

Dhātu,nānatta Sutta

The Discourse on the Diversity of the Elements

[The components of our being]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 14.1/2:140)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

Introduction

1 COMMENTARIAL TERMS. According to the Saṃyutta 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:

<u>Sutta term</u>	<u>Commentarial explanation</u>	
eye element	eye sensitivity	(<i>cakkhu,pasāda</i>)
form element	form object	(<i>rūp'ārammaṇa</i>)
eye-consciousness element	mind based on eye-sensitivity	(<i>cakkhu,pasāda vatthuka citta</i>)
ear element	ear sensitivity	(<i>sota,pasāda</i>)
sound element	sound object	(<i>sadd'ārammaṇa</i>)
ear-consciousness element	mind based on ear-sensitivity	(<i>sota,pasāda vatthuka citta</i>)
nose element	nose sensitivity	(<i>ghana,pasāda</i>)
smell element	smell object	(<i>ghan'ārammaṇa</i>)
nose-consciousness element	mind based on nose-sensitivity	(<i>ghana,pasāda vatthuka citta</i>)
tongue element	tongue sensitivity	(<i>jivhā,pasāda</i>)
taste element	taste object	(<i>ras'ārammaṇa</i>)
tongue-consciousness element	mind based on tongue-sensitivity	(<i>sota,pasāda vatthuka citta</i>)
body element	body sensitivity	(<i>kāya,pasāda</i>)
touch element	touch object	(<i>phoṭṭhabb'ārammaṇa</i>)
body-consciousness element	mind based on body-sensitivity	(<i>kāya,pasāda vatthuka citta</i>)
mind element	the threefold mind element ²	
mind-object element	feeling, perception, formations; subtle form; nirvana	
ear-consciousness element	all mind-consciousness	(Vbh 87)

2 DEFINITION OF THE ELEMENTS.

2.1 Commentarial explanations. There is apparently no precise definition of the elements in the Nikāyas, so that we have to tease out their senses from passages that mention them. The oldest definition of the elements we have is perhaps the **Vibhaṅga** definition of the 18 elements (Vbh 87-90) [§4]. Even then, this explanation is given only in the Abhidhamma analysis (*abhidhamma bhājanīya*), not the Sutta

¹ *Nissattaṭṭha, suññaṭṭh,saṅkhatena sabhāvaṭṭhena dhātū ti laddha,nāmānaṃ dhammānaṃ nānā,sabhāvo dhātu,nānattaṃ.*

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

analysis of the Vibhaṅga, “which implies that the compilers of [the Vibhaṅga] considered the eighteen elements a proper Abhidhamma category rather than one pertaining to the suttas” (S:B 788 n224).³

The “sensitivities” (*pasāda*), an Abhidhamma term, refer to material phenomena, located in the “gross” or internal senses, that is, our sense-organs, that are receptive to specific types of sense-objects.⁴ As noted by **Bodhi**, in his Sāmyutta translation,

Both [the Vibhaṅga Commentary and the Visuddhi,magga] frame their explanations on the basis of the Abhidhamma theory of the cognitive process, which, though articulated as such only in the commentaries, already seems to underlie the classification of cittas in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. This scheme, however, is clearly later than the Nikāyas, and [the Sāmyutta Commentary’s] attempts to reconcile the two standpoints sometimes seems [sic] contrived. (S:B 788 f)⁵

2.2 The mind-object element (*dhamma, dhātu*), it is important to note, is not necessarily the object of mind-consciousness element, as we might construe from the other senses. Together with the object of mind-consciousness, it includes all feeling, perception, and formations that accompany consciousness in the cognitive process. As such, it is both a subjective as well as objective state.⁶

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.

Sutta teachings are like the tools, media and colours of an artists, 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.

— — —

³ For a commentarial discussion, see Vism 15.17-43/484-490 & VbhA 76-82.

⁴ On the specificity of each sense-faculty, see **Uṇṇābha 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.

⁶ See Bodhi (ed), *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, 1999: Table 7.4.

The Discourse on the Diversity of the Elements (S 14.1/2:140)

- 1 (The Blessed One was) residing at Sāvathī.
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	<i>Cakkhu,dhātu</i> <i>Sota,dhātu</i> <i>Ghāna,dhātu</i> <i>Jvā,dhātu</i> <i>Kāya,dhātu</i> <i>Mano,dhātu</i>	<i>rūpa,dhātu</i> <i>sadda,dhātu</i> <i>gandha,dhātu</i> <i>rasa,dhātu</i> <i>phoṭṭhabba,dhātu</i> <i>dhamma,dhātu</i>	<i>cakkhu,viññāṇa,dhātu.</i> <i>sota,viññāṇa,dhātu.</i> <i>ghāna,viññāṇa,dhātu.</i> <i>jivhā,viññāṇa,dhātu.</i> <i>kāya,viññāṇa,dhātu.</i> <i>mano,viññāṇa,dhātu.</i>
	The eye element, The ear element, The nose element, The tongue element, The body element, The mind element,	the form element, the sound element, the smell element, the taste element, the touch element, the mind-object element,	the eye-consciousness element. the ear-consciousness element. the nose-consciousness element. the tongue-consciousness element. the body-consciousness element. the mind-consciousness element.

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

— evaṃ —

090730; 090731