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Abstract

The act of compassionate lying, or causing harm to save a life, poses a deep ethical question. Although many Buddhists accept breaking a precept out of care, the Theravāda *Abhidhamma* is widely seen as a rigid system that denies this possibility. Previous scholarly debates on this issue have overlooked the crucial role of momentariness. This article examines the psychological mechanics of moral habituation to show how such acts are structurally possible. Drawing on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, the *Atthasālinī*, and the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, the study demonstrates that compassion and the intention to deceive cannot blend into a single mixed state. Instead, they arise in a rapid, alternating karmically active phase of cognitive impulsion (*javana*) sequence. I argue that this process is driven by the strict rules governing mental factors (*cetasikas*) and the repetition condition (*āsevana paccaya*) that reinforce the ethical character of each moment. By highlighting the threshold of determining consciousness (*voṭṭhapana*), this

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momentary analysis resolves long-standing debates about mixed motives. The analysis clarifies how compassionate deception functions moment by moment and explains why training in moral conduct (*sīla*) must doctrinally precede concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

Introduction

A person who repeatedly acts from greed does not simply accumulate a record of greedy actions. Over time, the repetition reshapes how that person encounters the world: what is noticed, how it is felt, and which responses arise with greatest ease. This observation is shared across Buddhist, Aristotelian, and many other ethical traditions. Within the Theravāda *Abhidhamma*, however, it receives a detailed account. The *Abhidhamma* does not rest content with the general observation that moral habits form through repetition. It clarifies, at the level of individual mind-moments, which mental factors constitute a wholesome or unwholesome response, which factors can and cannot co-arise, how repetition within a single cognitive sequence reinforces the ethical direction already taken, and how the accumulated weight of past volitional action alters the evaluative conditions for future responses.

The scholarly literature in Buddhist ethics has engaged meaningfully with *Abhidhamma* categories. Karunadasa (138-140) provides foundational textual analysis of the *cetasika* doctrine. Gethin's analysis of *Abhidhamma* (*Foundations* 202-205) discusses ethical psychology with careful attention to the relationship between mental factors and moral quality. Harvey's *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (17-20) situates moral psychology within the broader framework of Buddhist practice. Damien Keown's influential studies of Buddhist virtue ethics, including *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (213-222) and *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (30-35),

draw instructive parallels between Aristotelian habituation and Buddhist moral training, though without detailed engagement with the *Abhidhamma*'s internal pattern of allowable combinations. Davis (*Mindfulness* 223-236) has explored the relation among mindfulness, wisdom, and ethical discernment in Buddhist ethics, and Garfield (203-222) examines the foundational role of attention and mindfulness in ethical cultivation.

What remains less fully developed in the literature is the specific dynamics at work in moral habituation at the level of individual mind-moments. How, specifically, does the composition of the active moment of consciousness where moral volition and volitional action (*kamma*) are generated (*javana citta*) explain its ethical character? How does the repetition of *javanas* within a single cognitive sequence reinforce that character? And how does the accumulated weight of past *javana* sequences reshape the perceptual field for future ethical responses? These questions concern the internal mechanics of moral habit formation, and it is these questions that the present study addresses.

This article examines the *Abhidhamma*'s own account of moral habituation by focusing on three dynamics that have often been analyzed separately rather than as parts of a single psychological account. The analysis proceeds from within the *Abhidhamma*'s framework, drawing on its canonical sources and commentarial tradition. Although some of the resulting claims, such as the teaching that unwholesome acts are necessarily accompanied by specific unwholesome mental factors (*cetasika*), have been debated in the scholarly literature (Gethin "Killing" 174-180; Keown "Compassionate" 45-46), this article takes the *Abhidhamma*'s structural principles as given and examines their ethical implications when read as a coherent system. The first is the pattern of allowable combinations in mental factor association: the strict rules, codified in the *Sampayoga Naya*, that show which of the fifty-two mental factors can co-arise within a given

mind-moment (*citta*) and which are excluded under these doctrinal conditions. The second is the repetition condition (*āsevana paccaya*): the principle, grounded in the *Paṭṭhāna*'s conditional analysis, that each *javana* moment serves as a reinforcing condition for its immediate successor, producing a momentum effect across the seven *javanas* of a standard cognitive sequence, which in turn acts as a decisive support (*pakatūpanissaya paccaya*) for future states. The third is the *kamma* ripening (*kamma-vipāka*) cycle of conditioning: the way accumulated volitional action is represented within this structural account as influencing later affective disposition toward sensory encounters, illustrating how later disposition and response may be interpretively understood.

Taken together, these three dynamics offer a detailed psychological account of one important dimension of moral habituation: the specific psychological processes involved as ethical dispositions form, deepen, resist reversal, and yet remain open to transformation. The *Abhidhamma*'s account is distinctive not because it merely asserts that habits form through repetition, but because it offers a fine-grained analysis of that process, providing a structural level of detail that supplements the sutta accounts.

Building on the structural analysis of the cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*), specifically its temporal architecture and the role of the determining consciousness (*voṭṭhapana*), this inquiry focuses on the internal cognitive dynamics of moral habituation.

To make these complex interactions visible, this study employs an extended analytical example of these doctrinal dynamics. This approach makes certain relations stated in the classical *Abhidhamma* manuals more explicit, serving as a careful exegetical restatement rather than a computational simulation of consciousness itself. The *Abhidhamma* tradition, with its classified lists (*mātikā*) and elaborate conditional analysis in the

Paṭṭhāna, represents centuries of effort to organize psychological categories with analytical detail. This structural account reflects that commitment, offering an interpretive bridge to clarify the relations stated in the texts and expose their cumulative ethical implications.

