Abhidhammic Perspectives on Non-Violence and Peace-Building

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Abstract

In today's conflict-ridden world, peace-building efforts generally emphasize external negotiations and structural modifications, while often ignoring the internal mental states that fuel violence. This paper argues, rooted in early Buddhist psychology, that the Abhidhamma offers a profound cognitive framework for understanding how harmful mental factors—greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha)—fuel both individual and societal conflict. This study explores how the Abhidhammic distinction between wholesome and unwholesome mental states can improve practical approaches to non-violence, addressing the limitations of many contemporary peace-building models that frequently overlook these cognitive underpinnings. Specifically, it investigates how promoting non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa), and wisdom (paññā) strengthens the principle of ahiṃsā (non-violence) and aids in achieving enduring peace. Through a qualitative analysis of key Abhidhamma texts such as the Dhammasaṅgaṇī and Abhidhammattha Sangaha, along with secondary sources and contemporary studies on peace, this paper asserts that transforming harmful mental patterns through practices like mindfulness (sati), loving-kindness meditation (mettā bhāvanā), and right speech (sammā-vācā) can lay a solid foundation for non-violence. The incorporation of Abhidhammic principles into peace education and conflict resolution initiatives can link personal transformation to broader societal harmony, addressing the underlying causes of violence and offering a cognitive strategy for peace-building that is relevant to our time.

Keywords: *Abhidhamma*, non-violence, cognitive transformation, peace-building, Buddhist psychology, *ahiṃsā*

Introduction

In a time increasingly characterized by rising geopolitical conflicts, civil unrest, and ongoing violence, the quest for lasting peace stands as one of humanity's most pressing yet elusive objectives. Modern peace-building approaches typically focus on external methods - such as diplomatic discussions, institutional changes, and legal frameworks - while frequently overlooking the cognitive and psychological factors that fuel conflict (Galtung 171; Lederach 32). This prompts

a crucial inquiry for both researchers and practitioners: is it possible to attain enduring peace without altering the mental conditions that support violence?

The Buddhist tradition - especially the *Abhidhammic* approach to early Buddhist psychology - provides a sharp and less-explored viewpoint on this matter. The *Abhidhamma* offers a complex framework that organizes mental factors (*cetasikas*) into two categories: wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*), highlighting how these cognitive processes influence human actions and social dynamics (Bodhi 45). In this model, violence is viewed not just as an external action but as an expression of three core mental impurities: greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) (Narada 12). These unwholesome elements warp perception, intensify interpersonal conflicts, and perpetuate systemic forms of injustice and violence.

Building on this *Abhidhammic* understanding, this paper contends that *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) should be rooted in a conscious transformation of unwholesome mental states into wholesome ones. The practice of non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and wisdom (*paññā*) offers a practical approach to tackle the underlying causes of violence (Bodhi 213). This cultivation is realized through essential Buddhist practices, such as mindfulness (sati), loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), and right speech (*sammā-vācā*), which together diminish harmful mental tendencies and foster peaceful behavior (Harvey 162).

This research utilizes qualitative textual analysis of key *Abhidhammic* texts - primarily the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* - while contextualizing these findings within the realm of modern peace studies and conflict transformation literature (Gunawardana 89). In doing so, it shows that the *Abhidhammic* cognitive framework remains relevant for tackling the psychological aspects of violence that many contemporary models tend to neglect.

Ultimately, this paper contends that integrating *Abhidhammic* concepts into peace education and conflict resolution strategies can create a link between external structural changes and internal cognitive shifts. This method targets the root causes of violence, offering a practical and lasting path to non-violence that highlights the

modern significance of early Buddhist psychology within global peace efforts (Queen 5).

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary peace-building efforts frequently focus on external structural changes while overlooking the internal cognitive and psychological aspects that lead to violence. Although early Buddhist psychology, particularly from the *Abhidhammic* tradition, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how mental impurities like greed, hatred, and ignorance perpetuate conflict, this viewpoint is still not thoroughly examined in modern peace studies. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how *Abhidhammic* insights can enhance a cognitive approach to non-violence, connecting the inner transformation with outer peace.

