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Rūpa (Form)

A study of the 1st aggregate as the 4 elements
by Piya Tan ©2005

1 Einstein and matter

1.1 A MODERN MIND ON BUDDHISM

1.1.1 Albert Einstein (1879-1955), one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century, was attributed with some salient remarks on Buddhism being “a cosmic religious feeling ... which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man’s image” (K Wilber 1985:102). Buddhist enthusiasts often quoted (and misquoted) Einstein *ad nauseum* as a champion of Buddhism, especially where he is said to have remarked that:

The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. (Einstein, *Los Angeles Times*, 1954)¹

1.1.2 The year 2005 is the centenary of Einstein’s publication of his famous “special theory of relativity”²—that mass and energy are no longer conserved but can be inter-converted—scientifically summarized in his formula, $E = mc^2$ (energy is the product of mass and the speed of light squared).³ In very simple terms, Einstein is saying that mass (physical matter) and energy are interchangeable and convertible. In other words, mass and energy are not distinct. Just as solid ice can melt into water, mass is a frozen or solidified form of energy that can be converted into the more familiar energy of motion.⁴

1.2 FORM AND MATTER

1.2.1 Karunadasa opens his *Buddhist Analysis of Matter* by mentioning that at least four definitions of matter (*rūpa*) can be distinguished in the Pali Canon, thus:

¹ See esp Donald S Lopez, Jr (*Buddhism & Science*, Chicago & London, 2008:220 n1), where he says that the attribution of these statements to Einstein is questionable. They do not appear, for example, in Thomas J McFarlane, ed, *Einstein and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings* (Berkeley, CA: Seastone, 2002). When either of these of two statements is cited, either no source is provided or the source is identified as Helen Dukas & Banesh Hoffman, eds, *Albert Einstein: The Human Side* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press, 1954), with no page number provided. In fact, the quotation does not appear in this volume, where the only mention of Buddhism or the Buddha is, “What humanity owes to personalities like Buddha, Moses, and Jesus ranks for me higher than all the achievements of the enquiring and constructive mind” (70; German orig 144).

² Actually, in 1905, Einstein published the special theory of relativity, the quantum theory of radiation, and a theory of Brownian movement that led directly to the final acceptance of the atomic structure of matter. For a digest of this important event, see the two papers by Brian Greene, 2005.

³ Using this discovery, sadly, US politicians used the explosive power of the atomic and hydrogen bombs derived from the conversion of mass to energy, and in 1945 destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the other hand, this same power, can be mentally cultivated by the accomplished meditator as “psychic powers” (*iddhi, vidhā*) and used in peaceful ways for the common good. The Canon is full of stories how the Buddha and his arhats use psychic manifestations to teach the nature of true reality to others. Even then, the highest miracle is still that of “instruction” or education. See **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11.8-11/1:214), SD 1.7

⁴ The amount of energy (E) produced by the conversion is given in the formula, $E = mc^2$ thus: multiply the amount of mass converted (m) by the speed of light squared (c^2). The speed of light is 299,792,458 metres per second (approx 3.00×10^8 mi per sec). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speed_of_light.

- (1) as form (*rūpa*);
- (2) as what is visible [*rūpâyatana*, “form-base”];
- (3) as a sentient realm (*rūpa, dhātu*, “form-element” or *rūpâvacara*, “form-sphere”); and
- (4) as dhyana or meditation absorption (*rūpa-j, jhāna*, “form dhyana”).

He adds that they “may be represented as the generic, specific, cosmological and the psychological meanings of the term” (1967:1).⁵

1.2.2 Here, we shall examine the first, *rūpa*, as “form,” that is, physical or material form.⁶ In the Pali Canon stock passages, *rūpa* is defined as the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind), [2] and *rūpa* as being derived or dependent upon (*upādāya*) them [10].⁷ Gethin’s observation is instructive:

Rūpa is typically defined as the four elements earth, water, fire and wind, and *rūpa* dependent upon (*upādāya*) them. What is clear, both from the *nikāyas*’ elaboration of this by reference to parts of the human body, and from the list of twenty-seven items of *rūpa* distinguished in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī is the extent to which the early Buddhist account of *rūpa* focuses on the physical world as experienced by a sentient being—the terms of reference are decidedly body-endowed-with-consciousness (*saviññāṇaka kāya*).⁸ In view of this, the tendency to understand and translate *rūpa* as “matter” is rather misleading.⁹ The connotations of the word “matter” in the Western philosophical tradition, its association with concepts such as inert “stuff” or “substance,” are hardly appropriate either to the treatment of *rūpa* in the *nikāyas* or early *abhidhamma*, or to *rūpa*’s literal meanings of “form,” “shape” or “appearance.” (Gethin 1986:36)

1.2.3 The term *rūpa* then, it should be noted, is rendered into English both as “form” and as “matter,” but the distinction between the two English terms should be noted. In other words, when the context is mental or psychological, “form” is used. When a purely physical aspect of an aggregate or the aggregates is meant, “matter” is used. It might be said that “form” is what *rūpa* does (function), while “matter” is what it is (structure). Form, for example, arises with all the other four aggregates, but it consists of matter, or, in Abhidhamma terms, of sub-atomic or sub-nuclear particles called *kalāpa*.¹⁰

1.2.4 The Khajjanīya Sutta (S 22.79)¹¹ gives an instructive definitive of form, thus:

*Kiñ ca bhikkhave rūpaṃ vadetha.
Ruppatī ti kho bhikkhave tasmā rūpaṃ ti vuccatī.
Kena ruppati?
Sītena pi ruppati uñhena pi ruppati jigacchāya pi ruppati pipāsāya pi ruppati ḍaṃsa,
makasa, vāta, tapa, sirīmsapa, samphassena pi ruppati.
Ruppatī ti kho bhikkhave tasmā rūpaṃ ti vuccatī.*

And what, bhikshus, do you call **form**?¹²

⁵ See also Boisvert 1995:31-34.

⁶ On the sequence of the aggregates, see (Dve) Khandha S (S 22.48/3:47 f), SD 17.1a (1.2).

⁷ On *upādāya*, see SD 52.4 (2.1)

⁸ Cf M 1:185-190; S 3:86; Dhs 134-146. Gethin’s fn.

⁹ “Taken for granted and left largely unquestioned in Y Karunadasa’s study, *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter*, Colombo, 1967.” (Gethin’s fn)

¹⁰ See SD 17.2d.

¹¹ S 22.79/3:86.

¹² *Kiñ ca bhikkhave rūpaṃ vadetha*. Comy says that although emptiness (*suññatā*) is discussed here, it is not fully defined because the characteristic of emptiness (*suññatā, lakkhaṇa*) has not been presented. It merely introduces the characteristic of emptiness. Using the parable of a cow, Comy says that the cow is like

It is transformed [molested], bhikshus, therefore it is called form.¹³

Transformed [molested] by what?

Transformed [molested] by cold, transformed by heat, transformed by hunger, transformed by thirst, transformed by the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and serpents.

It is transformed, bhikshus, therefore it is called form. (S 22.79,5/3:86), SD 17.9

From this definition, it clear that early Buddhism takes form not merely as dead matter, but as *senti-ence*, the capacity for experiencing sensations. Our body, in fact, referred to as a “conscious body” (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*), or, literally, “a body along with its consciousness.”¹⁴

1.2.5 Matter and the external world are not denied, but taken as having a conditioned and relative existence. The rule of thumb is that while “matter” refers to a purely physical state, “form” refers to both a physical and mental (or psychological) state, especially to how matter is known, felt and recognized.¹⁵ Light and colour are regarded as being physical; hence, we have the “form” world (*rūpa*), but it is not at all physical the way our sense-world is.¹⁶

1.2.6 Modern academics, including monastic scholars, sometimes read more into an early Buddhist term than what it really is. A good and important example of such a common error of commission is this statement from a well known modern monk scholar:

In this term “Aggregate of Matter” are included the traditional Four Great Elements ... , namely, solidity, fluidity, heat and motion, and also the Derivatives ... of the Four Great Elements. In the term “Derivatives of Four Great Elements” are included our five material sense-organs, ie, the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, and their corresponding objects of the external world, ie, visible form, sound, odour, taste, and tangible things, and also some thoughts or ideas or conceptions which are in the sphere of mind-objects Thus the whole realm of matter, both internal and external, is included in the Aggregate of Matter. (W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed, 1985:20 f; underscore added)

Such a serious misunderstanding, as modern scholars like **Sue Hamilton** often points out, needs to be urgently cleared because if we are to continue to take early Buddhism for what it really is, as “what the Buddha *really* taught,” that is, as

a tradition which has persisted in seeing them as an analysis of the individual into five aggregate parts, there being in their view no “self” as such, this definition, faithful though it is to the later Pali texts, is hard to follow.

emptiness, and the cow’s characteristics are like the characteristic of emptiness: we discern the cow by its characteristics; even so one will be able to discern emptiness by noticing its characteristics (SA 2:289 f). On form, see SD 17.2a.

¹³ *Ruppatī ti kho bhikkhave tasmā rupan ti vuccati*. Although the vb *ruppati* and the n *rūpa* look related, their roots are not related. **Ruppati** is a passive vb derived from √RUP = Skt LUP, to break, injure, spoil. SED: *rup* has *rupyate*, “to suffer violent or racking pain.” PED defines *ruppati* as “to be vexed, oppressed, hurt, molested,” & refs to S 3:86 & Sn 1121. Comy: *Ruppatī ti kuppati ghaṭṭiyati pīḷiyati, bhijjati ti attho* (It is transformed means it is disturbed, stricken, oppressed, broken) (SA 2:290). Comys give examples of how some existences (eg the cold hells, hot hells, intergalactic “black holes,” etc) “deform” those being there (SA 2:290 f; VbhA 3-5). SA adds that being “deformed” is the specific characteristic (*paccatta,lakkhaṇa*) of form, which distinguishes it from feeling and the other aggregates, but they share the general characteristics (*sāmañña,lakkhaṇa*), namely, impermanence, suffering and non-self (SA 2:292). See S:B 1070 n110 (where Bodhi also points out Woodward’s misunderstanding of comy).

¹⁴ *Sa,viññāṇaka kāya*, see SD 17.8a (12.3).

¹⁵ See E Sarachchandra 1994: 103 & Sue Hamilton 2000:158-165.

¹⁶ For a modern scholarly insight into a Buddhist view of mind and matter, see, eg, Cho 2014.

... And notwithstanding my previous suggestion ... that one should see the form-*khandha* as the living and functioning body rather than of mere matter, it is still difficult to accept the inclusion *here* of “some thoughts or ideas or conceptions.” It is difficult not only because thoughts, ideas and conceptions are so clearly described in the context of the way the other, non-form *khandhas* contribute to the cognitive process, but also because the ways in which the livingness of the body is indicated (breathing, temperature, decay, mobility, and so on) are not suggestive of thoughts, ideas and conceptions, or, indeed, of whatever is meant by a “sphere of mind objects.”

The author is attempting to explain the inclusion in the Buddhist texts of “mind” as one of the senses, an inclusion which is rendered even more conceptually troublesome than usual if one understands the form-*khandha* in the traditional material sense.¹⁷ More relevantly to us here, though, it is simply not compatible with the traditional Theravāda understanding of the *khandha* as the five parts of which human beings are comprised that the form-*khandha* should include, as part of secondary form, sense *objects* ...

