

Attentional Capture and Ethical Responsibility in Theravāda Abhidhamma: A Formal Reconstruction of the Cognitive Sequence

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Abstract

Understanding how intention and karmic accumulation occur within Buddhist ethics benefits from examining the cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*) described in Theravāda Abhidhamma. Standard manuals describe this process for isolated stimuli, but leave open how competing or overlapping objects are resolved under the system's timing constraints. This paper introduces a typology of attentional capture based on four orthodox object-intensity categories: uninterrupted capture, delayed capture, weak capture, and mind-door capture. Using a formal reconstruction constrained by the one-consciousness-at-a-time rule, *eka-citta* (Buddhaghosa 1920, 96) and the seventeen-moment material lifespan (Nārada 1987, 237), it examines how attention is captured, delayed, or blocked under different conditions and traces the ethical significance of each outcome. The reconstruction suggests that delayed capture may weaken the conditions for wholesome volition through psychological momentum (the repetition condition, *āsevana paccaya*; *Paṭṭhāna*, Paccayaniddesa §12), that weak objects may never reach the volitional phase of impulsion (*javana*; Nārada 1987, 237–38), and that mind-door objects reach volitionally relevant processing with very little temporal buffer (Bodhi 2007, 143). By distinguishing how serial processing, object intensity, and temporal delay shape the path to volition, the study clarifies how these structural factors condition moral responsiveness without reducing ethics to mechanics. Across these modes, the analysis points to the determining moment (*voṭṭhapana*) as the site of moral conditioning rather than moral production: it sets the posture for the impulsion run that follows, while *javana* remains the locus of karmically productive volition.

Keywords

Theravāda Abhidhamma, *citta-vīthi*, *voṭṭhapana*, *javana*, Buddhist ethics, attention, moral agency

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Introduction

Where does moral responsibility begin in a mind that processes one object at a time? Within Theravāda Buddhist philosophy, ethical responsibility is rooted not in outward behavior but in volition (*cetanā*). In the *Nibbedhika Sutta*, the Buddha states: “It is volition, *bhikkhus*, that I call action. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind” (Bodhi 2012, 963). As Gombrich observes, this redefinition of action (*kamma*) from ritual performance to psychological intention marked a major turning point in Indian religious thought (Gombrich 2009, 195). Harvey similarly grounds Buddhist ethics in the quality of mind present at the moment of action rather than in outcomes or rules alone (Harvey 2000, 49, 52). The centrality of intention is well established. What remains underexamined is the micro-temporal mechanism through which intention arises. This includes how the resolution of competing stimuli within the Abhidhamma’s own timing constraints conditions moral responsibility.

The Theravāda Abhidhamma maps this mechanism through its cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*), which traces how an external stimulus enters consciousness as a series of discrete mental moments until karmically productive volition (*cetanā*) arises during the phase of impulsion (*javana*) (Nārada 1987, 49–50). The system posits that only one consciousness can occupy a single mind-moment (Nārada 1987, 188–90; Buddhaghosa 1920, 96), meaning the mind processes stimuli serially. Yet ordinary experience involves constant competition among stimuli. A sound interrupts visual processing; a bodily sensation breaks the flow of thought; a memory surfaces while the senses are engaged. When scholars describe these overlapping scenarios, they typically resort to generalized language: the mind “turns away” or the object “is missed.” Such descriptions leave unspecified the structural mechanics of why certain stimuli fail to generate karmic consequences and what becomes of objects that arrive while the mind is already engaged. Without a clear account of these mechanics, it is easy to allow interpretive contradictions. One might assume, for instance, that intention can be split across multiple objects simultaneously, or that a strong interruption bypasses the sequential rules to overtake the cognitive sequence midstream. Neither assumption is consistent with the system’s stated constraints.

These timing questions carry significant moral weight because material phenomena (*rūpa*) persist for only 17 mind-moments before dissolving (Nārada 1987, 237; Buddhaghosa 2010, 1000). When a stimulus arrives while the mind is occupied with a prior sequence, it must wait, and during that wait it continues to deteriorate. If the delay is too long, the stimulus may lack the remaining vitality to support a complete cognitive sequence. In such a case, the moral opportunity is lost not through conscious rejection but through temporal exhaustion, a structural condition that gives concrete meaning to the Buddhist teaching on heedfulness (*appamāda*). As the *Dhammapada* puts it: “Heedfulness is the path to the Deathless. Heedlessness is the path to death” (Buddharakkhita 2007, 26).

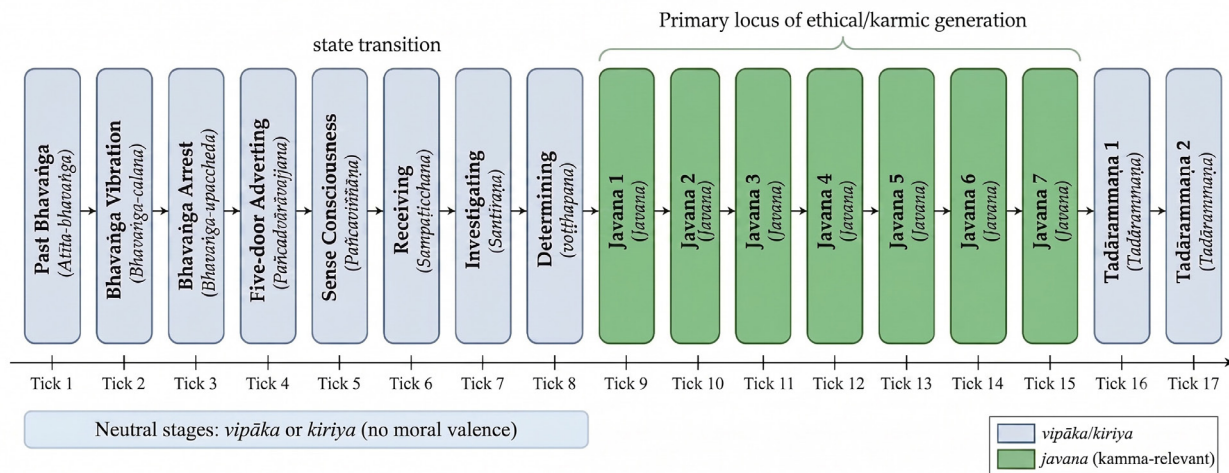
Existing scholarship has carefully mapped the cognitive sequence. Gethin clarified how the mind transitions between active cognition and its resting state, the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*) (Gethin 1994, 15–16), while Karunadasa detailed how material and mental phenomena operate on distinct, though intersecting, temporal rhythms (Karunadasa 2016, 145, 148–50).

