

Rūpa and the Sense Bases: Physicality as the Ground of Cognition in Theravāda Abhidhamma

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Abstract

This article examines how rūpa (materiality) functions as the indispensable basis for cognition in the Theravāda Abhidhamma. While consciousness (*citta*) and mental factors (*cetasika*) are treated as primary in knowing, Abhidhamma insists that cognition in the sensory domain depends on specific forms of rūpa, especially **sense-faculties (pasāda-rūpa)** and **sense-objects (rūpārammaṇa / other ārammaṇa)**. The study examines the Abhidhamma classification of rūpa, the operation of the **six sense bases (saḷāyatana)**, and how physical conditions enable cognitive episodes through structured processes (*citta-vīthi*). It also compares the Abhidhamma model with key sutta presentations of sense bases, contact (*phassa*), and dependent arising. The article argues that the "law of physicality" here is not a substance metaphysics but a conditional principle: cognition arises in dependence on a reliable material support and an object domain, revealing impermanence and non-self through analytic insight.

Keywords-Rūpa; pasāda-rūpa; saḷāyatana; ārammaṇa; phassa; Abhidhamma; Theravāda; citta-vīthi; nāma-rūpa; paccaya

Introduction

In Theravāda Buddhism, experience is often analyzed through the dual lenses of nāma (mental) and rūpa (physical). Since the Abhidhamma texts are highly revered in the vast scholarship on consciousness (*citta*) and the mental compounds (*cetasika*), it is easy to think that rūpa is merely "the body" or of secondary importance. However, the Theravāda tradition emphasises that sensory cognition cannot occur in the absence of the "material" or the "physical". Rūpa is important for knowing, because it provides the functional supports through which sensory experience becomes possible. These include the sense organs that receive stimuli (the "sensitive bases" of experience), the "object-fields" that offer stimuli to these bases, and the "material" conditions that determine the contact (*phassa*) and the arising of consciousness. "Physicality" is then not a mere metaphysical abstraction, but rather an immensely important, law-governed domain of conditioned phenomena that makes cognising possible.

This paper begins with a key interpretive issue: How does the Theravāda Abhidhamma account for cognition in terms of material elements? In most suttas, there is a practical, experiential account, especially with reference to the teaching on the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), sense contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*) and the unfolding of craving. In contrast, the Abhidhamma seeks to systematize these teachings into a mechanistic description of cognitive occurrences as they occur moment to moment. This is not so much introducing a different doctrine of experience as providing a more detailed account of its structure and conditionality. A meticulous treatment of rūpa with sense bases illustrates how the Theravāda steers clear of the crude extremes of reducing the mind to mere materiality (crude materialism) and of the independence and eternity of mind and matter (substance dualism). In both cases, Theravāda considers mind and matter as interdependent conditioned processes.

1. Aim and Scope

This study aims to analyze rūpa specifically as **the ground-condition for sensory cognition**, focusing on two interrelated dimensions:

1. **Sense faculties** are understood as **pasāda-rūpa** (the sensitive materiality of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body), and
2. **Sense objects** understood as external object-domains (*ārammaṇa*) are visual form, sound, odour, taste, and tangible objects.

This scope intentionally **does not** attempt an exhaustive survey of the entire rūpa system. Instead, it focuses on the subset of material phenomena that directly serve as the bridge between the environment and awareness.

2. Research Questions

Three questions guide the discussion:

- What is pasāda-rūpa, and why is it essential for sensory knowing?
- How do rūpa-based conditions shape contact (*phassa*) and the arising of cognitive episodes?
- How does Abhidhamma expand or systematize the sutta account of the sense bases and cognition?

3. Sources and Method

Regarding this inquiry's primary sources, I shall analyze (i) the presentations of the classification of rūpa in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka (especially the analytic style attributed to Dhammasaṅgaṇī), (ii) the commentarial/handbook tradition, for instance the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, which offers a more simplified system map, and (iii) and sutta parallels dealing with the saḷāyatana and phassa frameworks. I combine doctrinal-textual analysis and conceptual mapping to show the roles of key terms (rūpa, pasāda, ārammaṇa, phassa) in the Abhidhamma account of cognition.