(Hamilton 2000:159)

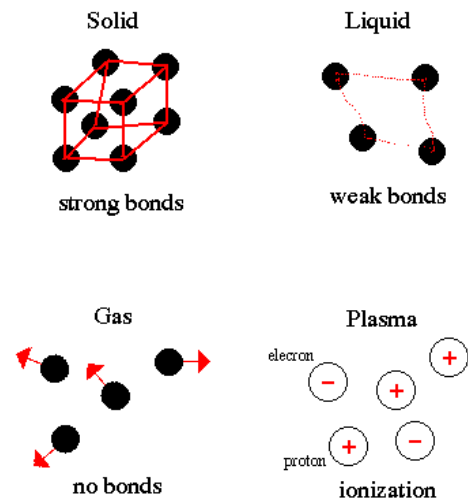


Table 3.1a The 4 states of matter

2 The 4 great elements

2.1 This scientific explanation is at once clear to one familiar with Abhidhamma or Buddhist scholastic psychology, especially in connection with the model of the 4 great (or primary) elements (*mahā, bhūta*). In **the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas** (D 22; M 10) they are only briefly defined,¹⁸ because (according to traditional Buddhists) that it is meant for meditators with quick intuition (*ugghaṭitaññū*),¹⁹ thus:

Furthermore, bhikshus, a monk reviews²⁰ this body, however it may be placed or disposed, in terms of the elements:²¹

¹⁷ Nowhere in the early texts is “mind” in this context equated with the brain, and, in spite of its materialistic understanding of the form-*khandha*, the Theravāda tradition as a whole has not interpreted mind to mean brain. As explained in Chapter Two [Hamilton 2000 esp p38], in the early texts “mind” seems to refer to the most preliminary stage of filtering and organizing of experiential data according to whether it is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched or non-sensory (that is, abstract). [Hamilton’s fn]

¹⁸ D 22,6/2:294 = M 10,12/1:57 f (SD 13). **Vism 348** says that the 4 primary elements are only briefly explained here, but at length in **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,6-27/1:185-191), SD 6.16, **Mahā Rāhul’ovada S** (M 62,8-17/1:421-426), SD 3.11, and **Dhātu, vibhaṅga S** (M 140,13-18/3:240-242), SD 4.17. The 4 elements are explained in some detail in **Mūla, pariyāya S** (M 1). On how the 4 primary elements cannot exist in themselves, see Boisvert 1995:36 f. Practical meditation instructions on the elements can be found in Vimm:ESK 1961:197-205, Vism 351, Pa Auk 1996:17; Fryba 1987:123. For the first 5 elements in later Buddhism, see Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, London, 1959:183 ff.

¹⁹ The texts speak of 4 kinds of person in terms of learning capability: (1) the one with quick intuition or the intuitive (*ugghaṭitaññū*); (2) the one who needs detailed discourse or the intellectual (*vipacitaññū*); (2) the one who needs guidance or the tractable (*neyya*); and (4) the one who merely knows the letter or rote-learner (*pada, parama*) (A 2:135; Pug 41; Nett 125).

²⁰ “Reviews,” *paccavekkhati*, see SD 13.1 (3.9c).

²¹ In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the 4 elements dissolve in the death-process thus: earth dissolves into water, water into fire, fire into air, air into space; the consciousness dissolves in 4 further stages (white flash,

“There are in this body

- (1) the earth-element, *paṭhavi*
- (2) the water-element, *āpo*
- (3) the fire-element, *tejo*
- (4) the wind-element.” *vāyo* (D 22,6; M 10.12)²²

2.2 These 4 elements—earth, water, fire, and wind—are the ancient Indian names for the 4 “great (or primary) elements” (*mahā, bhūta*), that is, qualities present in varying proportions in all matter, loosely paralleling the phases (or states) of matter [3]. Elsewhere—in **the Mahā Hatthi, padôpama**

Sutta (M 28),²³ **the Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62)²⁴ and **the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140)²⁵—the 4 elements are explained in greater detail.

2.3 These primary elements, “great elements” or “great essentials” (*mahā, bhūta*), are “elements” (*dhātu*) in the sense that they have their own characteristics (*attano sabhavaṃ dhārenti*).²⁶ None of these elements exist in themselves but are merely essential characteristics that manifest in various proportions, for example,

a rock:	mostly earth
(resistance, hardness, solidity);	
rain:	mostly water
(fluidity);	
fire:	heat
(maturation or decay); and	
atmosphere:	wind or air
(motion).	

Taken together, the 4 primary elements are founded on the earth, held together by the water element, maintained by the fire element, and spread about by the wind element.




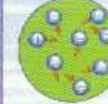
Solid	Liquid	Gas	Plasma
Example Ice H ₂ O	Example Water H ₂ O	Example Steam H ₂ O	Example Ionized Gas H ₂ → H ⁺ + H ⁺ + 2e ⁻
Cold T < 0°C	Warm 0 < T < 100°C	Hot T > 100°C	Hotter T > 100,000°C (> 10 electron Volts)
			
Molecules Fixed in Lattice	Molecules Free to Move	Molecules Free to Move, Large Spacing	Ions and Electrons Move Independently, Large Spacing

Table 3.1b

The 4 phases (states) of matter

<http://www.plasmas.org/rot-plasmas.htm>

3 The 4 states of matter in science

3.1 PHASES OF MATTER. According to contemporary science, most simple substances can exist in any of the three phases (or states) of matter—solid, liquid, and gas—within certain ranges of temperature [Table 3.1a]. Other states of matter, but less clearly definable, are plasma (sometimes called “the fourth state of matter”), colloids, and amorphous conditions, such as glass. Each state is generally distinguishable by its own properties, the most familiar example of which is *water*, whose

red flash, black flash, clear light). See Lati Rinbochay & Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism*, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1979:13-57; Terry Clifford, *Tibetan Buddhist Medicine and Psychiatry: The Diamond Healing*, York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984:108-114; Kalu Rinpoche, *Luminous Mind: The Way of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997:53-56; Margaret Coberly, *Sacred Passage: How to provide fearless, compassionate care for the dying*, Boston & London: Shambhala, 2002:79-98.

²² D 22,6/2:294; M 10,12/1:62 (SD 13.3).

²³ M 28,6-27/1185-191 (SD 6.16).

²⁴ M 62,8-17/1:421-426 (SD 3.11).

²⁵ M 140,13-18/3:240-242 (SD 4.17).

²⁶ See Vism 11.93, 109; Abhs:BRS 1999:234-246.

properties as ice, liquid, and vapour (gas) are dramatically different within the temperature and pressure ranges of everyday experience. [Table 3.1b]

A **solid** is almost rigid, and is subject to two kinds of stress: *tensile stress* tends to pull the body apart, while *shear stress* tends to press one part past another. On a microscopic level, the molecules of a crystalline solid are characteristically arranged in an orderly lattice. In the fluid states—the liquid and the gas—stress is proportional to the rate of strain, and a shearing stress turns parts of them into a viscous flow. Spatial order is less obvious than that of a solid.

Modern science still has not fully understood the nature of non-solid states. Distinction between a solid and the two fluid states (gas and liquid) is clear only for those substances whose molecules are composed of a small number of atoms. When the number exceeds about 20 atoms, the liquid may often cool below the true melting point to form *glass*, which has the mechanical properties of a solid but lacks crystalline order. If the numbers of atoms in the molecule exceeds about 100-200, then the classification into solids, liquids, and gases is no more useful.

A **liquid**, as such, is an intermediate phase or state between solid and gas, but it lacks both the strong spatial order of a solid, though it has the high density of solids, and lacks the order of a gas that results from the low density of gases (that is, gas molecules move more freely, and independent of each other's influence).

A **gas**, on the other hand, has greater spacing with its molecules moving even more freely. Gases may range from simple, whose particles are single atoms (monatomic), such as helium or neon, to complex polyatomic gases, such as hydrocarbons, produced in the petroleum industry.

The **plasma** state of matter, being unique like the solid, liquid and gas states, is sometimes defined as the fourth state of matter. It conducts electricity, and generally comprises of negatively charged electrons, positive charged ions (atoms of molecules that have lost one or more of their electrons), and atoms or molecules or both. Nearly all the matter in the universe exists in plasma state, mostly in the sun, stars and interstellar space. Auroras, lightning, and welding arcs are also plasma, and it is found in neon and fluorescent tubes, the crystal structure of solids, and in many other phenomena and objects.

3.2 PHASE DIAGRAMS. Each element or substance has its own phase diagram (which is a plot of all the equilibrium curves between any two phases on a pressure/temperature diagram). **Table 3.2** shows the scientific explanation of the phases of water. All the three phases of water (solid, liquid and vapour) are at an equilibrium at 0.0098°C and 4.58 “torr”²⁷ (point A, “the triple point”). At 0°C and 1 atm,²⁸ water freezes into ice (point B). At 100°C and 1 atm, water turns into steam (vapour) (point C). The liquid-gas equilibrium curve ends at a temperature and pressure where gases and liquids reach an indistinguishable “supercritical fluid state,” that is, at 374°C and 218 atm (point D, “the critical point”).²⁹

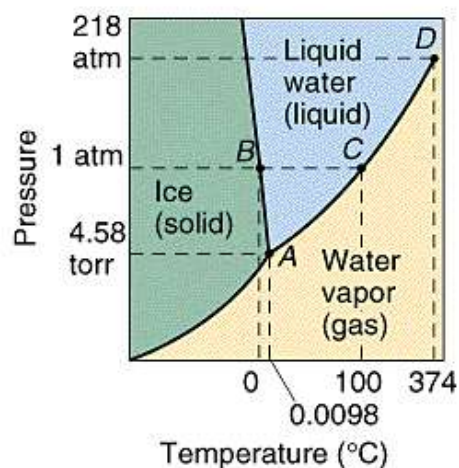


Table 3.2. The phases of water

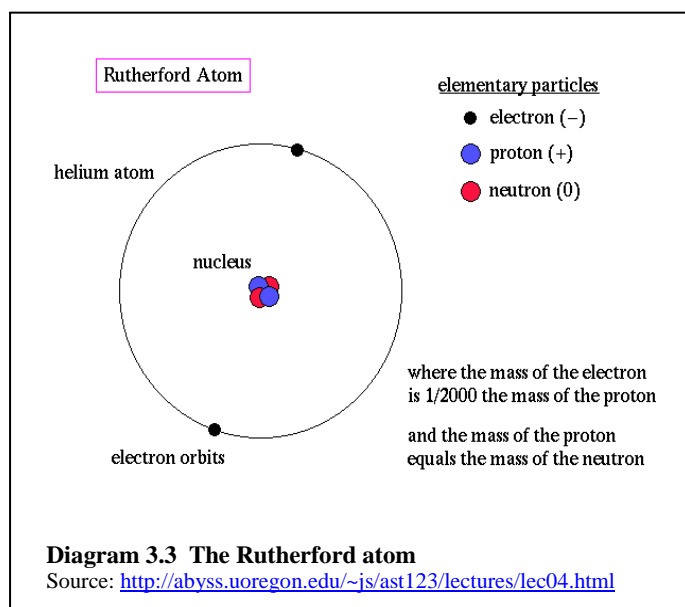
http://itl.chem.ufl.edu/2045_s00/lectures/lec_f.html

²⁷ A “torr” (after E Torricelli, died 1647) is a unit of pressure equal to $1/760$ of an atmosphere and very nearly equal to the pressure of a column of mercury 1 mm high at 0° C under standard gravity.

²⁸ An “atm” = “atmosphere,” is a unit of pressure equal to 101,325 newtons per sq m and very nearly equal to the pressure exerted by a vertical column of mercury 760 mm high at 0° C under standard gravity.

²⁹ See Ency Brit (15th ed) 14:206 (Phase Changes and Equilibria), and also http://itl.chem.ufl.edu/2045_s00/lectures/lec_f.html.

3.3 ELEMENTS OF THE ATOM. The **atom** is defined as the smallest unit of matter, or more specifically a chemical element, that retains its elemental identity. According to current knowledge, the nucleus is positively charged and accounts for 99.95 percent of the mass of the atom, but it occupies only about 10^{-15} of the volume. The electrons are scattered throughout the remaining space around the nucleus. An **atom** is, as such, mostly empty space (as such, so is all matter). An even more remarkable characteristic of atoms is that they all have about the same diameter, about 10^{-8} cm (called an ångstrom, abbreviated Å).