Research Questions

1. How does the *Abhidhamma* classify and explain the cognitive roots of violence, specifically through the mental factors of *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion)?
2. In what ways can the cultivation of wholesome mental states (*alobha*, *adosa*, *paññā*) contribute to the principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) according to Abhidhammic texts?
3. How do mindfulness (*sati*), loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), and right speech (*sammā-vācā*) practically transform unwholesome mental patterns?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the *Abhidhammic* classification of unwholesome mental factors that contribute to individual and collective violence.
2. To analyze how the cultivation of wholesome mental factors supports the practice of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence).

3. To explore practical methods within the *Abhidhamma* - mindfulness (*sati*), loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), and right speech (*sammā-vācā*) - that transform harmful cognitive patterns.

Literature Review

The academic discipline of peace-building has undergone substantial development since the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with early theorists like Johan Galtung, who emphasized the difference between direct, structural, and cultural violence (Galtung 171). His groundbreaking research suggested that achieving lasting peace necessitates tackling not just overt conflict but also the underlying structural conditions that allow violence to continue. Expanding on this, John Paul Lederach highlighted the transformative aspects of conflict resolution, advocating for methods that go beyond mere superficial agreements to confront deeper social and cultural issues (Lederach 36).

Although these foundational theories have enriched the understanding of peace-building, a significant portion of the scholarship has largely focused on external frameworks - such as legal structures, policy measures, and socio-political negotiations (Richmond 112). Critics contend that these approaches frequently neglect the internal psychological and cognitive elements that perpetuate cycles of violence and impede authentic reconciliation (Gopin 78).

In the realm of Buddhist studies, researchers have examined various aspects of ahiṃsā (non-violence), compassion (*karuṇā*), and loving-kindness (*mettā*) as ethical principles pertinent to peace-building. For instance, Peter Harvey has shown how Buddhist ethics prioritize the development of mental states that counter aggression and foster peaceful coexistence (Harvey 159). Christopher Queen's research on Engaged Buddhism highlights how Buddhist communities and thinkers have modified traditional teachings on non-violence to tackle present-day social injustices (Queen 4).

Nevertheless, while the general Buddhist principles of ethics and compassion have garnered attention, the *Abhidhamma's* analytical framework - especially its systematic categorization of wholesome and unwholesome mental

factors - has received relatively less scholarly consideration in the context of contemporary peace studies (Gunawardana 86). Bhikkhu Bodhi's detailed commentary on the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* continues to be a valuable resource for understanding the intricacies of mental factors and cognitive processes in *Theravāda Abhidhamma* (Bodhi 45). Similarly, Narada's texts offer explicit explanations of how mental impurities like greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) skew perception and affect actions (Narada 22). However, these discussions have mostly been approached within doctrinal or meditative contexts rather than being systematically connected to current theories of conflict transformation.

Research Gap

While contemporary peace-building frameworks increasingly recognize the significance of education, dialogue, and cultural understanding, they frequently lack a strong cognitive model that tackles the origins of violence within the psyche. At the same time, Buddhist scholarship has often regarded the psychological framework of the *Abhidhamma* as an area of doctrinal or philosophical exploration rather than a functional resource for peace-building (Gunawardana 88). This creates a notable gap: the possible role of the *Abhidhammic* classification of mental factors in fostering practical, sustainable non-violence is still largely overlooked in the mainstream peace studies literature.

This paper aims to address that gap by integrating *Abhidhammic* insights regarding the cognitive origins of violence into current conversations about peace-building. In doing so, it suggests a unifying model that connects inner mental transformation with broader structural peace initiatives, thereby providing a holistic approach to *ahiṃsā* that is both theoretically sound and practically applicable.

Research Methodology

This investigation employs a qualitative research approach rooted in textual and interpretative analysis, which is suitable for exploring doctrinal sources within Buddhist studies and placing them within the interdisciplinary domain of peace and

conflict studies (Creswell 79). Considering the conceptual nature of the *Abhidhamma* and its focus on mental processes, the methodology emphasizes hermeneutical interpretation of primary *Pāli* texts in conjunction with critical engagement with pertinent secondary literature. The main sources for this research are significant texts from the *Theravāda Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, particularly the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, which categorizes mental and physical phenomena in a systematic manner and the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* by Ācariya Anuruddha, which is a subsequent manual that condenses the intricate *Abhidhamma* teachings into an organized and accessible format (Bodhi 34). Secondary sources encompass authoritative commentaries, modern translations, and scholarly works that interpret the psychological constructs of the *Abhidhamma* and investigate their relevance to ethics and conflict transformation (Gunawardana 89; Harvey 143). Additionally, current literature in peace and conflict studies is crucial to the secondary corpus, including foundational works by Galtung and Lederach as well as recent critiques that address the shortcomings of structural peace-building models and support the incorporation of psychological and cognitive elements (Galtung 174; Lederach 40).