This study uses a limited reconstruction to clarify how different mental factors interact in the *Abhidhamma*. This illustration represents only a portion of the complete doctrinal system. The specific patterns are provided in plain language as an explanatory aid, intended to offer a clear exegetical restatement of the cognitive process.

To investigate this process, this article first examines the rules governing co-arising of mental factors, followed by the reinforcing momentum of the repetition condition, and the long-term perceptual reshaping of karmic reinforcement. Taken together, these three dynamics offer a detailed psychological account of one important dimension of moral habituation and illustrate the significance of the determining consciousness as the threshold of ethical arising.

The Rules Governing Co-Arising (*Sampayoga Naya*)

The fifty-two mental factors are standardly classified within the *Abhidhamma* manual tradition into three primary groups (Bodhi 78-79; *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *Mātikā* 1; §§1, 365, 431). The ethically variable (*aññasamāna*) set comprises thirteen factors: seven universals (*sabbacitta sādhāraṇa*) that accompany every conscious moment without exception, and six occasionals (*pakiṇṇaka*) that arise contingently depending on the type of mind-moment. The unwholesome (*akusala*) set comprises fourteen factors organized into distinct subgroups: four universal unwholesome factors (including *moha* and *uddhacca*), three rooted in greed (*lobha*), four rooted in aversion (*dosa*), the *thīna-middha* (sloth and torpor) pair, and

vicikicchā (doubt). The beautiful (*sobhana*) set comprises twenty-five factors: nineteen *sobhana sādhāraṇa* (beautiful universals) factors present in all beautiful mind-moments, the three abstinences (*virati*), the two illimitables (*appamaññā*), and wisdom or non-delusion (*amoha*). This classification is set out in detail in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* (Bodhi 78-79) and is grounded in the enumerations of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī* §§1, 365, 431).

First, the Universal Factors: The seven universal mental factors are unconditionally present in every mind-moment. This establishes a baseline of conscious experience, comprising contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*), life faculty (*jīvitindriya*), and attention (*manasikāra*), that is ethically neutral in itself but necessary for any conscious moment to occur.

Second, the Root Selection: Based on the root (*hetu*) classification of the mind-moment, the appropriate root factors are added. A greed-rooted mind-moment receives greed together with the four delusion-associated factors. An aversion-rooted mind-moment receives aversion together with the four delusion-associated factors. A delusion-only mind-moment receives only the four delusion-associated factors. A wholesome mind-moment receives all nineteen beautiful universal factors, including non-greed, non-aversion, and optionally wisdom. This root-selection procedure follows the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*'s classification of mind-moments by root (Bodhi 29-45).

Third, the Feeling Conditions: The feeling-tone (*vedanā*) constrains the composition further. A mind-moment accompanied by joy (*somanassa*) includes rapture (*pīti*) and excludes the aversion-group factors. A mind-moment accompanied by grief (*domanassa*) excludes *pīti* and must include the aversion-group.

Fourth, the Energy Conditions: The *sasaṅkhārika/asaṅkhārika* (prompted/unprompted) distinction helps explain whether the sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*) pair is present. These factors can arise only in prompted unwholesome mind-moments and are structurally excluded from unprompted states (Bodhi 36-37).

Finally, the Ethical Threshold: The occasional mental factors applied thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), determination (*adhimokkha*), energy (*viriya*), rapture (*pīti*; included in joy-accompanied mind-moments as described above), and desire-to-act (*chanda*) are added as appropriate. Critically, a strict doctrinal limit operates: unwholesome mental factors and beautiful mental factors can never co-exist within the same mind-moment. This principle, which emerges from the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*'s classification of mind-moments as exclusively wholesome or unwholesome and is made explicit in the traditional exegetical approach in the commentaries, ensures that each conscious moment is ethically unambiguous (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī* §§1, 365, 431; Bodhi 95-106). The presence of any one of the fourteen unwholesome factors categorically precludes the presence of any of the twenty-five beautiful factors, and vice versa.

These rules of co-arising yield several structural consequences. First, the absolute segregation of unwholesome and beautiful factors means that there is no such thing as a "partially wholesome" mind-moment. Each *javana* mind-moment is either entirely wholesome or entirely unwholesome (or, in certain *vipāka* and *kiriya* mind-moments, ethically resultant or functional). This binary ethical character at the level of individual mind-moments is a foundational feature of *Abhidhamma* moral psychology. It stands in instructive contrast to folk-psychological intuitions about "mixed motives." One might object that common expressions such as "being in two minds" already capture the sense of alternating between conflicting inclinations, and that the *Abhidhamma* account merely restates

this familiar experience in technical language. However, the *Abhidhamma*'s analysis differs in a structural respect. A folk-psychological description of mixed motives typically allows that a single moment of feeling may contain both positive and negative elements in a blended or confused state. The *Abhidhamma* denies this possibility. Because the fourteen unwholesome mental factors and the twenty-five beautiful mental factors can never co-arise within the same mind-moment (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *Mātikā* 1; §§1, 365, 431; Bodhi 95-106), each individual mind-moment is categorically either wholesome or unwholesome, with no intermediate state. A person who appears to act from greed while simultaneously experiencing genuine compassion is not, in the *Abhidhamma*'s account, undergoing a single ambivalent mental state. Rather, the succession of mind-moments alternates between unwholesome and wholesome moments in rapid sequence, each individually unambiguous in its ethical character. Furthermore, each moment within a *javana* sequence is subject to the repetition condition, which introduces a directional momentum absent from ordinary descriptions of indecision. The impression of moral ambivalence is, strictly speaking, a temporal aggregate produced by the rapid succession of ethically distinct mind-moments, not a feature of any single mind-moment.