4. Conceptual Framework and Article Trajectory

Within Abhidhamma, **rūpa** is defined as **conditioned, non-cognitive phenomena** events that do not "know" but can condition knowing. It is commonly organized into the structural foundation of the **four great elements (mahābhūta)** and **derived materiality (upādā-rūpa)**, which includes the sense faculties. Crucially, this "physicality" should be read as **operational support for experience**, not as a permanent material self. Building on this framework, the article examines the sense bases as the bridge between rūpa and cognition, clarifies why pasāda-rūpa is treated as distinct, explains the triadic structure of **faculty–object–consciousness** culminating in contact, and then sketches a simplified Abhidhamma account of the cognitive process to show how cognition is event-like, conditioned, and impermanent. Finally, it compares the Abhidhamma systematization with the sutta emphasis and draws implications for meditation practice and the philosophy of mind.

The doctrine of the **six sense bases (saḷāyatana)** stands at the centre of Theravāda explanations of experience because it identifies the conditions through which the world becomes "known." In the suttas, the six internal bases, **eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind-base**, are presented as the primary interface where contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and subsequent craving may arise. The Abhidhamma retains this structure but reorganizes it into a more technical ontology: cognition occurs when a specific **internal base** is operative, an appropriate **external base/object-domain** impinges, and consciousness arises dependent on these supports. Thus, saḷāyatana becomes a bridge between **rūpa** and **nāma**, showing how materiality and mentality cooperate under conditional law rather than through an enduring self.

A key emphasis in Abhidhamma interpretation is that the **five physical bases**, eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, are not merely anatomical organs. They are understood as **rūpa-dependent "doors"** (*dvāra*) or functional entry points for experience. The mind-base is treated differently because it is not a material faculty in the same sense; nevertheless, even mental cognition in everyday life frequently depends on prior sense input and bodily vitality. In this way, Abhidhamma highlights that cognition is not a free-floating activity of a permanent subject but a **conditioned occurrence** tied to specific bases.

The Abhidhamma alignment can be expressed in a simple conditional formula:

internal base (faculty); external base (object-domain); conditions for cognitive events.

This does not imply that matter produces mind mechanically; rather, it asserts that when suitable material conditions are present, the arising of sense-consciousness becomes possible. The eye base, for example, is a material support that enables visual consciousness when visible form becomes prominent. In the same pattern, the ear-base supports auditory consciousness when sound impinges, and so on. The Abhidhamma model treats these as dependable regularities, which one might call the "lawfulness" of physicality, not because matter is ultimate, but because conditioned phenomena function consistently when their conditions are fulfilled.

This framework also clarifies why the six sense bases are so central for insight practice. If experience is mapped through saḷāyatana, then the practitioner can observe that what is taken to be "I see" or "I hear" is actually a sequence: a material base operates, an object appears, consciousness arises, and contact occurs. The "I" is not located in any one part of this chain. The Abhidhamma's value lies in its precision: it makes explicit that a self does not own the sense bases but are **temporary functional supports**, rūpa conditions through which cognitive events occur. In summary, saḷāyatana functions as the conceptual bridge that prevents two misunderstandings: that cognition exists independent of the body and world, or that cognition is reducible to physical substances. Instead, Abhidhamma uses the sense-based model to show that cognition is **dependent**, structured, and impermanent, grounded in material supports that themselves arise and pass away.

5. Pasāda-Rūpa: The "Sensitive Matter" That Enables Knowing

Among the many types of rūpa discussed in the Theravāda analytical tradition, **pasāda-rūpa** occupies a special role because it directly connects physicality to cognition. Pasāda-rūpa is commonly explained as the **"sensitive" or "clear" materiality** that underlies the five physical sense faculties: the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. It is crucial to stress that pasāda-rūpa is **not identical with gross organ matter**. The eye as a physical organ, for instance, contains many material components. Still, pasāda-rūpa refers to the specific capacity within the sensory system that can serve as a basis for sense-consciousness. In other words, pasāda-rūpa is best understood functionally: it is the **enabling condition** that makes sensory knowing possible.

This functional reading protects the Abhidhamma from crude physiological reductionism. The tradition does not say, "the eyeball sees"; it says that a certain sensitive base—classified as a rūpa supports the arising of eye-consciousness when a visible object becomes present. The emphasis remains conditional: when the sensitive base is intact, and an object impinges, cognition may arise; when the base is absent or damaged, that form of cognition cannot arise. This is why pasāda-rūpa is described as essential: without it, there is no doorway for contact (*phassa*) through that sense channel.

