

# From Āhāra to Paccaya: The “Nutriment Condition” (*Āhāra-paccaya*) in the *Paṭṭhāna*

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## Abstract

This article reinterprets the sutta-level notion of “nutriment” (*āhāra*) through the Abhidhamma’s causal grammar, asking how the four nutriments become the technical “nutriment condition” (*āhāra-paccaya*) in the *Paṭṭhāna*. Combining philological analysis (lexical range; key terms such as *ojā* and *āhāraja-rūpa*) with doctrinal mapping of the twenty-four *paccayas* and selective comparisons with Āgama parallels, the study argues that the Abhidhamma preserves the sutta insight—what is fed persists—by distributing “feeding” across precise conditions rather than a single rubric. It shows that *āhāra-paccaya* denotes nutritive essence sustaining material phenomena via co-nascent, presence, and non-disappearance, while the other sutta nutriments are re-located: contact under *phassa/ārammaṇa-paccaya*, volition under *kamma/upanissaya*, and consciousness under roles such as root, faculty, dominance, and decisive support. Key findings clarify the pipeline from *kabaḷīkāra-āhāra* to *ojā* to sustained *rūpa-kalāpas*; delineate training levers (sense-restraint, intention-training, and calibrated bodily support); and show how agency is reconceived as stewardship of supports rather than a substantial self. The result is a cross-genre harmonization that renders the sutta’s pedagogy analytically exact and practically actionable.

**Keywords** Āhāra; Āhāra-paccaya; Paṭṭhāna; Abhidhamma; Conditionality; Oja; Rūpa-kalāpa; Dependent Origination

## Introduction

How does the sutta notion of “nutriment” (*āhāra*)—a pedagogical matrix of four “fuels” (edible food, contact, volition, consciousness)—become a technical causal condition in the Abhidhamma? This article answers by tracking the migration from discourse to analysis, showing how the *Paṭṭhāna* reframes nutriment as *āhāra-paccaya*, a precise support relation. Our central claim is twofold: first, that *āhāra-paccaya* in Abhidhamma narrows to nutritive essence (*oja*) sustaining material phenomena (*rūpa*); second, that the non-material “nutriments” of the suttas are not abandoned but redistributed across other condition-families—contact under *phassa/ārammaṇa-paccaya*, volition under *kamma/upanissaya*, and consciousness through roles such as faculty, dominance, and decisive support. In this way the Abhidhamma preserves the sutta insight (“what is fed persists”) while increasing resolution.

Methodologically, the study combines philology (lexical range and genre-sensitive usage of *āhāra*, *oja*, *āhāraja-rūpa*) with doctrinal analysis of the *Paṭṭhāna*’s twenty-four *paccayas*, supplemented by selective comparative glances at Āgama parallels. The scope is limited to Pāli sources (Nikāyas, Vinaya, Abhidhamma, and major commentaries), with practice implications foregrounded where Vinaya allowances and sense-restraint intersect causal theory. The contribution is twofold. Conceptually, we translate the sutta’s “fuel” metaphor into manipulable causal levers, clarifying how “not feeding” maps onto distinct condition-clusters rather than a single rubric. Practically, we identify training handles—calibrated bodily support (*āhāra-paccaya*), sense-door management (*phassa/ārammaṇa*), and intention retraining (*kamma/upanissaya*)—that render conditionality actionable. Thus, tracing *āhāra* into *paccaya*

illuminates both the canon's causal grammar and the craft of liberation. Along the way, we note terminological pitfalls and justify genre-specific translations that avoid collapsing pedagogy into technicality entirely.

### Background: The Four Nutriment in the Nikāyas

In the Nikāyas, *āhāra* (“nutriment”) names four distinct “fuels” that sustain the ongoing processes of body and mind: (1) **edible food** (*kabalīnkāra-āhāra*), (2) **contact** (*phassa-āhāra*), (3) **volition** (*mano-sañcetanā-āhāra*), and (4) **consciousness** (*viññāna-āhāra*). Edible food is literal sustenance: it keeps the body viable and sets conditions for practice. Contact is experiential fuel: when sense faculty, object, and consciousness meet, contact “feeds” the arising of feeling and perception. Volition is motivational fuel: intentions condition future becoming through karmic continuity. Consciousness is cognitive fuel: as awareness arises in dependence on name-and-form, it also sustains that very nexus, perpetuating lived experience. Together the four outline a graded ecology of conditioning—from the somatic to the experiential, the ethical, and the cognitive.