Second, the mutual exclusion of greed and aversion within a single mind-moment means that greed and aversion, though both unwholesome, cannot operate simultaneously. They represent structurally distinct modes of unwholesome engagement: greed as attraction to what is perceived as desirable or agreeable (*iṭṭha*), and aversion as resistance toward what is perceived as undesirable or disagreeable (*aniṭṭha*). This mutual exclusion principle, which extends to the categorical separation of all unwholesome and all beautiful mental factors, means that moral quality within the *Abhidhamma* is not a matter of weighing one type of factor against another. There can be no "preponderance" of wholesome over unwholesome factors within a single mind-moment, because the two groups

never co-exist in the same mind-moment. The *javana* that executes a given action is either entirely wholesome or entirely unwholesome. Moral development, within this framework, occurs not by shifting the balance within a single moment but by increasing the frequency and strength of wholesome *javana* sequences across successive cognitive episodes. A strict analytical application of these rules illustrates this exclusion, as the two factors cannot simultaneously arise. A further constraint within the aversion-group is that the three factors of envy (*issā*), avarice (*macchariya*), and remorse (*kukkucca*) are standardly presented as distinct optional accompaniments of aversion-based states. At most one of these may accompany aversion in any given mind-moment. A careful reading enforces this constraint, reflecting the *Abhidhamma*'s teaching (Bodhi 82-83) that these represent distinct attitudinal colorings of aversion-based mentality that cannot co-occur.

Third, the invariable inclusion of delusion (*moha*), moral shamelessness (*ahirika*), moral recklessness (*anottappa*), and restlessness (*uddhacca*) in every unwholesome mind-moment establishes a shared substrate of moral blindness underlying all unwholesome states. Whether the dominant affliction is greed or aversion, the delusory infrastructure is identical. This observation has ethical consequences that extend beyond the *Abhidhamma*'s technical vocabulary: it suggests that the distinction between greed-based and aversion-based moral failures is secondary to the shared absence of moral sensitivity, specifically moral shame or conscience (*hiri*) and moral dread or concern (*ottappa*), and clarity that characterizes all unwholesome mentality. The paired factors of moral conscience and moral concern, designated the "guardians of the world" (*lokapāla*) in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as "Dve *dhammā sukkapakkhā lokaṁ pālenti*" (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 2.9), are present in every wholesome mind-moment and absent from every unwholesome mind-moment. Their role as necessary conditions of moral conduct is directly reflected in this pattern of allowable combinations.

This clarification helps illustrate the mental factor composition of these relevant mind-moment-types. A greed-rooted unwholesome mind-moment accompanied by joy that is unprompted and with wrong view present, contains exactly nineteen mental factors. An aversion-rooted unwholesome mind-moment accompanied by grief that is unprompted contains exactly seventeen factors. A wholesome mind-moment with wisdom, unprompted and with equanimity (*upekkhā*), contains thirty-two factors (assuming the contextual absence of the occasional abstinences and illimitables). These counts follow logically from the rules described above, and they align with the standard counts given in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* (Bodhi 79). The consistency of these counts illustrates that this analytical framework aligns with textual principles.

Āsevana Paccaya: Repetition as Ethical Momentum

The *javana* phase of the cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*) normally comprises seven consecutive mind-moments (five in the case of individuals near death). A defining feature of this phase, insufficiently examined in the secondary literature, is the repetition condition. Described in the *Paṭṭhāna*, *Paccayaniddesa* 12,[2] on the repetition condition and discussed in the commentarial tradition, this condition specifies that each *javana* moment serves as a conditioning factor for the immediately succeeding *javana* moment, reinforcing the same ethical character through repetition (*Paṭṭhāna* 12; Ledi Sayadaw *Paṭṭhānuddesa* 22-23).

Within this analysis, the conditioning effect of each *javana* is best understood as a graduated reinforcement within the sequence. The *javana* run is progressively reinforced; the later *javanas* continue and deepen the

[2] *Paṭṭhāna* citations are by *paccaya* number in the PTS edition.

ethical orientation already established by the earlier moments. The seventh *javana* can therefore be read as the point where that reinforcement is most fully expressed in the illustrated sequence.

This interpretive representation finds support in the orthodox manual tradition's distinction between the karmic weight of the first and seventh *javanas* (Bodhi 200-205). The first *javana* is described as generating only *kamma* ripening in this life (*diṭṭhadhammavedanīya kamma*), that is, *kamma* ripening in this very life and of the weakest force in the run, whereas the seventh *javana* generates *kamma* ripening in the next life (*upapajjavedanīya kamma*), that is, *kamma* ripening in the immediately following existence and of the second weakest force. The five intermediate *javanas* produce *kamma* ripening in subsequent lives (*aparāpariyavedanīya kamma*), or *kamma* ripening in some subsequent existence. This graduated differentiation of volitional weight, outlined in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* and treated extensively in Ledi Sayadaw's *Paramatthadīpanī* (219, 236-239), does not by itself specify a numerical gradient across the seven *javanas*. It does, however, provide interpretive support for reading the *javana* run as ethically differentiated rather than uniform.

