

Applied Abhidharma: Personal Transformation through Wisdom, Faith and Grace

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Abstract Submitted Date
August 31, 2025

Artical Submitted Date
October 2, 2025

Artical Reviewed Date
October 22, 2025

Artical Accepted Date
November 6, 2025

Date of Publication
April 07, 2026

Abstract

The Abhidharma is a systematic and analytical insight into the nature of mind, causality, and morality. This topic focuses on the daily practice of Abhidharma through wisdom, faith, and grace, for personal transformation. It provides an analytical approach to the Buddha's ultimate philosophy, enabling people to adopt a metaphorical, non-theist approach and a soteriological way of understanding that explores how wisdom (Prajñā), faith (Sraddhā), and grace (Anugraha) function to foster personal transformation. In the general approach, the Abhidharma is primarily based on the wandering mind that can be controlled by wisdom. Wisdom cultivates insight into the impermanent and interdependent nature of phenomena, enabling one to overcome ignorance and cultivate a deeper understanding. Additionally, on the other hand, it is not only the systematic and analytical insight into the nature of mind and arrangement of dharmas in numerical order, but it is a faith and grace in God, which elevates the power of the mind by developing the five factors of absorption and its controlling faculties, which are chain-related to faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. In the non-Buddhist tradition, faith is often regarded as blind adherence, whereas in the Buddhist tradition, faith is understood as confidence in the possibility of achieving success. One's own mind and effort determine one's progress and destiny. Mind and effort are the key to self-development. Grace (Anugraha) is not an unmerited gift of God, but rather the beauty of behavior; therefore, it is considered a compassionate support of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, or the karmic result of personal power through wholesome actions. Through a comparative study of both Pali and Sanskrit Abhidharma traditions, descriptive and interpretive methodological approaches are employed to examine how the Abhidharma doctrine can be applied for personal transformation. This paper outlines moral and existential changes, in which grace actualizes the liberated potential of being, faith sustains drive, and wisdom sharpens understanding.

Keywords : Abhidharma, Personal Transformation, Wisdom (Prajñā), Faith (Sraddhā), Grace (Anugraha)

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Introduction

Abhidharma is a Buddhist canonical text that contains a detailed doctrinal presentation of the Buddhist sutras. It is a compound of two words, *Abhi* and *Dharma*, in which *Abhi* means great, and *Dharma* is the law of nature. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, it is an abstract and highly technical systemization of the Buddhist doctrine, which is simultaneously a philosophy, psychology, and an ethics, all integrated into the framework of a program for liberation. Later, it was developed in large treatises (*Sastra*) and their commentaries (*Atthakatha*).

Generally, Abhidharma is found in Pali and Sanskrit versions, Theravadin and Sarvastivadin Abhidharma. A Chinese fragmentary version was also found in a Sanskrit translation. It is considered the description of the ultimate truth (*Paramatthasatya*), while the sutras were considered 'conventional' (*Sambhidhisatya*) truths, which are the subjects of the three marks of existence, impermanence, impersonality, and insubstantiality, taught by the Buddha in every experience of daily life. Thus, the Sutras are for conventional truth, and Abhidharma is concerned with ultimate truth (Santina 274). Likewise, when Abhidharma was later interpreted in the Sarvāstivāda tradition, Vasubandhu emphasized conventional truth and ultimate truth to justify his opinion by raising the question of the four noble truths. These are related only to suffering despite the pleasant (*Sukha*) feelings that exist and are experienced by sentient beings (Hanner 8). In general, the Philosophy and psychology of Abhidharma is an analysis of consciousness (*Citta*), mental factors (*Cetasikas*), matter (*Rupa*), and conditionality that is the systematic path for liberation.

According to Buddhaghosa, the Abhidharma was first preached by Buddha in the heaven of the *Tāvātimsa* realm of gods to his mother. “*Abhidhammo nāmo esa sabbaññubuddhānam yeva visayo na aññesam visayo*. It is the sphere of the omniscient Buddhas, but not the sphere of others (Guenther 3). This statement serves multiple purposes, such as the Buddha’s teachings being merit-oriented to help others achieve liberation. It is also a higher level, as well as the ethical and moral teachings of the Buddha, that are directly connected to the law of *karma*, categorizing one’s actions into the six realms of existence. Such as the god realm or the divine, is a symbolic representation of the fact that sensuous objects are directed towards the source of all things. This state of fruition is full of pleasure, where nothing needs to be done, but in the absence of merit, this realm lies under the *samsara*.