The atomic model described here is technically known as the Rutherford atom, there is the small and relatively heavy nucleus around which the electrons gyrate. This model can be compared to the solar system, with the nucleus corresponding to the sun and the electrons to the revolving planets, except that the solar system revolves on an almost flat plane, whereas the electrons in the atom orbit in all planes, creating a sphere of effectiveness. As such, the atom is almost all nucleus, whose mass is about 4000 times that of all the electrons together.

The nucleus consists of protons and neutrons, both called nucleons. The proton is positive charged, whereas the neutron has no charge, but both have almost equal masses. The electrons are positively charged. The nucleons cling together to form a nucleus because of a strong, attractive force known as a *nuclear force*, one nucleon exerts on another close to it. The individual nucleons spin on their own axes and orbit vaguely around a common nuclear centre. These orbits have various energies and are ordered in shells, arranged according to the laws of quantum physics.

3.4 SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY. From the Buddhist viewpoint, the atom, too, consists of the 4 elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.

Earth element	The massive nucleus and electrons.
Water element	The electrical charges, nuclear force, the orbital energy and the binding energy that hold the atom together.
Fire element	The atom's nuclear energy and atomic decay.
Wind element	The ceaseless motions of the atomic and subatomic particles.

These elements interact and combine in different way within the atoms and with other atoms and molecules to force various elements, compounds and substances that form the physical world. As all these are incessantly moving particles, nothing remains the same for even a moment even in the physical world.

It is imperative to understand here that we are not attempting some "scientific" explanation of Buddhism or to show the superiority of Buddhism over science (or vice versa). There are interesting parallels and scientific models that help us to understand the Buddha's explanation of matter in connection with mental development and spiritual liberation. However, the goals of science and of Buddhism are very different.³⁰ It is not the purpose of Buddha's Teaching to explain the world, at least not in the way that science does: Buddhism has only one purpose, that is, understanding the nature of suffering and ending it.

³⁰ See, eg, Ken Wilber (ed), *Quantum Questions*. Boston: Shambhala, 1985 esp pp5-8.

Understandably, the Abhidharma systems, in their effort to give a systematic presentation of the Buddha's teachings in terms of ideas, approach the preciseness and thoroughness of modern science. The Pali Abhidhamma and scholastic traditions, for example, have concepts of *paramāṇu* (the "atom")³¹ and *rūpa, kalāpa* ("material unit").³² Such Abhidhamma conceptions and teachings are clearly skillful means for the attaining of insight (*vipassanā*), that is, liberating knowledge. If such traditional Buddhist teachings are canonized as scientific treatises to be pitted against modern science, surely we would be "quarrelling with the world,"³³ when we should properly be counting our own cows.³⁴

3.5 A GRAMMAR OF SPIRITUALITY. While science is the unending quest for knowledge and perfection of technology, the spiritual quest is one of knowing less and less, of letting go; for, all knowledge are mental constructions. On the lowest level of our existence, we are constantly "**doing**" things with the body and with speech, pushed on by a fundamental ignorance of the true nature of life, seeking something permanent in the impermanent, seeking something pleasurable in the painful, seeking reality in the illusory. There is a great thirst for "collecting" things at this level: the quest for power, for pleasure and for physical comfort, but above all of putting oneself above all else. The training precepts are helpful in integrating and focussing one's energies here into a harmonious being with respect for self, others and the environment.

This harmonious life on the level of "doing" then forms the basis as well as structure for mental cultivation, whereby one becomes more aware of the true nature of one's lack. This is a *perceived* lack born of seeking happiness outside of oneself, of taking others as one's standard, of measuring others and accumulating things: the wrong view that numbers means happiness. On the level of "**having**," one sees that what one really lacks is true happiness, a self-fulfilling contentment through enjoying the wealth of one's wholesome potential.³⁵ For this is what mental cultivation in the form of meditation and mindfulness practice lays before one: one is much more than the sum total of one's physical senses; one can see and feel beyond them. One then truly begins to *have* a sense of living a full life. One's thoughts are richer and more wholesome. One has broken out of the limits of experience.

If the "**doing**" world is dominated by language and words, then the "**having**" world is one mostly of thoughts and ideas. Only when we see and enjoy the full potential of our goodness that we have attained to a true level of "**being**," the most joyful state imaginable. And yet all this is only the tools for wisdom, the key to total liberation. One simple way of describing this liberation is that we are emotionally independent of the world:³⁶ we are no more troubled by rain or rainbows. We are happy simply for *being* oneself, and it is a contagious joy that that benefits others, too. We have broken out of the created world.

³¹ VbhA 343 = VbhA:Ñ 2:67.

³² Vism 18.4/587 f; Abhs 6.8 = Abhs:SR 164, 250; DhsA 316 = DhsA:PR 2:413 f. See BDict: *kalāpa* & *rūpa-kalāpa*. See SD 17.2d.

³³ See **Puppha S** (S 22.94/3:138). There is however the problem of holding a candle against the wind when one takes the Abhidhamma as the "ultimate truth" effectively displacing the primacy of the Dhamma-Vinaya. The proper use of the Abhidhamma tradition as ancillary to and clarifying the Buddha's Teaching, however, can be an excellent expedience.

³⁴ "Though much he recites the sacred texts, | the heedless man who acts not accordingly, | is like a cowherd who counts the cows of others: | he has no share of the holy life [recluseship]. (Dh 19)

³⁵ One is usu truly happy when one is able to work using the best of one's abilities and potential, rather than having to do something as a matter of routine.

³⁶ See, eg, **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 20,4/1:56 etc, the insight refrain), SD 13.3 esp SD 13.1(3.10) on "Independence."

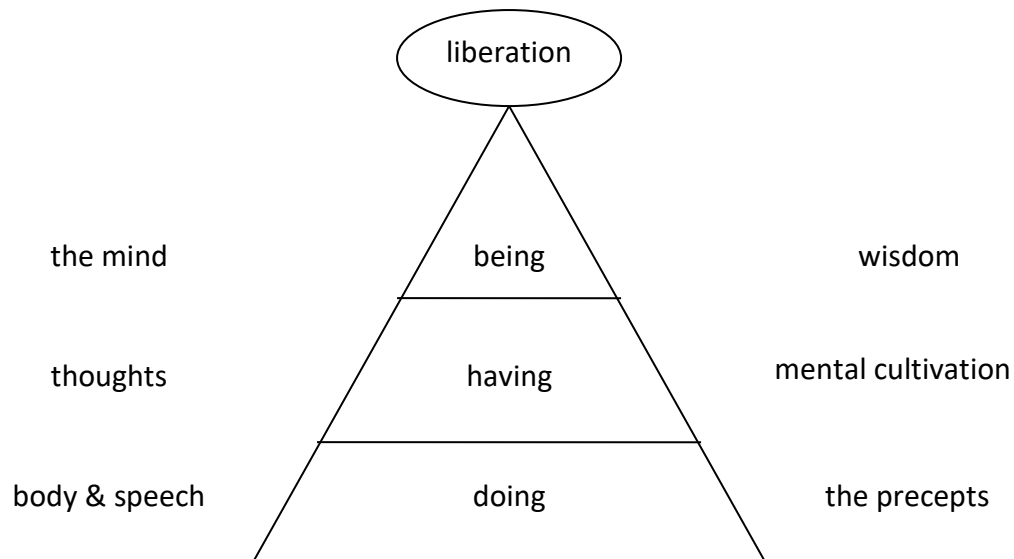


Table 3.5 The grammar of spirituality

As it were, the Dharma is like the scaffolding by which one builds oneself, and when the building is done, the scaffolding has to be removed so that the building can be used for all its utility and beauty. In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), after giving the parable of the raft, the Buddha admonishes thus:

Bhikkhus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Dharma,
how much more that which is not Dharma!³⁷ (M 22,14/1:135), SD 3.13

4 The 6 elements: definitions

4.1 We now return to our discussion on the elements. Thus far, we have seen that 4 primary elements comprise the physical world; our bodies, too, are the elements. Sometimes, as in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62), a fifth element is added, that is, **space** (*ākāsa*).³⁸ In the Abhidhamma system, however, “space” is not a primary element but is classified under “derived (or derivative) material form” (*upādā rūpa*) [10, no 19]. Space is defined in **the Dhātu,vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140) below.

4.2 While the Dhātu,vibhaṅga Sutta gives a detailed definition of space, **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62), in the section on the practices promoting impartiality, merely says that “space is not established anywhere”³⁹ [8(5)], which, in fact, succinctly defines the nature of space: while all the manifestations of the 4 primary elements, of whatever density or subtlety, are spatially located, space is not; for space is, as it were, the “stage” on which the primary elements perform their cosmic dance.

³⁷ *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag’eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean “good states,’ ie, calm and insight (*samatha,vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikōpama S** (M 66,26-33/1:455) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṅhāsaṅkhaya S** (M 38,14/1:260 f @ SD 7.10) as one of the abandonment of attachment to insight. Bodhi, however, is of the view that “*dhamma* here signifies not good states themselves, but the teachings, the correct attitude to which was delineated just above in the simile of the snake.” (M:ÑB 1209 n255). See Intro.

³⁸ M 62,12/1:423 (SD 3.11). See **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S**, S 22.56,7 (SD 3.7) n on “forms derived” See also Sue Hamilton 2000:168-172.

³⁹ M 62,17/1:424 (SD 3.11).

We might even venture to say, that this is also the *temporal* aspect of the elements. In other words, space and time are inextricably interconnected.

4.3 As Sue Hamilton intuitively observes:

One might suggest, in fact, that all form, whatever its degree of density or subtlety, is additionally characterized by having a spacial dimension: it is spacially locatable. It is also the case that whatever is part of our experience, whether concrete or abstract, occurs temporally. Whether spatially locatable or not, all aspects of our experience are temporally locatable. Put differently, one might say that there is no such thing as experience as we know it that is not characterized by space and time. (Hamilton 2000:170)

As such, it is profoundly significant that nirvana has neither temporal nor spatial referents [13].

4.4 The Dhātu, vibhaṅga Sutta (M 140) lists 6 elements (*cha dhātu*) and tells on how we should regard them. A major section of the Sutta deals with the 4 foundations (*adhiṭṭhāna*) as the contemplation of mind-objects (*dhammānupassanā*). The uniqueness of this Sutta is that the contemplation of mind-objects here describes the nature of arhatood (M 140.12-29). These foundations are what makes the arhat a “sage at peace” (*muni santo*) (M 140.7b, 30). Of special interest to us here is the “first foundation,” dealing with the cultivation of wisdom, and which also gives a helpful definition of the 6 elements:⁴⁰

THE 6 ELEMENTS (DHĀTU, VIBHAṄGA SUTTA, M 140.14-19/3:240-243)

WISDOM: THE 6 ELEMENTS

“How, bhikshu, does one not neglect wisdom?⁴¹ There are these elements:

- (1) The earth element.
- (2) The water element.
- (3) The fire element.
- (4) The wind element.
- (5) The space element.
- (6) The consciousness element.

(1) THE EARTH ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the earth element** [hardness]?
Whatever that is solid, solidified [rigid]⁴² and clung to⁴³ internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely,
head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin;⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The 6 elements (4 primary elements + space + consciousness) are briefly mentioned in **Saṅgīti S** (D 33,2.1 (16)/3: 248), **Bahu, dhātuka S** (M 115,5/3:62), and **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61,6/1:175 f (SD 6.8) n here); see also Dhs 638. For the first 5 elements in later Buddhism, see Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, London, 1959:183 ff.

⁴¹ Comy: Wisdom is not neglected by way of the meditation on the 4 elements. Here, the meditation on the 4 elements is identical to that found in **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,6+11) SD 6.16, and **Mahā Rāhu-’ovāda S** (M 62.8-12), SD 3.11.

⁴² “Solid, solidified [rigid],” *kakkhaḷaṃ kharigataṃ*. The former is the element’s characteristic (*lakkaḥa*) and the latter its mode (*ākāra*) (Vism 286). In the Abhidhamma, the hardness (*kakkhaḷatta*) itself is the earth element (VismṬ 362 f). See Karunadasa 1967:17 f.