The ethical significance of this principle becomes clearer when the sequence is read in this way. Within a single cognitive sequence, the first *javana* may be treated as initially significant in the run, whereas the *javana* run as a whole is progressively reinforced. Once the ethical character of the *javana* sequence has been established, the subsequent *javanas* are represented as continuing and deepening the established orientation. The final *javana* may therefore be read, within this reconstruction, as the point where the established direction has been most fully reinforced within the analytical sequence.

This also bears directly on the understanding of volition in Buddhist ethical theory. Harvey (16-17) has argued that volition is the primary

bearer of moral responsibility in the *Abhidhamma*'s account. The repetition condition clarifies that this volitional process is not best understood as a single isolated point, but as a structured series whose later moments sustain and reinforce an already established direction. The initial *javana* plays an important role early in the run, whereas the subsequent *javanas* deepen the force of that same orientation within the progressively reinforced run. Moral responsibility may thus be read as extending across the sequence, even though the earliest moment remains particularly important for the setting of its ethical course.

This graduated reinforcement also helps clarify, within the limits of this reconstruction, why entrenched habits are difficult to reverse. If repeated unwholesome *javana* runs are read together with the interpretive cycle of conditioning discussed below, each sequence may be understood as providing decisive support (*pakatūpanissaya paccaya*) for later conditioned tendencies in subsequent cognitive episodes. Habituation is therefore represented here not as the product of a single moment alone, but as the cumulative ethical effect of repeated sequences whose force extends into the conditions that shape later responses.

The *Kamma-Vipāka* Cycle of Conditioning as Perceptual Reshaping

This process is illustrated by the practice of giving (*dāna*). A person's first attempt to give may be difficult due to habitual greed. However, each act of giving strengthens the factor of non-greed. Through this repetition, the wholesome choice becomes more natural, and the unwholesome habit is gradually reshaped.

Following the internal momentum of the *javana* sequence, the analysis outlines how these sequences contribute to a cycle of condition-

ing connecting volitional action to its resultant effect on subsequent experience (*vipāka*). Within the supplementary analytical framework, a non-canonical framing is introduced at the conclusion of each sequence to illustrate how accumulated volitional activity shapes later affective disposition over a lifespan. For the sake of exposition, this analytical example shortens the temporal distance between a moral action and its resultant effect, making the delayed consequences of *kamma* and its subsequent resultant effect immediately visible as an analytical device to expose the cumulative ethical significance of the *javana* sequence.

A visual stimulus of high prominence (*atimahanta*) is received while the internal disposition is set to unwise attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*). The sequence proceeds as a greed-rooted *javana* sequence: seven *javanas*, each containing nineteen mental factors. This view-associated greed mind-moment includes greed, wrong view (*diṭṭhi*), and the four delusion-associated factors, accompanied by joy. Throughout this sequence, the unwholesome momentum progressively builds, establishing an initial unwholesome tendency within the reconstruction.

Upon completion, the accumulated state has shifted negatively. Rather than peacefully relinquishing the sensory encounter, the mind-door registers this unfavorable interpretive condition and triggers a chain of four subsequent mental engagements reflecting upon the resulting dissatisfaction. Each of these subsequent mind-door sequences includes its own *javana* phase, which is independently conditioned by the newly established frustrated tendency.

Here the sequence becomes ethically significant. In the worked example, because the orientation turned toward frustration after the initial greed *vīthi*, each subsequent reflective *vīthi* takes this dissatisfaction as its object. Constructed from the selected co-arising and conditioning rules discussed above, this sequence illustrates how continued unwise attention is represented as being followed by an aversion-rooted *javana* sequence:

seven *javanas* of seventeen mental factors, with aversion, grief, and the four delusion-associated factors. The cognitive chain is thus included to illustrate a reinforcing cycle of unwholesome states. A single initial sense-contact is mapped as initiating not one but five separate *javana* sequences (the original greed encounter plus four subsequent aversive reflections). If the first is unwholesome, the illustrative trajectory helps show how the cycle of conditioning, under the condition of continued unwise attention, makes further unwholesome responses more likely, with each reflection deepening the negative orientation.

If the cumulative state has shifted toward a negative tendency, the structural account represents this as a less favorable orientation toward the incoming sensory encounter. At the micro-level, this shift occurs because the affective quality of the initial encounter is itself conditioned by the prior sequence of *kamma-vipāka* processes (Bodhi 41-42).

First, the cycle of conditioning reflects the principle that *kamma* does not merely provide a "reward" or "punishment" at some distant future point. Within this framework, this analysis helps make sense of how prior conditioning may be understood as influencing later affective disposition. This illustrates what, in ordinary language, might be described as the way that moral failure colors one's subsequent experience of the world. The *Abhidhamma*'s framework is more specific: this analytical framework helps clarify how such conditioning may be understood through the resultant mind-moment at the *pañcaviññāṇa* stage, illustrating a directional shift toward a less favorable resultant pattern.

Second, the resulting chain of responses is significant. In the worked example, a single greed-rooted *vīthi* is represented as being followed by a chain of four aversion-rooted reflective *vīthis*, each deepening the unwholesome conditioning. The worked sequence is included to sug-

gest how, within this framework, a single unwholesome act does not remain isolated in its effects; initial pleasure-seeking frequently collapses into frustration.

Third, and most critically for the question of moral transformation, the wholesome intervention in a subsequent encounter is included to illustrate that, within this reconstruction, the cycle of conditioning constrains but does not foreclose future ethical response. In the worked example, despite a deeply entrenched unwholesome tendency, the shift to wise attention is used to illustrate the arising of a wholesome mind-moment with thirty-two beautiful factors. The prior unwholesome momentum is not easily overcome, and the single wholesome sequence only partially offsets the accumulated degradation. But the doctrinal possibility of wholesome response persists. This dynamic can be read alongside the Theravāda teaching, expressed in texts such as the *Accharāsaṅghāta Sutta* ("Snapping of a Finger," *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 1.53-54) regarding the transformative value of even a moment of wholesome cultivation, that wholesome states can always, in principle, be cultivated, regardless of past *kamma*, so long as the conditions for wise attention are present.

