

## “Scientific” Buddhism or Higher Dharma?

Source:

***Handbook of Meditation in Society 5:***

[Sutta Discovery 60e: Delusion and experience: epistemology, psychology and the Abhidhamma \(Section 13.15\)](#) © Piya Tan 2023b.

### **13.15.2 “Scientific” Buddhism?**

Unlike the Buddha Dharma, the Abhidhamma is full of technical terms and numerical lists, ideas of citta, cetasika, matter and nirvana, all fixed in the “absolute” or “ultimate” sense. There are even scholars and students today who think of the Abhidhamma as some kind of Buddhist “science” or that it is “scientific Buddhism.” In doing so, they ironically take “science” as the gold standard and measure “Buddhism” by that standard.

Apparently, such “scientific” Buddhists do not need to practise such a Buddhism or any Buddhism: they only need to “know” something about it; they don’t have to change or better themselves in any way—they change Buddhism! If we attribute such a *status* as “science” to Abhidhamma or Buddhism, we do not need to experience any awakening state.

What do you think is wrong with this way of thinking?<sup>1</sup>

According to scientific thinkers, science must be **falsifiable**; more exactly: *scientific theories* must be falsifiable. The statement that “All swans are white” is *falsified* once we see a single black swan. Newton worked with the idea that light travelled in a straight line. Einstein, however, explained that light bends around massive objects like the Sun. In this way science corrects itself, and gets to know the world better.<sup>2</sup>

### **13.15.3 Higher Dharma?**

The question is: will Abhidhamma or any aspect of it be proven wrong by modern science or true learning? Will it be proven one day that there are more than 52 cetasikas, or perhaps less? Or that there are a different number of moral variables, or unwholesome factors, or beautiful factors?

Abhidhamma scholars and students claim that it is “higher Dhamma,” the absolute truth: What if some revisions of it are needed in time? In the case of the suttas, any *neyy’attha* (implicit) teaching—those using worldly or conventional language—can be changed. In the Buddha’s time, people thought that the world was a flat disc. Now we know better: we need to revise this *neyy’attha* teaching. [10.4.1]

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<sup>1</sup> On the word is not the thing: SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5); SD 44.1 (5.4).; identifying with words or lineage: SD 60.1d (7.6.7.2); the name is not the named: SD 17.4 (4), SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5); the statement is not the state: SD 10.16 (1.3.2.3), SD 49.5b (4.6.4.2).

<sup>2</sup> **Falsifiability** is the capacity for some statement, proposition hypothesis or theory to be proven wrong. The concept of falsifiability was introduced in 1935 by Austrian philosopher and scientist Karl Popper (1902-1994). See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-method/>; <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-idea-that-a-scientific-theory-can-be-falsified-is-a-myth/>.

The *nīṭ'attha* (explicit) teaching—such as the 3 characteristics, the 4 noble truths, the 5 aggregates, the 12 links, and meditation—have yet to be proven wrong. In fact, we see modern learning, like psychology, adapting these teachings to improve themselves. The point is clear: We must keep to the Dharma; so long as the Abhidhamma keeps close to the Dharma and clarifies it, the Abhidhamma is useful. It certainly should not be a cause of conflicts. [13.14]

**13.15.4** To respect early Buddhism, we must take it *as it is*. It comprises the conventional or worldly language (especially its ancient and Indian background), and the Dharma language points directly, as it were, to true reality. These are the 2 presentations pointed out in **the Neyy'attha Nīṭ'attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5 f) [10.4.1]. This is our **study guide**: we take the historical (or the social and conventional) for what it is; we must take the ahistorical (pointing to true reality) for what it is. Then we will truly learn, neither for title nor status, but as a basis for personal transformation and spiritual breakthrough.

This is true renunciation for both the monastic and the laity: the noble path.

Then there is the teaching of **the 2 teachings**, that is, by way of presenting the relative truth (*pariyāya*) and presenting the absolute truth (*nippariyāya*), using “worldly language” and using “Dharma language” respectively [10.8]. As **teaching tools**, neither is the superior: it depends on how we *skillfully* present the Dharma to transform lives for the better, and to see true reality [10.3.2]. It is like when we use fairy-tales and Jātaka stories to inspire children with good role models and the cultivation of moral virtue; and we teach the suttas as they are for those with ready minds and radiant hearts. Or, we retell inspiring stories (especially from the last 10 Jātakas) to enrich the lives of the audience and to move them to a higher vision of the Dharma. [10.5]

We may use science to explain certain points, but we must not do this to measure the Dharma against science. Science is conventional and worldly: all scientific data are theory-laden, historically contextual and falsifiable. Early Buddhism is “prescientific” (it is older than modern science) and “non-scientific” (not about what science tries to measure); true reality is unfalsifiable. Science is theoretically sense-based; the Dharma teaches us to rise beyond the senses.

We may, however, take what makes sense in science and use it to better understand what true reality is as the Buddha himself has shown us. We should neither reject science, nor put science above the Dhamma. They are different paradigms with different goals.

Science measures the world; the Dharma teaches *the immeasurably free mind*.

Science teaches us how the eye sees; the Dharma teaches us to *see beyond sight*.

One last point, just as vital, remains: it is not how much Dharma or Abhidharma we know—nor all our titles nor status—that matters. Our compassion and wisdom are what really matter: **compassion** includes the joy and willingness to be falsified; **wisdom** straightens our views when we see our errors. Compassion cultivates moral virtue out of respect for self and others; wisdom knows and values life and all that it signifies.

In this way, compassion conduces to **mental concentration** by cultivating a calm, clear and joyful mind. Wisdom prepares us to personally and directly see into true reality, so that we gain freedom and **nirvana**. [10.8]

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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