistemic model is experiential: insight arises from mindful observation of bodily and mental processes. Such knowledge transforms perception and leads to dispassion. The Abhidhamma tradition refines this model by analyzing the components of experience. It distinguishes between conventional truth (sammuti-sacca) and ultimate truth (paramattha-sacca). Conventional truth refers to everyday designations such as “person” or “self,” while ultimate truth refers to irreducible phenomena—moments of consciousness, mental factors, and material elements. Epistemologically, this distinction allows for a deeper level of analysis, in which knowledge becomes the discernment of ultimate realities.

Another key feature of Buddhist epistemology is conditionality (paṭiccasamuppāda). Knowledge involves understanding the causal structure of phenomena. Ignorance conditions volitional formations; formations condition consciousness; and so forth. Insight into conditionality undermines attachment and reveals the impermanent and selfless nature of existence.

Thus, the Sutta approach emphasizes direct insight into conditional processes, while the Abhidhamma provides a systematic map of those processes. Together, they form a comprehensive epistemology grounded in experience, analysis, and liberation.

Sutta Pitaka

The Sutta Pitaka is composed of five Nikāyas and contains discourses attributed to the historical Buddha. Its primary concern is guiding practitioners toward awakening. Knowledge is conveyed through dialogues, similes, parables, and structured teachings such as the Noble Eightfold Path.

In the Suttas, knowledge is inseparable from practice. The Buddha frequently tailors his teaching to the disposition of the listener. This adaptive pedagogy reflects an epistemology grounded in lived reality. The aim is not to construct a philosophical system but to facilitate insight into impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

The Sutta method also emphasizes verification. Practitioners are encouraged to test the teachings in their own experience. This empirical spirit is evident in discourses that stress personal realization rather than blind faith. Knowledge is validated through transformation: greed, hatred, and delusion diminish as insight deepens.

Moreover, the Suttas often present knowledge in ethical terms. Right View (sammā-diṭṭhi) is the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path and serves as the foundation for further progress. Thus, knowledge is both cognitive and moral.



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In summary, the Sutta Pitaka presents a holistic and practice-oriented approach to knowledge. It prioritizes clarity, accessibility, and transformative power over analytical detail.

Abhidhamma Pitaka

The Abhidhamma Pitaka represents a systematic reorganization of the Buddha's teachings. It seeks to analyze experience into its fundamental components (dhammas) and to explain their interrelations.

Unlike the narrative style of the Suttas, the Abhidhamma employs matrices, enumerations, and technical terminology. It classifies consciousness into various types, identifies numerous mental factors, and distinguishes wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral states. This analytical precision supports meditative insight by clarifying the structure of experience.

The Abhidhamma also elaborates the theory of momentariness: phenomena arise and pass away in rapid succession. Knowledge consists in discerning these fleeting events without superimposing a notion of self. By reducing experience to impersonal processes, the Abhidhamma deepens the insight already encouraged in the Suttas.

Furthermore, the Abhidhamma develops a sophisticated account of conditional relations, detailing multiple modes of causality. This contributes to a nuanced epistemology in which knowledge is the recognition of lawful patterns rather than enduring substances.

Thus, the Abhidhamma Pitaka offers a philosophical and psychological expansion of the practical teachings found in the Suttas.

Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths constitute the foundation of Buddhist doctrine and practice. First proclaimed in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, they summarize the essence of the Buddha's awakening and provide the structural framework for Buddhist epistemology and soteriology. Rather than being abstract metaphysical propositions, the Four Noble Truths are experiential insights to be understood, realized, and cultivated.

The first Noble Truth is the truth of suffering (dukkha). It teaches that conditioned existence is marked by unsatisfactoriness. Birth, aging, illness, and death are forms of suffering; so too are sorrow, lamentation, and despair. Even pleasurable experiences are ultimately unsatisfactory because they are impermanent. In epistemological terms, recognizing dukkha requires honest observation of lived experience. It is not pessimism but clear-sighted realism about the conditioned nature of life.

The second Noble Truth identifies the origin of suffering (samudaya), which is craving (taṇhā). Craving manifests as desire for sensual pleasure, desire for existence, and desire for



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non-existence. This craving arises dependent on ignorance (avijjā), the fundamental misperception of reality as permanent and self-based. Knowledge, therefore, begins with understanding how craving operates within one's own mind. Insight into causality reveals that suffering is not random but conditioned.

The third Noble Truth proclaims the cessation of suffering (nirodha). When craving is extinguished, suffering ceases. This cessation is Nibbāna, the unconditioned state beyond birth and death. The realization of cessation is not annihilation but liberation from attachment and delusion. Epistemologically, this truth affirms that knowledge has a transformative endpoint: it culminates in freedom.

The fourth Noble Truth outlines the path (magga) leading to the cessation of suffering, known as the Noble Eightfold Path. This path includes Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. The path integrates ethical discipline, mental cultivation, and wisdom. Knowledge is both the beginning and culmination of this path: Right View initiates practice, and deeper insight completes it.

