

Acquisitions

From the Commentary on **(Vaṅgīsa) Aratī Sutta** (S 8.2), SD 53.7.

Upadhi is probably only second in its comprehensiveness of senses as *dhamma*, which has the broadest senses in early Buddhism. In simple terms, *upadhi* should be understood in two ways:

- (1) objectively, *upadhi* refers to all that we have and all that we are—our *being* and *having*;
- (2) subjectively, *upadhi* refers to the *mind*, the intention, conceptions, perceptions and feelings connected to our having and being, that is, a mind rooted in ignorance and craving.

Upadhi is often confused with *upādi*, both of which share the sense of “birth-bases,” the fuel of rebirth and redeath. There is a subtle but significant difference. *Upadhi* is the diachronic (“daily, this moment”) collecting, acquisition; *upādi* is the synchronic (“over time”) expending—the insatiable shopping around for more acquisitions—that keeps going life after life.¹

Upadhi is the “kinetic karmic energy”—those activities and their fruits in our daily activities spurred on by greed, hate and delusion—to *be* this and that, to *have* this and that: to acquire things; hence, they are called **acquisition**, the action of accumulating being and having. These acquisitions keep us mindlessly “going” moment-to-moment, day after day in this life, rolling the Sisyphus rock up the hill and running after it downhill, again and again. It is the “being” (activities) and the “having” (their fruits) of our existential burden here and now.²

Upādi is the “potential karmic energy”—that existential battery that keeps us going, whether we like it or not (we usually think we like it). Hence, *upādi* is often taken to refer to the 5 aggregates—where it functions as the “clinging,” as *upādāna-k, khandha*, “the aggregates of clinging,” which keeps us in the samsaric cycle.³

The seen, heard, sensed and thought

Upadhi acquires its burden of being and having [2.3.1.2] through “**what is seen, heard, sensed and thought**” [S 714b]. This is the sum of all our experiences—the “all” of our lives, as famously declared by the Buddha in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23).⁴ The “*seen, heard, sensed and thought*” are all that we can know. We can only *know* what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think (“sensed” includes “smell, taste, touch”).⁵

¹ But first see their synchronic and diachronic functions: SD 53.5 (4.2.3.2).

² On “being and having,” see **Loṇa,phala Sutta** (A 3.99), [SD 3.5](#); **Esukāri Sutta** (M 96/2:177-184), [SD 37.9](#); **Kuṭa,-danta Sutta** (D 5), [SD 22.8](#).

³ Further see [SD 28.11 \(3.2\)](#).

⁴ S 35.23 ([SD 7.1](#)).

⁵ See **Diṭṭha muta suta viññāta**, SD 53.5.

In translating *mute* as “(the) touched” [S 714b], I follow Buddhaghosa rather than Dhammapāla.⁶ Line a of **S 714** says that “People are bound to their acquisitions,” which most likely refers to material possessions in terms of the 5 senses. Moreover, the psychological acquisitions are dealt with in the following verse [**S 715a**] s “the 60.” [2.4.1].

These acquisitions are all “empty” passing things and states. They are empty in the sense that none of these acquisitions—these “things”—have any essence or lasting reality. They only make sense in their movement, arising, changing and passing away. When we fail to see this—and think of them as being more than this—they become a burden, “acquisitions” to us.

The Buddha, through his awakening, has unraveled the mystery of suffering, and how to rise above that suffering. In essence, the only way to unburden oneself of all acquisitions is to practise **the Bāhiya teaching**,⁷ which essentially runs thus:

In the seen	there will only be the seen;	<i>diṭṭhe</i>	<i>diṭṭha,mattarṃ bhavissati;</i>
in the heard	there will only be the heard;	<i>sute</i>	<i>suta,mattarṃ bhavissati;</i>
in the sensed	there will only be the sensed;	<i>mute</i>	<i>muta,mattarṃ bhavissati;</i>
in the known	there will only be the known.	<i>viññāte</i>	<i>viññāta,mattarṃ bhavissati.</i>

(U 1.10,16), SD 33.7⁸

One who has no desire is unshaken

Where there is no thought, there is no lack, where there is no want, there is no desire. Living the moment means we feel every event as it arises, changes and fades away. It is a direct experience; nothing to know, but all to feel—without a thought as it were, just as it is.

It is our knowledge, our desire, that projects its will onto the moment, so that we only see what it wills, and miss the moment. We exist in the knowing, but we never live in the feeling. Without this true taste of life, we know no freedom. We are but the creature of the Creator, our thoughts.

Clearly, we cannot live with knowledge alone. We do and must *think* about our experiences, even *think* before we act, as the saying goes. But here, knowledge is the servant of **wisdom**. Knowledge comes from the dead past or seems to be the future that never comes; it is someone else’s experience. Wisdom is our looking and seeing into this very moment of reality and seeing the truth and beauty of what is really before us.

⁶ Buddhaghosa says that *paṭigha*, “the sensed” comprises smell and taste, while *muta* is touch (tactile objects) (SA 1:270,10 f). Dhammapāla reverses the list: *paṭigha* is touch, and *muta* is smell and taste (ThaA 3:190,14-20).

⁷ See **(Arahatta) Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10/8), [SD 33.7](#).

⁸ This teaching is also given to Māluṅkya,putta, where here, **(Arahatta) Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (S 35.95,12/4:73) + [SD 5.9 \(3\)](#). Having heard this teaching, it is said that Bāhiya becomes an arhat, while Māluṅkya,putta attains arhat-hood during his ensuing solitary retreat. On the Bāhiya teaching, see **(Arahatta) Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10,15-17) + [SD 33.7 \(1\)](#).

We see the pattern of change with such familiarity that we are no more fooled by change, seeking eternity in a grain of sand. We just let the sands of time flow and smile knowingly and joyfully at it. We are joyful because we are free, “**rid of desire, unshaken**” by change and what we make of change. Desire dictates, wisdom liberates.

A sage who clings to nothing here

The sage is truly wise, unburdened by knowledge, living the moment, like the breath he takes in and then frees it back to whence it comes. There is nothing here—in the **all** there is, was or will be. All that is now *was*; all that will be now *is*—it’s the way we know and think. There’s nothing to cling to, but all to give away in joy and peace.

This is the antidote to the burden of seizing the moment, of making the day—by letting go of the moment, letting go the day. The poet frees his heart by unburdening his feeling to be the words of his poem. The artist creates beauty by leaving the colours from his brush or finger on the canvas. The musician breathes music by freeing his heart to be his instrument. The dancer moves his body without a thought beyond time and space. The meditator takes in a breath and joyfully returns it to whence it comes.

Beauty comes from letting go: that’s the truth. Now we know why early Buddhism is indeed **truth and beauty**.

R553 Revisioning Buddhism 209

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2018