⁴³ “Clung to,” *upādiṇṇa*. In the Abhidhamma, this is a technical term applicable to bodily phenomena that are produced by karma. Here, in Mahā Rāhulovāda S (M 62), as well as **Mahā Hatthipadōpama S** (M 28), it is used in the general sense as applicable to the entire body insofar as it is grasped as “mine” and misapprehended as a self.

*flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys;*⁴⁵
*heart, liver, membranes (around the lungs),*⁴⁶ *spleen, lungs;*⁴⁷
*large intestines, small intestines, stomach-contents,*⁴⁸ *dung,*⁴⁹
 or whatever else⁵⁰ that is solid, solidified and clung to, internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this, bhikshu, is called the internal earth element.

Now both the internal earth element and the external earth element are simply **earth element** [hardness].⁵¹ And that should be seen as it really is with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’⁵²

Having seen it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the earth element, by wisdom the mind becomes detached [lust-free].

(2) THE WATER ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the water element** [cohesion]?⁵³

The water element may be either internal or external. And what, bhikshu, is the internal water element?

Bhikshu, whatever that is water, watery and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely,

*bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat;*⁵⁴

*tears, skin-grease [tallow], saliva, snot, oil of the joints,*⁵⁵ *urine.*⁵⁶

or whatever else that is water, watery and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this, bhikshu, is called the internal water element.

Now both the internal water element and the external water element are simply **water element**. And that should be seen as it really is with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Having seen it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the earth element, by wisdom the mind becomes detached [lust-free].

⁴⁴ The meditation on these 5 parts “with skin as the fifth” or “skin pentad” (*taca, pancake kamma-t, ṭhāna*) (Vism 242=8.50) forms the basic spiritual practice first taught to novices on their initiation.

⁴⁵ *Mamsam nahāru aṭṭhi aṭṭhi, miñjā vakkam.*

⁴⁶ “Membranes,” alt tr, “pleura,” *kilomaka*, ie, a pair of membranous sacs surrounding the lungs.

⁴⁷ *Hadayam yakanam kilomakam pihakam papphasam.*

⁴⁸ *Udariyam*, lit “that which is in the *udara* (stomach),” sometimes tr as “gorge” (Vism:Ñ 8.120/-122/258 f); technically, this includes chyme (food half-digested by gastric juices, expelled into the duodenum).

⁴⁹ *Antam anta, guṇam udariyam karisam.* See M 3:90; KhP 38. Later traditions add the 32nd part—*matthake mattha, luṅgam* (lit, “the brain in the head”) (Kh 3, Pm 1:6 f; Vism 8.42-144/239-266): “brain” is not listed at S 4:111). Although “brain” is usually listed last, Comys list it as no 20, after “faeces” (KhA 60; Vism 8.126/260) in the set headed by “large intestines” since they have similar or related appearances. For a fascinating discussion on how ancient ascetics obtain such knowledge of the human anatomy, see Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*, 1998:34-37.

⁵⁰ The phrase “whatever else” (*aññam pi kiñci*) is meant to include the earth element in those parts of the body not included in the above enumeration. According to the Abhidhamma, the 4 elements are primary qualities of matter in which they are all inseparably present in varying degrees of strength. Thus “each element is also included though in a subordinate role, in the bodily phenomena listed under the other three elements” (M:ÑB 1221 n329). Later tradition add “brain” here, making it a set of 32 body parts. See also BDict: Dhātu.

⁵¹ Comy to Mahā Hatthi’padōpama S ad loc says that this statement is made to emphasize the insentient nature (*acetanā, bhāva*) of the internal earth element by yoking it to the external earth element, thus making its insentient nature more apparent (MA 2:223 f). The Vibhaṅga lists more examples: iron, copper, tin, lead, etc. (Vbh 82). According to Abhidhamma, it is characterized by hardness (*thaddha, lakkhaṇa*).

⁵² See §3n.

⁵³ “Water,” *āpo*. Abhidhamma characterizes it by cohesion (*ābandhana*).

⁵⁴ *Pittam semham pubbo lohitaṃ sedo medo.*

⁵⁵ *Lasikā*, ie, synovial fluid.

⁵⁶ *Assu vasā kheḷo siṅghāṇikā lasikā muttam.* Here there are a total of 31 parts of the body. See here (4)n.

(3) THE FIRE ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the fire element** [heat]?

The fire element may be either internal or external. And what, bhikshu, is the internal fire element?

Bhikshu, whatever that is fire, fiery and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely,

that by which one is warmed, ages and burns,⁵⁷ and that by which what is eaten, drunk, chewed and tasted⁵⁸ gets completely digested,

or whatever else that is fire, fiery and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this, bhikshu, is called the internal fire element.

Now both the internal fire element and the external fire element are simply **fire element**. And that should be seen as it really is with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Having seen it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the fire element, by wisdom the mind becomes detached [lust-free].

(4) THE WIND ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the wind element** [motion]?⁵⁹

The wind element may be either internal or external. And what, bhikshu, is the internal wind element?

Bhikshu, whatever that is wind [airy], wind-like and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely,

⁶⁰up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds that course through the limbs,⁶¹ in-breath and out-breath,

or whatever else that is wind, wind-like and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this, bhikshu, is called the internal wind element.

Now both the internal wind element and the external wind element are simply **wind element**. And that should be seen as it really is with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Having seen it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the wind element, by wisdom the mind becomes detached [lust-free].

(5) THE SPACE ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the space element**?⁶²

The space element may either be internal or external. And what, bhikshu, is the internal space element?

Bhikshu, whatever that is space, spatial and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely, *the ear-canals, the nostrils, the mouth cavity, and that (opening)*

⁵⁷ Apparently, these preceding three terms—*santappati, jiriyati, pariḍayhati*—refer to the body metabolism. In fact, the whole section refers to the body metabolism.

⁵⁸ *asita, pīta, khāyita, sāyitā*. These are the four modes of consuming food, namely: *eat* food; *drink* liquids; *chew* solid food, a toothstick, betel-nut, chewing gum; *taste* (or lick) sweets, ice-cream.

⁵⁹ “Wind,” *vāyo*, or “air” element, that is, motion, in Abhidhamma, said to be “strengthening” or “supporting” (*vitthambhana, lakkhaṇa*). On how winds cause pains, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97, 28-29/2:193), SD 4.9.

⁶⁰ According to **Visuddhi, magga**, “winds” are responsible for the various internal motions of the body, namely, “up-going winds” (*uddhaṅ, gamā vātā*) for vomiting and belching, “down-going winds” (*adho, gamā vātā*) for the expelling of faeces and urine (Vism 350). “Wind” here clearly refers to elemental “motion,” not to the object moved.

⁶¹ “Winds that course through the limbs,” *aṅga-m-aṅgānusārino vātā*. In reference to this, Peter Harvey says, “Note that the ‘motion/air’ 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). In contemporary terms, these “winds” clearly refer to the oxyhaemoglobin, ie, the oxygen in the blood, coursing through the body.

⁶² “Space,” *ākāsa*, according to Abhidhamma, is not a primary element but is classified under “derivative material form” (*upādā rūpa*).

whereby what is eaten, drunk, taken and tasted is swallowed, and where it collects, and whereby it is excreted from below, or whatever else that is space, spatial and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this, bhikshu, is called the internal space element.

Now both the internal space element and the external space element are simply **space element**. And that should be seen as it really is with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

Having seen it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed by the space element, by wisdom the mind becomes detached [*lust-free*].

(6) CONSCIOUSNESS. Then there remains only **consciousness**,⁶³ pure and bright.⁶⁴ What does one know [cognize] with that consciousness?

One knows, ‘(This is) pleasurable.’

One knows, ‘(This is) painful.’

One knows, ‘(This is) neutral.’

On account of a contact that arouses pleasure, there arises a pleasurable feeling. When one feels a pleasurable feeling one understands, ‘I feel a pleasurable feeling.’ One understands, ‘With the cessation of that same contact that arouses pleasure, the pleasurable feeling conditioned by that contact ceases, it is stilled.’⁶⁵

On account of a contact that arouses pain, there arises a painful feeling. When one feels a painful feeling one understands, ‘I feel a painful feeling.’ One understands, ‘With the cessation of that same contact that arouses pain, the painful feeling conditioned by that contact ceases, it is stilled.’

On account of a contact that arouses neither pain nor pleasure, there arises a neutral feeling.⁶⁶ When one feels a neutral feeling one understands, ‘I feel a neutral feeling.’ One understands, ‘With the cessation of that same contact that arouses a feeling that is neither painful nor pleasant, the neutral feeling conditioned by that contact ceases, it is stilled.’⁶⁷

(M 140,13-19b/3:240-242), SD 4.17

The mediaeval Abhidhamma manuals say that each unit of matter (*rūpa, kalāpa*) is delimited (*paricchindate*) by the surrounding space (*ākāsa*).⁶⁸ The actual delimitation is so minute that it is

⁶³ Comy: This sixth element “remains” in that it has yet to be taught by the Buddha and which Pukkusāti has yet to realize. Here it is explained as the consciousness that accomplishes the work of the insight meditation on the elements. Feeling is also introduced under this same heading. (MA 5:53)

⁶⁴ Cf “Monks, this mind is bright, but it is soiled by external impurities.” (A 1.6.1/1:10).

⁶⁵ “Ceases ... is stilled,” *nirujjhati ... vūpasammati*.

⁶⁶ Although in English, it appears contradictory in terms to speak of “neutral feeling”, this oxymoron exists in Buddhist psychology. For example, when one is asked, “How do you feel?” one may answer “I feel nothing.” Otherwise, one could resort to rendering it in a cumbersome manner as “a feeling that is neither painful nor pleasant.” Comy to Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S says that it is not easy to be mindful of neutral feeling, and that it should be best approached by way of inference, by noting the absence of both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Comy illustrates with the example of a hunter seeing tracks before and after a rock, thereby inferring the track of an animal (MA 1:277). **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** says that only the sense of touch is accompanied by pain or pleasure, while feelings arising at the other four sense-doors are invariably neutral (Dhs 139-145; Abhds 2). The suttas, however, speak of pleasant and unpleasant sights, sounds, smells and tastes, that in turn condition the arising of corresponding feelings of pleasure or displeasure (S 4:115, 119, 125, 126). “This *Abhidhammic* presentation offers an intriguing perspective on contemplation of feeling, since it invites an inquiry into the degree to which an experience of delight or displeasure in regard to sight, sound, smell or taste is simply the outcome of one’s own mental evaluation” (Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 2003:171).

⁶⁷ A parable of the fire-sticks (M 140,19.3/3:243 f), SD 4.17, follows, illustrating how contact arouses pleasure, pain or neutral feeling, just as fire is produced when the sticks are rubbed together. One should merely note the feeling without comment, which would lead to equanimity (§20) and mental development.

⁶⁸ VismṬ 453; AbhsVṬ 98; Abhvk 279; VismSn 5:67.

described as “as if delimiting” (*paricchindanti viya*). Nevertheless, there is enough space around each unit (*kalāpa*) of matter so that it can properly be said to be “untouched” (*asamphuṭṭha*) by the other units.⁶⁹ Hence, space is said to manifest itself as “untouchedness” (*asamphuṭṭha,paccupaṭṭhāna*).⁷⁰

5 Nature of the elements

5.0 The Dhātu,vibhaṅga Sutta (M 140) [4]—like the **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62)⁷¹ [8] and the **Mahā Hatthi,-pādōpama Sutta** (M 28)⁷²—presents the 4 primary elements both as internal (comprising the body) and as external (comprising another’s body and as nature or the universe). The elements are systematically defined and discussed in the **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī**,⁷³ and elaborated in the **Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha**⁷⁴ and the **Visuddhi,magga**.⁷⁵ Let us further examine the nature and characteristics of the elements and summarize them in connection with meditation practice.