The research utilizes thematic content analysis to pinpoint essential cognitive concepts concerning violence and non-violence within the *Abhidhamma* texts. This method consists of classifying mental elements into beneficial and detrimental states, and then relating these classifications to contemporary theories regarding the causes and transformation of conflict. Comparative analysis is applied to investigate the alignment and differences between *Abhidhammic* cognitive frameworks and contemporary peace-building models. When relevant, insights are synthesized to formulate an integrated viewpoint that illustrates how *Abhidhammic* principles can enhance existing theories (Queen 8). Interpretative analysis is further enriched by situating the conclusions within the wider discourse on Engaged Buddhism and cognitive approaches to non-violence, thereby emphasizing practical implications for peace education and conflict resolution.

Analysis and Discussion

Unhealthy Mental Conditions as the Cognitive Origins of Violence

According to the *Abhidhamma*, the sources of violence extend beyond mere actions, stemming from deeply ingrained mental factors. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* recognizes *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion) as unwholesome (*akusala*) origins that distort perception and lead to suffering for both oneself and others (Bodhi 52). These defilements work in conjunction rather than in isolation, dynamically influencing thoughts, speech, and actions that result in personal conflict and systemic violence (Narada 30).

Current peace theorists, such as Galtung, posit that violence continues to exist because the foundational causes are frequently concealed within individuals and cultures (Galtung 173). In this framework, the psychological insights of the *Abhidhamma* deepen our comprehension by detailing the mechanisms of mental impurities. For example, *lobha* fuels desire and exploitation, *dosa* forms the basis of anger and hostility, while *moha* obscures awareness of the moral repercussions of actions (Bodhi 54). Awareness of these elements transitions peace-building from merely addressing external disputes to changing the mind itself.

Nurturing Wholesome Mental Conditions: The Foundation of *Ahiṃsā*

The *Abhidhamma* advocates for developing counteracting wholesome states: non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and wisdom (*paññā*). These concepts are not mere theoretical ideals but practical mental attributes that should be consciously nurtured (Narada 41). When non-greed is enhanced, it mitigates possessiveness and exploitation. Non-hatred alleviates bitterness and hostility, while wisdom eradicates ignorance that perpetuates harmful behaviors (Bodhi 213).

This mental cultivation closely aligns with Galtung's concept of positive peace, which encompasses more than just the absence of direct violence but also the presence of social justice and inner tranquility (Galtung 175). Therefore, through the lens of the *Abhidhamma*, *ahiṃsā* becomes not just a matter of refraining from harm but rather an active mental practice rooted in continual cognitive development.

Practical Strategies: Mindfulness, Loving-Kindness, and Right Speech

The *Abhidhamma* associates cognitive transformation with specific practical techniques. Sati (mindfulness) allows practitioners to recognize and interrupt the emergence of unwholesome thoughts before they manifest outwardly (Harvey 162). The ability to be self-aware is crucial for cultivating *alobha*, *adosa*, and *paññā*.

Metta bhāvanā (loving-kindness meditation) directly counteracts *dosa*. By purposefully offering unconditional kindness to everyone, practitioners reduce their usual feelings of anger and animosity (Narada 45). Likewise, *sammā-vācā* (right speech) acts as a social manifestation of inner non-violence. The *Abhidhamma* highlights the importance of ethical speech—truthful, gentle, and conciliatory—as a preventive measure against verbal disagreements and social unrest (Bodhi 215).

Contemporary peace education frequently emphasizes dialogue, empathy, and conflict resolution abilities (Lederach 48). *Abhidhammic* practices complement these teachings by tackling the cognitive foundations that render such skills sustainable and genuine.

Towards a Cognitive Framework for Peace-Building

When considered alongside modern peace theories, the cognitive model of the *Abhidhamma* offers a distinct contribution: it connects the structural and psychological facets of peace. As Queen points out in the context of Engaged Buddhism, transformative efforts necessitate both external and internal changes (Queen 6).