Keown has argued that Buddhist ethics is best understood through a virtue-theoretic lens, where moral development cultivates dispositions that lead to wholesome action (Keown 2001, 23). Both Keown's account and Harvey's emphasis on the quality of mind at the moment of action (Harvey 2000, 49, 52) assume that intention is uniformly accessible. The typology developed here complicates this assumption by showing that the structural conditions for wise attention at the determining moment vary depending on how the object was captured. A wholesome stimulus arriving during an unwholesome mental loop faces different conditions than one arriving when the mind is at rest, and the differences are not just qualitative but temporal and structural. Throughout this paper it is important to distinguish two related but distinct questions: (1) which cognitive stage is the locus of *kamma* production, and (2) which stage best explains variation in moral responsiveness across capture modes. On orthodox Theravāda doctrine the answer to (1) is unambiguous: karmically productive volition arises only in *javana* (Buddhaghosa 1920, 362; Karunadasa 2016, 149). The claim pursued here concerns (2). By introducing a conditional typology of capture modes and tying it to the determining moment (*voṭṭhapana*) understood as the site of moral conditioning for the impulsion run that follows, the paper aims to connect specialist Abhidhamma mechanics to broader ethical discussions about distraction, mindfulness training, and accountability under constrained attention, showing how moment-level conditions shape when moral attention is practically available. This complements established discussions of intention-centered ethics by adding a structural dimension, without reducing ethics to mechanics. The wider relevance of the argument lies in this point: moral responsiveness depends not only on intention itself, but also on the temporal conditions under which attention becomes available.

To examine these dynamics, this paper develops a typology of attentional capture based on four object-intensity categories described in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* (Nārada 1987, 237–40). Each intensity level produces a distinct ethical profile. Objects of the highest intensity (*atimahanta*) complete the full sequence including volitional processing and registration, while objects of moderate intensity (*mahanta*) generate volition but not registration, and weaker objects may stop short of the volitional phase entirely. The typology is tested through a formal reconstruction constrained by the *eka-citta* rule and the seventeen-moment material lifespan. This reconstruction is not a neural simulation or an artificial intelligence model; it is a rule-bound interpretive tool that makes the tradition's timing constraints explicit and testable, functioning like worked proofs in a formal argument. The full reconstruction and its output traces are provided as a supplementary archive; the paper itself examines the logical structure and ethical consequences.

The Citta-*vīthi* and the Locus of Intention

Figure 1. Orthodox seventeen-moment five-door cognitive sequence. The figure marks the movement from *bhavaṅga* disturbance through sense-door processing, determining, *javana*, and registration, showing where karmically productive volition becomes structurally possible.

Orthodox 17-moment five-door cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*)

The standard five-door (*pañcadvāra*) sequence unfolds within those seventeen moments. When a physical stimulus activates a sense door, the resting consciousness (*bhavaṅga*) vibrates and arrests. The mind then adverts to the relevant sense door, and the corresponding sensory consciousness arises. This bare sensory moment, whether seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching, merely performs the uninterpreted function of registering the stimulus. It is followed by stages of receiving (*sampaṭicchana*) and investigating (*santīraṇa*), during which a preliminary feeling (*vedanā*) arises based on the object's physical qualities.¹ All these early stages are classified as resultant (*vipāka*) mental events and carry no present moral weight. Even an enlightened person experiences this automatic sensory processing (Boriharnwanaket 2006, 53, 77). A person has no moral control over the bare visual consciousness that arises when light reaches the eye; that consciousness is a consequence of past conditions, not a seed of new *kamma*.

A decisive turn occurs at the determining stage, where the mind identifies the object and establishes the orientation that conditions the next phase. This moment is ethically important because it sets the posture for the subsequent *javana* run, but it is not itself the locus of karmically productive volition in the strict sense. That role belongs to the *javana* phase, a run of typically seven mind-moments in which wholesome (*kusala*) or unwholesome (*akusala*) volition is generated (Nārada 1987, 256–58; Buddhaghosa 1920, 362). Whether these moments are shaped by wisdom or delusion depends on the quality of attention present at *voṭṭhapana*. Appropriate attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) supports wholesome roots, while inappropriate attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*) supports unwholesome ones (Bodhi 2007, 115). Within a single sequence, the seven *javana* moments generally share the same broad ethical orientation because they arise from the determining posture that immediately precedes them. For the most intense objects, two moments of registration (*tadārammaṇa*) follow before the mind returns to *bhavaṅga*, helping preserve the cognitive impression for future recall (Nārada 1987, 237–40).

The gap between merely experiencing a painful feeling (*dukkha vedanā*) and reacting to it with aversion (*dosa*) is the distinction on which Buddhist ethical responsibility rests: the resultant stages provide raw input, while *javana* is where *kamma* is generated. Understanding what

conditions must be in place for *javana* to arise, and what prevents it, is essential for any account of moral responsibility within this framework.

Methodology: Formal Reconstruction as a Consistency Check

To clarify how the cognitive sequence handles competing stimuli, this study uses a formal reconstruction as a consistency-checking tool. The reconstruction translates the sequence rules from the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* into an explicit step-by-step model that processes one operation per mind-moment, enforces the one-consciousness-at-a-time (*eka-citta*) constraint, and treats physical objects as expiring after seventeen mind-moments. It is an interpretive tool for testing coherence within the sequence, not a neural simulation, predictive algorithm, or claim that the tradition itself states every modeled step in explicit operational form (Ronkin 2005, 10). When the paper speaks of the reconstruction “showing” or “demonstrating” an outcome, this should be read in a specific sense: the reconstruction demonstrates that the outcome follows from the doctrinal rules together with the operational conventions stated below. It does not, and cannot, show that the tradition itself operates in this way. A differently parameterized reconstruction, adopting alternative but equally defensible conventions, could yield somewhat different traces. The ethical inferences drawn later in the paper are accordingly conditional on the conventions adopted here; the strongest inferences are those that follow from the doctrinal rules alone and would survive a range of plausible conventions.

Standard manuals describe the cognitive sequence for a single object with considerable precision, but when two or more objects compete for attention, the prose leaves open practical questions. A word such as “interrupts” can be read in more than one way. Does the current sequence abort? Does the new object override the old one immediately, or does it wait its turn? When such questions remain at the level of prose alone, a reader can easily slide into assumptions that are not clearly warranted by the tradition. The reconstruction is used here to force those assumptions into view and to make each interpretive choice available for inspection.