Illustrative Dynamics in Practice

An extended analytical illustration clarifies these dynamics over multiple sensory encounters. The sequence spans three distinct sources of sensory stimuli and outlines six complete cognitive impulse sequences, illustrating how past responses condition future perception.

The distribution of mental factors across these illustrative encounters reveals a clear ethical pattern. Across the six sequences, the universal factors naturally provide a consistent baseline. More strikingly, the four

delusion-associated factors accompany every moment of the five unwholesome sequences, whereas the beautiful factors, such as mindfulness (*sati*) and moral sensitivity (*hiri*, *ottappa*), emerge only during the single wholesome sequence. Aversion factors predominate over greed, illustrating how initial pleasure-seeking can quickly degenerate into successive aversive states.

This analysis clarifies the absence of beautiful factors during periods of unwholesome engagement. Moral sensitivity, mental flexibility (*mudutā* [malleability], *kammaññatā* [wieldiness]), and ethical awareness (*sati*) and confidence (*saddhā*) are structurally precluded for the overwhelming majority of the cognitive life depicted in such a sequence. Their absence is not a failure of "willpower" in any folk-psychological sense; it is a direct consequence of the rules governing co-arising. When any one of the fourteen unwholesome mental factors is present, beautiful mental factors cannot co-arise.

This sequential conditioning helps make sense of the *Abhidhamma*'s principle that desirable objects produce pleasant resultant consciousness. Yet the subsequent greed-rooted *javana* run reverses this favorable condition: by the conclusion of the sequence, the conditioning has shifted in an unfavorable direction, and subsequent objects are received with a less favorable orientation.

In the worked example, a later sensory event is presented. Constructed from the co-arising and conditioning rules discussed above, the shift in internal disposition (with the presence of wise attention [*yoniso manasikāra*]) is used to illustrate one possible wholesome *javana* configuration despite the strongly established unwholesome tendency. This sequence illustrates a three-rooted wholesome mind-moment (*alobha*, *adosa*, *amoha*) with thirty-two mental factors, representing a wholesome karmic weight that begins to reverse the prior unwholesome tendency. This doctrinal possibility of recovery is ethically essential: it offers a structural

way of understanding the Theravāda teaching that wholesome states can always be cultivated, regardless of past *kamma*, so long as the conditions for wise attention obtain.

A subsequent minor (*paritta*) sound illustrates another feature: it does not generate *javanas* at all. The cognitive sequence falls back into the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) without any *javana* phase. This demonstrates that not every moment of sensory contact constitutes a morally significant event. Ethical significance requires sufficient stimulus intensity to reach the *javana* stage, and this requirement is itself a doctrinal constraint on moral engagement: one can only generate *kamma* when the cognitive process reaches the impulsion phase.

The final sensory stimulus, a tactile encounter, arrives under the accumulated weight of the preceding unwholesome orientation and is received with a correspondingly less favorable orientation. However, in *Vīthi* six of the worked example, the sequence is constructed to illustrate how, within this reconstruction, the presence of wise attention may accompany a wholesome sequence despite prior conditioning. This single wholesome sequence is included to illustrate how the framework remains sensitive to the quality of attention, helping to show, within the worked example, that even a deeply conditioned unwholesome trajectory remains interpretively open to redirection.

Table 1. Summary of the initial state and the six *vīthis* in the worked example

Vīthi Number	Trigger Stimulus	*Javana* Root	*Vedanā*	*Cetasika* Count	Resultant Orientation
Initial	–	–	–	–	Favorable Orientation
Vīthi 1	Visual *Atimahanta*	*Lobha*	*Somanassa*	19	Favorable Orientation
Vīthi 2	Mind-dependent	*Dosa*	*Domanassa*	17	Unfavorable Orientation

Vīthi 3	Mind-dependent	*Dosa*	*Domanassa*	17	Unfavorable Orientation
Vīthi 4	Mind-dependent	*Dosa*	*Domanassa*	17	Unfavorable Orientation
Vīthi 5	Mind-dependent	*Dosa*	*Domanassa*	17	Unfavorable Orientation
Vīthi 6	Touch *Mahanta*	*Kusala*	*Upekkhā*	32	Unfavorable Orientation

Determination, *Javana*, and Ethical Arising

The dynamics described above raise a question that any reader versed in Buddhist philosophy will immediately pose: does this account reduce moral agency to a deterministic process? If the *kamma-vipāka* and prior repetition habits constrain the available mental factor combinations, is there a genuine moment of ethical redirection? In our analytical illustration, this redirection is understood not as an autonomous "free will" choice. The determining consciousness marks the immediate threshold where the mind's accumulated conditions issue into an ethically active response, providing the critical juncture for redirection into a wholesome or unwholesome *javana* sequence.

Within the worked example, the final tactile encounter is included to illustrate how the presence of wise attention is represented as functioning as part of the broader conditioned background. This illustrates how the framework remains sensitive to the quality of attention, helping to show that even a deeply conditioned orientation remains interpretively open to redirection.

The sequence may be compared to a course altered by changing conditions. Past habits are like the current whereas wise attention is one condition among others in the changing course of the cognitive sequence.

