

(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Sutta 3

The Third Discourse on Recluses and Brahmins (On the Elements)

[The elements and the four noble truths]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 14.39/2:176 f)

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1 Related discourses

The (Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Sutta 3 (S 14.39) is the third of three identically named discourses which close the Dhātu Saṃyutta (S 14).¹ While the first two **Dhātu Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa Suttas** (S 14.37-38) are based on the “gratification” (*assāda*) formula, the third discourse deals the elements based on the four noble truths, that is, the practitioner

- (1) should know what the element really is;
- (2) how we reify or experience the “arising” of the element through craving;
- (3) how we remove the craving by not owning the element; and
- (4) practising the whole process properly.

According to **the Visuddhi,magga**,² the four primary elements are briefly explained in **the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22),³ but at length in

the Mahā Hatthi,padōpama Sutta	(M 28), ⁴
the Mahā Rāhul’ovada Sutta	(M 62.8-17/1:421-426) and
the Dhātu,vibhaṅga Sutta	(M 140.13-18/3:240-242).

“Understanding” the elements means knowing them as follows:

- (1) *the internal element*: identifying those parts of our body that exemplify the element;
- (2) *the external element*: the element that occurs naturally outside our body;
- (3) noting both in the internal and external forms of the element as being the same thing; and
- (4) not owning the element in any way.

Let us now briefly examine how we can practise this analysis of the elements, which is a summary of the practice described in **the Mahā Hatthi,pad’ōpama Sutta** (M 28).⁵

2 The earth element

2.1 KNOWING THE EARTH ELEMENT. The internal earth element is defined in **the Mahā Hatthi,-padōpama Sutta** as follows:

... whatever that is solid, solidified and clung to⁶ internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely, *head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin,*⁷ *flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidney;*

¹ For further details, see **(Dhātu) Samaṇa,brāhmaṇa S** (S 14.37) = SD 29.12 Intro(1).

² Vism 348.

³ D 22.6/2:293.

⁴ M 28.6-27/1:185-191 = SD 6.16, esp Intro (3).

⁵ M 28.6-27/1:185-191 = SD 6.16.

⁶ “Clung to,” *upādiṇṇa*. In the Abhidhamma, this is a technical term applicable to bodily phenomena that are produced by karma. Both the **Mahā Rāhulovāda S** (M 62) and **Mahā Hatthipadōpama S** (M 28) use *upādiṇṇa* in the general sense as applicable to the entire body insofar as it is grasped as “mine” and misapprehended as a self.

⁷ The meditation on these five parts “with skin as the fifth” or “skin pentad” (*taca,pancaka kamma-t,ṭhāna*) (Vism 8.50/242) forms the basic spiritual practice first taught to novices on their initiation.

heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs; mesentery, bowels, stomach contents, dung, or whatever else that is solid, solidified and clung to, internally and individually [belonging to oneself] —this is called internal earth element. (M 28.6a/1:185) = SD 6.16

2.2 THE ARISING OF THE EARTH ELEMENT. The solid parts of our body are the physical senses: the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body. These organs are sensitive to pleasure and pain, and craving arises when we indulge in trying to accumulate such pleasures, and pushing away such pains. We may find dissatisfaction with any or all of these sense-organs, or others could find fault with them. But they are all *impermanent*.

2.3 REMOVING CRAVING FOR THE EARTH ELEMENT.

2.3.1 Disowning the earth. *The external earth element* is the solid and resistant states we notice around us, or what is commonly known as material or physical things. Both the internal earth element and the external earth element are the same earth element. We are not to own it, but regard it as: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’⁸

2.3.2 Earth-like meditation. The earth element, being solid and resistant, as such, supports other things. We step on it and dig it; animals wander over it, sleep on it, and void and pee all over it. Trees grow on it. But the earth is in no way affected by it: we, too, should be strong with lovingkindness like the earth, even when we are hurt by others or when things do not seem to work our way.⁹

2.4 THE FULL PRACTICE. When we are ready, we should then go on to one of the inspiring meditations, such as the six recollections, recollecting on one of the Three Jewels, on charity, on moral virtue, or on the devas.¹⁰ Reflecting thus, if we are not yet spiritually equanimous (our minds are not yet wholesomely calm), then we should arouse religious urgency (*samvega*) in our hearts, that is, what disadvantages we would face if we do not succeed in our practice. This would motivate us on with spiritual energy. Then, when the mind is happy, we go on to breath meditation, and similar meditations.

3 The water element

3.1 KNOWING THE WATER ELEMENT. The internal water element is defined in the **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** as follows:

...whatever that is liquid, liquefied and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely, *bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat; fat, tears, tallow, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine, or whatever else that is liquid, liquefied and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]*—this is called internal water element. (M 28.11a/1:187) = SD 6.16

3.2 THE ARISING OF THE WATER ELEMENT. Liquid make up from about half to three-quarters of our body: blood, lymph, urine, sweat, snot, phlegm, tears, and so on. Various fluids and impurities ooze through our skin, and the nine openings (the 2 eyes, the 2 ears, the 2 nostrils, the mouth, the urethra, the rectum).¹¹ Our body is also held together by its liquidity; when our skin is dry, for example, it cracks. The liquid that pervades our body, too, is *impermanent*.