For that reason, the argument in this paper distinguishes three levels of claim, and these levels do not carry the same evidential weight.

A further source-level distinction should be considered. The sources used here do not all occupy the same textual layer. The *Paṭṭhāna* belongs to the canonical Abhidhamma Piṭaka, while the detailed presentation of the cognitive sequence, the seventeen-moment lifespan of material phenomena, and the standard object-intensity categories are known primarily through commentarial and post-canonical manual traditions, especially the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, the *Visuddhimagga*, and later explanatory manuals. The reconstruction therefore does not treat all details as canonical in the same sense. It uses canonical Abhidhamma where relevant, but it also relies on the commentarial and manual systematization through which the Theravāda cognitive sequence is normally taught.

Textually attested rules, drawn from standard Abhidhamma manuals, include the five-door sequence structure, *eka-citta* seriality, *javana* as the locus of karmically productive volition, and the seventeen-moment window for *rūpa*-based objects (Nārada 1987, 188–90, 237–40, 256–58; Boriarnwanaket 2006, 60, 68–70). These claims are the strongest ones in the present argument because they are directly grounded in the doctrinal sources.

Operational conventions are adopted only where the sources do not specify an exact procedural rule (Nyanaponika Thera 1976, iv–v). These include a short inter-sequence separator followed by a fixed two-moment rest gap between dependent mind-door sequences, arbitration among simultaneous sense-door candidates by object intensity, and a mind-door sequence modeled without an explicit *atīta-bhavaṅga* step.² For executable clarity, the reconstruction also models consequent mind-door elaboration after a five-door process as a fixed four-loop sequence. These conventions are used for clarity and reproducibility. They are not presented as the only possible reconstruction, nor as rules stated in this exact operational form by the tradition itself.

Conditional implications follow from combining the doctrinal rules with those stated conventions. On this reconstruction, delayed capture can prevent some objects from reaching *javana* within the material window, *atiparitta* objects may fail to arrest *bhavaṅga*, and the ethical role of *voṭṭhapana* can be described more clearly: as a *kiriya* (functional) moment it produces no *kamma*, but it conditions the orientation of the *javana* run that follows and is therefore the site where variation in moral responsiveness across capture modes is most visible. These claims should be read as interpretive consequences of this reconstruction, grounded in the sources but not always stated in the primary texts in this exact form, and not presented as the only possible way to model every underdetermined step.

The supplementary archive accompanying this paper contains the full reconstruction and its output traces, which a reader can inspect and reproduce. The archive is provided so that the stated conventions and their consequences remain auditable. It is not presented as an empirical study or a performance evaluation. The strongest ethical claims in this paper are those that follow from constraints shared by plausible reconstructions of the sequence. Claims that depend more directly on a chosen convention are correspondingly more limited, and may shift in force even where the main structural contrast remains intact.

Table 1 summarizes four worked cases cited throughout the paper. Full step-by-step traces are provided in the supplementary archive (Supplementary Trace File: *citta_vithi_simulation_output.txt*). The reconstruction would be undermined if a trace showed either parallel advancement of two sequences in a single mind-moment or a queued physical object entering *javana* after its material window had elapsed. The supplementary traces exhibit neither violation. This supports the internal coherence of the reconstruction on the stated conventions, though internal coherence alone does not show that every modeled detail is explicitly stated in the tradition.

Example	Worked case	Outcome in the reconstruction	Ethical significance (as argued here)
A	Delayed capture under the <i>eka-citta</i> rule: a queued, very weak sense-door object (<i>atiparitta</i>) arrives while a strong sequence is already running.	No five-door adverting occurs for the queued object; it produces two late-window <i>bhavaṅga</i> vibrations and expires without being cognized.	Distraction can remove the conditions for volitional engagement altogether; on the standard manual view, ethical appraisal tracks what actually reaches <i>javana</i> .
B	Weak capture: a minor sense-door object (<i>paritta</i>) is admitted to the sequence.	The run reaches the determining moment (<i>voṭṭhapana</i>) and then collapses; the remaining object window is filled by continued <i>bhavaṅga</i> flow (no <i>javana</i>).	Where there is no <i>javana</i> , no new <i>kamma</i> is generated; the sequence reaches its last pre-volitional posture at determining without entering a karmically productive <i>javana</i> run. This illustrates the distinction between <i>kamma</i> production (located in <i>javana</i>) and moral conditioning (located at <i>voṭṭhapana</i>).
C	Mind-door capture: a prominent mental object begins with mind-door adverting (<i>manodvāravajjana</i>).	The sequence moves rapidly into a full <i>javana</i> run, with minimal buffer between resting <i>bhavaṅga</i> and karmically productive volition.	Ethical cultivation must function as preparedness: wise attention must already be established before the rapid onset of <i>javana</i> .
D	Near-death constraint (<i>marañāsanna</i>): the physical basis is failing.	The <i>javana</i> phase is contracted (five moments rather than seven) in the near-death mode implemented in the reconstruction.	Volitional bandwidth is structurally reduced; this supports the traditional urgency to cultivate wholesome dispositions before the final moments.

Attentional Capture: A Typology and Its Ethical Significance

Uninterrupted capture: the ethical baseline

When a stimulus of maximum intensity (*atimahanta*, “very great”) impinges on a sense door while the mind rests in the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*), the object proceeds through receiving (*sampaṭicchana*) and investigating (*santīraṇa*) with its full physical vitality intact and reaches the determining moment (*voṭṭhapana*) without delay. This is the condition under which moral agency has the widest scope. The individual can apply wise attention at the determining stage

without temporal pressure, competing demands, or dispositional residue from prior sequences. Because there is no delay, no residual orientation from prior processing, and no sensory overlap, the *kamma* generated during the impulsion (*javana*) phase arises as a direct expression of the individual's conditioned ethical disposition meeting a clear and vivid object.

Each successive *javana* moment reinforces the volitional orientation established at *voṭṭhapana* through the repetition condition (*āsevana paccaya*; *Paṭṭhāna*, Paccayaniddesa §12), progressively strengthening the ethical quality of the act (Nārada 1987, 414, 421–22). Under uninterrupted conditions, this reinforcement operates at full capacity across all seven moments, supporting what the tradition calls superior wholesome action (*ukkaṭṭha kusala*) when wisdom is present (Bodhi 2007, 185–86). The full *atimahanta* sequence also concludes with two *tadārammaṇa* (registration) moments that consolidate the experience before the mind returns to rest, storing the cognitive imprint for future recall.

