The Discourse on the Diversity of the Elements  
[The components of our being]  
(Saṁyutta Nikāya 14.1/2:140)  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

Introduction

1 **COMMENTARIAL TERMS.** According to the Saṁyutta Commentary, “diversity of the elements” (dhātu,nānatta) is the diverse intrinsic nature of phenomena, given (“which receives”) the name “elements” in the sense that they have an intrinsic nature on account of their emptiness and of lack of a being.¹ (SA 2:130)

Keeping to the Abhidhamma tradition, the Commentary continues by explaining as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sutta term</th>
<th>Commentarial explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eye element</td>
<td>eye sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form element</td>
<td>form object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eye-consciousness element</td>
<td>mind based on eye-sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear element</td>
<td>ear sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sound element</td>
<td>sound object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear-consciousness element</td>
<td>mind based on ear-sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nose element</td>
<td>nose sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>smell element</td>
<td>smell object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nose-consciousness element</td>
<td>mind based on nose-sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongue element</td>
<td>tongue sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taste element</td>
<td>taste object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongue-consciousness element</td>
<td>mind based on tongue-sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>body element</td>
<td>body sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>touch element</td>
<td>touch object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>body-consciousness element</td>
<td>mind based on body-sensitivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mind element</td>
<td>the threefold mind element²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mind-object element</td>
<td>feeling, perception, formations; subtle form; nirvana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear-consciousness element</td>
<td>all mind-consciousness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² SAṬ says these are the two receiving (sampaṭicchana) mind-elements and the functional mind-element (i.e. the five-door adverting citta) (SAṬ:VRI 2:111).

¹ Nissattāṭṭha, suññattāṭṭha, saṅkhataṇa sabhāvaṭṭhena dhātu ti laddha, nāmānaṁ dhammānaṁ nānā, sabhāvo dhātu, nānattam.
Sutta teachings are like the tools, media and colours of an artist, or the musical instruments, musical notes and acoustics of a musician. We can spend a whole life-time writing, reading and discussing in great detail of the tools of an artist or a musician, but without actually painting something beautiful or playing beautiful music, we are neither artists nor musicians. We are not masters of our arts.

Much of Buddhism became fetishized into magic, ritualism and superstition on a popular level. On a more elitist level, much of Buddhism became dogmatized into academic theories, philosophical fineries and passing comments. None of these is likely to bring about spiritual liberation, or even lasting mental peace.

The purpose of the Suttas as Dharma teachings is clear: for spiritual liberation. As the tools of spiritual liberation, the Suttas should first be studied from the original texts (eg Pali) or a good translation, and best done with an experienced and wise teacher. Such a study should inspire joy and stillness in our hearts, so that they become the basis for meditation and mindfulness practice.

As our mind-heart becomes more calm and clear, we begin to see beyond the letter of the Suttas into their spirit. We are then ready to experience true reality directly for ourselves, as the Buddha has intended in the first place.

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3 SUTTAS ARE SUFFICIENT. We have enough Sutta teachings to occupy our whole adult life of study and practice, even without their Commentaries, helpful as they may be. However, explanations and details are given in the Commentaries and later works for the purpose of clarifying technical aspects of the Sutta teachings.

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3 For a commentarial discussion, see Vism 15.17-43/484-490 & VbhA 76-82.
4 On the specificity of each sense-faculty, see Uṇṇāha Brāhmaṇa S (S 48.42/2:217-219) = SD 29.3.
5 Where Bodhi give a brief explanation of the mental processes according to Abhidhamma: see also Bodhi (ed), A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, 1999: 1.8-10, 4.1-23.
The Discourse on the Diversity of the Elements
(S 14.1/2:140)

1  (The Blessed One was) residing at Sāvatthī.
2  “Bhikshus, I will teach you the diversity of the elements.
Listen, pay close attention. I will speak.”
   “Yes, bhante,” the monks answered the Blessed One in assent.
3  The Blessed One said this:
   “And what, bhikshus, is the diversity of the elements?

4  Cakkhu, dhātu  rūpa, dhātu  cakkhu, viññāna, dhātu.
   Sota, dhātu  sadda, dhātu  sota, viññāna, dhātu.
   Ghāna, dhātu  gandha, dhātu  ghāna, viññāna, dhātu.
   Jvhā, dhātu  rasa, dhātu  jivhā, viññāna, dhātu.
   Kāya, dhātu  phoṭṭhabba, dhātu  kāya, viññāna, dhātu.
   Mano, dhātu  dhamma, dhātu  mano, viññāna, dhātu.

   The eye element, the form element, the eye-consciousness element.
   The ear element, the sound element, the ear-consciousness element.
   The nose element, the smell element, the nose-consciousness element.
   The tongue element, the taste element, the tongue-consciousness element.
   The body element, the touch element, the body-consciousness element.
   The mind element, the mind-object element, the mind-consciousness element.

—This, bhikshus, is called the diversity of elements.

— evaṁ —

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