

SD 62.10e

(Chakka) Dhātu Sutta

The (Sixes) Discourse on Elements | A 6.111

Theme: *Dhātu* as “something” or mind-objects

Translated by Piya Tan ©2024

1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND RELATED SUTTAS

1.1.1 Summary of A 6.111

The (Chakka) Dhātu Sutta (A 6.111) is a very short sutta where the Buddha exhorts us:

- to abandon the elements of sensuality, of ill will and of violence;
- by cultivating the elements of renunciation, of non-ill will and of non-violence.

1.1.2 Significance of A 6.111

1.1.2.1 The (Chakka) Dhātu Sutta (A 6.111) lists the 6 things to be practised, that is, 3 things to be *abandoned* and 3 things to be *cultivated*.

The 3 things **to be abandoned** (*dhammā pahānāya*) are:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) the sensual element | <i>kāma, dhātu;</i> |
| (2) the element of ill will | <i>vyāpāda, dhātu;</i> |
| (3) the element of violence | <i>vihiṃsā, dhātu.</i> |

These 3 unwholesome elements overlap with the 3 unwholesome roots (*akusala mūla*), that is, *greed, hatred and delusion*; both triads negative drive and feed our karma (thought, speech and action).

1.1.2.2 The following 3 wholesome elements are **to be cultivated** (*dhammā bhāvetabbā*) for the abandoning of the 3 unwholesome elements, that is:

- | <u>for the abandoning of</u> | <u>should be cultivated</u> | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| (1) the sensual element, | the element of renunciation | <i>nekkhamma dhātu;</i> |
| (2) the element of ill will, | the element of non-ill will | <i>avyāāda dhātu;</i> |
| (3) the element of violence, | the element of non-violence | <i>avihiṃsā dhātu.</i> |

The sensual element should be understood as it is, of a nature to make “something” out of nothing and to drive us to have *more and more* of themselves—of what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched and thought—so they feed on themselves without end. When we notice and accept them as they really are, we will be able to renounce, let go, of the desire for the sensual elements. **This is the element of renunciation.**

The element of ill will arises and dominates us when we fail to let go of craving for the sensual element. We feel ill will when we are unable to get sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts that are sensually pleasant. With lovingkindness, we accept these sense-objects as they are; they are of a nature that are insatiable. This is **the element of non-ill will.**

Giving up both the sensual element and the element of ill will, we are free of **the element of violence**. With compassion, we let go of the element of ill will; when we are free of ill will, we rejoice. Calming this joy of renunciation, we feel true inner peace of **the element of non-violence.**

The 3 wholesome elements are the elements of *renunciation*, the element of *non-ill will* and the element of *non-violence*. These 3 wholesome elements overlap with the 3 wholesome roots (*kusala mūla*), that is, *non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion*. These work as the roots of our wholesome actions (thought, speech and bodily action).

1.1.2.3 The Bahu,dhātuka Sutta (M 115) lists the same 6 elements in pairs as follows:

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| (1) the sensual element, | <i>kāma,dhātu</i> | |
| (2) the renunciation element, | <i>nekkhamma,dhātu,</i> | |
| (3) the ill will element, | <i>vyāpāda,dhātu</i> | |
| (4) the non-ill will element, | <i>avyāpāda,dhātu</i> | |
| (5) the violence [cruelty] element, and | <i>vīhiṃsā,dhātu</i> | |
| (6) the non-violence [non-cruelty] element. | <i>avīhiṃsā,dhātu.</i> | (M 115,7/3:62 f), SD 29.1a |

These 6 are defined in **the Vibhaṅga** (Vbh §183/86 f) as the 6 corresponding types of initial application or thinking (*vitakka*) as listed in **the Dvedhā,vitakka Sutta** (M 19).¹ The Commentary reminds us that these elements refer to the “conscious” body (*sa,viññāṇaka,kāya*) (MA 4:104).² In other words, these 6 elements are part of our thought-processes, and thus can and must be understood as they are: the unwholesome elements are to be *removed*; the wholesome elements are to be *cultivated*.