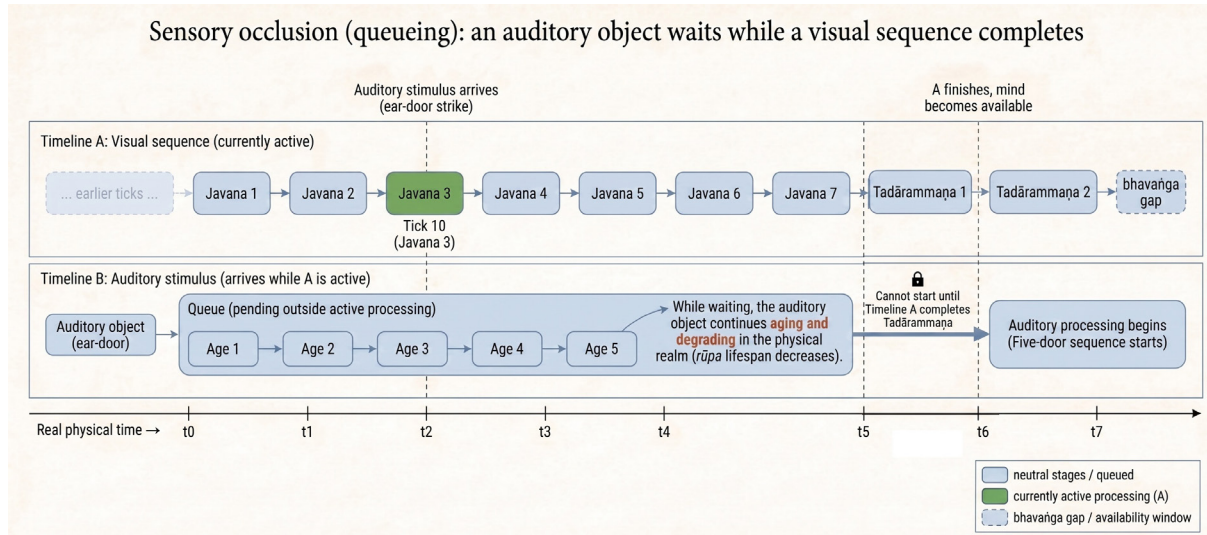
The reconstruction illustrates this process concretely. Under the conventions stated in §3, when an *atimahanta* visual object enters the reconstruction, the sequence proceeds through all seventeen moments without interruption: the initial disturbance of *bhavaṅga*, the vibration (*bhavaṅga calana*) and arrest (*bhavaṅga upaccheda*), five-door adverting (*pañcadvārāvajjana*), visual consciousness (*cakkhu-viññāṇa*), receiving, investigating, determining, seven *javana* moments, and two moments of registration (*tadārammaṇa*). After the five-door sequence completes, the mind returns briefly to *bhavaṅga* and then, in this reconstruction, initiates four dependent mind-door processes that further elaborate the apprehended datum. These four loops, modeled here as grasping the immediate past (*atītaggahaṇa*), synthesizing a whole (*samūhaggahaṇa*), grasping meaning (*atthaggaṇa*), and assigning a name (*nāmaggaṇa*), each operate as distinct sequences with their own *javana* runs. The outcome in the trace is that a single vivid sensory encounter generates not only the initial seven-moment *javana* run but also four additional seven-moment *javana* runs through these modeled dependent loops, each reinforcing and consolidating the experience. In the present reconstruction, this extended processing is attached only to the *atimahanta* trace; lesser intensities do not trigger this dependent mind-door chain.

Harvey's emphasis on the quality of mind at the moment of action (Harvey 2000, 49, 52) gains structural support here: uninterrupted capture provides the conditions that best enable that quality to express itself. Moral agency is functioning at its fullest scope, unburdened by temporal backlog or prior orientation carried over from earlier sequences. This baseline is important because it establishes what happens when no structural obstacles intervene; the capture modes that follow show what happens when these conditions are compromised.

Delayed capture and the moral cost of distraction

When a new stimulus arrives while the mind is already processing a prior sequence, the one-consciousness-at-a-time rule (*eka-citta*) prevents the mind from abandoning its current task or handling both objects simultaneously. The mind cannot abort a sequence midway to process a new physical object. Therefore, the new stimulus must wait until the ongoing sequence finishes and the mind returns to the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga*).

Figure 2. Sensory occlusion (queueing): an auditory object waits while a visual sequence completes. The figure illustrates how the *eka-citta* constraint forces a later object to wait, so that part of its finite material lifespan is consumed before processing can begin.



A point about interpretive status is necessary here. The Abhidhamma texts separately attest that consciousness is serial (Nārada 1987, 188–90) and that material phenomena have finite lifespans (Nārada 1987, 237), but they do not explicitly describe stimuli waiting in a queue. The concept of sensory occlusion used in this paper is an inference drawn from combining these two premises: given serial cognition and finite material lifespan, a delayed stimulus will have consumed part of its available window by the time the mind finally processes it. This is a tool for making explicit what follows from the stated constraints, not a mechanism that the primary sources directly describe.

What the formal reconstruction yields under these premises, on the conventions stated in §3, is that a waiting physical object continues to age through its 17-moment lifespan regardless of whether it is actively cognized. The object does not pause its decay simply because the mind is occupied elsewhere. If the mind is engaged in a visual sequence that runs for many moments, an auditory stimulus arising midway through must wait until the visual sequence completes and the mind returns to *bhavaṅga*. By then, the auditory object has consumed much of its material window and may lack the remaining vitality to sustain a complete cognitive sequence. A delayed object whose remaining window is too short for the minimum viable sequence may terminate at the determining moment or earlier and never reach the *javana* run. In such cases, according to the standard manual view that karmically productive volition is located in *javana* (Buddhaghosa 1920, 362; Karunadasa 2016, 149), no new *kamma* accumulates from that object.

The reconstruction illustrates this concretely with an object of the weakest intensity (*atiparitta*, “very minor”). When such an object enters the reconstruction while the mind is already occupied with an *atimahanta* sequence, the weak object waits in its sense channel and continues to age. Because it never meets the conditions for five-door adverting, it produces only

two subliminal vibrations of *bhavaṅga* late in its lifespan, and then expires without being cognized at all. The mind, having been occupied with the prior sequence and its dependent conceptual loops, never turns to the weak object. The trace records the object's expiry explicitly, labeled as having expired without processing. While this particular case involves a very weak object that would not have generated *javana* under any conditions, the underlying principle applies to stronger objects as well: any physical stimulus that must wait consumes part of its finite window, and the longer the wait, the less processing capacity remains. An object of moderate intensity delayed long enough would similarly fail to reach *javana*.³

The ethical consequences extend well beyond the practical issue of missed stimuli. Consider a person caught in an unwholesome mental loop, cycling through sequences conditioned by desire (*rāga*) toward a visual object. While the mind runs through successive unwholesome *javana* phases, a wholesome stimulus appears elsewhere: an act of generosity visible in peripheral vision. Because the mind is committed to the current sequence, this wholesome object must wait.

