

Sūtra or Abhidharma?

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Synopsis

Some argue that the Sūtra is the true *Buddhavacana* ('Word of the Buddha'). The Abhidhamma/Abhidharma comprises treatises composed subsequent to the Vinaya- and Sūtra-piṭaka, and therefore does not represent the Buddha's teachings.

The Ābhidhammaikas/Ābhidhārmikas, however, maintain that it is only through the Abhidhamma/Abhidharma that we come to truly discern the Buddha's words.

This short talk outlines the controversy in the Abhidharma period, and explains the Ābhidhārmika contention, and shows the contribution of the Abhidharma to the understanding of the Sūtra.

Sūtra-dharas, Vinaya-dharas, māṭṛkā-dharas

- In the *sūtra-piṭaka* (/sutta-piṭaka), we see specialists known as Sūtra-dharas, Vinaya-dharas, māṭṛkā-dharas.
- In the Abhidharma period, we find in Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā (《大毗婆沙論》 ‘Great Commentary’) a group of masters known as the Dārṣṭāntikas (譬喻師). They are the Sūtradharas who
 - (1) emphasize meditation and preaching the Dharma.
 - (2) reject the authority of the Abhidharma texts.
- Towards the latter part of the 2nd century CE, they evolved into Sautrāntikas (經量部), and asserted that they were *sūtra-prāmāṇika* (以經為量) — taking the Sūtra as authority.

The Ābhidhārmikas (阿毘達摩論師)

On the other hand, the *māṭṛikā-dharas* evolved into the Ābhidhārmikas — specialists in the Abhidharmas. They maintain that:

the *abhidharma* is definitive (*lākṣaṇika*) and represents the true intention of the Buddha, taught at the level of absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*), with fully drawn out meanings (*nītārtha* 了義). In contrast, the *sūtra*-s are implicit (*ābhiprāyika*) and do not represent the Buddha's true intention. They generally represent the expedient (*aupacārika*) teachings whose meanings are yet to be fully drawn out (*neyārtha* 不了義).

The Ābhidhārmika standpoint

In Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (《俱舍論》 c. 5th century CE) the Vaibhāṣika Ābhidharmikas claim:

Without the expositions in the *abhidharma*, a student is unable to discern the *dharma*.

This, for them is the significance of the Abhidharma. It is not that deny of neglect the Sūtra as the Buddha-word. But the proper discernment of the Buddha's teachings require a proper methodology of investigation – the **Abhidharma**.

Samṅhabhadra (《順止埋論》):
Abhidharma is the authority of the Sūtra

Samṅbahdra (c. 5th century CE) ridicules the Dārṣṭānika-Sautrāntika leader, Śrīlāta:

Thus not comprehending the distinctive features of the *nītārtha* and *neyārtha* sūtra-s, he claims: “We take the Sūtra as the authority (*sūtra-prāmāṇikāḥ* 以經為量)”. This is extremely illogical. It is for this reason that their school of thought has been repeatedly ridiculed by us Vaibhāṣikas. ...

Samṅhabhadra: Abhidharma is also Buddha-vacana

**Nyāyānusāra* (《順正理論》):

As the *abhidharma* [texts] were compiled by the great disciples on the basis of the Buddha's teaching, they are approved by the Buddha; they are also *buddha-vacana*. As they are in accord with the knowledge which knows fully (*pari-vjñā*) the causes and effects of defilement and purification, they are like the *sūtra*-s. If what has been approved by the Buddha is not called *buddha-vacana*, then innumerable *sūtra*-s would have to be abandoned!

Samghabhadra's definition of "sūtra"

- Buddha-vacana are classified into 12 genres (*dvādaśāṅga-dharma-pravacana = buddha-vacana*): *sūtra*, *geya*, *vyākaraṇa*, *gāthā*, ... *upadeśa* (= *abhidharma*)
- The claim that the *abhidharma* represents the real words of the Buddha is also reflected in Samghabhadra's definition of *sūtra*, the first of the 12 aṅgas

By *sūtra* is meant that which subsumes and contains all the words which accord with the firm principles of both the conventional and absolute truths. *Sūtras* in this sense are either discoursed by the Buddha or the disciples, for [the latter] discoursed because [the content was] approved by the Buddha.

Aṣṭasāharikā Prajñāpāramitā: Any disciple's *dharma-deśanā* directly outflowing from the Buddha's Enlightenment is true *buddha-vacana*

1st chapter of Aṣṭa reflects the earliest stage of formation of Mahāyāna. At the outset, the question of the Mahāyāna doctrines (*sūtras*) as genuine Buddha-Dharma must be addressed:

Subhūti to Śāriputra: “Whatever... the Bhagavat's Disciples teach ..., all that is to be known as the Tathagata's direct effectuation (/personal performance *puruṣakāra* 士用. X: 如來威神之力).

For, whatever *Dharma* taught by the Tathagata, they, training in it, realise its True Nature (*dharmatā* 法性), and hold it in mind. Having realized and held its True Nature, whatever they teach ... is not contradictory to its True Nature. It is just an emanation/outpouring of the Tathagata's *Dharma*-teaching (*tathgata-dharmadeśanāyā ... eva eṣa niṣyandaḥ* དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པས་ཚོས་བསྟན་པའི་རྒྱ་མཐུན། 亦是[如來]所證法性等流). Whatever they are expounding as the true nature of that *dharma*, they do not cause it to contradict with the True Nature of *Dharma* (Reality).”

Abhidharma is not scholasticism, not even philosophy. It is soteriology

Ābhidharmika analysis must serve the sole purpose of spiritual realization. This soteriological function is also brought out in the following explanation in MVŚ regarding the practitioners of insight meditation (*vipaśyanā-bhāvanā*):

Those who mostly cultivate the requisites (*saṃbhāra*) of insight are those who, at the stage of preparatory effort, always delight in studying and reflecting on the *tripiṭaka*. They repeatedly examine the specific and general characteristics of all *dharma*-s [— topics of fundamental importance for *abhidharma*]. When they enter into the noble path, they are called the *vipaśyanā*-type of practitioners (*vipaśyanā-carita*).

Abhidharmika claim: Abhidharma is the indispensable means for transcending saṃsāra

Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya:

Since apart from the discernment of *dharmas* (*dharmapra vicaya* = *prajñā* = *abhidharma*), there is no excellent means for the appeasement of the defilements; And it is on account of the defilements that beings wander in the existence-ocean. For this reason, therefore, it is said, the [*abhidharma*] is taught by the Master.

(若离择法（阿毘達摩）定无余，能灭诸惑胜方便。由惑世间漂有海，因此传佛说对法。)

Conclusion

We may conclude that:

- (1) Indeed, Sūtra (Buddha's words and personal examples) constitutes the **absolute authority of the Buddha's teachings**. The early Buddhist discourses must be regarded as the **Buddha-dharma** (佛法) and **Buddha-vacana** (佛說/佛語).
- (2) Abhidharma developed subsequent to Vinaya and the Sūtra.
- (3) We need not agree with all the Ābhidhārmika claims. However, Abhidharma is a very important contribution. It provides a **systematic and well developed methodology** for examining and analysing the Buddha's teachings. Approached properly, it can help us to discern the true, **nītārtha** teachings in the *sūtras*, in respect of both doctrines and practice.