Pedagogically, the Nikāyas deploy this schema to reshape the practitioner's stance toward consumption. The visceral simile of “a child's flesh” casts edible food as something to be taken with sober necessity, not for fun or adornment, thereby anchoring moderation and gratitude. The requisites reflection generalizes this ethic: food is medicine for sustaining the holy life. Sense-restraint extends the lesson to contact: guarding the doors governs what experience is allowed to “enter” and thus what feelings, perceptions, and intentions get fed. Training in right effort focuses on volition: intentions either nourish unwholesome cycles or supply wholesome momentum. Insight practice targets consciousness and its supports: by seeing the contingency of awareness, the practitioner ceases to “feed” identification and proliferation. In each domain, *āhāra* functions as a lever within *paṭiccasamuppāda*: change the fuel, change the downstream links of craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (*upādāna*), and becoming (*bhava*).

This sutta pedagogy opens directly onto Abhidhamma questions. If “what is fed persists,” what **exactly** is being fed, by **what**, and **how**? Which kinds of fuel are best analyzed as object-conditions or contact-conditions, which as karmic or decisive supports, and which as literal material sustenance? Where does timing matter (pre-, co-, post-arising), and how do presence or non-disappearance sustain processes moment to moment? The Nikāya map supplies the practical insight and the training targets; the Abhidhamma will refine these with a taxonomy of conditions, specifying the distinct families through which “feeding” operates so that practice can intervene with analytic precision.

### The Abhidhamma Framework of 24 Conditions

Within the Abhidhamma, the *Paṭṭhāna* is the culminating treatise on conditionality. It enumerates twenty-four kinds of relation—*paccaya*—by which *dhammas* condition other *dhammas* across moments, concomitantly, and through lingering traces. The list includes root, object, predominance, the two contiguities, conscence, mutuality, support, decisive support, pre- and post-nascence, repetition, *kamma* and result, nutriment, faculty, *jhāna*, path, association and dissociation, and the presence-absence pair together with disappearance and non-disappearance. The *Paṭṭhāna*'s novelty is not a single master cause but a taxonomy of modes, each tracking a different way support is supplied: some immediate and synchronous, some sequential, some dispositional, some mere continued availability. Read together they provide a grammar for translating the suttas' fluid talk of “feeding” into analyzable mechanisms.

Among these, several families are especially relevant for understanding how “fuel” operates. **Consence** (*sahajāta*) captures the born-together solidarity of co-arising factors. In a single mental moment, consciousness and its associated mental factors—contact, feeling, perception, volition, and others—condition one another by arising together, sharing one object, and functioning as a team. In the material domain, nutritive essence (*oja*) is conscent with the *rūpa-kalāpas* it sustains. In a feeding idiom, consence names the mutual boost given by companions: what is co-born helps its fellows to perform their functions and to endure for the brief span of a moment.

**Support and decisive support (*nissaya/upanissaya*)** describe graded modes of resting-on. Support is the ordinary leaning relation: a mental event leans on a base or a meditation object; a road supports walking even if it does not compel a step. Decisive support is the stronger, broader cousin: anything that, by similarity, repetition, contrast, or remoteness, tips the system toward a given state. Habits, study, landscapes, foods, and friendships can become decisive supports. In feeding terms, *nissaya* is the plate; *upanissaya* is the appetite and ambience that make a particular meal probable.

**Object (*ārammaṇa*)** names the way an object “feeds” consciousness: seeing depends on visible form, hearing on sound, thinking on ideas. Without an appropriate object, there is nothing to know; with a certain object, a corresponding awareness is invited. Objects are, in effect, mental calories. Curating objects—lowering exposure to inflammatory stimuli, choosing themes for recollection, sustaining a meditation sign—modulates the caloric flow available to contact, feeling, and intention. The Abhidhamma thereby tracks the sutta claim that what one attends to is what one ends up feeding.

**Presence and non-disappearance (*atthi/avigata*)** explain how continued availability sustains processes. When a requisite remains present, its beneficiary remains fed; when the support fades or disappears (*vigata*), the beneficiary weakens. These conditions specify the mechanics of starving a process: remove the object, the company, the time, or the material nutriment, and downstream states lose their sustenance. Conversely, wholesome supports—good friends, suitable dwellings, steady meditation objects—remain present and keep wholesome states provisioned.

**Kamma (volitional action)** links present formations to future experiences. Volitions leave traces that ripen as results (*vipāka*), set channels for attention, and predispose which objects will be salient. In feeding language, intentions are provisioning acts: they stock or empty the larder that later consciousness will draw from. Repetition (*āsevana*) strengthens these grooves; path and *jhāna* conditions refine and stabilize them. This renders the sutta’s “volition as nutriment” analytically: volitions feed futures by becoming conditions for later mind-moments.