1.2 MEANINGS OF DHĀTU

1.2.0 The word **dhātu** simply means “element” with these 4 senses, that is as:

- | | |
|---|---------|
| (1) the 4 primary elements (<i>mahā,bhūta</i>), and | [1.2.1] |
| (2) the 18 elements of perception. | [1.2.2] |
| (3) intention | [1.2.3] |
| (4) “something” | [1.2.4] |

The Commentaries define **dhātu** as “that which bears their own essential nature” (*attano sabhāvaṃ dhārentī ti dhātu*).³ These are not abiding entities but refer to their inherent nature, such as it is the nature of the earth element to support, the fire element to burn, and so on.⁴

1.2.1 The 4 primary elements

The 4 primary or physical elements (*mahā,bhūta*), are earth (*paṭhavī,dhātu*), water (*āpo,dhātu*), fire (*teja,dhātu*), and wind (*vāyo,dhātu*). They are the essential qualities of matter or the physical world.

The Visuddhi,magga defines them as follows:

“Whatever that is characterized

- by hardness (*thaddha,lakkhaṇa*) is the earth or solid element;
- by cohesion (*ābandhana*) or fluidity is the water element;
- by heating (*paripācana*) is the fire or heat element;
- by strengthening (*vitthambhana*) or supporting, is the wind or motion element.”

(Vism 11.2/341)

¹ M 19,2/1:114 (SD 61.1); cf D 3:215; S 2:151; A 3:447.

² See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,19.2), SD 1.11 & **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16 (6). See also **Rūpa**, SD 17.2a.

³ PmA 1:84 = VbhA 77 = Vism 15.21/485,

⁴ On “skill in the elements,” see **Vimutti,magga**: Vimm 2.40-42 (Vimm:Ñ 609-612),

1.2.2 The 18 elements of perception

(1) eye-element	(6) form-element	(11) eye-consciousness-element
(2) ear-element	(7) sound-element	(12) ear-consciousness-element
(3) nose-element	(8) smell-element	(13) nose-consciousness-element
(4) tongue-element	(9) taste-element	(14) tongue-consciousness-element
(5) body-element	(10) touch-element	(15) body-consciousness-element
(16) mind-element	(17) mind-object [object-element]	(18) mind-consciousness-element

Table 1.2.2: The 18 elements of perception⁵

The 18 elements of perception (*aṭṭhārasa dhātu*) consist of (1) the 6 internal sense-faculties (*saḍ-āyatana*), (2) the respective 6 sense-objects (*dhamma*), and (3) the 6 sense-consciousnesses (*viññāṇa*), such as those listed in **the Bahu, dhātuka Sutta** (M 115), as seen in **Table 1.2.2**.⁶

The basic facts and terms to know here are as follows: [Table 1.2.2]

1-5	the 5 physical sense-faculties.	<i>pañc'indriya</i>
6-10, 16	the 6 internal (personal) sense-bases.	<i>ajjh'āyatana</i> or <i>ajjhatika āyatana</i> ⁷
11-15, 18	the 6 external ⁸ (physical) sense-bases.	<i>bāhir'āyatana</i> or <i>bāhiddh'āyatana (ārammaṇa)</i> ⁹
1-10	the physical sense-bases (<i>āyatana</i>). ¹⁰	
1-18	the 18 elements (<i>dhātu</i>).	
11-18	the mental bases.	
16	performs the function of advertence (<i>āvajjana</i>) towards the object at the start of the 5-door (physical sense) conscious process (<i>viññāṇa kicca</i>). ¹¹ It also performs the function of receiving (<i>sampañichanna</i>) the sense-object. Simply called “mind” (<i>mano</i>) ¹² in the suttas.	
17	may be either physical (based on sense-experience) or mental (based on thought).	
18	performs the function of investigating (<i>santīraṇa</i>), determining (<i>voṭṭhapana</i>) and registering (<i>tad-ārammaṇa</i>) the object. ¹³	
17-18	called <i>dhamma</i> (dharma or thought); not differentiated in the suttas.	