The Abhidhamma also treats pasāda-rūpa as a distinct rūpa type because it is not merely "matter" in a broad sense; it is **matter with a specific causal role**. It is the kind of rūpa that participates in the lawful structure of experience by serving as a proximate condition for consciousness. This distinction helps explain why sensory life is patterned and limited. Humans experience visible form through eye-sensitivity, sound through ear-sensitivity, and so forth. The structure of available bases therefore constrains the structure of cognition. Abhidhamma analysis implies: cognition arises in dependence, not according to a permanent will.

Another essential point is that pasāda-rūpa itself is **conditioned and impermanent**. It arises due to supporting causes and ceases when those causes break down. This impermanence is philosophically and meditatively significant. People often assume sense faculties are stable possessions ("my eyes," "my hearing"), but Abhidhamma analysis reveals that the sensitive bases are not lasting entities; they are momentary conditioned phenomena that function only when conditions hold. This view supports insight into non-self: the sense faculty is neither a self nor owned by a self, because it cannot be controlled absolutely and is subject to arising and dissolution.

Finally, pasāda-rūpa helps clarify how the tradition understands embodiment. The body is not merely a container for the mind; it is an active participant in the possibility of knowing. Sensory cognition depends on sensitive matter that is neither purely mental nor merely gross physical substance. This "in-between" role is precisely why pasāda-rūpa is central

these moments. The entire process can be summarised as: object impact touching sense 'advertence' consciousness receiving investigating consciousness determining (javana) registering.

The process begins when a sense object becomes prominent at a specific door (for example, visible form at the eye door). This "impact" is not described as a self-choosing to see; this is the arising of conditions: the object appears, the sensitive base is intact, and the mind stream becomes oriented to the door. Attention is then a turning of focus to the relevant sense door. This already suggests dependence: without an appropriate object and an operative door, there is no cause for the occurrence of advertence in that mode. Then sense consciousness arises: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so forth. Here, the function of *paśāda-rūpa* becomes unmistakable. The Abhidhamma explanation states, in effect, that eye consciousness cannot arise without the eye sensitivity; ear consciousness cannot arise without ear sensitivity. The sensitive base is the material "door" that the appropriate consciousness requires for its occurrence. Immediately following sense consciousness, the stream, described as receiving and investigating, includes the object, which is taken up more fully, and determining, where the mind "fixes" the object's significance for further response.

The most ethically and karmically important phase is **javana** (impulsion). This is where wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral responses occur, and where intention (*cetanā*) is prominent. The Abhidhamma therefore distinguishes between the raw sensory registration (which is limited and conditioned) and the reactive or intentional phase (where ethical quality becomes decisive). Yet even this phase depends on *rūpa* conditions: without the initial sense-door event made possible by faculty and object, there is no subsequent impulsion about that object. The chain shows how sense-based experience becomes the platform for moral and psychological life.

Finally, **registering** occurs, in which the object may be "held" briefly before the stream returns to its underlying flow. The significant philosophical insight here is that cognition is **event-like**: it consists of rapidly arising and ceasing moments, none of which remain. *Rūpa* is equally event-like: the sensitive bases and object-domains that condition cognition are themselves impermanent. Therefore, the Abhidhamma picture does not support the idea of a stable subject encountering stable objects; it supports a process view in which temporary conditions give rise to temporary knowing.

This process analysis is not merely scholastic. It provides a practical framework for insight meditation. When a practitioner observes "seeing as seeing," the Abhidhamma model helps clarify what is being observed: not a self, but conditioned events at the sense door—object impingement, consciousness, contact, feeling, and possible reaction. The "law of physicality" appears here as the consistent conditional role of *rūpa*: the sense faculty functions as a door; the object functions as a trigger; the bodily base supports tactile and vitality-related processes. Seeing these conditions clearly weakens the illusion of ownership and permanence and strengthens insight into impermanence and non-self.

8. Sutta–Abhidhamma Comparison: Continuity and Systematization

A careful comparison of sutta presentations and Abhidhamma analysis shows more continuity than conflict. The suttas repeatedly emphasize the **six sense bases**, contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and the danger of craving (*taṇhā*) arising from unguarded sensory experience. The goal of sutta teaching is often pragmatic: it aims to guide conduct and meditation by revealing where suffering begins and how it can be ended. Thus, the suttas stress **sense restraint**, mindful observation, and insight into the dependent nature of experience. The Abhidhamma inherits these same concerns but expresses them through a more explicit and detailed analytic framework.

