Buddhist Atomism

The theories of \textit{paramāṇu} and \textit{kalāpa} in post-canonical Buddhism

1 Buddhist psychology

Buddhist growth, on a higher level, invariably focusses on knowing the mind, training it, and freeing it from suffering. The true nature of existence is marked by the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not-self. During post-Buddha times, as Buddhist philosophy developed, various efforts to systematize and standardize the Buddha’s teachings were made, and came to be known as the Abhidhamma tradition.\footnote{See Dhamma and Abhidhamma = SD 26.1.}

An important development in the Abhidhamma method of clarifying the deepest aspects of understanding the mind and seeing reality is the \textit{analysis} of existence right down to its atomic level, as it were. Although the early Abhidhamma tradition never actually got down into such detailed definition of “atoms” of experience or states of matter, such ideas became popular in later times.

While such atomic models of experience and insight are interesting, even useful, in some way, it should be remembered that they are not canonical. Such models are at best \textit{theoretical} and may serve as useful teaching tools. However, during actual meditation, it is vital not to project such models onto our deeper experiences. The idea is to experience reality directly to the level beyond models and language.

We are also living in a time when mind science is already making scientific measurements of the palpable processes of the brain and meditation, and advancing new mind theories. In the theoretical field, modern science generally does a better job than traditional theories and dogmas. Should science come up with a better atomic model of experience than the Abhidhamma model, it would easily be construed that the Abhidhamma model is outdated.

On the other hand, the key teachings of early Buddhism remain unchallenged, and always work well in mind-training when we properly direct our attention fully to them. In other words, the Abhidhamma is useful insofar as it inspires us to be wisely engaged in our spiritual practice, and to become wise compassionate beings, and it must never become an excuse for not keeping to the True Dharma.

2 Post-canonical atomism

2.1 Sources of Theravāda Atomism. In 12\textsuperscript{th}-century Sri Lanka, the Abhidhamma theory of moments\footnote{On the theory of moments (\textit{khanika,vāda}), see SD 17.2b(3).} took a very interesting turn, without any precedent in the Pali Canon itself: it evolved further into the \textit{theory of rūpa,kalāpa} (“unit of matter”). The first identifiable development of this theory appears in \textit{the Visuddhi,magga} and in the Abhidhamma commentaries. The theory is fully developed in the commentaries and manuals of the 12\textsuperscript{th} century and after, especially the \textit{Abhidhammatthāsaṅgaha} of Anuruddha,\footnote{Anuruddha, Sri Lanka, 10\textsuperscript{th}-11\textsuperscript{th} cent (Malalasekera, \textit{The Pāli Literature of Ceylon}, 1928:168 f; Bechert, “Remarks on four Buddhist Sanskrit Works,” in \textit{Studies in Pali and Buddhism}, ed J Kashyap, 1979:26).} its Sinhalese commentary \textit{(sannaya or sannē)} by Sāriputta,\footnote{Sāriputta “Sāgara,mati” of Pulatthipura (Sri Lanka), 11\textsuperscript{th} cent.} its Pali Subcommentary \textit{(tīkā)} by Sumāṅgala,\footnote{Sumāṅgala Arañña,vāsī, pupil of Sāriputta “Sāgara,mati.” See prec n.} and various Abhidhamma compendia such as the \textit{Nāma,-rūpa,saṃsāra} and the \textit{Sacca,saṅkhepa}.\footnote{Abhidhammatthāsaṅgaha (Abs 29); Abhidharmārtha,saṅgaha Sannaya (AbhsSn 156); Abhidhammatthāsaṅgaha Vibhāvinī Tīkā (AbhsVT 58); \textit{Sāccha,saṅkhepa} (Sacs 4); \textit{Nāma,rūpa,saṃsāra} (Nāmr 19).}
A close study of the fundamental principles of the theory of rūpa,kalāpa have shown that it is simply the Theravāda counterpart of the atomic theory of Sanskrit Buddhism. Karunadasa notes:

Since the Theravāda scholasticism developed in comparative isolation in Ceylon, it is very unlikely that it influenced the Buddhist schools which flourished in the mainland. Therefore, and in view of the close parallelism that exists between the Theravādins’ theory of rūpa-kalāpas and the atomic theory of the schools of Sanskrit Buddhism, it seems very probable that the former was formulated on the basis of the latter. In the manuals and the commentaries of the twelfth century and later, when the theory under consideration is presented in its fully developed form, the signs of external influence are more marked and therefore more unmistakeable. (1967:143)

This is of course not to say that the Pali atomic theory is a carbon copy of the Sanskrit system, but the similarities are more striking than the differences. The Vaibhāṣikas, for example, postulate two kinds of paramāṇu (atom), namely, the dravya, paramāṇu (the monad or unitary atom) and the saṅghātā, paramāṇu (the aggregate atom, i.e. the molecule). The dravya, paramāṇu is the most subtle (sarva, sūkṣma), that is, the smallest unit of matter. In modern technical terms, then, the dravya, paramāṇu would be the atom and the saṅghātā, paramāṇu the molecule. [1.3]

In the Visuddhi,magga, where we find the earliest traces of atomism in the Theravāda, the term kalāpa (unit or group) is not used in the same sense as it is used in the mediaeval works. The Visuddhi,magga, for example, says that head-hair is an aṭṭha, dhamma, kalāpa, “eight-element unit,” and Karunadasa notes:

If it had used the term kalāpa in the technical sense, that it should say that the head-hair is a collection of kalāpas (each consisting of eight elements). The term should be put in the plural and not in the singular. For in the technical sense, kalāpa means the smallest unit of matter and as such the head-hair should consist of a large number of kalāpas. It is clear therefore that when the Visuddhimagga says that the head-hair is an aṭṭha-dhamma-kalāpa, it is referring to the eight kinds of material elements that enter into its composition. (1967:145)

Karunadasa then adds that this conclusion is further confirmed by the Viśuddhi,mārga Sannaya (the Sinhalese Commentary on the Visuddhi,magga), where it is stated that the aṭṭha, dhamma, kalāpa refers to the eight kinds of rūpa, which in their combination, make up what is called head-hair. Nowhere in the Visuddhi,magga, where we find the earliest form of Buddhist atomism, is it in any way implied that the final or ultimate state of matter consists of atoms. Furthermore, the term kalāpa, whether in the singular or in the plural, is used interchangeably with the same sense.

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9. Abhk 1.22, Abhk: P 1:185, 187 f; AbhkV (ed Wogihara) 1:34, 123

10. (aṭṭha, dhamma, kalāpa, māttam eva) yamudu keṣa, prajñātīyaṭa kāraṇa vā varṇādin ekatvayen gena kīha, ovun aṣṭa,dharma, mātra noveyi data yunu. (VismSn 4:136)
From the Buddhist point of view, one can say that the hair on one’s head is a kalāpa of eight material elements, because it consists of the four primary elements and four of the secondary elements, viz., rūpa, gandha, rasa and dhāra [2]. One can also say that the hair on one’s head consists of an enormous number of kalāpas, each consisting of the above-mentioned eight material elements.

(Karunadasa 1967:145)

2.2 BUDDHAGHOSHA’S TERMINOLOGY. Buddhaghosa (early 5th century), the author of the Visuddhi,magga, uses kalāpa in the former (general) sense, as a group, while Anuruddha (12th century), the author of the Abhidham’attha,saṅgaha, uses it in the technical sense, as the smallest unit or group of matter. Furthermore, the mediaeval works use the term kalāpa (in the technical sense) where the Visuddhi,magga uses cunña (particle) or paramāṇu (atom).  