The worked illustration helps make this possibility clearer. Within the example, a shift from unwise attention to wise attention is depicted as being associated with a complete reversal of *javana* character, from greed-rooted to three-rooted wholesome.

Everything we have examined—the rules governing mental factor composition, the reinforcing momentum of the repetition condition, and the reshaping of perceptual disposition through the *kamma-vipāka* cycle—converges at the determining consciousness. At this juncture, the accumulated weight of prior conditioning meets the present quality of attention. The determining consciousness does not "choose" in the sense of an autonomous act; rather, it is the point where the conditioned stream of consciousness transitions from the ethically neutral *vipāka* phase (sense-consciousness, receiving, and investigation) into the ethically active *javana* phase. The quality of attention at this point, wise attention or unwise attention, is itself conditioned, arising from prior habituation and the cultivation of mindfulness. Wise attention functions as part of the broader conditioned background rather than operating as a special intervention, yet it is one condition that the ethical direction of the ensuing *javana* sequence depends.

This analysis also bears on a point Mark Siderits raises about Buddhist reductionism and moral responsibility (73-75): explanation may focus on sub-personal events such as volitions, but responsibility still belongs to persons as wholes. This analysis suggests a different reading. By showing that the quality of attention is one of the conditions involved in a *javana* sequence becoming wholesome or unwholesome, and that *javana* configuration is not mechanically fixed by prior *kamma*, the analysis delineates a specific space of moral responsiveness within an otherwise highly constrained cognitive process. The agent is not a homunculus behind the cognitive machinery; moral responsiveness consists in the conditioned possibility of wholesome attention and wholesome response.

Mindfulness (*sati*), which appears in the *mental factor* map only when wholesome mind-moments are generated, is the distinctive characteristic of this conditioned responsiveness.

Habituation, the Threefold Training, and Broader Ethical Implications

This dynamic is illustrated in a practical moral dilemma, such as contemplating a lie (*musāvāda*) to protect a life. When a person tells a "compassionate lie" to protect someone, their motives appear mixed. Psychologically, the *Abhidhamma* resolves this not as a single contradictory state, but as rapidly alternating cognitive moments whose ethical character is determined by the mental factor composition of each *javana* phase.

A clarification of the *Abhidhamma*'s technical vocabulary is important here, because the terms *moha* (delusion) and *dosa* (aversion) carry a wider range of meaning in the *Abhidhamma* than their ordinary translations suggest. Every unwholesome mind-moment is necessarily accompanied by the four universal unwholesome mental factors: *moha*, *ahirika* (moral shamelessness), *anottappa* (moral recklessness), and *uddhacca* (restlessness) (Bodhi 95-96; *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* §§390, 393-394, 427-430). The *Atthasālinī* defines *moha* not as gross confusion but as "not connecting things with impermanence, suffering, and non-self" (Buddhaghosa *Atthasālinī* 249, 254). Even a person of considerable intelligence and good intent is, at the moment of executing an unwholesome act, not seeing reality as it truly is in the *Abhidhamma*'s technical sense. Similarly, aversion does not require gross anger. The *Atthasālinī* describes aversion as having the characteristic of ferocity (*caṇḍikka-lakkhaṇa*), but the commentarial tradition recognizes that its manifestation ranges from subtle aversion or discomfort to overt hatred. In the scenario of a compassionate lie, even subtle aversion directed toward the suffering one seeks to prevent falls within the *Abhidhamma*'s understanding of aversion. The *Paṭṭhāna*, in its analysis

of the decisive support condition (*upanissaya paccaya*), recognizes that wholesome states can serve as conditions for the arising of unwholesome states across separate moments (*Paṭṭhāna* 6-7; Ledi Sayadaw *Paṭṭhānuddesa* 17-20). Compassion (*karuṇā*) in one *vīthi* may serve as a decisive support condition for aversion arising in the subsequent *vīthi* directed at the threat or the suffering itself.

A *vīthi* sequence in such a scenario thus involves unwholesome *javanas* (whether greed-rooted attachment to the victim or aversion-rooted aversion toward the threat) that execute the deceptive act, rapidly alternating with conceptually distinct wholesome *vīthis* containing compassion (*karuṇā*). The compassionate *vīthi* is genuinely wholesome, containing the beautiful mental factors of *karuṇā* (compassion, an *appamaññā* factor) together with the full complement of nineteen beautiful universals factors. The deceptive *vīthi* is genuinely unwholesome, containing the four universal unwholesome factors. These two types of *vīthi* cannot merge; the mutual exclusion of unwholesome and beautiful mental factors ensures that each *javana* phase is categorically one or the other. It is worth noting here that the *Abhidhamma*'s analysis of lying as an unwholesome act is not an appeal to an objective norm external to its psychological system (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī* §299; Buddhaghosa *Atthasālinī* 99). The preference for truthful speech is reflected within the mental factor framework itself through abstinence from false speech (*musāvādā virati*), one of the three abstinence mental factors (*virati*) among the twenty-five *sobhana* factors (Bodhi 86-87). When this factor is active in a wholesome mind-moment, the inclination is toward truth; it is structurally excluded from any unwholesome mind-moment.

Repeated compassionate responses within this interpretation gradually alter the direction of habit, making future protective actions, specifically those involving truth or strategic silence rather than deception, more naturally accessible within the cognitive habit (*āsevana*). The

ethical trajectory of the habituated agent thus moves, over time, toward responses where wholesome moments increasingly dominate and the internal inclination for deception diminishes.