One important continuity is the shared claim that experience is **conditioned** and **not self-owned**. In the suttas, sense contact is a condition for feeling, and feeling may condition craving; this chain highlights dependence and the absence of autonomous control. The Abhidhamma does not deny this; it clarifies the mechanisms behind it. Where the suttas speak in accessible experiential terms, the Abhidhamma provides a "micro-map" of how contact and cognition occur in momentary sequences. Both traditions aim at the same insight: seeing is not "I," hearing is not "mine," and the arising of feelings is not proof of a permanent subject.

At the same time, there is a difference in the **mode of explanation**. The suttas typically present the sense bases as a field for contemplation: "in dependence on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises; the meeting of the three is contact." This

is already analytic, but it remains close to lived experience and ethical consequence. Abhidhamma systematizes this further by classifying the types of rūpa involved (especially **pasāda-rūpa**), clarifying the categories of objects (*ārammaṇa*), and outlining the cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*) that follows impingement. In doing so, it renders the same experiential teaching into a structured ontology and psychology.

A second difference is that Abhidhamma introduces technical distinctions that are implicit in the suttas. For example, the suttas speak of "eye" as a base; the Abhidhamma distinguishes gross organ matter from **sensitive matter** that functions as the actual condition for eye-consciousness. This does not contradict the suttas; it proposes a refined interpretation of what "eye" means in the context of cognition. Similarly, the Abhidhamma explicitly states that not all materiality is directly relevant to cognition; certain rūpa types are specifically tied to sensory function, while others serve broader, supportive roles. The comparison also reveals complementary emphases. The suttas often foreground the **ethical turning point**: contact leads to feeling, and without mindfulness, feeling may lead to craving and suffering. Abhidhamma foregrounds the **structural turning point**: cognition depends on the faculty and the object, and proceeds through identifiable phases culminating in ethically charged impulses. When combined, these perspectives reinforce each other. The sutta framework keeps analysis tied to liberation; the Abhidhamma framework provides clarity about the conditioned architecture of experience.

Therefore, the Abhidhamma's contribution can be described as systematization rather than replacement. It is a more granular account of the "how" behind the sutta's "what" and "why." The continuity lies in the shared commitment to dependent arising and non-self; the difference lies in the depth of explanation and classification. For an analytical study of rūpa and the sense bases, this comparison is essential: it shows that the "ground of cognition" thesis is rooted in early formulations but developed with technical precision in later Theravāda analytical traditions.

9. Implications for Practice and Philosophy

The Abhidhamma analysis of rūpa, sense bases, and cognition has two major implications: one practical, for meditation and ethical life, and one philosophical, for understanding mind–body relations. Practically, the teaching provides a clear way to observe how suffering is constructed at the sensory interface. In mindfulness practice, especially in body- and sense-contemplation, one learns to recognize that a self does not own sensory events but arises from conditions. Seeing becomes: eye-base form consciousness contact feeling, possible craving. Hearing becomes: ear-based sound consciousness, contact, feeling, and possible craving. This conditional map strengthens mindfulness because it gives the practitioner a stable interpretive framework: one observes not "me" encountering "the world," but conditioned sequences unfolding.

This observation supports insight into the three marks: **impermanence (anicca)**, **unsatisfactoriness (dukkha)**, and **non-self (anattā)**. Impermanence becomes evident because both the material bases (*pasāda-rūpa*) and the mental events (*citta*, *cetasika*) arise and cease. Unsatisfactoriness becomes evident because dependence means vulnerability: when conditions change ageing, illness, fatigue, loss of sensory clarity experience shifts beyond one's control. Non-self becomes evident because the sense bases and cognitive events function lawfully without an inner controller. The practitioner cannot command the eye to see only pleasant forms, or the ear to hear only agreeable sounds, or feelings to remain pleasant. Abhidhamma analysis thus becomes a support for insight: it shows that what is taken as "my faculties" are conditioned supports, not possessions.

Ethically, this framework also reinforces a **sense of restraint**. If contact is known to be condition-dependent and capable of triggering craving, then guarding the doors is not repression; it is wisdom about conditions. One does not deny perception; one understands its causal power. The Abhidhamma model clarifies the point where moral quality becomes decisive—particularly in the impulsion (*javana*) phase. This helps practitioners see that while raw sensory consciousness is conditioned, the response to it can be trained. Mindfulness can interrupt the habitual slide from contact to craving.