Two consequences follow from this. First, the wholesome object consumes part of its material lifespan during the delay. If it waits too long, it may arrive at the cognitive sequence with reduced vitality, reaching *voṭṭhapana* but failing to sustain a full *javana* run, or perishing before the sequence begins. In that case, a wholesome opportunity may fail to reach volitional response not because the agent consciously rejected it, but because attention was already committed elsewhere. Second, even when the delayed object still reaches *javana*, it does so under less favorable conditions than an object encountered at rest. On the present reconstruction, the likely result is not simply a delayed wholesome response but a weaker one, because the mind receives the new object after carrying forward the momentum of the prior sequence.

One might object that because cognitive sequences operate with great rapidity, a delay of a few mind-moments is negligible. On this view, the mind would simply catch the wholesome stimulus in the next available sequence with no real ethical cost. But this objection treats the mind as though it resets to a neutral baseline between sequences. The repetition condition (*āsevana pac-caya*; *Paṭṭhāna*, *Paccayaniddesa* §12) directly contradicts this. The mind carries the conditioning of its recent activity forward, and it is precisely because processing is rapid that each sequence reinforces the last, building momentum rather than dissipating it. The speed of processing enables momentum to accumulate, not dissipate. The delay matters because of the mind's speed, not in spite of it. Each unwholesome *javana* moment strengthens the volitional disposition of its immediate successor. In simple terms, the later moment does not arise on neutral ground but inherits the pressure of the preceding run, so that a mind emerging from a sustained unwholesome loop is structurally inclined away from the wholesome object that finally arrives. This is a matter of inclination, not determination: the repetition condition is one among twenty-four conditional relations set out in the *Paṭṭhāna* (Cousins 1981, 39), and its force must be weighed together with the others. The ethical cost is real and cumulative, but it conditions the *voṭṭhapana* posture rather than fixing the *javana* outcome in advance.

This analysis provides structural content to the traditional emphasis on *appamāda*. A mind habitually occupied with trivial or unwholesome content becomes less available for wholesome objects when they arise. Heedfulness is therefore not only a general exhortation to pay attention. It can also be understood as the practice of keeping the cognitive apparatus more open to wholesome objects before delay and prior momentum weaken the conditions under which they are received. Even when moral character is strong, the conditions at *voṭṭhapana* have already been shaped by what the mind was doing just before the new object arrived.

Weak capture and the boundary of responsibility

For objects of the lowest intensity (*atiparitta*, “very minor”), the *bhavaṅga* vibrates for two moments but never fully arrests (Bodhi 2007, 139; Boriharnwanaket 2006, 69). The object expires in the physical world before the mind can generate the conditions required for five-door advertizing. The mind registers only a subliminal disturbance but remains in its resting state, untouched by the stimulus. This accounts for common experiences such as sleeping through a low hum or failing to notice a slight change in ambient room temperature.

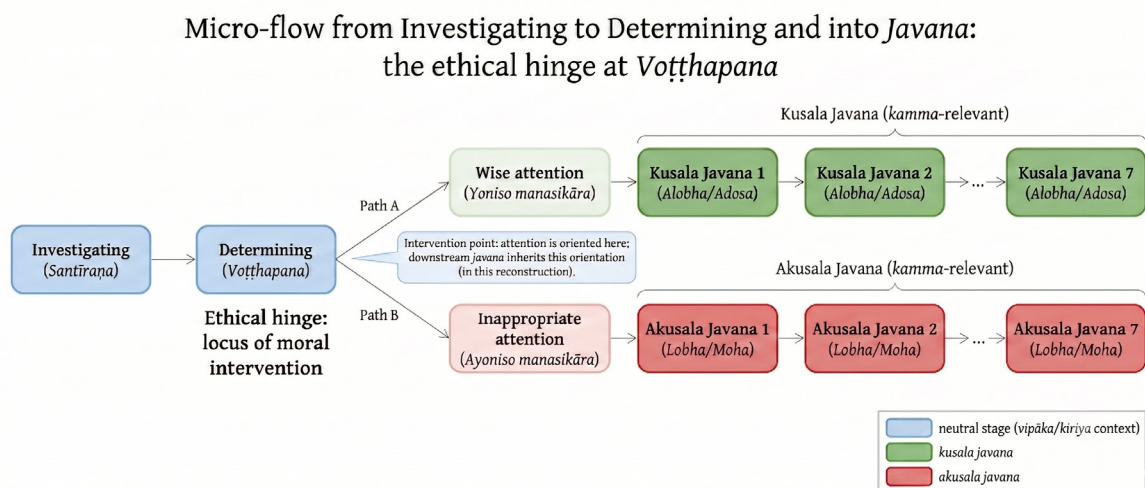
For *paritta* (“minor”) objects (Bodhi 2007, 138–39), the sequence begins and advances through the early stages, reaching the determining moment (*voṭṭhapana*), but then collapses before entering the *javana* phase.⁴ The object lacks the intensity needed to sustain attention through a complete cognitive cycle. Under the conventions stated in §3, the reconstruction yields this outcome clearly: the *paritta* object progresses through the initial disturbance of *bhavaṅga*, vibration, arrest, advertizing, sense consciousness, receiving, investigating, and determining, but then the sequence stops. The remaining moments of the object’s material window are filled by continued *bhavaṅga* flow rather than *javana*, and the mind returns to rest when the object perishes.⁵ Without *javana*, no present *kamma* accumulates in the Abhidhammic account. Instead of volitional processing, the mind registers the sensory data passively and returns to its resting continuum.

The ethical significance of this boundary is direct. Mere sensory contact, even contact that reaches the determining stage, does not by itself amount to a completed case of present moral responsibility in the karmically productive sense. The Abhidhamma draws a clear three-way distinction between resultant states (*vipāka*), which are fruits of past action; functional states (*kiriya*), which include *voṭṭhapana* and operate without karmic result; and *javana*, which alone generates new *kamma* in ordinary experience (Buddhaghosa 1920, 362; Nārada 1987, 49–50; Karunadasa 2016, 92–93, 149). Passive reception of sensory data therefore falls outside the domain of karmically productive action unless the sequence proceeds into *javana*. The point is not that weak impingement is irrelevant, but that it remains pre-volitional: it may condition later sequences without itself producing *kamma*.