Similarly, whether the soteriological aim is to attain liberation through the purification of the mind, enlightenment can be gained either through *Sraddhānusarin*, which is trust in the teacher (*Sraddhā*) or confidence in oneself, or *Dharmānusarin*, an independent thinker, by following the (wisdom) doctrine. Thus, the former is known as *Sraddhādhimukta*, his interest catering to the religious experience involving confidence and trust, and the latter, due to his analytical method, has gained a certain view of reality and is known as *Dristiprāpta* (230). Likewise, grace is another supporting factor for enlightenment, which is the compassionate activities as a skillful means. The Vaibhasikas introduced a distinction between compassion in general and great compassion (*Mahakarunā*). The general compassion extended to sentient beings, but the great compassion doesn’t know of any distinction between sentient beings; it is an expression of the highest meditative concentration, and it is realized when one actually succeeds in rising above the world (203).

There are twenty-five beautiful mental factors (*Cetasikas*) out of fifty-two mental factors. The first beautiful *Cetasikas* is faith (*Sraddhā*), which has the characteristics of placing faith or of trusting. Its function is to clarify, as a water cleaning gem causes muddy water to become clear (Bodhi 86). In the Pali literature, faith (*Saddha* in Pali) is well-established confidence in the Buddha Dharma and Sangha. Purification (*Sampasādana*) of its mental associates is its chief characteristic (Anuruddhā 101). Therefore, the three core concepts of the title are faith (*Sraddhā*), trust or confidence in the path, grace

(*Anugrahā*) as a Buddhist interpretation of grace, not divine but compassionate support, and wisdom as an insight into ultimate reality, which is the major aim of this article to explain how Abhidharma can be applied beyond theory for personal transformation. It is an analytical framework as a transformative psychology of the mind. Through the integrative functioning of this triadic framework, Abhidharma is presented as a practical, non-theistic soteriological model that makes more ethical, cognitive, and existential transformation in modern contexts.

Literature Review

For the related literature on the topic, the book *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, written by Herbert V. Guenther, is taken as a secondary source material. The writer has interpreted Abhidharma literature in terms of modern philosophical and psychological concerns. The philosophical and psychological aspects of Abhidharma have been presented in a systematic way of analysis of the mind, mental factors, perception, and the path to liberation theories based on the reference books of Buddhaghosa's *Ātthasālinī*, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kośa*, and Asanga's *Abhidharma-samuccaya*. In this book, the author presents Abhidharma as a moral science, mind, and mental factors are mental events that create perception, and how different frames of mind respond to meditative methods. The ontologies and Epistemologies of Theravada, Sarvastivada, and Yogacara doctrine of mind and world are comparatively exposed in this book. Similarly, this book emphasizes that the Abhidharma doctrine contains ethical and soteriological aims along with ontological and epistemological definitions for liberation, in the sense that faith is inner confidence or trust that makes the practice strong. Similarly, grace is a supportive condition for destiny.

Another relevant text for the study is a comprehensive manual of *Abhidharma*, a translated work by Bhikkhu Bodhi, which provides a detailed introduction to Buddhist philosophical psychology found in Pali literature. The book offers a systematic framework for liberation through the explanation of the mind and its processes, consolidating the seven books of the Abhidharma texts.

It presents karmic mechanisms, ethical value, and mental and physical phenomena in a descriptive methodological manner. Although the text has a strong analytical framework and doctrinal clarity, its main focus is on theoretical description. The actual application of Abhidharma teachings for personal development is not covered. The study aims to fulfil this research gap by examining how Abhidharma's faith, grace, and wisdom can promote experiential and soteriological transformation in day-to-day life.

Another book, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, is a thematic concept of liberation in a branch of a single tree, incorporating an overview of the major tradition of Buddhism, including Abhidharma, meditation, and devotional practice. The author argues that the doctrinal analysis of four realities, such as mind (*Citta*), mental factors (*Cetasikas*), matter (*Rūpa*), and dependent arising (*Pratītyasamutpāda*), for an integration of devotional or faith-based practices, such as refuge, devotion, and grace in the Mahayana tradition, informs practical meditation and ethical training for personal transformation. When talking about faith and grace, which seem more powerful in Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, the author attempts to show how Abhidharma concepts are incorporated into various devotional and meditative cultures. Although the book aims to simplify the concepts of Abhidharma, a wider range of knowledge is necessary to provide a supplement of canonical sources.

Statement of the Problem

Although the Abhidharma is a rich theoretical acknowledgement, there is a gap in understanding how its doctrines, incorporating devotional practices and rational support, can enhance psychological, ethical, and spiritual growth.