Within the Sutta Pitaka, the Four Noble Truths are presented as tasks: suffering is to be understood, its origin abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path developed. In the Abhidhamma Pitaka, these truths are further analyzed into specific mental and material phenomena, offering doctrinal precision.

Ultimately, the Four Noble Truths provide a comprehensive framework for understanding reality. They transform knowledge from mere conceptual understanding into liberating insight, guiding practitioners from ignorance to awakening.

Citta

Citta, commonly translated as “consciousness” or “mind,” occupies a central position in Buddhist philosophy and epistemology. In early Buddhist teachings, particularly within the Sutta Pitaka, citta is described functionally as that which knows or experiences an object. It arises dependent on conditions, especially the interaction between a sense organ and its corresponding object. Thus, eye-consciousness arises dependent on the eye and visible forms; ear-consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, and so forth. In this sense, citta is not a permanent entity but a dynamic and conditioned process.

The Suttas emphasize the ethical and transformative dimension of citta. The mind can be defiled by greed, hatred, and delusion, or purified through mindfulness and wisdom. Mental cultivation (bhāvanā) involves observing the arising and passing away of mental states, thereby



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weakening attachment. Knowledge, therefore, is closely linked to understanding the conditioned and impermanent nature of citta.

The Abhidhamma Pitaka provides a more detailed and systematic analysis of citta. It classifies consciousness into numerous types based on ethical quality (wholesome, unwholesome, resultant, functional) and sphere of experience (sense-sphere, fine-material sphere, immaterial sphere, supramundane). Each moment of citta arises with associated mental factors (cetasikas) and ceases immediately, giving way to another moment. This doctrine of momentariness reinforces the principle of non-self (anattā), since there is no enduring mind-substance underlying these fleeting events.

Thus, in both Sutta and Abhidhamma traditions, citta is understood as a conditioned, impermanent process. However, while the Suttas present it in practical and ethical terms, the Abhidhamma elaborates it through precise psychological classification. Together, these perspectives deepen the understanding of consciousness as central to liberation.

Nibbana

Nibbāna (Sanskrit: Nirvāṇa) is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice and the culmination of liberating knowledge. In early Buddhist teachings, especially within the Sutta Pitaka, Nibbāna is described as the cessation of suffering (dukkha) and the extinguishing of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). The term literally means “blowing out” or “extinguishing,” symbolizing the quenching of the fires of craving that sustain the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra).

In the Suttas, Nibbāna is often portrayed in experiential and negative terms—“the unborn,” “the unconditioned,” “the deathless.” Such descriptions indicate that Nibbāna transcends ordinary conditioned phenomena. It is not a place or a heavenly realm but a state of liberation realized through wisdom. The attainment of Nibbāna occurs when one fully understands the Four Noble Truths and eradicates ignorance. Thus, Nibbāna represents the highest form of knowledge: direct realization of reality free from distortion.

The Abhidhamma Pitaka offers a more technical explanation. It defines Nibbāna as the unconditioned element (asaṅkhata dhamma), distinct from all conditioned mental and material phenomena. Unlike conditioned dhammas, which arise and pass away, Nibbāna is not produced by causes and does not undergo change. It is experienced through supramundane consciousness (lokuttara citta) at the moment of enlightenment.

Epistemologically, Nibbāna is not conceptual knowledge but transformative insight. It marks the complete destruction of ignorance and craving. While the Sutta approach emphasizes its experiential peace and freedom, the Abhidhamma clarifies its ontological status as the sole



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unconditioned reality. Together, these perspectives present Nibbāna as both the goal and fulfillment of Buddhist knowledge.

Conclusion

The comparative study of the Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka reveals two distinct yet harmonious approaches to knowledge within early Buddhism. Both traditions share a common objective: the eradication of ignorance (avijjā) and the realization of liberation. However, they differ in method, style, and emphasis.

The Sutta approach is practical, dialogical, and transformative. It presents knowledge as direct insight into lived experience, particularly through understanding the Four Noble Truths and cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path. In this framework, knowledge is inseparable from ethical conduct and meditation. It is verified through personal realization and measured by the reduction of greed, hatred, and delusion. The language of the Suttas is accessible and often metaphorical, designed to guide practitioners toward experiential wisdom.

In contrast, the Abhidhamma approach is analytical and systematic. It reorganizes the teachings into precise classifications of mental and material phenomena, offering a detailed account of consciousness (citta), mental factors, and conditional relations. Knowledge here becomes discriminative awareness of ultimate realities (paramattha dhammas). Through rigorous analysis, the Abhidhamma clarifies the structure of experience and deepens insight into impermanence and non-self.

Despite these differences, the two approaches are not contradictory. Rather, they complement each other. The Suttas provide the practical path and existential orientation, while the Abhidhamma supplies the philosophical and psychological framework that refines understanding. Together, they form a comprehensive Buddhist epistemology in which knowledge is both experiential and analytical, culminating in the realization of Nibbāna.

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