The mediaeval Pali works use the terms for the four primary elements in two ways: one in the sense of “characteristic” (lakkhaṇa) and the other in the sense of “intensity” or extrusiveness (ussada). In the former sense, “earth” (paṭhavī) is solidity (kakkhalatta). In the latter sense, what is solid (kakkhalalata) is “earth” (paṭhavī); for, in whatever matter where solidity is most intense (ussada) is also called pathavī, although it comprises all the four primary elements and their derived matter. The diversity of material manifestation of the elements is not due to difference in quantity (pamāṇa), but due to a difference in the intensity (ussada) or capability (samatthiya) of each element.

Karunadasa, in his Buddhist Analysis of Matter, goes on to explain how the Visuddhi,magga uses the terms kalāpa and cunña or paramāṇu. The Visuddhi,magga, when referring to the earth element on an atomic level, uses paṭhavī, dhātu in the second sense, that is, in terms of its intensity. Each detailed analyses of head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, etc, ends with the statement that each is “rigid earth element,” and each detailed analysis of bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, etc, ends with the statement that each is “liquid water element.” It then goes on to say, “But it is on account of intensity (ussada) that it comes to be called ‘the earth element, the water element,’” (ussada, vasena pana, paṭhavī, dhātu āpo, dhātu ti sākhkhām gato ti). As such, the statement—that the earth element is the human body is reducible to atoms (paramāṇu) refers to head-hair, body-hair, etc.

Next, according to the theory of avinibbhoga, rūpa (inseparable form), the four primary elements and four of derived matter, namely, rūpa, rasa, gandha and āhāra, are necessarily conascent (niyata,-sahajāta) and positionally inseparable (padesato avinibbhoga). It follows then that those parts of the human body that, on account of the intensity of the earth element, are conventionally called paṭhavī-dhātu, consist of the above-mentioned eight material elements.

And since these eight elements are positionally inseparable, even when the head-hair, body-hair, etc, are reduced to atoms, each of the atoms should in turn consist of the same number of elements. As such, what the Visuddhi,magga calls cunña or paramāṇu is actually an aggregate of eight material elements, and is the same, in its technical sense, as kalāpa, and also corresponds to the sanighṭṭha,-paramāṇu of the Vaibhāṣika.

This interpretation is further confirmed by the Visuddhi,magga’s statement that if the human body’s earth element were to be reduced to atoms, they would amount to an average dona-measure (1 litre), and that the water element would amount to half as much. Karunadasa observes:

In a given instance of matter there is no quantitative difference between the primary elements that enter into its composition; the only difference is one of intensity (ussada). If the Visuddhi,magga had used paṭhavī and āpo in the philosophical sense (in the sense of lakkhaṇa

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11 Vism 11.89/365.
13 VismT 451; Abhvka 273.
14 Vism 11.48-68/353-359.
15 Vism 11.69-80/359-363.
16 Vism 11.88/365.
17 Karunadasa 1967:146.
18 Abhs 28; VismSn 389.
19 Karunadasa 1967:146.
only), then it would not say that, when reduced to the size of paramāṇus, the former might amount to a dona-measure and the latter half as much. (1967:146)

2.3 KALĀΠ’AŅGA. By way of summary, it can be said that in the Visuddhi,magga, wherein the theory of atomism was first introduced into the Theravāda, the ultimate unit is called paramāṇu or cuṇṇa (ie, the “atom”). In later works, however, the standard term is kalāpa (as the “atom”). Karunadasa notes that

While the first two terms are indicative of the fact that what is indicated thereby is the smallest unit of matter, the other brings into relief that, although it is the smallest, yet in the ultimate analysis, it is but a plurality of different material elements. The preference shown by the authors of the mediaeval works for the use of kalāpa instead of paramāṇu and cuṇṇa—the two earlier terms—is itself indicative of their desire to emphasize this fact. The use of the term piṇḍa [heap] in the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha and its paraphrase as rūpa-samudāya in the Sinhalese samnē of Sāriputta are also suggestive of the same fact.20

According to Karunadasa, the closest Theravāda term to the dravya,paramāṇu (the “atom”) of the Vaibhāṣika is kalāp’a (literally, “the limb of the group,” kalāpa + anga), that is, a constituent of a kalāpa.21 For the sake of expedience, one could render kalāp’a anga as “component,” or even “part.” The word anga clearly suggests that it has no independent existence and implies a whole. The Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, for example, says:

It is impossible to separate the tastes, etc.,22 of matter (rūpa). Like grains of sand, they are said to be mutually inseparable [ie mutually diffused]. In the ultimate sense, too, there is no taste in matter. If that were the case, then there would be taste-stimulus (rasa-g,gaḥa) whenever there is sight-stimulus (rūpa-g,gaḥa). In the same way, too, in the ultimate sense, the body-base (kāyāyatana) [ie the sense of touch] is not everywhere. Yet, it is not absent23 because of the impossibility of breaking it up. Hence, no mixing of characteristics occurs. (Dhs 311)

However, if this were the case—that the kalāp’a anga has no independent existence, apart from the kalāpa—it would be better equated with the sub-atomic particles, namely, the nucleons (neutrons and positrons) and electrons, which indeed do not exist separately, but only as components of the atom. Just as a nucleon in the nucleus of an atom or any of its electrons, even though theoretically smaller than the atom itself, is not actually regarded as a smaller independent particle, even so a unit-limb (kalāp’a anga) is not regarded as being smaller than the unit (kalāpa) itself.

The basic atomic terminology of the Visuddhi,magga when compared to those of the Vaibhāṣika is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vaibhāṣika</th>
<th>Buddhaghosa</th>
<th>Physics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dravya,paramāṇu</td>
<td>kalāp’a anga</td>
<td>nucleons, electrons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saṅghāta paramāṇu</td>
<td>paramāṇu, cuṇṇa</td>
<td>atom</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kalāpa</td>
<td>molecule</td>
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Table 2.3a Comparison of atomic models (Buddhaghosa)

The basic atomic terminology of the later mediaeval scholiasts compared to those of the Vaibhāṣika is as follows:

20 Abhs 28; AbhsSn 166.
21 Karunadasa 1967:147 f, 153-158.
22 Etc = any of the other components (kalāp’a anga), namely, the 4 elements, colour, smell, and nutritive essence.
23 Na ca sabbattha n’atthi, lit “and it is not not everywhere.”
3 The rūpa, kalāpa

Now we will examine Buddhist atomism or atomic theory as we find it today, most popularly amongst those who practise the so called “vipassana” form of Buddhist meditation. This atomism is especially popular in the meditative traditions of Myanmar Buddhism, and they generally follow the most developed atomic theories of the post-Buddhaghosa scholiasts [1.1]. According to the contemporary “vipassana” atomic theory, an “atom” (kalāpa) of matter, has a minimum of eight material components. It is said to be smaller than even that subatomic particles of modern science, hence practically invisible!

Hence, one should note here that this vipassana “atom” (kalāpa) is not identical to the “atom” of science: they are only etymologically identical, that is, in the sense that they are “not divisible” (Latin, atomus; Greek, atomos). Theoretically, Buddhaghosa’s definition of kalāpa would be closest to the “atom” of modern science.

These eight components of matter, forming an octad (aṭṭhaka), are called “indivisible matter” or simply “inseparable” (avinibbhoga rūpa). The four primary elements—earth, water, fire and wind—arise together, interdependently and inseparably. The smallest independent unit of matter—the octad—comprises of the four primary elements and the following material components:

- colour (vaṇṇa) or a visible object;
- smell (gandha) or an olfactory object;
- taste (rasa) or gustatory object; and
- nutritive essence (ojā), or food (energy).

This is called the “octad with nutriment as the eighth” (oj’aṭṭhamaka, kalāpa) or simply the “pure octad” (suddhaṭṭhaka, kalāpa), which is the most primitive material combination, found in dead matter, that is, carcasses and inanimate things. The simplest form of living matter is the “vital nonad unit” or simply “life nonad” (jīvita, navaka, kalāpa), formed by adding life-faculty (jīvit’indriya) to the octad. Every experiential unit of the five physical sense-faculties, the heart-base (physical seat of the mind), and sex has their respective decad units (dasaka, kalāpa) each, that is, a nonad unit plus their own matter.