⁵ Note that the first set of 5 refer to the physical senses; the last 3 relate to the mind. On the 18 elements, see also SD 17.13 (3.3.3); SD 29.5 (1.4.2). On “skills in the elements,” see also **Vimutti, magga** (Vimm 11.40 f; Vimm:Ñ 609-612).

⁶ M 115,4/3:62 (SD 29.1a); SD 17.13 (3.3.3). Def at Vbh §§183-184/87-90; expl in detail at Vism 15.17-43/484-490. For a full list and functions of the 18 elements, see Table 3.3.3.1 (SD 17.13).

⁷ See SD 29.5 (1.2, 18).

⁸ Notes that “external” generally means “in the world” for the physical senses, but means “object” in the case of the mind. Thus “external” should be understood contextually.

⁹ *Ārammaṇa* (objects), late term for the external foundations for sense-perception: **Samādhi Mūlaka Ārammaṇa S** (S 34.5), SD 41.20; non-tt: SD 32.10 (1.3.2) [DEB: ārammaṇa (1)].

¹⁰ SD 17.2a (9.2).

¹¹ On the 5-door cognitive process (*pañca, dvāra*), see SD 19.14 (2); SD 47.19 (3.2.2.3).

¹² In Abhidhamma, *citta* is used referring to the specific functions or aspects of the mind (*mano*).

¹³ For the other mental functions, see BDict Table I. For the 14 functions of consciousness, see *viññāṇa-kicca*. See **Bahu, dhātuka S** (M 115), SD 29.1a; **Dhātu Saṃy** (S 14), eg **Dhātu Nānatta S** (S 14.1), SD 19.9; and esp Vbh ch 2 (Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka*, 1938, 1971:28-30); Vism 15.17-43.

1.2.3 *Dhātu* as “intention”

1.2.3.1 The 3 unwholesome elements of *sensuality*, of *ill will* and of *violence* occur as thoughts in the perceptual process:

one feels (*vedeti*) → one perceives (*sañjānāti*) → one thinks and ponders (*vitakketi vicāreti*).

“**One feels**” refers to the arising of feelings of something *pleasant* or *unpleasant* (before the arising of any emotion).

“**One perceives**” is when one recalls some happy memory and *relates* that to the feeling.¹⁴

“**One thinks and ponders**” about this connection between memory and feeling.

1.2.3.2 At this point of thinking and pondering, the **karmic emotions** (*saṅkhārā*) have not yet arisen but are building up ready to act. We have seen that ***vitakka*** plays the role of “intention” or may lead to an intended act.¹⁵ When *vitakka* assumes thoughts of sensuality (lust) or of ill will or of violence, then the **elements of intention** have set in. *Vitakka* is the willed (conative) thought while *dhatu* refers to the intentional root itself (whether of greed, hatred or delusion) arising as the sensual element or the element of ill will or of violence. By this stage, the acts have become karmic, that is, bad karma.

1.2.3.3 This is where the **(Chakka) Dhātu Sutta** teaching comes in: we are to abandon this negative karmic thought before it becomes speech or action, when it is full-fledged bad karma. The Sutta is telling us to act *wholesomely* just before the element of sensuality, or ill will or violence takes root. To be sure that no bad roots sink down, we should arouse the **elements of renunciation** (letting go of the sensual thought), or of **lovingkindness** (countering any hatred), or of **non-violence** (removing any violent thought).¹⁶

1.2.4 *Dhātu* as “something”

1.2.4.1 The idea of making **something** (*kiñcana*) out of nothing is an ancient unbuddhist teaching. In fact, **the 3 somethings** (*tayo kiñcana*) are an ancient term for the 3 unwholesome roots, as listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), that is,

(1) the something that is lust	<i>rāgo akiñcanaṃ</i>	
(2) the something that is hatred	<i>doso akiñcanaṃ</i>	
(3) the something that is delusion	<i>moho akiñcanaṃ</i>	(D 33,1.10(31)/3:217) ¹⁷

The meaning is that the elements of lust, or hatred or delusion create situations and problems for us where there is none. Thus, we are driven to desire and acquire what we see as pleasant; to reject the unpleasant or what contradicts the pleasing; to violate, even destroy, what we do not like or that disagrees with us. Thus the elements make “**something**” of what is gone and non-existent, or something that has not happened and will not happen, or something that is not present before us as reality.