Mind-door capture, mental proliferation, and ethical vulnerability

Mental objects such as memories, concepts, and internal visualizations are immaterial. Unlike physical objects, they do not strike material sensitive matter (*pasāda-rūpa*) and are not governed by the seventeen-moment material lifespan. The mind-door process also differs structurally from the five-door process: receiving (*sampaticchana*) and investigating (*santīraṇa*) do not figure in it at all, since they are functions tied to the presentation of a material object at a physical sense base (Bodhi 2007, 113–14; Karunadasa 2016, 157). It is not that these stages are “skipped” under some compressed condition; rather, they do not apply to mind-door cognition in the first place. In this reconstruction, the mind-door sequence is modeled without an explicit *atīta-bhavaṅga* step, an operational choice that keeps the mind-door pathway minimal and isolates the ethical analysis at *voṭṭhapana* and *javana*.

Figure 3. Micro-flow from investigating to determining and into *javana*: the ethical hinge at *voṭṭhapana*. The figure highlights how *voṭṭhapana* conditions the posture of the *javana* run that follows, without itself becoming the locus of *kamma* production.



When a prominent mental object arises (such as a sudden memory of a past wrong, a theoretical concept, or an intense internal visualization), the sequence begins with mind-door advertizing (*manodvārāvajjana*; Bodhi 2007, 143) and moves directly into the *javana* phase. Because receiving and investigating do not figure in the mind-door process, the temporal distance between the resting state and karmically productive volition is short by structure rather than by compression.⁶ The determining moment arrives with very little buffer for wise attention to establish itself before volitional engagement takes hold.

This structural feature helps explain why intrusive thoughts, deep anxieties, and sudden fits of anger can seem to overtake consciousness before one can consciously intervene. The mind-door pathway does not provide the same temporal separation that five-door processing does. Habitual unwholesome patterns, whether sustained desire or habitual worry (*kukkucca*), may therefore reach the *javana* phase before attention is redirected. The short distance between the

resting state and karmically productive response makes the mind more vulnerable to being carried by habitual reactivity before wise attention is applied.

After the initial sequence completes, dependent mind-door processes elaborate the apprehended datum into conceptual content (Bodhi 2007, 141–42). In this reconstruction, that post-sensory elaboration is modeled through four successive loops: grasping the immediate past (*atītaggahaṇa*), synthesizing a whole (*samūhaggahaṇa*), grasping meaning (*atthaggaṇa*), and assigning a name (*nāmaggaṇa*). Each loop is treated as a distinct sequence separated by brief rest gaps, which preserves the *eka-citta* constraint and creates micro-temporal gaps between runs. On this reconstruction, each of these four loops is represented as a separate twelve-step sequence: *bhavaṅga* vibration, arrest, mind-door adverting, seven *javana* moments, and two *tadārammaṇa* moments. Between each loop, the mind returns briefly to *bhavaṅga* rest before the next loop begins. The significance of this structure is twofold. First, the emotional valence established in the initial *javana* carries forward through these loops, where perception (*saññā*) and mental proliferation (*papañca*) can transform a momentary unwholesome reaction into sustained narrative. A brief irritation becomes, through repeated mind-door cycles, a reconstructed story of personal injury with a named offender. Each successive *javana* reinforces the last through *āsevana paccaya* (*Paṭṭhāna*, Paccayaniddesa §12), structurally embedding the proliferative tendency that the tradition warns against. Second, the gaps between loops represent the precise structural points where a practitioner with trained mindfulness could intervene, catching the proliferative chain before it deepens.

This mechanism shows why sustained anger, remorse (*kukkucca*), and worry are not single cognitive episodes but chains of reinforcing conceptual loops. A moment of regret, for instance, does not simply occur and pass; it initiates a mind-door sequence, which then spawns further loops that rehearse the regretted action, reconstruct the circumstances, and deepen the emotional weight of the initial reaction. The ethical stakes become apparent when this is recognized as an architectural feature of consciousness rather than a personal failing: the mind-door pathway is designed to elaborate and consolidate, and without trained intervention at the gaps between sequences, that consolidation proceeds on whatever valence was established in the first *javana* run. The architecture of the mind-door sequence leaves very little room for cognitive hesitation or mindful interception, which is precisely why the tradition places such emphasis on recognizing mental objects as they arise.

Moral Agency, Mindfulness, and the Architecture of Intention

Voṭṭhapana as the ethical hinge

Across all four capture modes, *voṭṭhapana* emerges as the stage where variation in moral responsiveness is most clearly visible. It is helpful to restate the distinction drawn in the introduction. Two related but distinct questions are in play: (1) which cognitive stage is the locus of *kamma* production, and (2) which stage best explains variation in moral responsiveness across capture modes. On orthodox Theravāda doctrine the answer to (1) is unambiguous: *javana* alone

is karmically productive, while *voṭṭhapana*, functioning in the five-door series as the mind-door advertizing *citta* performing the determining role, is *kiriya* (functional) and produces no *kamma* of its own (Buddhaghosa 1920, 362; Karunadasa 2016, 93, 149). The claim advanced in this paper concerns (2): *voṭṭhapana* is the site where the prior history of the mind, including its training, its momentum, the intensity and delay of the present object, is gathered together and shapes the orientation of the *javana* run that follows. It is, in this sense, the site of moral conditioning rather than moral production. Uninterrupted capture brings clarity without competing momentum; delayed capture arrives carrying orientation from prior sequences; and mind-door capture operates within a very short temporal buffer. None of this displaces *javana* as the locus of karmically productive volition. It clarifies how the path to *javana* is ethically conditioned at the determining moment. Any ethical account that treats intention as uniformly accessible overlooks this earlier conditioning.