Let us now briefly examine these seven decad units.

The eye sensitivity (cakkhu pasāda), located in the retina, takes a colour or visible form as its object. It serves as the physical base for eye-consciousness, which arises with the impingement of a colour or form upon the eye sensitivity, resulting in the eye decad (cakkhu, dasaka).

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24 See Khandha 1 Rūpa = SD 17.2a.
25 Vism 18.5 f/585; Abhs:SR 164, 250; Dhs 315 f = DhsA:PR 413 f.
26 Vism 15.105/368, 17.194/560; Abhs:BRS 6.18.253; Mohv:Be 99.
The ear sensitivity (*sota pasāda*), located in the inner ear, takes a sound or vibration as object. It serves as the physical base for ear-consciousness, which arises with the impingement of a sound or vibration upon the ear sensitivity, resulting in the ear decad (*sota,dasaka*).

The nose sensitivity (*ghana pasāda*), located in the nostrils, takes smell as object. It serves as the physical base for nose-consciousness, which arises with the impingement of a smell upon the nose sensitivity, resulting in the nose decad (*ghana,dasaka*).
The tongue sensitivity (*jivhā pasāda*), located one the tongue (taste-buds), takes taste as object. It serves as the physical base for tongue-consciousness, which arises with the impingement of a taste upon the tongue sensitivity, resulting in the tongue decad (*jivhā,dasaka*).

![Diagram 10.4 The tongue decad unit](diagram)

The body sensitivity (*kāya pasāda*), located on the skin and nerves, takes a tangible form (earth, water, fire, wind) as object. It experiences softness, hardness and warmth, smoothness and roughness, warmth and cold, lightness and heaviness, pressure and support, and so on. It serves as the physical base for body-consciousness, which arises with the impingement of a tangible form upon the body sensitivity, resulting in the body decad (*kāya,dasaka*).

![Diagram 10.5 The body decad unit](diagram)

The heart-base sensitivity (*hadaya,vatthu pasāda*), located in the blood of the heart, takes a mental phenomenon as object. It serves as the physical base for mind-consciousness, which arises

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27 A base (*vatthu*) is a physical support for the occurrence of consciousness. A base, however, is different from a door (*dvāra*), since it plays a different role in the origination of consciousness. A door is a channel through which the mind-moments (*citta*) and mental concomitants (*cetasika*) of a cognitive process gain access to the object; a base is a physical support for the occurrence of cittas and cetasikas. (Abhs:BRS 3.20 guide).

According to Pali commentators, the heart (*hadaya*) serves as the physical support for all cittas other than the physical senses and their objects. Neither the Suttas nor the canonical Abhidhamma expressly mention the heart-base, but simply speak of “that matter (*tam rāpam*) in dependence on which the mind element and mind-consciousness element occurs” (Paṭṭhāna 1.4). The Comys, however, subsequently specify “that matter” to be the heart-base (*hadaya,vatthu*), a cavity situated within the physical heart (Vism 8.111 f/256).

The heart-base has the characteristic of being the material support for the mind element and the mind-consciousness element (*Manual* ch 3 §21). The heart-base is to be found in dependence (*paccaya*) on the blood inside the heart, and is assisted by the four primary elements and maintained by the life-faculty (Abhs:BRS 239,5).

For further discussion, see Abhs:SR 277-279.

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with the impingement of a mind-object upon the heart-base sensitivity, resulting in the heart-base decad (hadaya,vatthu,dasaka). It also serves as the support for all consciousness, including the life-continuum (bhavanga), with the exception of the sense-consciousnesses.

### Diagram 10.6 The heart-base decad unit

**Sexual phenomena** are of two kinds, namely, femininity and masculinity. Only one of the sexual phenomena exists in each sexuality decad unit.