¹⁴ On *saññā* as memory, see SD 62.10d (2.1.3).

¹⁵ On *vitakka* as intention, see SD 62.10c (2.6.2).

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion, see SD 62.10d (1.2.2) The perceptual process.

¹⁷ M 1:298,14; Sn 645 = Dh 421, Sn 1098; Tha 306.

1.2.4.2 The opposite of *kiñcana*, “something; having something; defiled” is *akiñcana* (literally, “nothing, having nothing, poor”). However, in a good sense, it means one who has nothing to do with what is unreal (not there), one free from acquisitions, from defilements (*raga, kiñcan’ādīnaṃ abhāvena akiñcanā*, “one who is *akiñcana* is without anything that is lust and so on,” VA 973,5). Here are some usages of *akiñcana* in the suttas:

S 1:141,19*	<i>akiñcano bhikkhu anañña, posi</i> , “A monk, owning nothing, supporting no other.”
Dh 88	<i>hitvā kāme akiñcano</i> , “giving up sensual pleasures, having nothing.”
U 14,17	<i>sukhino vata ye akiñcana vedaguno hi jana akiñcana</i> , “happy indeed are those with nothing, for those with true knowledge are people with nothing.”
Sn 1094	<i>akiñcanam anādānam etaṃ dipam anāparam</i> , “this island, that is nothing, without grasping, matchless” (I call nirvana).
Tha 36	<i>etaṃ sāmāññam akiñcanassa</i> , “this is recluseship for one with nothing.”

1.3 THE PERCEPTION OF ABANDONING

1.3.1 The perception of abandoning: the definition

1.3.1.1 The *Giri-m-ānanda Sutta* (A 10.60) defines the perception of abandoning (*pahāna, saññā*) as follows:

And what, Ānanda, is **the perception of abandoning**?

8 Here, Ānanda, a monk does not give in to a sensual thought that has arisen, but he abandons it, pushes it away, makes an end of it, brings it to extinction.

He does not give in to a thought of ill will that has arisen, but he abandons it, pushes it away, makes an end of it, brings it to extinction.

He does not give in to a violent thought that has arisen, but he abandons it, pushes it away, makes an end of it, brings it to extinction.

He does not give in to evil unwholesome states that have arisen, but he abandons them, pushes them away, makes an end of them, brings them to extinction.

This, Ānanda, is called the perception of abandoning. (A 10.60,8/5:109 f), SD 19.16

1.3.1.2 Here is the context of **the perception of abandoning** (*pahāna saññā*) in the *Giri-m-ānanda Sutta*’s list of 10 perceptions:

		SD 62.10d
(1) the perception of impermanence	<i>anicca, saññā</i>	[2.4.2.5]
(2) the perception of nonself	<i>anatta, saññā</i>	[2.4.4.2]
(3) the perception of foulness	<i>asubha, saññā</i>	[2.4.2.1]
(4) the perception of danger [disadvantages]	<i>ādīnava, saññā</i>	[2.4.4.3]
(5) the perception of abandoning	<i>pahāna, saññā</i>	[2.4.1.2]
(6) the perception of fading away (of lust) [of dispassion]	<i>virāga, saññā</i>	[2.4.1.3]
(7) the perception of cessation	<i>nirodha, saññā</i>	[2.4.4.4]
(8) the perception of not delighting in all the world	<i>sabba, loke anabhirata, saññā</i>	[2.4.2.4]
(9) the perception of wishlessness towards all formations	<i>sabba, saṅkhāresu aniccha, saññā</i>	[2.4.4.5]
(10) THE MINDFULNESS OF THE BREATH	<i>ānāpāna, sati</i>	[2.4.4.6]

(A 10.60,4-13/5:108-112), SD 19.16

Apparently, the above 10 meditations are taught to the sick monk Giri-m-ānanda as an “affective therapy” so that he recovers from his illness. The first 9 meditations act as a preamble to the 10th and

last meditation, that on the breath.¹⁸ What concerns us here is **the perception of abandoning**, which is the 5th meditation.