Keown's virtue-theoretic reading captures an important aspect of this: moral development cultivates character dispositions that incline the mind toward wholesome action (Keown 2001, 23). In the *Abhidhammic* system, this broader ethical point can be examined as the habitual quality of attention at *voṭṭhapana*. A mind trained through moral discipline (*sīla*) and mindfulness (*sati*) inclines more reliably toward wise attention regardless of capture mode. But the typology introduces a complication that the virtue-theoretic account does not fully address. Even a well-trained mind faces structural disadvantages under delayed or mind-door capture, because the conditions at *voṭṭhapana* are not entirely within present-moment control. The momentum of prior sequences, shaped by the repetition condition (*āsevana paccaya*; *Paṭṭhāna*, Paccayaniddesa §12), shapes what is possible at the determining stage without dictating it. Virtue alone does not guarantee wise attention; attentional availability is equally necessary. Harvey's emphasis on the quality of mind at the moment of action (Harvey 2000, 49, 52) gains precision here: that quality is not a single variable but the combined product of capture mode, prior conditioning, object intensity, and available processing time. The *voṭṭhapana* moment is where these strands converge and set the posture for what follows.

This analysis also helps answer a natural worry about responsibility. If prior conditioning shapes *voṭṭhapana*, and *voṭṭhapana* shapes the direction of *javana*, in what sense is the agent responsible? The Abhidhamma answers this not by denying conditioning, but by treating it as multiple and not strictly determining: the *Paṭṭhāna* sets out many conditional relations, not one necessitating chain, and *javana cittas* are classified as prompted or unprompted, showing that dispositions can issue in action in different ways (Cousins 1981, 39; Bodhi 2007, 27–28, 40, 114; Karunadasa 2016, 276, 279). Therefore, responsibility still lies in the volitional quality of *javana*, even though that volition is shaped by prior conditions; in this sense, the account is compatibilist rather than deterministic (Harvey 2007, 35–36, 64–65).

On this reading, an unwholesome reaction is not necessitated by past *kamma*. It is a processing event in which wise attention did not arise under specific structural conditions. Buddhist ethical training in moral discipline (*sīla*), mindfulness (*sati*), and clear comprehension (*sampa-*

jaññā) works by conditioning *voṭṭhapana* to incline toward wise attention across a range of circumstances, whether the short timeline of mind-door capture, the weakened conditions of delayed capture, or the full scope of uninterrupted apprehension. The Abhidhamma thus preserves moral agency while locating it within a conditioned temporal architecture in which the agent is accountable for the volition that arises in *javana*, conditioned but not necessitated by what came before.

The illusion of simultaneous intentions

Ordinary experience suggests that one can harbor multiple simultaneous intentions, greed for a visual object alongside annoyance at a sound. However, the one-consciousness-at-a-time rule (*eka-citta*) places this intuition in tension with the serial constraint: at any given mind-moment, the mind processes one object with one ethical valence. The *Visuddhimagga* addresses this through the spinning firebrand (*alātacakka*) analogy (Buddhaghosa 2010, 1716). What appears as a continuous circle of light is actually very rapid succession, with one cognitive event arising after another. What seems like unified simultaneous experience is rapid alternation between discrete cognitive events separated by moments of *bhavaṅga*. The mind switches between the visual object and the auditory object so rapidly that the experience feels unitary.

Recognizing this serial nature carries ethical weight. Moral purification does not require overhauling some monolithic state of mind or an inherently flawed self. Each cognitive sequence is discrete, and a practitioner with trained mindfulness can recognize the gaps between sequences and intervene before the next object initiates its *javana* phase. The seemingly solid mass of suffering decomposes into separate, addressable moments. Ethical purification requires learning to intercept sequential, isolated moments of capture, and the typology developed here maps the structural conditions under which such interception is more or less feasible.

Sati as micro-temporal intervention

Within the cognitive sequence, mindfulness (*sati*) operates as an intervention at the determining stage. The commentarial tradition compares it to a gatekeeper who cannot prevent travelers from approaching a city but who controls who enters the palace of active engagement (Buddhaghosa 2010, 750; AN 7.67). Sensory objects will arrive regardless; what mindfulness influences is the cognitive posture at *voṭṭhapana*, helping ensure that consciousness recognizes the object as it is, without adding layers of craving or aversion.

When a practitioner cultivates mindfulness through meditation, the mind develops the capacity to maintain clear comprehension (*sampajaññā*) at the determining moment, helping ensure that *voṭṭhapana* recognizes the object as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without self, rather than processing it through habitual patterns of grasping. In advanced insight practice (*vipassanā*), this framework can be used to interpret meditative observation as increasingly sensitive to the arising and passing of discrete sequences, including the intervals between them. By noticing these intervals, the practitioner increases the chance that wise attention can arise before the next volitionally productive run begins. The practitioner perceives the raw sensory datum before the mind names it and constructs a story, interrupting the dependent mind-door loops before the naming stage

generates further unwholesome *javana*. The typology of attentional capture thus provides a structural map of meditation practice, illustrating where the chain of suffering can be severed and what structural conditions support or hinder that interception.

The cognitive architecture also adjusts under extreme physiological conditions. In the near-death sequence (*maraṇāsanna-vīthi*), the *javana* phase occurs five times rather than seven because the physical basis of mind is failing (Nārada 1987, 256–58; Buddhaghosa 2010, 1488).⁷ This contraction of volitional capacity has direct ethical consequences: with fewer *javana* moments available, there is less opportunity to apply wise attention at moments that often condition the next existence. The *kamma* generated or recalled in these final moments frequently serves as the bridge to the next life, taking on the role of death-proximate *kamma* (*āsanna-kamma*). This structural feature reinforces the traditional urgency to cultivate wholesome dispositions while the mind and body still support full cognitive sequences. The ability to generate wholesome *kamma* depends not only on philosophical understanding but on the working capacity of the cognitive apparatus itself.

Scope and Limitations

The formal reconstruction captures the temporal and structural dynamics through which serial processing, object intensity, and material lifespan combine to produce different cognitive outcomes. It does not encode the full qualitative range of karmic conditioning. Some claims in this paper are more directly grounded in the doctrinal sources than others. The strongest claims concern structural features that are explicitly stated in the tradition, such as serial processing, the seventeen-moment lifespan of material objects, and the location of karmically productive volition in *javana*. More limited claims concern ethical consequences inferred from combining those rules with the operational conventions stated in the methodology section, and should be read as conditional on those conventions. This applies in particular to the reconstruction's fixed segmentation of consequent mind-door elaboration into four named loops with short *bhavaṅga* gaps between them. An alternative reconstruction, adopting defensible but different conventions, for example modeling *paritta* objects with a reduced but non-zero *javana* count, introducing an explicit *atīta-bhavaṅga* step in the mind-door process, or segmenting consequent mind-door elaboration differently, could produce somewhat different traces. Where that is the case, the paper's broadest structural points (serial processing, material impermanence, the role of *āsevana*, and the *voṭṭhappana-javana* distinction) would still stand, but some of the finer ethical inferences would shift in strength. The repetition condition bearing on delayed wholesome response, and the distinction between inferior and superior wholesome action (*omaka* versus *ukkaṭṭha kusala*), are drawn from the Abhidhamma literature itself rather than from the reconstruction alone.