Fig 5. The 4 elements in graphics

5.1 THE EARTH ELEMENT (*paṭhavī,dhātu*)

5.1.1 The earth element is essentially hardness, softness, roughness, smoothness, heaviness, lightness,⁷⁶ and is so called because, like the earth, it serves as a support or foundation for physical phenomena. The word **paṭhavi** (Skt *pr̥thivī*) comes from the root √PRATH, “to expand or spread,” thus, the earth element represents the principle of “extension,” which includes aspects of solidity, support, resistance, etc. Whatever karmically acquired hardness or firmness that is in our own body—head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, stomach contents, dung and so on—this is called our own earth element.

5.1.2 According to Commentaries, the earth element has the characteristic of hardness (*kakkaḷat-ta,lakkhaṇa*), the function of acting as a foundation (*patiṭṭhāna,rasa*) for the other primary elements and derived matter [11], and manifests itself as receiving (*sampaṭicchana,paccupaṭṭhāna*).⁷⁷ Its proximate cause is the other three great elements. The earth element is experienced by the sense of touch as hardness and softness.

We usually think of the earth as being stable ground that supports life: we live on it. The earth is symbolic of fortitude: no matter what people do to it (throw rubbish on it, dig it, etc), it does not complain. It is symbolic of compassion, supporting everyone alike, the good and the evil, the rich and the poor and so on. We will look at this symbolism more fully below [8].

⁶⁹ VismṬ 453.

⁷⁰ VismṬ 453. See Karunadasa 1967:152 f.

⁷¹ M 62,8-12/1:421-423 (SD 3.11), with §12 on “space,” the 4th element. Only 5 elements are mentioned here.

⁷² M 2,5-25/1:185-190 (SD 6.16). On the 4 elements are mentioned, each in connection with the parable of the saw (M 21.20/1:129).

⁷³ Book 2 (*rūpa,kaṇḍa* or *rūpa,saṅgaha*), Dhs §§583-980/124-179 = Dhs:R 153-229.

⁷⁴ In ch 6: *Rūpa,saṅgaha,vibhāga*, see Abhs:BRS 234-263.

⁷⁵ Vism 11.85-117/364-370.

⁷⁶ These are amongst the characteristics mentioned at Dhs §648/165, see also Dhs 962/177.

⁷⁷ Vism 93/365.

5.1.3 The earth symbolism in the Buddha legend

5.1.3.1 The earth plays important symbolic roles in the legend and life of the Buddha. In the Buddha legend, it is said that when the Bodhisattva child is born, he stands on the earth and declares aloud his impending awakening. His standing on the earth (*paṭhaviyā patitṭhānam*) represents the Buddha's attaining of the 4 paths of accomplishment (*iddhi, pada*).⁷⁸

5.1.3.2 The earth symbolism appears again in the Bodhisattva's childhood: during the ploughing festival (*vappa maṅgala*), when the boy Siddhartha is disturbed when he sees the earth broken up by the plough and how the small creatures suffer as a result.⁷⁹ The Mahāvastu gives some interesting details: the Bodhisattva looks at the soil being tilled and sees the ploughs throw up a snake and a frog. A young boy takes the frog away for food but throws the snake away. The young Bodhisattva is deeply stirred by what he sees and quietly retires to the shade of a jambul tree (*Eugenia jambolana*), and in the tree's unmoving shade attains the first dhyana (Mvst 2:45).⁸⁰

This meditative experience becomes a turning-point, in due course (when the Buddha is 35), in his decision to abandon self-mortification and turn to breath meditation, and so he gains his awakening, as recorded in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta**.⁸¹

5.1.3.3 Another important episode in the Buddha's life where the earth plays a significant role is just before the great awakening, when Māra the bad one tries to distract the Bodhisattva in every way possible to prevent him from sitting under the Bodhi tree, so that he would fail to awaken. When Māra fails in all his efforts, he attempts subterfuge: he challenges the Bodhisattva to prove his worth to sit under the Bodhi tree—What good karma has the Bodhisattva done that he deserves the “diamond seat” (*vajir'āsana*) under the Bodhi tree? Thereupon, the Bodhisattva touches the earth with his right hand.

The earth shakes and rumbles, and Thāvarā (Skt Sthāvarā)—Gaia or Mother Earth—emerges from the bowels of the earth in witness to his unsurpassed virtues. One account says that all of Māra's evil host sinks into the ground; another account says that Thāvarā wrings her long hair from which a great flood emerges and washes all the demons away. Māra himself, surprised and terrified, flees. This event is known as “the victory over Māra” (*māra, vijaya*).⁸²

5.1.3.4 This event is often commemorated in two common ways, ritually and iconographically. Among the Theravāda Buddhists of Thailand, it is commemorated when, after the conclusion of a merit-making ceremony, the water of dedication⁸³ is poured away at the root of a tree. Iconographically, the Buddha's final victory over Māra (*māra, vijaya*) is depicted in the Buddha images showing the earth-touching gesture (Skt *bhūmi, sparśa mudra*), calling the earth to witness, most famously depicted by the Phra Buddha Jinarāj image in Phitsanulok province, Thailand.

5.2 THE WATER ELEMENT (*āpo, dhātu*)

5.2.1 The water element is essentially cohesion, stickiness (viscosity), thickness (viscosity) and liquidity. Whatever karmically acquired liquidity or fluidity there is in our own body—bile, phlegm,

⁷⁸ DA 2:439. *Iddhi, pāda*: the will to attain mental absorption, the effort to attain it, the mind to enjoy it, the investigation of that mental absorption (D 2:213, 3:78). See SD 10.3.

⁷⁹ MA 2:290; J 1:57 f.

⁸⁰ See Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 §13d/31 f. See also Reflection, **True prayer**, R452, 2016.

⁸¹ M 36.31-32/1:246 f @ SD 1.12; MA 2:291 (on recollecting his first breath meditation); cf Chinese version, T1428.781a4-11.

⁸² J 1:72-75; BA 8.

⁸³ P *dakkhiṇ'odaka*, Skt *dakṣiṇ'odaka*.

pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, urine and so on—this is called one’s own water element.

5.2.2 According to Commentaries, the water element has the characteristic of flowing [trickling] (*paggharaṇa, lakkhaṇa*), and the function of intensifying (*brūhana, rasa*) the other elements and derived matter [10], and manifests itself as holding together [cohesion] (*saṅgaha, paccupaṭṭhāna*).⁸⁴ The water element is the physical factor that holds different particles of matter together so that they do not scatter or disintegrate. The Abhidhamma holds that the water element, unlike the other three elements, cannot be physically sensed but is only known by inference from the cohesion of observable matter.

5.2.3 We normally think of water as flowing, trickling and wet. The wetness of water has an “intensifying” function, for example, when water is added to flour and then kneaded, it in due course becomes dough, or when water is sprinkled into soap powder, it becomes a ball of lather.⁸⁵ This happens because the water element holds the molecules together in even larger groups.

5.3 THE FIRE ELEMENT (*tejo, dhātu*)

5.3.1 The fire element is essentially decay, heat, cold, oxidation, combustion, and digestion (metabolism). Whatever karmically acquired heat or warmth there is in our own body—such as that whereby one is heated, consumed, scorched, whereby that which has been eaten, drunk, chewed or tasted, is fully digested and so on—this is called one’s own heating element.

5.3.2 According to Commentaries, the fire element has the characteristic of heat (*uṇhatta, lakkhaṇa*), the function is that of maturing [ripening, ie, decaying] (*paripacāna, rasa*) of the other elements and derived matter [10], and manifests itself as sustaining softness (*maddavānuppādāna, paccupaṭṭhāna*).⁸⁶ The fire element is experienced both as heat (eg, a fever) and as cold (the weather).

5.3.3 The burning power of fire has both a negative as well as a positive connotation. In a negative sense, fire represents the destructive quality of the unwholesome roots, namely, greed, hate and delusion, as famously illustrated in **the Āditta, pariyaṇa Sutta** (S 35.28): all the six senses are burning with greed, hate and delusion.⁸⁷ In a positive sense, fire has a “purifying” sense, as reflected in fire-like meditation taught in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62).⁸⁸ [8(3)]

5.4 THE WIND [OR AIR] ELEMENT (*vāyo, dhātu*)

5.4.1 The wind element is essentially motion, vibration, distension, and pressure. There are 6 kinds of karmically acquired “wind” in one’s own body, that is,

- upward-going wind (vomitting, hiccup, burping, etc);
- downward-going wind (peristalsis when voiding and peeing);
- the wind in the belly;
- the wind outside the belly;

⁸⁴ Vism 93/365.

⁸⁵ Cf the lather parable in **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2): “just as if a skilled bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath lather—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without—would not drip; even so, the monk permeates this very body with the zest and happiness born of solitude. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by zest and happiness born of solitude” (D 2,78/1:74), SD 8.10.

⁸⁶ Vism 11.93/365.

⁸⁷ S 35.28/4:19 f = S 1:34 f (SD 1.3), where see esp (1) for other fire symbolisms in the Suttas.

⁸⁸ M 62,10/1:422 (SD 3.11).

the wind in all the limbs; and
the in-breath and out-breath—
this (including peristalsis and muscular movements) is called one's own wind element.

5.4.2 According to Commentaries, the wind element has the characteristic of distending (*vitthambhana, lakkhaṇa*), the function is that of causing motion (*samudīraṇa, rasa*) in the other elements and derived matter [10], and manifests itself as conveying (*abhinihara, paccupaṭṭhāna*).⁸⁹ This last aspect is seen when it vibrates where it is, or when it moves about from one place to another. The proximate cause of the wind element is the other three great elements. It is experienced as tangible pressure.

5.5 SPACE (*ākāsa, dhātu*)

5.5.1 The space element is essentially an abstract representation of all the bodily orifices, internal passages (the alimentary canal, etc), and the processes of swallowing and retaining food, and expelling waste, and so on. It is, as such, one of the six elements (the sixth being consciousness, *viññāṇa*) (as described in **the Dhātu, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140) [4].

5.5.2 Technically, space is not an element (*dhātu*), but one of the derived forms [Table 9]. This “limited space” is also the object of *kaṣiṇa* meditation.⁹⁰ It is defined as follows:

The space element has the characteristics of delimiting matter. Its function is to indicate boundaries of delimiting matter. Its function is to indicate the boundaries of matter. It is manifested as the confines of matter, or its manifestation consists in being untouched (by the four primary elements), and in holes and apertures. Its proximate cause is the matter delimited. And it is on account of the space element that one can say of the material things delimited, thus: “This is above, below, in between, with regard to that.” (Vism 14.63/448)

5.5.3 The other kind of space is the unencumbered space (*ajaṭ'ākāsa*), unobstructed or empty space. It is the object of the first formless dhyana (*ākāsānañcāyatana*). According to the Abhidhamma, unencumbered space has no objective reality, as it is purely conceptual.⁹¹

6 The interbeing of the elements

6.1 All these elements are found in all existence everywhere. Taken together, the 4 great elements are founded on the earth element, held together by the water element, maintained by the fire element, and extended by the wind element.⁹² When we touch water, for example, we feel some kind of softness (earth element), or that it is cold or warm (fire element), and water flows around (wind element), and it makes our clothes stick to our skin (water element). Similarly, wind is moving air (wind element), cools us (fire element), it fills the sail (earth element) and moves a boat (wind element).

6.2 Ledi Sayadaw, in his essay on the elements, uses the example of **sealing-wax**. In its natural form, sealing-wax is mostly the *hard earth* element (solid), but when it comes in contact with the fire element, it turns into the *soft* earth element, and when the fire is taken away, it returns to its hard earth state. Again, in its natural state, sealing-wax is *cohesive water* element. When it is near fire, it becomes the *liquid* water element and flows, but when the fire is taken away, it returns to its

⁸⁹ Vism 93/365.

⁹⁰ See *Bhāvanā*, SD 15(9.2).

⁹¹ See BDict: *ākāsa*.