Finally, **contact (*phassa*)** deserves clarification. In the *Paṭṭhāna*, contact is not counted as a separate *paccaya* among the twenty-four. Yet as a universal mental factor it conditions its companions through the families already named—conscience, association (*sampayutta*), mutuality, support, and, crucially, object. Contact is the touch where object and faculty meet, the spark that makes an experience available to be fed upon. Thus, when the suttas speak of “contact as nutriment,” the Abhidhamma parses the feeding through *ārammaṇa*, *sahajāta*, and *upanissaya* rather than by positing a new category. Taken together, these families show how the *Paṭṭhāna* retains the Nikāya intuition—what is fed persists—while rendering feeding as a spectrum of precisely characterizable supports. Practice becomes the art of managing these supports: calibrating material nutriment, curating objects, arranging decisive supports, and pruning the continued presence that sustains unwholesome cycles.

### Defining Āhāra-paccaya: Scope and Limits

In the *Paṭṭhāna*, **āhāra-paccaya** (“nutriment as condition”) is a technical relation denoting **nutritive essence (*oja*)** as a sustaining cause for **material phenomena (*rūpa*)**. Once *kabalīkāra-āhāra* (edible food) is ingested and assimilated, its nutritive component becomes *oja*, which functions within material groups (*rūpa-kalāpas*) as their “fuel.” The conditioning is immediate and concurrent: *oja* arises **conascent** with the material cluster it supports and continues to sustain it so long as it remains **present** and **non-disappeared**. In this narrow, analytical sense, *āhāra-paccaya* is not a metaphor for all kinds of “feeding” but a specific causal role within the material domain—preventing rapid decay, enabling basic functions, and providing the physiological sufficiency on which practice depends.

**What it conditions.** Āhāra-paccaya sustains **coexistent/associated *rūpa-kalāpas***—the bodily bases and material aggregates that arise together with *oja*. Its action is thus intra-material and synchronic: nutriment supports the life of the cluster in that moment. Across moments, the presence of adequate *oja* allows successive clusters to arise with integrity, but the conditioning remains anchored in the material continuum. **What it does not condition.** Intention (*cetana*), contact (*phassa*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*)—three items named as “nutriments” at the sutta level—are

not treated as objects of *āhāra-paccaya* in Abhidhamma analysis. Their “feeding” roles are **re-located** to other condition-families that better capture their causal work: intention to **kamma-paccaya** (and decisive supports such as **upanissaya/āsevana**), contact to **ārammaṇa-paccaya** and conascence/association, and consciousness to a suite of conditions (e.g., **hetu**, **indriya**, **adhipati**, **upanissaya**) depending on context. The payoff of this restriction is precision: the Abhidhamma preserves the Nikāya insight that “what is fed persists” while distributing different kinds of feeding across the conditional map, leaving *āhāra-paccaya* to name specifically the **material** sustenance furnished by *oja*.

## Harmonizing Sutta and Abhidhamma

The Abhidhamma preserves the sutta insight “what is fed persists”—by redistributing the four nutriments across precise condition-families. Three of the sutta’s “nutriments” move to loci that better capture how they causally “feed” processes. **Contact** relocates to **phassa-paccaya** and **ārammaṇa-paccaya**: as universal mental factor, contact conditions its associates conascently, while as object-condition the presented object “feeds” the arising and tone of awareness. Practice lever: curate objects and guard sense-doors so that contact supplies wholesome fodder; sustain meditation signs to keep wholesome streams provisioned. **Volition** is analyzed chiefly under **kamma-paccaya** and **upanissaya/āsevana**: intentions create karmic pathways and, by repetition, strengthen decisive supports that tip future mind-moments. Practice lever: reshape habits by repeated wholesome intending; interrupt grooves that stock unwholesome provision. **Consciousness** disperses into roles as **root (hetu)** when greed/hatred/delusion (or non-greed, etc.) function as sources, as **faculty (indriya)** for certain awarenesses, as **dominance (adhipati)** when especially strong, and as **decisive support (upanissaya)** when prior cognitions set the stage for later ones. Practice lever: cultivate wholesome roots, stabilize attention (e.g., *jhāna*), and engineer supportive backgrounds that make insight probable.

The **continuities** are clear. The suttas identify leverage points—what we eat, attend to, intend, and sustain—precisely where the *Paṭṭhāna* gives granular handles: object-selection maps to *ārammaṇa*; sense-restraint and attentional training fine-tune *phassa*’s downstream effects; habit and character formation ride on *kamma* and *upanissaya*; the ambience of mind is regulated through roots, faculties, and dominance. The **shifts** concern presentation. Sutta pedagogy groups heterogeneous “fuels” for moral clarity and memorability, maximizing rhetorical unity. Abhidhamma analysis trades that unity for **technical precision**, separating kinds of feeding into distinct causal families and narrowing *āhāra-paccaya* itself to nutritive essence (*oja*) sustaining *rūpa*. The result is a complementary pair: the sutta’s image guides conduct; the Abhidhamma’s taxonomy guides diagnosis and fine-tuning.