1.3.1.3 [The *italicized* numbers here refer to **Diagram 1.3.2** below.] The suttas describe one's spiritual transformation by way of **the *nibbidā* cycle**,¹⁹ that is, how upon seeing the true nature of the world, one turns away from it, seeking the way out to the attainment of liberation. The suttas and Commentaries often describe the bodhisattva or someone turning away from the world when they have a ***saṁvega*** (spiritual shock) experience, such as young Siddhattha seeing the “raw” nature of *decay, disease and death* in the dramatic metaphors of *an old man, a sick man and a corpse*.²⁰ [1.3.2.2]

1.3.2 The 10 stages of spiritual transformation

<u>the 6 perceptions</u>			<u>the sevenfold <i>nibbidā</i> cycle</u>	
(1) perception of impermanence	<i>anicca saññā</i>	1		
(2) perception of nonself	<i>anatta saññā</i>	2		
(3) perception of foulness	<i>asubha saññā</i>	3		
(4) perception of danger	<i>ādīnava saññā</i>	4	(1) revulsion	<i>nibbidā</i>
(5) perception of abandoning	<i>pahāna saññā</i>	5	(2) fading away [dispassion]	<i>virāga</i>
(6) perception of cessation	<i>nirodha saññā</i>	6	(3) cessation (of suffering)	<i>nirodha</i>
		7	(4) inner peace	<i>upasama</i>
		8	(5) direct knowledge	<i>abhiññā</i>
		9	(6) awakening	<i>sambodha</i>
		10	(7) nirvana. ²¹	<i>nibbāna</i>
				(A 7.83/4:143)

Diagram 1.3.2 The stages of transformation

In the 10 stages of spiritual transformation [**Diagram 1.3.2**], the spiritual shock (*saṁvega*) experience—which may include the disillusionment one gets on losing a good job, or a great relationship. Or something we thought were lasting and beautiful—is that of seeing *change, becoming other, or disappearance*. This clear vision of **impermanence** [1] seems to contradict all that we have expected of life. Or, on a deeper level, the realization that there is nothing at all when we expect *something* to be there.

We think or hope that there must be something permanent or eternal so that life seems meaningful. All that has happened is that we have convinced ourselves with our childhood conditioning or our unconscious tendency: since we know and believe *it*, it must be real and true. The reality is that there is only sunrise, sunset, sunshine, but no sun that is fixed eternally. Whatever exists only does so in change; to exist is to change. This is **nonsself**. [2]

We see the beauty of newness and youth, but over time, we notice the clay feet of youth and beauty. This body decays, is diseased and dies; it becomes so foul that we have to return it to the elements, to earth, to fire, to the skies, or to the depths. We are but **foulness** waiting our turn. [3]

¹⁸ See SD 62.10d (2.4.4).

¹⁹ There are 2 types of *nibbidā* passages, the shorter and the longer. On the shorter, SD 20.1 esp (2.2.2); on the longer, **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,29), SD 3.13. Here, the longer *nibbidā* passage is meant.

²⁰ **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,2.1-2.14) + SD 49.8b (1.0.4.4 + 1.0.4.5).

²¹ Eg *etam hi upāli attha,saṁhitam etam dhamma,saṁhitam etam ādi,brahma,cariyakam etam nibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṁvattati*.