### Diagram 10.7 The sexuality decad unit

**The Saññoga Sutta** (A 7.48) describes sexuality in these graphic terms:

**WOMANLINESS.** A woman thinks about herself in terms of her womanly faculty, her womanly ways, her womanly looks, her womanly pride, her womanly desires, her womanly voice, her womanly adornments. She is aroused by this and delights in it.

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28 “to herself,” *ajjhataṃ*, lit “internally”.
29 “womanly faculty,” *ithi indriya*, lit “womanly sense-organ”. Here referring to the physical features that make one a woman, that is, “womanliness”. The term “femininity” usually refers to the psychological aspect of a woman, related to Jung’s notions of *anima* and *animus*.
30 “womanly ways,” *ithi kutta*, eg seductiveness, coquetry, and wiles (AA 4:32). Many of such terms in this sentence and their cognates below are in the Pali singular, which however need to be rendered idiomatically into the English plural.
31 “womanly looks,” *ithi akappa*, ie her physical looks and how she is dressed (AA 4:32).
32 “womanly pride,” *ithi vidha*, ie her pride and conceit (AA 4:32).
33 “womanly adornments,” *ithi alankāra*. “adorning the head, the neck, the hands, the feet, the hips (*kaṭi*)” (*sīsūpa gīvūpa hatthūpa pādūpa kaṭūpa, V 4:340*)
Thus aroused, she considers another in terms of a man’s faculty, his manly ways, his manly looks, his manly pride, his manly desires, his manly voice, his manly adornments. She is aroused by this and delights in it.

Thus aroused, she desires external union, and she desires the [physical] pleasure and [mental] joy arising on account of such a union. Monks, attached to her womanliness, she enters into union with men.

In this way, monks, a woman does not rise above her womanliness.

MANLINESS. A man thinks about himself in terms of his own manly faculty, his manly ways, his manly looks, his manly pride, his manly desires, his manly voice, his manly adornments. He is aroused by this and delights in it.

Thus aroused, he contemplates another in terms of a woman’s faculty, her womanly ways, her womanly looks, her womanly pride, her womanly desires, her womanly voice, her womanly adornments. He is aroused by this and delights in it.

Thus aroused, he desires external union, and he desires the pleasure and joy arising on account of such a union. Monks, attached to his manliness, he enters into union with women.

In this way, monks, a man does not rise above his manliness. (A 7.48.2 f/4:58 f) = SD 8.7

In a homosexual male, his masculinity is latent and weak, and his femininity is predominant, hence his attraction for another male. In the homosexual female, her femininity is latent and weak, and her masculinity is predominant, hence her attraction to another female. The decisive factor here is of course lust and delusion, as described in the Saññoga Sutta.

4 Life and food

It is earlier said that the simplest form of living matter is the “vital nonad unit” or simply “life nonad” (jīvita, navaka, kalāpa). Just as there is a vital force in the mental factors, so, too, there is a vital material force called life-faculty (jīvit’indriya) in living matter. The life-faculty has a supportive function, like water in a pond that prevents the lotus from withering. The life-faculty maintains the life of conascent (sahajāta) kinds of matter (those arising together) at the stable moment. It is itself being produced and dying from moment to moment, maintaining the life of conascent matter only in the unit (kalāpa). It maintains the karma-generated matter such as the eye, ear, nose, tongue, boy, heart-base and sex decad units. Without life-faculty, the body becomes dead matter, a corpse.

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34 “She is aroused by this…” Here I have rendered tattha in the English singular, since such an unskillful person would attend to the features mentioned. In the cognate sentences below [4-5] tattha is rendered in the English plural, ie referring to the various physical features, to which the skillful person remains unattracted.

35 “Another,” bahiddhā, lit “outside (of herself)”.

36 “Manly faculty,” puris’indriya, lit “manly sense-organ”. Here referring to the physical features that make one a man, that is, “manliness.” The term “masculinity” usually refers to the psychological aspect of a man. Note here in the sutta that the reference is “in terms of a man’s faculty,” and not “in another man.” This is very significant as this reflects the fact that those sexually attracted to others, consciously or unconsciously, may look for such features that excite them in either sex.