## Discussion of article

Read through the lens of *āhāra*, the Nikāyas, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma converge on a single training logic that spans psychology, ethics, and community life. Psychologically, the four nutriments identify the **inputs** that keep experience going: what the senses admit, what intention endorses, and what consciousness sustains. Ethics reframes those inputs through **restraint**—the requisites reflection makes eating an exercise in sufficiency; sense-door guarding curates contact; right effort prunes and replants volitions. Communally, the **alms economy** choreographs this same pedagogy at scale: householders provision the saṅgha not as consumers but as donors; monastics reciprocate by living lightly, receiving gracefully, and converting food into practice. In all three registers, the question is the same: *what are we feeding, and why?* The answer, repeatedly, is to feed just enough for health and practice, and otherwise to starve the cycles of craving and proliferation.

Abhidhamma precision underwrites this pedagogy by turning a memorable image (“nutriment/fuel”) into **manipulable mechanisms**. Instead of a single diffuse “feeding,” the *Paṭṭhāna* disaggregates causal support: object-condition (*ārammaṇa*) explains how choosing a theme or stimulus steers awareness; conascence and presence (*sahajāta*, *atthi/avigata*) show how supports must co-arise and remain available; *kamma* and decisive support (*upanissaya/āsevana*) model how intention and repetition stock the future’s pantry. Narrowing *āhāra-paccaya* to **nutritive essence (oja)** keeps the material story honest, while relocating the other three sutta “nutriments” to their

proper condition-families preserves their **feeding functions** with greater diagnostic power. For practice, this matter: if restlessness blooms, Abhidhamma suggests checking object-conditions and decisive supports rather than merely “eating less”; if torpor arises, calibrate material nutriment and adjust repetition grooves; if craving bites at the sense-doors, work on contact’s access to inflammatory objects.

Thus, the sutta’s moral clarity and the Abhidhamma’s analytic granularity are complementary. The former tells us where to place effort eat simply, guard the senses, intend well, know contingently while the latter tells us **how** these moves bite into the causal web. The pedagogy remains humane and communal, because it is embedded in a rhythm of alms, gratitude, and restraint; the analysis remains liberative, because it maps concrete levers by which conditions are starved or supplied. Together they yield a practical science of sufficiency: feed the body just enough, feed the mind the right objects, feed intention with repetition in the wholesome, and let the rest go.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that **āhāra-paccaya** nutriment as condition renders the sutta exhortation to “stop feeding what binds” analytically precise and practically actionable. By narrowing *āhāra* in the Abhidhamma to **nutritive essence** (*oja*) sustaining **rūpa**, while relocating the other sutta “nutriments” to condition-families that better capture their causal work **contact** under *phassa* and *ārammaṇa*, **volition** under *kamma* with *upanissaya/āsevana*, and **consciousness** under roles such as *hetu*, *indriya*, *adhipati*, and *upanissaya* we obtain a clear map of where practice actually “bites.” The sutta’s pedagogical unity (“four fuels”) is thus preserved in aim but sharpened in method: different kinds of feeding are handled by different condition-clusters. In this frame, *āhāra-paccaya* names the **material sufficiency** necessary for cultivation; object- and contact-conditions govern **cognitive input**; *kamma* and decisive supports govern **motivational grooves**; and the ecology of consciousness is stabilized through roots, faculties, dominance, and supportive backgrounds. What the suttas present as memorable levers, the *Paṭṭhāna* renders as manipulable mechanisms.

Three avenues for future research follow naturally. **First**, a **corpus analysis** of *āhāra* collocations across the canon and commentaries could test the genre-sensitive claims advanced here by mapping its neighbors *tanhā*, *upādāna*, *vedanā*, *viññāṇa*, *paṭisaṅkhā* and tracing distributional shifts across Nikāya, Vinaya, Abhidhamma, and Aṭṭhakathā/Ṭīkā strata; parallel queries in the Āgamas would benchmark stability and divergence. **Second, seasonality and diet histories** deserve close attention: monsoon rhythms, regional ecologies, and local economies likely modulated alms patterns, medical allowances, and notions of sufficiency, thereby shaping how *āhāra-paccaya* functioned in lived practice. **Third**, a study of **commentarial variants on āhāraja-rūpa** definitions, sub-classifications, and cross-references to other paccayas would clarify how later scholastics harmonized sutta rhetoric with Abhidhamma precision.

The practical upshot is straightforward. By understanding **what** is being fed, **by what**, and **how**, practitioners can cease provisioning unwholesome cycles without starving the supports required for health and cultivation. *Āhāra-paccaya* names the minimum bodily adequacy on which practice stands; the redistributed “nutriments” specify the **cognitive and volitional channels** where training takes hold. Aligning these layers yields a pragmatic science of sufficiency: feed the body just enough, feed the mind the right objects, feed intention with wholesome repetition—and let the rest go.

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