Objectives

The main objective of the paper is to present the wisdom, faith, and grace as key factors of gaining empirical knowledge of Abhidharma for personal transformation.

Methodology

This study is based on a descriptive and interpretive approach to examine how the Abhidharma doctrine can be applied for personal transformation through wisdom, faith, and grace. The books are taken as source materials, which are written based on canonical texts, and commentaries are taken as a thematic view for the process of meditation, ethical values, and psychological growth of practitioners. The factors, wisdom, faith, and grace are synthesized to develop a concept of applied Abhidharma for inner personal transformation. Both the Pali and Sanskrit Abhidharma traditions, wisdom and faith as essential mental factors for liberation; however, grace is implicit in the Pali tradition through causal and karmic conditions, whereas the Sanskrit Mahayana tradition explicitly conceptualizes grace as compassionate support within a non-theistic soteriological framework.

Delimitation

Abhidharma is a comprehensive field of study that incorporates systematic analysis of mind, mental factors, and matter known as samsara, and beyond it is Nirvana, within which a wide range of interpretations of the entire universe and human experiences are defined. However, the focus of this study is on the subject matter of applied Abhidharma, which is limited only to the three key dimensions- wisdom (insight thought), faith (devotional and motivational act), and grace (a supportive act or skillful means) for inner personal transformation. The textual sources are limited to selected secondary texts written based on Vasubhandu's *Abhidharma-kosa* commentaries and Abhidharma summaries. The research is limited to the integrative function of wisdom, faith, and grace. It does not go beyond the practical area of Buddhist philosophy, which includes cognitive behaviour, ethical practice, and empirical knowledge that aids in changing a person's behavioural pattern during a transformational process.

Analysis and Discussion

Fundamentally, Buddhism is an integration of the three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, which together provide the foundation and continuity of the tradition. Buddha, as a symbolic representation of the potential of enlightenment inherent in all sentient beings, Dharma is the body of teachings of doctrine, ethics, cognition, and meditative development. Similarly, Sangha is a community and practitioner. In the absence of one, it could not be completed and sustained; therefore, each plays a collective role to sustain it for the long term. Buddhist adherents must take refuge in the triple gems as their respective principles, just as other religions require taking formal vows. In terms of taking the triple refuge, strong faith (*Saddha*) or commitment is mandatory to be a Buddhist adherent. Once one enters the community, ethical behavioral commitment and a compassionate heart are generated, and they call themselves *Kalyanamitra*, spiritual friends, considering it essential for progress on the spiritual path because the journey toward liberation is difficult to move alone.

For the journey toward liberation, the threefold training of morality (*Śīla*), concentration (*Samādhi*), and wisdom (*Prajñā*) is set forth. On the journey toward this path, a strong commitment to morality or good conduct becomes a foundation for stabilizing the mind (*Samādhi*) and a deep understanding of reality (*Prajñā*). While a deep understanding of reality approaches toward liberation, a (*Puñña Karma*) meritorious action is to be pursued to attain perfect Buddhahood. Abhidharma addresses the development and operational process of meritorious action (*Puñña*). All meritorious actions are a combination of

Citta, *Cetasikas*, and *Rupa*. *Puñña* influences both supramundane and mundane results. As *Puñña* establishes the karmic and mental conditions for developing faith, grace, and wisdom, Abhidharma is employed for personal transformation.

Therefore, morality, commitment or effort, wisdom, and meritorious action are to be accomplished to attain (*Samyak Sambuddha*) perfect Buddhahood. Buddha's three-dimensional prototypical process of enlightenment is wisdom, faith, and grace, which are distinct but complementary aspects of spiritual growth.

Wisdom as transformative knowledge in Abhidharma

The etymological meaning of the word wisdom is a combination of wis (wise) and dōm (judgment, decision, law), which refers to the possession of good judgment, sound sense, or the capacity to make right decisions in matters of life and conduct (Oxford Dictionary). The Perfection of Wisdom Treatise also says: Even though people have only cultivated a little bit of merit, because they have the power of their vows, they will attain great rewards (Thich 65). In Abhidharma, wisdom is an analysis of (dharma), ultimate realities possessing the inherent nature of suffering, impermanence, and non-self. The knowledge of these three marks of existence is covered by ignorance (*Avidyā*), which can be realized through meditation and reflective analysis by cultivating wisdom. *Prajñā* wisdom is a certitude that derives from that which is termed an instrument of valid knowledge (*Pramāna*) as applied by a reliable and qualified person (*āptavacana*). *Prajñācintāmayi* is certitude arrived at by rational investigation; *Prajñābhāvanāmayi* is certitude brought about by meditative absorption (Guenther 217).