37 “Manly looks,” puris’ākappa, ie his physical looks and how he is dressed.

38 “Manly pride,” purisa,vidha, ie his pride and conceit.

39 “She desires external union,” bahiddhā samyogam ākāṅkhāti. Notice here neither man nor woman is mentioned.

40 “Attached to,” sattā (V 1:185; D 2:246; Nc 23, 34; Dh 342; J 1:376).

41 “She desires external union,” bahiddhā samyogam ākāṅkhāti. Notice here neither man nor woman is mentioned.
Nutritive essence \( (oja) \) is found in every unit of matter that forms the basic eight inseparables or pure octad, that is, earth, water, fire, wind, colour, smell, taste and nutritive essence. Nutritive essence is that part of edible food which helps the growth of new matter in the body. The nutritive essence in each unit of matter, supported by digestive heat, multiplies itself over and again. As such, the Abhidhamma term for the simplest cluster of material states is “form with nutritive essence as the eighth” \( (oja, \text{at}ṭhamaka, \text{rupa}) \).

5 How to see not-self

In the Arahantā Sutta 1 \( (S \ 22.76) \), the Buddha declares:

Bhikshus, form is impermanent.
What is impermanent is not-self.
What is not-self \( [83] \) should be seen as it really is, with right wisdom, thus:
“This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my self.” \( (S \ 22.76/3:82 \ f) = SD \ 42.9 \)

The Vibhaṅga Commentary explains that in such passages, the Buddha teaches the characteristic of not-self by means of both the impermanence and suffering.

Why is this so? Because of the self-evidence [obviousness] of impermanence and suffering. For, when a plate or a saucer, etc, falls from the hand and breaks, they say, “Ah! Impermanence!” As such, impermanence is self-evident.

But as regards selfhood \( (\text{atta}, \text{bhāva}) \), when boils, carbuncles, and so on, have arisen, or when pierced by splinters, thorns and so on, they say, “Ah! The pain!” As such, suffering is self-evident.

The characteristic of not-self is not self-evident, dark, unclear, difficult to penetrate, difficult to illustrate, difficult to make known. \( (VbhA 49 \ f) \)

The Commentary (with some additional paraphrasing) goes on to explain how to directly see not-self in things around us. The characteristic of not-self is not self-evident if we are unmindful of or unable to see into the resolution into the various elements \( (\text{nānā}, \text{dhātu}, \text{vinibbhoga}) \) because these are concealed by compactness \( (\text{ghan}a) \).\(^2\)

But when continuity is analyzed by closing observing of the rise and fall in daily life, the characteristic of impermanence appears as it really is.

When the postures are carefully noted by keeping in mind their continual oppression, the characteristic of suffering appears as it really is.

\(^2\) Anatta, lakkhaṇaṁ nānā, dhātu, vinibbhogassa amanaśikāra, ghanena paṭiccānattā na upaṭṭhāti. \( (VbhA 50; \ Vism 21.3/640) \).
When this perception of compactness is resolved into the various elements of earth (resistance), water (coherence), fire (heat) and wind (motion), then the characteristic of not-self appears as it really is.

Now, why are the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness) impermanent? Because they rise and fall, change, and become something else.

But these same five aggregates are suffering because “what is impermanent is suffering” (S 4:1). Why? Because of continual oppression. The mode of being continually oppressed is the characteristic of suffering.

But those same five aggregates are not-self because “what is suffering is not-self” (S 4:1). Why? Because there is no control over them. This lack of control over them is the characteristic of not-self.

For this reason, what is impermanent, suffering and not-self are one thing, and the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not-self are another. For, the five aggregates, the twelve bases, the eighteen elements, are all impermanent, suffering and not-self. The modes of change in the manner mentioned are the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and not-self. (VbhA 50 f)

Bibliography
[See also SD 26.1]

Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw

Susīlā, Sayalay

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