The relationship between moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) in the threefold training (*tisso sikkhā*) can be understood in terms of their dependence on certain mental factors (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.90). Concentration requires more than just one-pointedness; it depends on a wider foundation of mental stability and clarity. It requires sustained one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) accompanied by the full complement of beautiful mental factors (*sobhana sādhāraṇa*): tranquility (*passaddhi*), lightness (*lahutā*), malleability (*mudutā*), wieldiness (*kammaññatā*), proficiency (*pāguññatā*), and rectitude (*ujukatā*). These factors are structurally available only in wholesome mind-moments. A cognitive process whose *kamma-vipāka* cycle of conditioning has oriented perception toward unfavorable interpretive objects, and whose habitual *javana* response is aversion-rooted (producing restlessness, displeasure, and the active suppression of all *sobhana* factors), faces a doctrinal impediment to the arising of the concentrated states required for *samādhi*. The mental factors of tranquility and lightness are not merely difficult to cultivate under these conditions; they are not admitted within the mind-moments that constitute habitual unwholesome response.

This helps explain the traditional sequence of the threefold training. The cultivation of moral conduct/restraint from unwholesome bodily and verbal action is understood in the Theravāda tradition not merely as an ethical prerequisite for meditation but as an essential foundation for higher cultivation.

By systematically reducing the frequency of unwholesome *javana* runs, the cultivation of moral conduct contributes to the reversal of prior unwholesome conditioning. It clarifies how ethical conduct conditions a

more favorable basis for wholesome development (*iṭṭha*), which ultimately supports and stabilizes the mind for the concentrated states required for insight. The *Visuddhimagga*'s insistence that purification of conduct (*sīla-visuddhi*) must precede purification of mind (*citta-visuddhi*) (Buddhaghosa *Visuddhimagga* 121-122) receives here an interpretive rationale grounded in the structural principles of mental factor composition.

The worked illustration makes this visible in miniature. The single wholesome *vīthi* begins to reverse the prior unwholesome tendency. If this process were repeated, with increasing frequency of wholesome *javana* runs, the underlying tendency would gradually shift toward positive territory, the affective orientation would revert to wholesome development and the evaluative conditions for sustained wholesome response would become progressively more favorable. This is the fine-grained ethical unfolding of what, in the *Visuddhimagga*'s language, is described as purification of conduct serving as the foundation for purification of mind.

This account clarifies Keown's observations (*Nature* 213) on Buddhist moral development as the cultivation of stable dispositions through repeated practice. The repetition condition functions as a short-term habituation dynamic, training the immediate cognitive process, whereas *Pakatūpanissaya paccaya* provides the decisive support necessary to transition this training into a long-term ethical orientation. Together, they function alongside the *kamma-vipāka* cycle of conditioning, which reshapes the evaluative conditions for future conduct. Habituation is located at the level of individual mind-moments. Moral character, on this reading, is not a static trait but a dynamic aggregate of countless micro-level conditioning episodes, continuously shaped by the interplay of repetition and karmic reinforcement.

A further outcome of this close reading suggests a patterned asymmetry between the ease of moral degradation and the difficulty of moral

recovery. In the illustrative sequence, a single greed-rooted *vīthi* is followed by four subsequent aversion-rooted reflective *vīthis*, creating a rapid and severe degradation from a single sensory encounter. The subsequent wholesome *vīthi*, despite mobilizing thirty-two mental factors (nearly twice the unwholesome count of seventeen) and representing a robust wholesome intervention, produces a recovery that is much slower and harder to sustain. This asymmetry demonstrates how the *Abhidhamma*'s moral psychology can be read as pointing toward a patterned asymmetry regarding moral inertia: unwholesome habits are easier to establish and harder to reverse than wholesome ones. This suggestive interpretive correlation aligns with the emphasis placed throughout the Theravāda tradition on the urgency of moral restraint (*saṃvara sīla*) and the protective function of *sīla* as the foundation of the entire path.

The analysis also bears on the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) in its ethical dimensions. The account presented here contains no entity that could be identified as a "self" directing the cognitive process. There is no separate supervisor, no inner controller, and no executive self-standing behind the process. The cognitive process is entirely constituted by the interplay of mental factors, conditional relations (*paccaya*), and the cycle of conditioning. Moral responsiveness, as argued above, consists in the conditioned possibility of wholesome attention and wholesome response, and this is a function of mental factor composition (specifically, the presence or absence of mindfulness and the beautiful universal factors in preceding wholesome *javana* episodes), not an irreducible "self" behind the process.

This also matters for the question of moral responsibility in a Buddhist framework that denies a permanent self. The account offered here suggests that moral responsibility can still be explained without appealing to a fixed inner agent. The doctrinal account offered here suggests a middle path between robust agent-causation and eliminativist denial of

moral responsibility. The analysis draws attention to the determining stage, the operative capacity of attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), and the constraining role of karmic reinforcement, which together help explain moral responsiveness within a non-self framework. Responsibility, on this account, does not require an unchanging agent-self; it evaluates a cognitive process whose ethical direction is conditioned by the quality of attention. The *Abhidhamma* provides such a framework.

This account also permits a clear articulation of the difference between habitual unwholesome conduct and determined ethical effort. In terms of mental factor counts alone, the difference is substantial: an unwholesome aversion-rooted mind-moment contains seventeen factors, whereas a three-rooted wholesome mind-moment contains thirty-two. The wholesome mind-moment structurally incorporates nearly twice as many mental factors, including the nineteen beautiful universal factors that provide the cognitive stability, moral sensitivity, and phenomenal clarity absent from the unwholesome state. Wholesome action is represented here as not merely the avoidance of unwholesome factors but the structural inclusion of a wider and more differentiated set of mental factors. Within the bounds of this structural analysis, this patterned asymmetry offers a tentative way to contextualize the observation, widely attested in contemplative traditions, that sustained wholesome conduct produces states of greater cognitive clarity and emotional balance, whereas habitual unwholesome conduct produces states that lack these supportive factors.