Faith is cognitive confidence in the Abhidharma interpretation.

The word "faith" comes from the Latin word "*fides*," which means trust, confidence, or belief (wiki). In the treatise Awakening of Faith, Ashvaghosha Bodhisattva taught that the most excellent method is to concentrate on reciting the Buddha-name, and thus achieve birth in the Pure Land, from which there is never any regression (Thich 43). In accordance with the Abhidharma interpretation, faith (*Sraddha*) is a type of cognitive process that understands the truth of the dharma through experiential confirmation rather than as blind faith. It is a positive mental state that serves as an ethical and positive force to eliminate doubt (*Vicikicchā*) and stabilize the mind to empower one to act in wholesome action. In other words, faith is a wholesome mental factor (*Cetasika*) to purify the consciousness (*Citta*) by enabling the emotions and thought process, realizing the three realities, suffering, impermanence, and non-self. Therefore, faith is a cognitive process to perceive something in the right view or understanding of truth, as well as it is a confidence in adhering to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for the emancipation. Therefore, faith in Abhidharma connects the gap between knowledge and experience, transforming knowledge into committed practice for the development of wisdom.

Soteriological Dimensions of Grace in Buddhism

The word grace comes from the Latin *gratia*, which means favor, kindness or charm. In its etymological meaning, grace encompasses notions of pleasing qualities, goodwill, and elegance (wiki). In Buddhism, grace is an enabling element that promotes spiritual development for emancipation rather than a miraculous gift of God. It is concerned with emancipation from suffering, which is referred to as soteriological. Therefore, the soteriological aspect of grace is a deed of kindness, sympathetic support, a motivational aspect of compassion, meritorious actions, and a paramita of the Bodhisattva to promote virtuous behaviours and belief in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Therefore, grace functions as a practical concept to enhance both the analytical understanding, wisdom, and devotional confidence or faith, all of which work together to move the practitioner.

Therefore, connecting to these triadic frameworks, particularly in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* in the Abhidharma text and *Vissudhimagga*, a non-canonical text, wisdom and faith are clearly systematized as wholesome mental factors essential for liberation, whereas grace remains as the supportive structure of causality, karmic maturity, and compassionate relationality. This triadic framework presents a non-theistic, but morally sound approach to personal transformation, in which liberation can be attained through the development of insight, building confidence, and supportive conditions.

Conclusion

The article concentrated on the integrative approach of Buddhist transformation when it is assessed in personal understanding. According to the analysis, wisdom (*Prajñā*) is the cognitive realization of reality that allows the practitioner to identify the types of suffering and how to overcome it. Faith (*Sraddhā*) is the emotive foundation that sustains commitment to the path, connecting ethical behavior and meditative understanding. Similarly, grace is the harmonizing factor that completes the soteriological process, which is the spontaneous unfolding of merit and compassion within dependent origination rather than an unmerited God gift. This discussion shows that personal transformation in applied Abhidharma is not a set forth achievement, but it is a continuous process of developing inner transformation and ethical understanding. It is an integration of philosophical knowledge and lived experience that is interconnected to cognition, emotion, and action. The finding also signifies that wisdom, faith, and grace work together to dissolve self-centred or stingy thoughts and promote an altruistic mindset based on compassion and mindfulness.

In conclusion, Applied Abhidharma provides a useful example for moral and existential change, where grace actualizes the freed potential of being, faith sustains drive, and wisdom sharpens understanding. These components work together to create an integrated model of self-transcendence that harmonizes the inner development of the individual with the global values of compassion and interdependence that are essential to the Buddhist concept of emancipation. No one can get enlightenment just by understanding or studying the Abhidharma. Therefore, the Abhidharma should not be regarded just as an intellectual or theoretical discipline, but as a sort of empirical knowledge that must be fostered and realized within one's own experience. Through persistent reflection and regular practice, the development of wisdom (*Prajñā*) supported by faith (*Sraddhā*) and grace becomes the transformational mechanism by which insight ripens (*Vipāka*) into liberation. This work has the potential to expand our knowledge of Buddhist practice as a transforming discipline that combines grace, faith (*Sraddhā*), and wisdom (*Prajñā*). By analyzing these ideas in the context of Applied Abhidharma, the study provides insightful information for both scholarly research and individual development. It challenges academics and practitioners to investigate the ways in which ethical engagement and inner realization might come together to promote clarity, compassionate action, and holistic transformation in modern life.

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