1.3.2.2 In the **Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38), the bodhisattva, despite living a life of wealth and splendour, notices that:

- by nature, we all *age*, thus all his intoxication with youth vanished; *yobbana mada*;
 - by nature, we all *suffer disease*, thus all his intoxication with health vanished; *ārogya mada*;
 - by nature, we all *die*, thus all his intoxication with life vanished. *jīvita mada*.
- (A 3.38/1:145 f), SD 63.7

Perceiving this danger (*ādīnava*) in youth, health and life, the bodhisattva felt **revulsion** (*nibbidā*) [4] towards them: he feels “distressed, ashamed, disgusted” being reminded of the frailty of youth, health and life.²² He is like a burnt child who dreads the fire, or a person, knowing a dangerous path, avoids it for a safe one.

This is called **the perception of abandoning** (*pahāna saññā*): one abandons thoughts rooted in greed, hatred or delusion. One knows that greed is a fire that burns body and mind; hatred is a fire that destroys self and others; delusion is a fire that blinds one. One thus wisely lets thoughts of greed, hatred and delusion fade away [5].

1.3.2.3 With the fading away of the 3 unwholesome roots, we learn **the perception of cessation** (*nirodha saññā*) [6], what it means to overcome suffering. When we fully understand this and fully master the 4 noble truths, we attain inner peace [7], direct knowledge [8], awakening [9] and nirvana, that is arhathood [10].

Or, we can interpret [6] “cessation (of suffering)” as the stage of streamwinning. This means that the 6 perceptions lead to (at least) streamwinning. The sevenfold *nibbidā* cycle describe the path to arhathood.

We may interpret the last 4 stages of spiritual transformation in terms of path-attainment:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| [10] “nirvana” | refers to the attainment of arhathood; |
| [9] “awakening” | refers to the attainment of nonreturning; |
| [8] “direct knowledge” | refers to the attainment of once-returning; and |
| [7] “inner peace” | refers to the attainment of streamwinning. |

Or, all the following stages [6-9], as those of the learner (*sekha*), and the last [10] to arhathood.

The idea is to sit on the Dharma-raft and paddle across the waters of samsara to reach the far shore; then we leave the raft behind.

— — —

²² A 3.38/1:145 f (SD 63.7). “Would feel pained, ashamed, disgusted,” *aṭṭiyeyyam harāyeyyam jeguccheyyam*. For fuller analyses of these terms, see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,5/1:213), SD 1.7 n sv; SD 5.16 (19.4.2); SD 50.9 (2.2.1).

(Chakka) Dhātu Sutta

The (Sixes) Discourse on Elements

A 6.111

1 (Originating in Sāvatthi.)

(sāvatthī, nidanaṃ)

2 There are, bhikshus, these 3 states.

tayo’me bhikkhave dhammā

What are the three?

katame tayo

(4) **Sensual element**;

kāma, dhātu

(5) **element of ill will**;

vyāpāda, dhātu

(6) **element of violence**.

vihiṃsā, dhātu

These, bhikshus, are the 3 states.

ime kho bhikkhave tayo dhammā

3 These are the 3 states, bhikshus, to be abandoned.

imesaṃ kho bhikkhave tiṇṇaṃ

dhammānaṃ pahānāya

4 Three (other) states are to be cultivated.

tayo dhammā bhāvetabbā

What are the three?

katame tayo

(1) For the abandoning of the sensual element,
an element of **renunciation** should be cultivated.

kāma, dhātuyā pahānāya

(2) For the abandoning of the element of ill will,
an element of **non-ill will** should be cultivated.

nekkhamma, dhātu bhāvetabbo

(3) For the abandoning of the element of violence,
an element of **non-violence** should be cultivated.

vyāpāda, dhātuyā pahānāya

avyāpāda, dhātu bhāvetabbo

vihiṃsā, dhātuyā pahānāya

avihiṃsā, dhātu bhāvetabbo

5 These, bhikshus, are the 3 states to be abandoned.

imesaṃ kho bhikkhave tiṇṇaṃ

dhammānaṃ pahānāya

These are the 3 states to be cultivated.

ime tayo dhammā bhāvetabbā ti.

—evaṃ—

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