

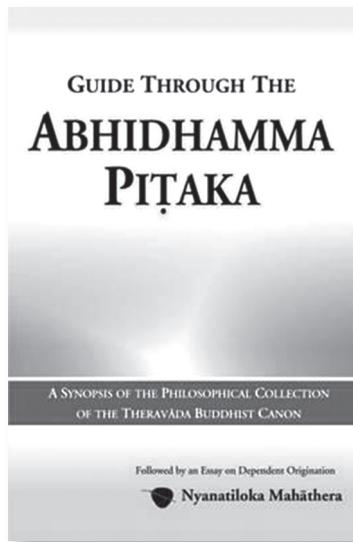
BOOK REVIEW

A GUIDE THROUGH THE ABHIDHAMMA (PART I)



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by

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This review of *A Guide through the Abhidhamma* will be in two parts: first will be a review of the detailed guide that Nyanatiloka compiled, the second will be a review of his essay on the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* that he included at the end of the guide. The second review will be published in the second issue of the JIBSC.

The first chapter of ‘*A Guide through the Abhidhamma*’ discusses and summarizes the main points of the *Dhammasaṅgani*. The thing that I enjoyed most about this chapter is the table of *cetisikas* presented by Nyanatiloka. In the

original Dhammasaṅgāṇī, there are 56 *cetisikas* presented in the wholesome consciousness. However, many of these *cetisikas* are quite similar as they represent different aspects of one quality of consciousness, for example, the quality of concentration is represented by a few *cetisikas* including one pointedness and tranquility. In the 12th century, Acariya Anuruddha took these 56 *cetisikas* and reduced them to 38 in the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, combining many *cetisikas* that represent different aspects of the same characteristics of consciousness in to one inclusive quality, e.g. concentration. Nyanatiloka constructs a graph that lists all original 56 *cetisikas* and Acariya Anuruddha's 38. The graph further explains which original qualities where combined with which of the newer ones. For me personally, this is an invaluable table in doing research that involves the original Dhammasaṅgāṇī matrix of *kusala cetisikas* and the more commonly used reduced matrix of Anuruddha.

The second chapter is an explanation of the Vibhaṅga, the second book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. The Vibhaṅga is a large compilation of lists expounded by the Buddha in the Nikāyas including an explanation for each list in the context of the *suttas* as well as a more theoretical explanation especially for the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Nyanatiloka gives an account for each list found in the Vibhaṅga, as well as very elegant summaries for each list. These teachings are laid out very clearly in a table at the beginning of the chapter, with summaries coming after, making this particular chapter a wonderful companion to the Vibhaṅga, both as an easy reference for the lists as well as quick explanations for said lists.

The 3rd chapter consists of excerpts and explanations of the extremely subtle and logical treatise of the Dhātukathā, the third book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. The Dhātukathā is a collection of various kinds of phenomena which are then analyzed as to their relation to the *pañca khandhā*, the āyatana and the *dhātus* in regards to 14 different categories of comparison. The original is a very terse yet very involved series of permutations that require great care when studying. Without going into details of this exhausting system in this review, I can say that Nyanatiloka does a tremendous job in presenting these systems in a more simplified manner. Nyanatiloka lists out the different categories while providing two tables, one for phenomena and one for the *pañca khandhā*, the āyatana and the *dhātus* that the first list is compared to. Nyanatiloka then goes on to cite examples from the original Dhātukathā, giving explanations of each specific phenomenon and what it is referring to. I find this chapter a wonderful aid to the complex system of the Dhātukathā and would implore its use to any serious investigation of the original.

The 4th chapter of this the book is a very short synopsis of the Puggalapaññatti, Nyanatiloka gives a general account of how the 5th book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka is structured with some useful examples to give the reader a feel for this treatise of conceptual reality.

The 5th chapter is a very impressive overview of the fifth book of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, the *Kathāvatthu*, which is done in an impressively small amount of space. In 27 pages, Nyanatiloka not only gives a brief history of the schisms within the early *Sangha*, but provides a graph of all 18 schools that are mentioned in the *Kathāvatthu*. Nyanatiloka then gives a summary of the events leading up to the 3rd Buddhist council held for the purpose of reestablishing the exact teachings of the Buddha. This is then followed up with a remarkable account of all 219 controversies presented at the council.

What I liked most about the sixth chapter of A Guide through the Abhidhamma, was the use of Venn diagrams as a tool to explain the logical discourse of the *Yamaka*. The *Yamaka*, being the 6th book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, is a massive presentation of logical permutations upon several concepts of the *Dhamma* by comparing one concept to itself in the context of the *pancha khandha*, the *āyatana* and the *dhātus*. For example, the *Yamaka* asks if everything that is called *rūpa* included in the *rūpa khandha*, and then answers that *piya-rūpa* is a *rūpa* but not included in the *khandha*. Nyanatiloka takes a few of these examples and shows the logical inference through the use of Venn diagrams, clearly showing how one aspect of a phenomenon exists in relation to another aspect of a broader phenomenon. The Venn diagrams show possibly difficult permutations of deduction in a simple graph, thus giving the reader a model in which to apply all the modes of inference presented in the *Yamaka* for easier understanding.

I will not spend long on the seventh chapter, that being a summary of the 7th book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka the *Patthāna*, as I will go into much more detail about it in part two of this review. The *Patthāna*, widely regarded as the most important, and most difficult, of the seven books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, is a treatise of the 24 different conditions within Buddhist metaphysics. Nyanatiloka gives an extensive and thorough presentation of this massive teaching, giving an account of all 24 conditions and their relation to four modes of origination: the positive method, the negative method, the positive-negative method, and the negative-positive method. This is a very impressive summary of the epitome of Buddhist theory given by Nyanatiloka as he offers examples of each condition with detailed explanations.

If I were to have any complaints about this intricate and sophisticated guide, it would be that it is too concise in that it carries such a vast amount of information in such a small amount of space. However, this turns out to be one of the guides most endearing qualities, having a vast wealth of knowledge at hand in such a compact book can be invaluable.

Whether for a Buddhist theory enthusiast, or the serious Abhidhamma scholar, the ‘Guide through the Abhidhamma’ should prove to be a most advantageous tool in not only getting to know the Abhidhamma Piṭaka itself, but also in deep and penetrating academic work within said Piṭaka. Its utility is much more than just being a quick reference, though it is a wonderful apparatus in this regard, it is also a source of original perspective from Nyanatiloka, offering new context to this ancient masterpiece. One must have a decent grasp on what the Abhidhamma is and some basic theory behind it before this guide will be of any use, but with a preliminary understanding of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka itself, the guide will help immensely in both navigating the giant tome and in better penetrating its knowledge.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Phra Sigambhirayarn, Pāli IX, Assoc. Prof., M.A. (Buddhist Studies), received his Ph.D. (Pāli and Buddhist Studies) from BHU (Banaras Hindu University), India. At Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) on which he sat as the Dean of Graduate School during 1998-2006 (appointed two times), he wrote four books (in Thai): Mahayana Buddhism (2000), Buddhist Philosophy (2001), Buddhism and Modern Technology (2002), Tibetan Buddhist Culture (2004) and many articles. In 2003, he received the *Sema Dhammacakka* (The Golden Pillar of the Dhamma), the Annual Award for Benefactors of Buddhism. Presently, Phra Sigambhirayarn is an MCU Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, and a Director of International Buddhist Studies College (IBSC) in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Thailand.

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