3.3 REMOVING CRAVING FOR THE WATER ELEMENT.

⁸ *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na mēso attā ti.* This threefold formula is the contrary of “the 3 grasplings” (*ti, vidha gāha*), that is, of craving (*tanhā*), of conceit (*māna*), of view (*diṭṭhi*) (MA 2:111, 225). A brief version of this is given below: “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ [wrong view] or ‘mine’ [craving] or ‘I am’ [conceit]” [7]: also at §§11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22 below. These three grasplings are syn with the three kinds of **mental proliferation** (*papañca*) of craving (*tanhā*), of conceit (*māna*) and of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f). In **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.12-16/3:68), the formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Pāṇāyā S** (S 22.81/ 3:94-99) to the 4 primary elements: see SD 6.16 Intro (5).

⁹ See **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 28), where Rāhula is taught the meditation of the 4 “element-like” meditations (M 28.13-17/1:424 f = SD 3.11.13-17).

¹⁰ See **Mental Cultivation** = SD 15.

¹¹ See **Gaṇḍa S** (S 9.15/4:386 f) = SD 29.15. The 9 openings are listed at SnA 248; see Sn 196-198.

3.3.1 Disowning the water element. *The external earth element* form about 71% of the world. The world's waters are ever moving in water cycles. And yet one day even the oceans of the world would dry up when the universe ends.¹²

Both the internal water element and the external water element are the same water element. We are not to own it, but regard it as: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'

3.3.2 Water-like meditation. Water quenches our thirst, washes us clean, we wash away all sort of dirt with water, we travel on it, we make use of water in many ways. But water is in no way affected by it: we, too, should be moved with compassion and flow like water to help others who are suffering or less fortunate.

3.4 THE FULL PRACTICE. When we are ready, we should then go on to one of the inspiring meditations, such as the six recollections, recollecting on one of the Three Jewels, on charity, on moral virtue, or on the devas. Reflecting thus, if we are not yet spiritually equanimous (our minds are not yet wholesomely calm), then we should arouse religious urgency (*samvega*) in our hearts, that is, what disadvantages we would face if we do not succeed in our practice. This would motivate us on with spiritual energy. Then, when the mind is happy, we go on to breath meditation, and similar meditations.

4 The fire element

4.1 KNOWING THE FIRE ELEMENT. The internal fire element is defined in **the Mahā Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** as follows:

... whatever that is fire, fiery, and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely, *that by which one is warmed, ages, and burns*¹³, *and that by which what is eaten, drunk, chewed and tasted*¹⁴ gets completely digested, or whatever else that is fire, fiery, and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this is called internal fire element.

(M 28.16a/1:188) = SD 6.16

4.2 THE ARISING OF THE FIRE ELEMENT. Fire or heat includes oxidation, our taking in and burning oxygen in our breathing process. Fire is here another word for the decay that sets in as soon as we are born, and to which we give different names: infancy, childhood, adulthood, maturity, old age, and senility. They are all aspects of the same process of decay, ending in death. Fire itself is changing and *impermanent* all the time.

4.3 REMOVING CRAVING FOR THE FIRE ELEMENT.

4.3.1 Disowning the fire element. *The external fire element* is the same fire element that warms and works our bodies. There are times when the external fire burns large areas of land, destroying almost everything in its way. And yet one day, even this fire will be quenched when the universe closes in.¹⁵

Both the internal fire element and the external fire element are the same fire element. We are not to own it, but regard it as: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'

4.3.2 Fire-like meditation. Fire warms, cooks our food, gives us light, and keeps us safe. We even burn our rubbish in fire. But fire is in no way affected by it: we, too, should be strong with altruistic joy warming others like fire when we see the success and happiness of others.

4.4 THE FULL PRACTICE. When we are ready, we should then go on to one of the inspiring meditations, such as the six recollections, recollecting on one of the Three Jewels, on charity, on moral virtue, or on the devas. Reflecting thus, if we are not yet spiritually equanimous (our minds are not yet wholesome-

¹² **Suriya S** (A 7.62) says that waters of the great ocean falls to only ankle deep when the "fifth sun" appears (A 7.62/4101 f).

¹³ Apparently, these preceding three terms—*santappati*, *jiriyati*, *pariḍayhati*—refer to the body metabolism. In fact, the whole section refers to the body metabolism.

¹⁴ *asita*, *pīta*, *khāyita*, *sāyitā*. These are the four modes of consuming food, namely: to *eat* food; *drink* liquids; *chew* solid food, a toothstick, betel-nut, chewing gum; *taste* (or lick) sweets, ice-cream.

¹⁵ **Suriya S** (A 7.62) says that waters of the great ocean falls to only ankle deep when the "fifth sun" appears (A 7.62/4101 f).

ly calm), then we should arouse religious urgency (*saṃvega*) in our hearts, that is, what disadvantages we would face if we do not succeed in our practice. This would motivate us on with spiritual energy. Then, when the mind is happy, we go on to breath meditation, and similar meditations.