Philosophically, the Abhidhamma account offers a distinctive middle path between extremes in theories of mind. It does not say that the mind is identical with matter, because consciousness and mental factors are treated as irreducible categories with distinct characteristics. Nor does it endorse a substance dualism in which mind and matter are separate,

eternal entities. Instead, it proposes a **conditional co-arising** model: mental events arise dependent on appropriate material bases and objects; material phenomena arise dependent on conditions and are not self-subsistent. This approach resembles a process ontology: what exists most fundamentally (in this framework) are not enduring substances but conditioned events.

Furthermore, the specific doctrine of **pasāda-rūpa** prevents simplistic interpretations of embodiment. Sense faculties are neither purely physical organs nor purely mental capacities; they are conditioned material sensitivities with a precise cognitive role. This complicates any attempt to frame Theravāda as either "materialist" or "dualist." The tradition is better read as functional and conditional: it analyses the roles that different phenomena play in producing experience and suffering. In short, the implications are twofold. For practice, the Abhidhamma analysis of rūpa and the sense bases offers a clear template for observing the arising of experience and the weakening of identification. For philosophy, it presents a coherent model of mind–matter relations grounded in conditionality, preserving the central Buddhist insight that liberation comes not from perfecting a self, but from understanding that the processes of knowing and embodiment are **conditioned, unstable, and not-self**.

10. Conclusion

The analysis in this study shows that, in Theravāda Abhidhamma, rūpa serves as a ground condition for cognition within the framework of the sense bases (saḷāyatana). The main discovery here is that the cognitive acts in the field of the senses are not presented as activities that are independent of a subject, or as a structure that is conditioned, but as an event that is structured under the law of sense faculty (pasāda-rūpa), sense object (ārammaṇa), and consciousness contact (phassa). The Abhidhamma's exhaustive process analysis and classification of the structures of the senses do not shift the Buddhist focus away from liberation; they merely analyze the structure of experience in such a way that the principles of dependence, impermanence, and non-self can be observed and understood with greater clarity.

The focus of this reasoning has centred around pasāda-rūpa, the "sensitive matter" that facilitates the process of sensory knowing. The Abhidhamma, by separating sensitive capacity from gross organ matter, identifies a particular functional aspect of materiality. Some types of rūpa, she argues, are not simply bodily materials, but rather enabling supports for the activity of cognition. She goes on to explain that without pasāda-rūpa, sensory consciousness does not arise. The sense faculties are not merely additions to the mind; they are, however, requisite for the purpose of sensory consciousness. In the same way, the examination of sense objects demonstrates the cognition, which is equally the result of a determining external factor: something must be adequate in the object-domain for the consciousness to arise at a particular door. In this situation, the "law of physicality" is best understood as a form of structured conditionality, a way of outlining the material conditions that are reliable in the process of the emergence of knowing.

The cognitive process described in the Abhidhamma is no different. The experience through the sense doors is described as a sequence including (1) advertence (attention), (2) sense-consciousness, (3) receiving, (4) investigating (interpreting), (5) determining, (6) impulsion (or initiation), and (7) registering (memory). This reminds us that there is more of an "event"-like quality to cognition than just the possession of a faculty by a self. The Abhidhamma is significant because it highlights the stronger ethical and liberative aspects. While raw sensory knowing is conditioned, and ultimately a mental response follows, that response can be trained through mindfulness and wisdom, thus weakening the normative progression from contact to craving.

The suttas, in relation to the Abhidhamma, suggest doctrinal continuity. The suttas and the Abhidhamma agree on the importance of the sense bases, contact, feeling, and dependent origination, and both emphasize the conditioned nature of experience to undermine self-view. The Abhidhamma is unique in that it can maintain doctrinal continuity from the standpoint of its systematization. It provides a more detailed and explanatory account of the "mechanics" of cognition, i.e. how the co-dependent workings of rūpa and nāma (matter and mind) operate while avoiding the implication of a permanent subject. This allows for practice to be supported by clarifying the causal structure of experience and deepening insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self.

To some extent, the current limitations must be recognized, although an account that is more complete could extend the analysis to show a more nuanced conditional-relations theory (*paccaya*) that would show more refined conditions that enable *pasāda-rūpa* and the cognitive sequences. Other inquiries could be directed to the more intricate functioning of the mind base (*mano-āyatana*), especially the involvement of mental objects and the underlying life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) in the later, organized constructs of the Theravāda. These additions would further substantiate the analysis that the Theravāda 'law of physicality' is not an exercise in material metaphysics, but rather a more refined exercise in conditionality that is primarily to aid the practitioner in attaining insight and liberation.

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