⁹² Vism 11.109/368 f; Abhs 6.3.

cohesive water state. In its natural state, sealing-wax is *cold* fire, when near fire, its *hot* fire element predominates. When the fire is taken away, it returns to its cold state. In its natural state, sealing-wax is the *pressured wind* element. When it is near fire, it becomes the *moving* wind and expands, but when the fire is taken away, it hardens again with the pressing wind element.⁹³

6.3 The best modern illustration is clearly that of *ice*, where the earth element predominates. When it is warm, ice melts into *water*, where the water element predominates. When a pot of water is put over a strong fire, it boils because the fire element predominates and scalds (burns) one just like *fire*. When the water boils long enough, it turns into *steam*, where the wind element predominates.

6.4 The elements, as such, are not discrete elements, but states of matter by way of proportion or intensity in its manifestation. In each case, it may be internal or external, and in either case here, they are merely the earth, the water, the fire or the wind element respectively. All the physical things around and inside us are manifestations of the 4 elements. As they are in a constant state of change and transformation, one should understand them and our being according to reality and right wisdom, "This does not belong to me; this I am not; this is not my self."⁹⁴

Element	Name	Principle	Characteristics	Function	Manifestation	Proximate cause
<i>Paṭhavi</i>	earth	extension	hardness	foundation	receiving	water, fire, wind
<i>Āpo</i>	water	cohesion	trickling, oozing	intensify	holding together	earth, fire, wind
<i>Tejo</i>	fire	fire	heat	mature, ripen	softening	earth, water, wind
<i>Vayo</i>	wind	motion, pressure	distension	motion	conveyance	earth, water, fire

Table 6. The 4 elements (a summary)

7 The parables of the elements

7.1 THE BUTCHERED COW PARABLE. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (D 22; M 10) contains a very important parable for understanding the purpose of meditating on the 4 elements, that is, the parable of the butchered cow:

Just as a skilled butcher or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow, were to sit at the cross-roads with the carcass divided into portions, so, too, a monk reviews this body, however it may be placed or disposed, in terms of the elements, thus:

"There are in this body

- (1) the earth-element (*paṭhavi*),
 - (2) the water-element (*āpo*),
 - (3) the fire-element (*tejo*),
 - (4) the wind-element (*vāyo*)."
- (D 22,6/2:294 = M 10,12/1:57 f), SD 13

The Commentaries explain this parable of the butchered cow in terms of meditation of the 4 elements. A butcher, having fed and raised a cow, in due course takes it to the shambles, ties it to a post and slaughters it. Up to this point, the butcher still has the notion of it being a "cow." If someone were to ask him what he is doing, he may reply, for example, "I am feeding the cow," or "I am killing

⁹³ Ledi Sayadaw 1965:438 f = 2005:235; see also 1965:457-467 = 2005:245-250.

⁹⁴ *Mahā Hatthipadopama S* (M 28,6-22/1:185-189), SD 6.16.

the cow.” Even after the cow has been slaughtered, but before he has dismembered it, he still maintains the notion that it is a cow.

However, after he has cut the cow’s carcass into pieces, and placed them on a table for sale at a crossroads, from that moment on, he abandons the notion of a cow. If someone were to ask him what he is selling, he would not say, “I am selling a cow.” As such, after having dismembered the cow, he abandons the notion of “cow.”⁹⁵

In the same way, when we analyze [“cut”] ourselves up into the 4 elements, whatever we are, whatever is in our body, whatever we have, is merely the 4 elements. We abandon the notion of a person or being. When we understand the true nature of the 4 elements, we let go of the notion of a “being.” The physical being is just a composite of the 4 elements: it is the 4 elements that is standing, going, sitting, lying down, or doing whatever action. It is important to understand here that the 4 elements here are not concepts, but are “ultimate reality” (*paramattha, dhamma*),⁹⁶ as contrasted against “conventional reality” (*sammuti, dhamma*), such as notions of “person,” things and names.

7.2 THE 5 MURDERERS

7.2.1 The Āśivisopama Sutta (S 35.238)⁹⁷ has this long but interesting parable of the four serpents, here summarized:

A man is warned of four serpents of fierce heat and deadly venom, and so he flees from them. Then he is warned of five murderous enemies pursuing him, and again flees. He is now warned about a sixth murderer, an intimate friend in disguise, seeking to kill him. He flees again and comes to an empty village, where he is warned that dacoits [bandits] will be attacking at that very moment. Fleeing, he comes to a great stretch of water with no means of crossing over. While on the near shore, fraught with dangers, he fashions a makeshift raft, and paddling with all four limbs,⁹⁸ he crosses over the waters to the safety of the far shore.

The Buddha goes on to clarify the meaning of this parable, thus:

The 4 serpents of fierce
and deadly venom

The 4 primary elements:

the wooden-mouthed serpent ⁹⁹	=	the earth element;
the putrid-mouthed serpent	=	the water element;
the fiery-mouthed serpent	=	the fire element;
the dagger-mouthed serpent	=	the wind element.

⁹⁵ Paraphrased, DA 3:770 f = MA 1:271 f = Vism 11.30/348.

⁹⁶ The Abhidhamma tradition speaks of these 4 ultimate realities: consciousness (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*), matter (*rūpa*) and nirvana (*nibbāna*) (Abhs 1.2 = Abhs:BRS 25-27 = Abhs:SR 81).

⁹⁷ S 35.238.5/4:173 (SD 28.1). See S:W 4:107 n3.

⁹⁸ We should imagine this to be a raft of log or flotsam.

⁹⁹ These 4 types of serpents are listed in **Āśivisa S** (A 4.110/2:110 f; also Pug 4.14/48). Comy (SA 3:6-8) says that these serpents were raised by kings to ward off robbers, and explains how each serpent’s venom destroys its victim. The first, the wooden-mouth serpent (*kaṭṭha, mukha*), further comprises 4 kinds in terms of how their venom works (quoting **Puggala Paññatti**): one whose venom is (1) fast-acting but not strong, (2) strong but not fast-acting, (3) fast-acting and strong, and (4) neither fast-acting nor strong—this respectively illustrates 4 kinds of persons: (1) one who is easily angered but his anger abates quickly, (2) one who does not anger easily but whose anger lasts long, (3) one easily angered and whose anger lasts long, and (4) one who neither angers easily nor does his anger last long (Pug 4.14/48). **Buddhaghosa** quotes verses by the Commentators (*aṭṭhakathācariya*), where it is said that the wooden-mouth serpent (*kaṭṭha, mukha*) rouses its *earth element* so that its bite would stiffen the victim’s body to be like dry wood; the putrid-mouthed serpent rouses its *water element* so that the victim’s body rots, decaying and oozing like rotting fruit; the fiery-mouthed serpent (*aggi, mukha*) burns the victim’s body so that it disintegrates like ashes or chaff; and the dagger-mouthed serpent (*sattha, mukha*) breaks up the victim’s body like a pole struck by lightning (Vism 11.-102/367*f = SA 3:13* qu at DhsA 300*). See also SA 3:12; SnA 458).

The 5 murderers	<u>the 5 aggregates of clinging.</u>
The 6 th murderer ¹⁰⁰	delight and lust (<i>nandi, rāga</i>).
The empty village	the 6 internal sense-bases.
The village-attacking dacoits	the 6 external sense-bases.
A great stretch of water	the 4 floods (<i>ogha</i>): sense-desire, existence, views, ignorance.
The near shore	self-identity (<i>sakkāya</i> , taking the aggregates to be self).
A makeshift raft	the noble eightfold path.
Paddling with all four limbs	the rousing of effort.
Crosses over to the far shore	the arhat.

7.2.2 In this parable, the first five murderers refer to the five aggregates. They are like murderers because they are impermanent, suffering and non-self,¹⁰¹ and they bind one to samsara, wherein one is repeatedly reborn and redies. Moreover, as the Commentary notes (in its explanation of “delight-and-lust”), all fears and punishment are rooted in rebirth. The Commentary adds that “delight-and-lust” is like a murderer with a drawn sword in two ways:

- (1) when greed arises for a certain object, it chops off one’s head, that is, the head of wisdom;
 - (2) it sends one off to rebirth in the womb, and all fears and punishment are rooted in rebirth.
- (SA 3:16 f)

7.2.3 Of the consciousness aggregate, **the Phena,piṇḍa Sutta** (S 22.95) says this:

That is to say, just this continuum,¹⁰²
 This illusion, a fool’s prattle [deceiving fools].¹⁰³
 A murderer, this is shown to be:
 Here no substance is found.¹⁰⁴ (S 22.95/143*), SD 17.12

The Commentary to this stanza explains that the 5 aggregates are murderers (*vadhaka*) in two ways:

- (1) they slay each other, and
- (2) murder appears on account of the aggregates.

In the case of (1), when the earth element breaks up, it takes along the other elements, and when the form element breaks up, it takes along the other (mental) aggregates. As for (2), when the aggregates exist, such things as murder, bondage, injury, etc, arise. (SA 2:324)

7.2.4 A similar parable is used by Sāriputta, in the same context of the aggregates, in **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85).¹⁰⁵ The Sutta’s Commentary, interpreting the parable, says that the untutored worldling attached to samsara is like the foolish householder, the five fragile aggregates like the murderous enemy. When the enemy comes up to the householder and offers to serve him, that is like the

¹⁰⁰ An erstwhile intimate companion or spy (*antara, cara*), closely pursuing with a drawn sword.

¹⁰¹ See **Yamaka S** (S 22.85/3:114 f): see foll para.

¹⁰² *Etādisāyaṃ santano*. A “continuum” (*santāna*) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and containing within itself a number of individual life-terms. The word “continuity” (*santati*) is used for this individual life-term, with its distinct birth, life and death. Each continuity, in turn, comprises of a rapid succession of dharmas or momentary mental and physical factors, held together by laws of causal relationship. (Summarized from Bodhi, *The All-embracing Net of Views*, 1978:192 n1.) See SD 25.3.49.

¹⁰³ “A trickster of fools,” *bāla, lāpinī*, which Comy glosses as the consciousness aggregate (SA 2:324). See Intro (“A Magical Illusion” n) & foll n.

¹⁰⁴ *Etādisāyaṃ santano | māyāyaṃ bāla, lāpinī | vadhako eso akkhāto | sāro ettha na vijjati*. Comy: *māyāyaṃ bāla, lāpinī* (see prec n) refers specifically to the aggregate of consciousness.

¹⁰⁵ S 22.85/3:112 f (SD 12.12).

time of arising of the aggregates at the moment of rebirth. When the householder gullibly takes the enemy to be his friend, that is like the time when the foolish worldling grasps the aggregates, thinking, “They are mine!” The honour that the householder confers upon the enemy, thinking, “He is my friend!” is like the honour a worldling confers on the aggregates by bathing them, feeding them, etc. The murder of the householder by the enemy is like the destruction of the worldling’s life when the aggregates break up. (SA 2:312)

7.2.5 It is with such understanding that Sāriputta, in **the (Sāriputta) Dāru-k,khandha Sutta** (A 6.41), declares that for a wise disciple even a tree trunk can be seen as a manifestation of each of the 4 primary elements, since each of them is but a quality of the same tree.¹⁰⁶ Since it is a short sutta, it is give in full here:

SD 17.2a(7.2)

(Sāriputta) Dāru-k,khandha Sutta

The Log of Wood Discourse (by Sāriputta) | A 6.41/3:340 f

Theme: Reflecting on the natural elements

1 Thus have I heard.

Once the Blessed One was staying on Mount Vulture Peak near Rājagaha. Then early in the morning, the venerable Sāriputta put on his robes and, carrying his bowl and outer robe (*saṅghāṭi*), was coming down from Mount Vulture Peak with some monks when he saw a large log of wood¹⁰⁷ at one side. Seeing it, he addressed the monks,

“Avuso, do you see that large log of wood over there?”

“Yes, avuso,” the monks replied.

2 “Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could determine¹⁰⁸ that log of wood to be just earth.

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the earth element in that log of wood, depending on which he could determine that log of wood to be just earth.

3 Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could determine that log of wood to be just water.

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the water element in that log of wood, depending on which he could determine that log of wood to be just water.

3.2 Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could determine that log of wood to be just fire.

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the fire element in that log of wood, depending on which he could determine that log of wood to be just fire.