By incorporating the insights of the *Abhidhamma* into peace education and conflict transformation initiatives, practitioners and policymakers can promote enduring non-violence that addresses the underlying causes of conflict. This integrated approach expands the horizons of peace-building from structural adjustments to the reformation of mental patterns that perpetuate violence.

Findings

This study reveals several key findings about how the *Abhidhamma*'s cognitive framework can inform a deeper understanding of non-violence and peace-building. First, the *Abhidhamma*'s classification of unwholesome mental factors (*akusala cetasikas*) — primarily *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion) — provides a systematic explanation of how violence originates within the mind (Bodhi 52). Unlike modern peace theories that often emphasize external socio-political conditions, the *Abhidhamma* foregrounds the mental and emotional patterns that sustain conflict (Gunawardana 88).

Second, the analysis confirms that cultivating the wholesome opposites - *alobha* (non-greed), *adosa* (non-hatred), and *paññā* (wisdom) - is not an abstract ideal but a concrete method for uprooting cognitive conditions that drive harmful speech and action (Narada 41). This aligns with Galtung's argument that positive peace must address not only visible violence but also its hidden roots (Galtung 175). Third, the study finds that the *Abhidhamma* identifies clear practical methods - mindfulness (sati), loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), and right speech (*sammā-vācā*) — as direct techniques to transform harmful mental patterns into peaceful mental states (Harvey 162). These practices function as cognitive tools that strengthen awareness, empathy, and ethical communication, thereby preventing the escalation of latent conflict.

Fourth, a comparative reading shows that although modern peace-building theories increasingly call for integrating psychological dimensions, they rarely provide a detailed cognitive map comparable to the *Abhidhamma*'s framework (Lederach 48). This study demonstrates that bridging this gap can enrich conflict transformation models with a robust mental training component. Finally, the findings suggest that integrating *Abhidhammic* principles into peace education and community reconciliation programs can create a practical link between individual mental transformation and collective peace-building (Queen 6). By addressing the roots of violence within the mind, the *Abhidhammic* perspective expands the scope of *ahiṃsā* from an ethical rule to a lived cognitive discipline.

Conclusion

In a world where cycles of violence and structural injustice continue to undermine global peace-building efforts, it is imperative to revisit and expand our understanding of non-violence beyond external interventions alone. This paper has argued that the *Abhidhammic* system of early Buddhist psychology offers a sophisticated and underutilized cognitive framework for addressing the inner mental states that sustain violence. By systematically categorizing unwholesome mental factors - *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion) - the *Abhidhamma* exposes the psychological roots of conflict that are frequently overlooked by mainstream peace-building theories (Bodhi 45; Narada 30). Through qualitative textual analysis of key *Abhidhammic* sources such as the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and *Abhidhammattha Sangaha*, this study has shown that transforming harmful cognitive patterns is central to the practice of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). The deliberate cultivation of non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and wisdom (*paññā*) provides a practical path for uprooting the mental conditions that perpetuate violence. Supported by practices such as mindfulness (sati), loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), and right speech (*sammā-vācā*), the *Abhidhammic* model aligns with and enriches modern peace-building principles that emphasize inner-outer transformation (Harvey 159; Queen 6). While contemporary peace studies have made significant strides in addressing structural and cultural forms of violence (Galtung 173; Lederach 48), this paper highlights a significant research gap: the lack of systematic integration of cognitive and psychological insights into mainstream conflict transformation frameworks. By bridging this gap, the *Abhidhammic* perspective contributes a much-needed dimension to the broader discourse on sustainable non-violence. This study concludes that the insights of early Buddhist psychology have enduring relevance for contemporary peace-building, especially in contexts where internalized greed, hatred, and ignorance drive systemic conflict. Integrating *Abhidhammic* principles into peace education, conflict resolution training, and community reconciliation programs could help cultivate the inner conditions necessary for lasting peace. Future research might extend this conceptual groundwork by empirically exploring

how *Abhidhammic* methods—such as mindfulness and loving-kindness practice— can be adapted in schools, communities, and post-conflict societies. By addressing the roots of violence within the human mind, the *Abhidhammic* approach to non-violence offers not only a moral vision but also a practical roadmap for building peace in a deeply divided world.

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