5 The wind element

5.1 KNOWING THE WIND ELEMENT. The internal wind element is defined in **the Mahā Hatthi, padô-pama Sutta** as follows:

...whatever that is wind, wind-like [airy] and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely, *up-going winds [burping], down-going winds, winds in the belly [flatulence], winds that course through the limbs,*¹⁶ *in-breath and out-breath*, or whatever else that is wind, wind-like [airy] and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this is called internal wind element. (M 28.21a/1:188) = SD 6.16

5.2 THE ARISING OF THE WIND ELEMENT. Wind is motion, that is, whatever moves within our body, including peristalsis (swallowing, burping, flatus, bowel movement). Wind, above all, is our breath; it sustains life. Our breath is the link to the present moment, as it helps us top me mindfulness. But even the breath is impermanent; wind itself is moving air; even wind is *impermanent*.

5.3 REMOVING CRAVING FOR THE WIND ELEMENT.

5.3.1 Disowning the wind element. *The external wind element* is the same wind element that we breath in and out, that gives us life and energize our blood and bodies. But when the universe has collapsed, there will be no more wind.

Both the internal wind element and the external wind element are the same wind element. We are not to own it, but regard it as: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

5.3.2 Wind-like meditation. Wind clears the skies and air to brighten our lives, and give us breath. Wind cools us and keeps the climate right and constant. The wind cools and blows on all alike, whether they deserve it or not. May we, too, be wisely equanimous like the wind no matter what happens to us, to others or to the world. For we all fare according to our karma.¹⁷

5.4 THE FULL PRACTICE. When we are ready, we should then go on to one of the inspiring meditations, such as the six recollections, recollecting on one of the Three Jewels, on charity, on moral virtue, or on the devas. Reflecting thus, if we are not yet spiritually equanimous (our minds are not yet wholesomely calm), then we should arouse religious urgency (*saṃvega*) in our hearts, that is, what disadvantages we would face if we do not succeed in our practice. This would motivate us on with spiritual energy. Then, when the mind is happy, we go on to breath meditation, and similar meditations.

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¹⁶ “Winds that course through the limbs,” *aṅga-m-aṅgānusārino vātā*. In reference to this, Peter Harvey says, “Note that the ‘motion/wind’ element might be related to the modern concept of electrical discharges of the nerves... In that case, the mind would move the body by effecting the electrical modulation of nerve discharges.” (1993:7 digital ed).

¹⁷ **Cūḷa Kamma, vibhaṅga S** (M 135.4/3:203) = SD 4.15; **Āghāta Paṭivīnaya S 1** (A 5.161/3:185 f) = SD 12.23. See further Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995: 66-68.

The Third Discourse to Recluses and Brahmins (On the Elements)

(S 14.39/2:176 f)

1 (The Blessed One was) residing at Sāvattḥī.

Those who do not understand the elements

2 “Bhikshus, those recluses and brahmins
who do not understand the earth element,
who do not understand *the arising* of the earth element,
who do not understand *the ending* of the earth element,
who do not understand *the way to the ending* of the earth element—

I do not regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones do not, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and
dwell, here and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood. [177]

3 Those recluses and brahmins
who do not understand the water element,
who do not understand *the arising* of the water element,
who do not understand *the ending* of the water element,
who do not understand *the way to the ending* of the water element—

I do not regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones do not, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and
dwell, here and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

4 Those recluses and brahmins
who do not understand the fire element,
who do not understand *the arising* of the fire element,
who do not understand *the ending* of the fire element,
who do not understand *the way to the ending* of the fire element—

I do not regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones do not, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and
dwell, here and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

5 Those recluses and brahmins
who do not understand the wind element,
who do not understand *the arising* of the wind element,
who do not understand *the ending* of the wind element,
who do not understand *the way to the ending* of the wind element—

I do not regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones do not, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and
dwell, here and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

Those who understand the elements

6 But, bhikshus, those recluses and brahmins
who understand the earth element,
who understand *the arising* of the earth element,
who understand *the ending* of the earth element,
who understand *the way to the ending* of the earth element—

I regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
and these venerable ones, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and dwell, here
and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

- 7 Those recluses and brahmins
 who understand the water element,
 who understand *the arising* of the water element,
 who understand *the ending* of the water element,
 who understand *the way to the ending* of the water element—

I regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
 and these venerable ones, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and dwell, here
 and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

- 8 Those recluses and brahmins
 who understand the fire element,
 who understand *the arising* of the fire element,
 who understand *the ending* of the fire element,
 who understand *the way to the ending* of the fire element—

I regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
 and these venerable ones, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and dwell, here
 and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

- 9 Those recluses and brahmins
 who understand the wind element,
 who understand *the arising* of the wind element,
 who understand *the ending* of the wind element,
 who understand *the way to the ending* of the wind element—

I regard them as recluses amongst recluses or brahmins amongst brahmins,
 and these venerable ones do not, by realizing it for themselves with direct knowledge, attain and
 dwell, here and now, in the goal of recluseship or the goal of brahminhood.

— evaṃ —

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