3.3 Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could determine that log of wood to be just wind [air].

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the wind element in that log of wood, depending on which he could determine that log of wood to be just wind.

¹⁰⁶ A 6.41/3:340 f.

¹⁰⁷ *Daru-k,khandha*. Although *khandha* is usu tr as “aggregate, heap, pile,” esp when used as a collective term, here the context is that of a tree-trunk, where it should clearly be rendered as “log.”

¹⁰⁸ “He could determine,” *adhimucceyya* (pot 3 sg; S 1:116,32 = *cinteyya*, “were to think” (SA); A 3:340,30), from *adhimuccati* (pass of *adhi* + √MUC, to release), here with the sense of “to apply oneself, to set one’s mind or heart to.” As such, the practices given in this Sutta are “perceptions” (*saññā*), ie, variations of the perceptions of impermanence (*anicca,saññā*) and of the foul (*asubha,saññā*).

3.4 Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could determine that log of wood to be just the beautiful.¹⁰⁹

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the beautiful element in that log of wood, depending on which he could determine that log of wood to be just the beautiful

3.5 Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could determine that log of wood to be just the foul.¹¹⁰

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the foul element in that log of wood, depending on which he could determine that log of wood to be just the foul.”¹¹¹

— evaṃ —

8 The 5 elements: Practices promoting impartiality¹¹²

8.1 The Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta (M 62) contains an interesting set of meditation instructions that combines the five elements—earth, water, fire, wind and space—with aspects of the meditation on the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*).¹¹³

(1) Rāhula, cultivate **an earth-like meditation**. For when you cultivate an earth-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts¹¹⁴ that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.¹¹⁵

Rāhula, just as people throw things clean and foul¹¹⁶—things soiled with dung, with urine, with spittle, with pus or with blood—the earth is not pained, humiliated, or revulsed because of that.

So too, Rāhula, cultivate an earth-like meditation. For when you cultivate an earth-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

¹⁰⁹ Comy: “A beautiful element” refers (for example) to a beautiful lotus flower red to the core (*ratta, vaṇṇamhi sāre paduma, puppha, vaṇṇā subha, dhatu*) (AA 3:367).

¹¹⁰ Comy: “A foul element” refers (for example) to rotting and pulverized, unattractive, inner wood or dry pieces of bark (*pūti, bhūte cuṇṇe c’eva pheggu, papaṭikāsu ca amanuñña, vaṇṇā asubha, dhātu*) (AA 3:367).

¹¹¹ For an example of such a psychic phenomenon, see **Mahaka S** (S 41.4/4:288-291), SD 27.2.

¹¹² Comy: The methods given in §§13-17—the meditation on the elements and on space—are given to Rāhula so that he would experience impartiality (*tādī, bhāva*) or “suchness” (Vism 1.10/5, 7.71/214). In **Vuttha Vassāvāsa S** (A 9.11)—where impartiality exercises (1)-(4) recur—Sāriputta gives a lion-roar by way of telling the Buddha that he dwells with his mind like these four primary elements in this manner, but adding his own parables to each of them (A 9.11/4:374 f). See Dh 81. It is important to note that space (*ākāsa*)—and sometimes, consciousness (*viññāṇa*)—are listed with the 4 primary elements (*mahā, bhūta*), but as a set (of 5 or 6 elements), they are called *dhātu*, while the term *mahā, bhūta* is used only for the first 4. See Karunadasa 1967: 16, 91-98. This section on the contemplation of the 5 elements is not found in any of the sutta’s Chinese versions.

¹¹³ See, eg, **Brahma, vihāra S** (A 10.208/5:299), SD 2.10.

¹¹⁴ “Contacts,” *phassa*, ie, all experiences through the six sense-bases: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind.

¹¹⁵ “Overpower ... and remain,” *pariyādāya ṭhassanti*. One who practices meditation on the elements can see the strength of his own mind in applying his understanding of things to unwholesome objects that arise at a sense-door (sense-organ). By reflecting on the experience in terms of conditionality and impermanence—as “guests” (*āgantuka*) at the sense-doors (*dvāra*)—he transforms the potentially provocative situation of being subjected to the powers of sense-experience into an opportunity for spiritual insight. See MA 2:225 f.

¹¹⁶ “Things clean and foul,” *sucim pi ... asucim pi*. Here I follow Nina van Gorkom, email 23 May 2003.

(2) Rāhula, cultivate a **water-like meditation**. For when you cultivate a water-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

Rāhula, just as people wash things clean and foul—things soiled with dung, with urine, with spittle, with pus or with blood—water is not pained, humiliated, or revulsed because of that.

So too, Rāhula, cultivate a water-like meditation. For when you cultivate a water-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

(3) Rāhula, cultivate a **fire-like meditation**. For when you cultivate a fire-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

Rāhula, just as people burn things clean and foul—things soiled with dung, with urine, with spittle, with pus or with blood—fire is not pained, humiliated, or revulsed because of that.

So too, Rāhula, cultivate a fire-like meditation. For when you cultivate a fire-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

(4) Rāhula, cultivate a **wind-like [air-like] meditation**.¹¹⁷ For when you cultivate a wind-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

Rāhula, just as the wind blows on things clean and foul—things soiled with dung, with urine, with spittle, with pus or with blood—the wind is not pained, humiliated, or revulsed because of that.

So too, Rāhula, cultivate a wind-like meditation. For when you cultivate a wind-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

(5) Rāhula, cultivate a **space-like meditation**. For when you cultivate a space-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.

Rāhula, just as space is not established anywhere—

so too, Rāhula, cultivate a space-like meditation. For when you cultivate a space-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.¹¹⁸ (M 62,13-17/1:423 f), SD 3.11¹¹⁹

— — —

8.2 As Buddhaghosa explains, these five element-like meditations—on the 4 elements and on space—are given to the 18-year-old Rāhula so that he would train himself in impartiality (*tādī, bhāva*) or “suchness”¹²⁰ in the face of such defilements as pride and lust. In **the Vuttha Vass’āvāsa Sutta** (A 9.11)—where practices (1)-(4) recur—Sāriputta gives a lion-roar by way of telling the Buddha that he dwells with his mind like these 4 primary elements in this manner, but adding his own parables to each of them.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ “Wind-like meditation,” *vāyo, sama bhāvana*, alt tr “air-like meditation.”

¹¹⁸ **Milinda, pañha** qu this para (Miln 388).

¹¹⁹ See also SD 3.11 (1.3) for textual criticism.

¹²⁰ Vism 1.10/5, 7.71/214.

¹²¹ A 9.11/4:374 f; see also Dh 81.

8.3 It is important to note here that space (*ākāsa*)—and sometimes, consciousness (*viññāṇa*)¹²²—are listed with the 4 primary elements (*mahā,bhūta*) [4]. However, as a set (of 5 or 6, in particular), they are called *dhātu*, while the term *mahā,bhūta* is used only for the first four.¹²³

8.4 Each of the 4 or 5 elements here is reflected on for its positive qualities, to which one relates as in the cultivation of lovingkindness. Although this is a set of five elements, one could just as well select one that one feels a close affinity for, and cultivate that particular “element-like” meditation. Due to the simplicity of this set of meditations, it is suitable for children, too, and, on a more mundane level, is helpful in building up self-confidence and a positive mind. The main purpose of the element-like meditations is, of course, to serve as helping practices for the breath meditation or as a base for going on to deeper mental focus.

9 The 12 senses

9.1 SENSE-FACULTIES AND SENSE-OBJECTS

9.1.1 A common way of looking at the “form” (*rūpa*) aspects of the living human body is in terms of sense phenomena and objective phenomena, that is, as sense-faculties and sense-objects. A fully-endowed human being comprises the internal sense-organs and their six respective external sense-objects:

Table 9.1. The sense-faculties and objects

	Faculty	Object	
eye	<i>cakkhu</i>	<i>rūpa</i>	form
ear	<i>sota</i>	<i>sadda</i>	sound
nose	<i>ghana</i>	<i>gandha</i>	smell
tongue	<i>jīvhā</i>	<i>rasa</i>	taste
body	<i>kāya</i>	<i>phoṭṭhabba</i>	touch
mind	<i>mano</i>	<i>dhamma</i>	thought

9.2 These are collectively known as the 12 “bases” or “sense-bases” (*āyatana*). Section iii of **the Sati-paṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10) has the technical term, *chasu ajjhattika,bāhiresu āyatanesu*, literally translated as “in the 6 internal and 6 external sense-bases.” The Buddhist Dictionary defines **āyatana** as:

The 12 “bases” or “sources” on which depend the mental processes, consist of 5 physical sense-organs and consciousness, being the six personal (*ajjhātika*) bases, and the 6 objects, the so-called external (*bāhira*) bases.¹²⁴

9.3 The Commentaries explain that **āyatana** is so called because the pairs of faculties and sense-objects, with their respective consciousnesses, actuate (*āyananti*) phenomena. They provide the range for (*tanonti*) for those states that are origins (*āya*), meaning that they give them the scope. As long as there is samsara, they ceaselessly recur, and so extend [is actuated] exceedingly (*atīva āyata*), that is, they lead one on (*nayanti*), causing phenomena.¹²⁵

¹²² On consciousness, see **Khandha 4 Viññāṇa** @ SD 18.8a.

¹²³ See Karunadasa 1967:16, 91-98

¹²⁴ See BDict: *āyatana* (2).

¹²⁵ VbhA 45; PmA 1:83; Vism 15.4/481; in place of *atīva āyata*, PTS has *atīta,āyatam* “extends to the past.”

9.4 The Commentaries,¹²⁶ quoting “the ancients” (or early sangha fathers), further give the following commonsensical etymologies for each of the 6 sense-faculties:

<i>Cakkhatî ti cakkhu</i>	It relishes,	thus it is	the eye.
<i>Suṇātî ti sotaṃ</i>	It hears,	thus it is	the ear.
<i>Ghāyatî ti ghānaṃ</i>	It smells,	thus it is	the nose.
<i>Jīvitāṃ avhayatî ti jivhā</i>	It summons life,	thus it is	the tongue.
<i>Kucchitānaṃ āyoti kāyo</i>	It is the source of vile states,	thus it is	the body.
<i>Manate vijñātî ti mano</i>	It knows how to think,	thus it is	the mind.
<i>Manayatî ti mano</i>	It causes one to think,	thus it is	the mind.
<i>Muṇātî ti mano (Porāṇa)</i>	It measures,	thus it is	the mind.

The definitions reflect the *functionality* and *activity* of the senses, and not as physical entities. This approach becomes even more obvious in the following section.

9.5 THE 5 PHYSICAL SENSE-ORGANS (PAÑC’INDRIYA)

9.5.1 The 6 internal senses (*ajjhattik’āyatana*) are the faculties of perception (*cakkhu, sota, ghana, jivhā, kāya*). The suttas use a different terminology for the first three physical organs (*akkhi, kaṇṇa, nāsā*), thus:

	Organ	Faculty
<u>eye</u>	akkhi	<i>cakkhu</i>
<u>ear</u>	kaṇṇa	<i>sota</i>
<u>nose</u>	nāsā	<i>ghana</i>
tongue	<i>jivhā</i>	<i>jivhā</i>
body	<i>kāya</i>	<i>kāya</i>
mind	<i>mano</i>	<i>mano</i>

Table 9.5 Physical organs and faculties

9.5.2 The fact that the set in **Table 9.1** is more common in the suttas shows that the emphasis is on the experiential, that is, our ability to see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Experience as represented by the 6 types of consciousness, however, is the outcome of two determinants: the “objective” incoming sensory impressions—the “sensing” of things—and the “subjective” way in which these sensory impressions are received and cognized—the “making sense” of things. **Ñāṇamoli** explains these two modes of experience as follows:

ajjhattik’āyatana = the organization of experience;
bahiddh’āyatana = the experience of the organized.¹²⁷

9.5.3 Van Zeyst explains: “the inner sphere ... constitutes the subjective element which is the capacity of reaction, and the outer sphere constitutes the objective element which produces the impact.”¹²⁸ **Analayo** adds this insightful observation here:

¹²⁶ This is a cumulative list from the foll sources: ItA 1:99; NmA 1:167; NcA 71; PmA 1:78; VbhA 45; Vism 15.1-4/481; cf BA 33; NmA 1:158.