The scope of this paper is limited to Theravāda Abhidhamma. It does not compare Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma accounts of cognitive seriality, moment duration, or the locus of volition, since the present argument depends on the Theravāda sequence and its object-intensity framework.

Several simplifications also warrant acknowledgment. The feeling assignment at *santīraṇa* is reduced to a binary desirable/neutral check; a fuller reconstruction would require the threefold classification of objects as *iṭṭha* (desirable), *aniṭṭha* (undesirable), or *iṭṭhamajjhatta* (moderately desirable) (Bodhi 2007, 149). The ethical valence at *javana* is modeled through a single variable for attention quality rather than the complex interplay of habitual tendencies, proximate conditions, and object qualities that the tradition describes (Bodhi 2007, 40, 149, 186). The concept of sensory occlusion is an inference from combining serial cognition with finite material lifespan, not a mechanism the primary sources directly describe. The inter-sequence gap between dependent mind-door loops is an operational convention for reproducibility, not the only possible segmentation. These limitations do not undermine the paper's core argument. The ethical analysis hinges on whether *javana* is structurally available or unavailable, and the temporal and structural constraints made explicit in the reconstruction are sufficient to determine that across all four capture modes. Readers who prefer a different segmentation of mind-door sequences or a different counting convention for *paritta* objects can adjust the supplementary traces transparently without overturning the paper's main structural claims, though some ethical inferences may shift in strength.

A small supplementary archive is provided for readers who wish to inspect the worked sequences discussed in this article. It includes a short executable reconstruction, a plain text trace of the runs used for the worked cases, and a brief README that explains how the trace is produced. These materials are hosted in an Open Science Framework (OSF) repository.⁸ The archive is offered so that the worked sequences can be followed in detail and checked against the conventions stated in the article. It is intended as a reference for readers who want to see how the step-by-step traces align with the Abhidhamma analysis developed here.

Conclusion

The cognitive sequence (*citta-vīthi*) of Theravāda Abhidhamma, when examined through a formal reconstruction built on its stated rules together with the operational conventions set out in §3, offers a typology of attentional capture with important ethical implications. Uninterrupted capture provides the fullest scope for wholesome or unwholesome volition, while delayed capture, arising from serial processing and material impermanence, may weaken or even prevent volitional engagement. The conditioning force of the repetition condition (*āsevana paccaya*) suggests that such delay is not ethically neutral, since the mind receives the new object after carrying forward the momentum of prior activity.

Across all four modes, the analysis developed here points to the determining moment (*voṭṭhapana*) as the site where moral conditioning is gathered together, shaped by prior training, object intensity, available processing time, and the momentum of preceding sequences (Buddhaghosa 1920, 362). On the orthodox Theravāda account, *voṭṭhapana* is a functional (*kiriya*) moment that produces no *kamma* of its own; what it does is condition the orientation of the *javana* run that immediately follows. The typology therefore does not displace *javana* as the locus of

karmically productive volition. It clarifies how the path to *javana* is conditioned at the determining moment and why the distinction between moral conditioning and moral production matters for an ethics of attention. Buddhist ethical practice, through moral discipline (*sīla*), mindfulness (*sati*), and clear comprehension (*sampajaññā*), trains this determining moment to incline toward wise attention under varied conditions.

The formal reconstruction offered in this paper is best understood as a consistency-checking tool rather than as an empirical model of mind. Its value lies in making explicit the structural consequences of rules already present in the tradition and in showing how those consequences bear on ethical life. On that reading, an unwholesome act need not be reduced to a simple failure of attention alone. It can be understood as arising within a conditioned sequence in which attention, habit, timing, and prior momentum all shape, without necessitating, the moral response that becomes possible. Accountability for the *javana* that issues from that sequence remains with the agent; what the typology clarifies is where practice can most usefully intervene.

Notes

1. Feeling at the investigating stage (*santīraṇa*) is classified in the *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* according to whether the object is desirable (*iṭṭha*), undesirable (*aniṭṭha*), or moderately desirable (*iṭṭhamajjhata*) (Bodhi 2007, 149). In the supplementary reconstruction, this is simplified to a binary desirable/neutral check. The ethical analysis in this paper does not depend on which feeling arises at *santīraṇa* but on whether the sequence reaches *javana*; the simplification therefore does not affect the timing claims that support the typology.

2. The reconstruction models mind-door sequences without an explicit *atīta-bhavaṅga* step to keep the mind-door pathway minimal. It uses a short inter-sequence separator followed by a two-moment rest gap (three steps total) between dependent mind-door sequences. Neither convention is asserted as canonical; they preserve the *eka-citta* constraint and keep sequences separable. Readers who prefer a different segmentation can adjust the supplementary traces without overturning the paper's main structural claims, though some ethical inferences may shift in strength.

3. For the worked trace, see Supplementary Trace File in the supplementary archive, *citta_vithi_simulation_output.txt*, Example A.

4. Some Abhidhamma teachers assign a reduced *javana* count to *paritta* objects rather than eliminating *javana* entirely (see, e.g., Karunadasa 2016, 148, 150, for discussion of the range of presentations). This reconstruction follows the zero-*javana* reading for the *paritta* category, which produces the sharpest boundary between volitionally productive and non-productive sequences, and is consistent with one standard teaching lineage (cf. Boriarnwanaket 2006, 69–70). On either reading, the broader structural point remains the same: object intensity places limits on how far a sequence can proceed toward a full volitional run, though the exact threshold varies across interpretations. Additionally, the reconstruction's queue-aging duration for *paritta* objects, combined with the explicit *atīta-bhavaṅga* step in the sequence, produces a pre-*calana*

count one moment longer than some standard presentations (Bodhi 2007, 138–39). This is an artifact of the counting convention and does not alter the ethical analysis, which depends on whether *javana* is reached.

5. For the worked trace, see Supplementary Trace File in the supplementary archive, *citta_vithi_simulation_output.txt*, Example B.

6. For the worked trace, see Supplementary Trace File in the supplementary archive, *citta_vithi_simulation_output.txt*, Example C.

7. For the worked trace, see Supplementary Trace File in the supplementary archive, *citta_vithi_simulation_output.txt*, Example D.

8. The supplementary archive is hosted in an Open Science Framework (OSF) repository at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/D6PY5>.

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