Recent scholarship also connects Buddhist models of mind with discussions in moral psychology and cognitive science. Davis and Thompson (585-597) use the five aggregates as a lens for cross-cultural cognitive science, and Garfield (203-222) treats mindfulness and attention as central to ethical cultivation and engagement.

Finally, for the study of Buddhist ethics specifically, this account suggests that the *Abhidhamma* is not merely a scholastic classification system but can be read as a dynamic ethical account. Its claims about habituation, perception, and moral agency bear directly on questions of contemporary interest, detailing the self-reinforcing character of repeated moral action and the persistent but doctrinally constrained possibility of moral transformation.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the Theravāda *Abhidhamma*'s account of moral habituation through three interconnected dynamics: (1) the strict rules governing mental factor co-arising (*sampayoga naya*), which ensure that every ethically active mind-moment is categorically wholesome or unwholesome; (2) the repetition condition, which progressively reinforces the ethical direction of each *javana* sequence; and (3) the *kamma* ripening cycle, which reshapes the affective conditions under which future responses arise. Together, these dynamics explain not merely that moral habits form through repetition but map the internal structure behind that formation at the resolution of individual mind-moments.

Two broader implications follow from this analysis. First, because the beautiful mental factors required for concentration and wisdom, including tranquility, malleability, wieldiness, and mindfulness, are structurally excluded from every unwholesome mind-moment, moral conduct is not merely an ethical ideal but an indispensable psychological condition for higher cultivation. The threefold training follows a necessary developmental sequence. Without the mental factor environment that moral conduct provides, the concentrated states required for *samādhi* cannot arise.

Second, this analysis offers a precise account of how apparently mixed moral motives are resolved. Because wholesome and unwholesome mental factors can never co-arise within the same mind-moment, states that appear morally ambivalent are, at the micro-level, rapid successions of ethically distinct mind-moments. We must then ask where this leaves us from a broader ethical perspective. From a strict *Abhidhamma* perspective, the key issue is not whether an act appears forceful or outwardly harmful, but whether the *javana* that executes it contains unwholesome mental factors constituting a precept-breaking intention. Some seemingly forceful life-preserving acts, such as extracting an object from a choking child's throat even if it causes bleeding, can be executed by a wholly wholesome *javana*. The mental factor of energy (*viriya*) utilized in such physical exertion is an occasional factor (*pakiṇṇaka*) common to both wholesome and unwholesome states. When driven entirely by compassion without any intention to harm, this applied energy remains entirely wholesome. The sharper ethical dilemma arises when the act itself is structurally a precept-breaking one, such as false speech or killing. In the case of killing, the same distinction turns on whether the act contains an intention to end life. Forceful rescue need not contain such an intention, whereas an act of killing, even when compassionately motivated in adjacent moments, would involve an unwholesome executing *javana*. False speech likewise cannot operate this way. Regardless of the energy applied, constructing a lie is structurally a precept-breaking act because it requires the distortion of truth. To actively conceal the truth and formulate a deception, the abstinence from false speech (*musāvādā virati*), which is necessarily present in a wholesome state directed at speech, must be absent. Furthermore, the act of concealment necessitates the presence of delusion (*moha*). In such cases, the compassionate intention may be genuinely present in adjacent wholesome moments, but the *javana* that executes the deception is, in *Abhidhamma* terms, strictly unwholesome.

However, classifying this *javana* as unwholesome does not mean all unwholesome acts carry the same karmic weight. The commentarial tradition, such as the *Atthasālinī*, clearly distinguishes between minor faults (*appasāvajja*) and grave faults (*mahāsāvajja*) based on the intention and the amount of harm caused (Buddhaghosa *Atthasālinī* 97-98). A deception used specifically to protect a life produces only a minor unwholesome result. This small fault is vastly outweighed by the powerful wholesome *kamma* generated by the dominant compassionate *javana* sequences. Although Keown argues that the *Abhidhamma* cannot accommodate such acts (Keown "Compassionate" 46, 58), this momentary analysis shows otherwise. Wholesome compassion and the unwholesome intention to deceive or kill cannot blend into a single mixed state, but they can arise in a rapid alternating sequence. This returns us to the possibility that a practitioner can act out of deep care while technically breaking a rule. The *Abhidhamma* does not deny the reality of the compassion, nor does it dismiss the ethical difficulty. It provides instead a structural analysis where the unwholesome mental factors constituting the harmful act (*moha*, *dosa*) and the wholesome mental factors constituting the compassionate response (*karuṇā*, *adosa*) arise in categorically distinct moments. The direction of moral habituation, on this account, is determined not by a single decisive moment but by the accumulated trajectory of countless such sequences, each conditioned by the one before.

The *Abhidhamma* locates moral transformation not in the intervention of an autonomous will, but in the gradual reorientation of attention within a conditioned cognitive process, as each volitional act helps shape the conditions for later responses. Its claim that such detailed habituation dynamics can be analyzed at the level of individual mind-moments remains a distinctive and significant contribution to the study of moral psychology.

Supplementary Materials

A supplementary archive containing additional worked examples is available at [https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/AT8GF] for readers who would like more detail. The article's argument, however, is presented in the main text and grounded in classical *Abhidhamma* sources.

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