¹²⁷ *A Thinker’s Notebook*, 1971:159.

¹²⁸ Ency Bsm 470 “Āyatana.”

Regarding **contemplation of the sense-spheres**, the Pali versions begin with the meditator knowing each sense and its respective object.¹²⁹ Their counterpart in the *Madhyama āgama*, however, does not direct mindfulness to the senses and their respective objects, but mentions both merely as conditions for the arising of the fetter, beginning with its actual instruction only after this point.¹³⁰

Hence according to the *Madhyama āgama* presentation, the task here is not to be mindful of the senses or their objects as such, but of the fetter that may arise at any sense-door. This would indeed seem to be the central import of mindfulness of the sense-spheres, namely awareness of the fettering force of perceptual experience and its relation to the arising of unwholesome mental reactions and associations. Here the *Madhyama āgama*'s instruction seems a little more straightforward than its Pali counterpart. The remainder of the *Madhyama āgama* version's instructions for contemplating the six sense-spheres resembles the instructions found in the Pali versions.

[Note: **D 22/2:302,20 & M 10/1:61,15** speak of the meditator knowing: (1) the fetter, (2) how the unarisen fetter arises, (3) how the arisen fetter is abandoned, (4) how the abandoned fetter will not arise again in the future. **MĀ 98 = T1.584a14** presents the same in terms of the meditator knowing: (1) if the fetter is present, (2) if the fetter is not present, (3) if the unarisen fetter arises, (4) if the arisen fetter ceases and does not arise again. Another difference is that MĀ 98 has mindfulness of the sense-spheres precede mindfulness of the hindrances, whereas the Pali presentations follow the reverse sequence.]”

(Analayo 2005:12; emphases added)

9.6 THE SENSES AS FACULTIES

9.6.1 The body and matter. Though one might be able to accept that the form aggregate includes physical sense-organs, beyond this, “the definition seems wholly incompatible with such a *khandha*,” and “that one should see the form-*khandha* as the living and functioning body rather than mere matter” (Analayo 2005:12). Even then, **Hamilton** argues further,

it is still difficult to accept the inclusion *here* of “some thoughts or ideas or conceptions.”¹³¹ It is difficult not only because thoughts, ideas and conceptions are so clearly described in the context of the way the other, non-form *khandhas* contribute to the cognitive process, but also because the ways in which the livingness of the body is indicated (breathing, temperature, decay, mobility and so on) are not suggestive of thoughts, ideas and conceptions, or, indeed, of whatever is meant by a “sphere of mind objects.” The author [W Rahula] is attempting to explain this inclusion in the Buddhist texts of “mind” as one of the senses, an inclusion which is rendered even more conceptually troublesome than usual if one understands the form-*khandha* in the traditional material sense. (Hamilton 2000:159)

9.6.2 The mind is *not* the brain

Hamilton then goes on to note that

Nowhere in the early texts is “mind” in this context equated with the brain, and, in spite of its materialistic understanding of the form-*khandha*, the Theravāda tradition as a whole has not interpreted mind to mean brain. As explained in Chapter Two [“The Indian Context”], in

¹²⁹ D 22/12:302,18; M 10.1:61,15.

¹³⁰ Analayo's n: The instruction in **MĀ 98** runs: “based on eye and form(s), an internal fetter arises. When there really is a fetter internally, the monk knows according to reality that internally there is a fetter” (T1.584a-14: 眼緣色生內結, 比丘者, 內實有結知內有結如真.)

¹³¹ Hamilton is referring to W Rahula in 1985:20: see 1.2

the early texts “mind” seems to refer to the most preliminary stage of filtering and organizing of experiential data according to whether it is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched or non-sensory (that is, abstract). (Hamilton 2000:167 n27)

When it is said that the sense organs, as physical body parts, are literally parts of the form aggregate along with other bodily organs, Hamilton is careful to note,

the senses as such are best understood as neither in terms of sense organs having corresponding sense objects, nor as things that can be identified as part of any particular *khandha*. Rather they should be understood figuratively as the faculties of vision, hearing, smelling and so on.

These are figurative in that the manner in which they are present, so to speak, is quite different from the presence of the sense organs. “An eye” (for example), as a later text puts it, “does not see because it is not conscious’ nor does consciousness see, because it is not an eye.”¹³²

The point of the sense referred to as eye is *seeing*—both the ability to see, and in the activity of seeing. This is the case with all the senses: the point of an ear is *hearing*, of a nose *smelling*, and so on. In knowing that a human being has senses, what one knows is not just that he physically has eyes, ears, nose, but that he can see, hear, smell.

(Hamilton 2000:161; underscoring added)

9.6.3 Functionality and faculty. The functional aspects of the 5 physical sense-faculties (*pañc’-indriya*) are well known to the Abhidhamma tradition, and to highlight this functionality over their physicality, the term *pasāda* is used for them. The word *pasāda* (Skt *prasāda*) literally means “clearness, brightness, serenity, faith,”¹³³ but the term is not used in the early Pali texts. **Mrs CAF Rhys Davids** observes that

Pasādo, meaning literally clearness, brightness, serenity, faith, is used to denote the receptive reacting sense-agency Taken causatively it may conceivably have meant either that which makes clear—a revealer, as it were ... or that which gratifies or satisfies, both emphasizing psychological *process*, rather than “product” or “seat.” (DhsA:R 159 n2)

The physical organs clearly function in both ways—receiving and reacting to sense-stimuli and as a channel for the gratifying of sense-pleasures.¹³⁴

10 Derived form

10.1 MATERIAL PHENOMENA. There are the 4 primary elements (*mahā,bhūta*) and the forms that take hold of or cling to the 4 primary elements, that is, the “derived (or derivative) forms” (*upādāya rūpā*). Although the “derived forms” are mentioned in the Suttas—such as **the Sammā,dīṭṭhi Sutta** (M 9),¹³⁵ **the Mahā Hatthi,padopama Sutta** (M 28),¹³⁶ and **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.-56)¹³⁷—their actual analysis first appears only in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.¹³⁸

¹³² DhsA (Attha,sālinī) 400 (said by the Ancients).

¹³³ Dhs:R 159; qu in Karunadasa 1967:44.

¹³⁴ See Karunadasa 1967:44-49.

¹³⁵ M 9,54/1:53 (SD 11.14).

¹³⁶ M 28,5/1:185 (SD 6.16).

¹³⁷ S 22.56,7/3:59 (SD 3.7).

¹³⁸ Dhs 596, 980; Tikap 3, qu at Vism 535; Tikap 89, 109; Vism 444. See also BDict: Khandha & also Abhs: ÑB 6.2-5. For a useful discussion, see Harvey 1993:3-5 (digital ed); also Karunadasa 1967:38 f & Boisvert 1995:37-42.

According to the Abhidhamma, there are 2 kinds of matter, namely, the 4 primary elements and the 24 derived forms, comprising 11 categories and totalling 28 types of phenomena—as mentioned in **the Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2): “The 4 great elements and the material forms derived from the 4 great elements (*upādāya rūpa*)—this is called form.”¹³⁹ Derived matter is discussed in some detail in **the Visuddhi.magga**.¹⁴⁰

Nothing beyond the listing of the types of derived forms is found in the Pali Canon, not even in the Dhamma, *sagaṇī*, which has the most exhaustive analysis of matter in the Canon. Some helpful information about the two groups of form, however, is found in **the Paṭṭhāna**, according to which the 4 primary elements constitute conditions (*paccaya*) by way of conascence (*sahajāta*), support or dependence (*nissaya*), presence (*atthi*) and on-abeyance [non-absence] (*avigata*) in relation to the derived forms.¹⁴¹

The implication that could be drawn from the first [conascence] is that the *upādā-rūpas*, whenever they arise, arise simultaneously with the arising of the *mahābhūtas*. As a rule their genesis is necessarily concomitant with that of the *mahābhūtas*. They cannot come into being independently of the latter. All the material elements, whether primary or secondary, with the exception of certain ones of the latter group, exist for the same length of time. Hence we might as well say that, since the *upādā-rūpas* arise concurrently with the arising of the *mahābhūtas*, the existence as well as the cessation of the majority of the former coincide with the existence and cessation of the latter. (Karunadasa 1967:31)

10.2 BASES FOR THE ARISING OF FORM. The 28 material phenomena can be summarized by way of their origin or basis for arising (*samuṭṭhāna*).¹⁴² The Commentaries often mention the following 4 “bases for the arising of form” (*rūpassa samuṭṭhāna*), that is, from karma (*kamma*), from consciousness (*viññāṇa*), from heat (*utu*) and from food (*āhāra*).¹⁴³

All forms, according to the Abhidhamma, are “rootless” (*ahetuka*) because they do not associate with either the wholesome, unwholesome or indeterminate roots, and any such association is restricted to mental phenomena. All form is “with conditions” (*sappaccaya*), because it arises dependent on the above 4 bases. It is “subject to influxes” (*sāsava*)¹⁴⁴ because it can be made an object of the 4 influxes.¹⁴⁵

All forms are conditioned (*saṅkhata*) and mundane (*lokiya*), because there is no form or matter that transcends the world of the 5 aggregates of clinging. All form is of the sense spheres, even that of the form spheres, because it is the object of sensual craving. Form is objectless (*anārammaṇa*) because, unlike mental phenomena, it cannot know an object, and it is “not to be abandoned” or indestructible (*apahātābba*), like the defilements, on account of the 4 supramundane paths.

In a later development in the Abhidhamma tradition, all the 11 classes of matter [I-XI, Table 10], primary and derived, are divided into two groups, namely, concretely produced matter (*nippahanna-rūpa*) and non-concretely produced matter (*anippahanna-rūpa*). Here, **anippahanna** is, as the Dīgha Subcommentary defines it, “unsubstantiated on the level of ultimate meaning: the meaning is that ‘it does not exist’” (*param’atthato asiddho, n’atthī ti attho*) (DAṬ 2:268). They are “non-concrete” in

¹³⁹ S 12.2.12/2:3 f; see SD 5.11.

¹⁴⁰ Vism 14.36-73/443-451. See also Karunadasa 1967:31-98 (chs 3-5).

¹⁴¹ Tikap 3, 4, 6, 7.

¹⁴² These are not to be confused with the 6 sources of wrongdoing (*samuṭṭhāna*), a late Vinaya legal term (Kkhv 22): see KhpA:Ñ 2.35/31.

¹⁴³ Vism 20.27-42/614-617; Miln 7.5/268; Abhk 6.9-14 = Abhk:BRS 246-252, also Abhk:SRD 161 n4. Buddhaghosa describes the world ruler’s wheel gem as arising from karma-conditioned “heat” (*utu*) (KhpA 172).

¹⁴⁴ Here the prefix *sa-* (with) does not imply association (*sampayutta*) but the ability to be made an object of the influxes.

¹⁴⁵ Namely, sensual desire (*kāma*), (attachment to) existence (*bhava*), views (*diṭṭhi*), and ignorance (*avijjā*), also called the “floods” (*ogha*): see Abhk 7.4 = Abhk:BRS 265 f.

the sense that they have no real existence of their own, but arise in dependence on the “concretely produced matter.”

From *nippahanna*, we get the intensive form, **parinippahanna** (“preconditioned,” ie predetermined by karma),¹⁴⁶ a term that qualifies practically all material states (*rūpa, dhamma*), that is, they are impermanent (*anicca*), conditioned (*saṅkhata*), dependently arisen (*paṭicca, samuppanna*), subject to destruction (*khaya, dhamma*), subject to passing away (*vaya, dhamma*), of a nature conducive to dispassion (*virāga, dhamma*), subject to cessation (*nirodha, dhamma*), and subject to change (*vipariṇāma, dhamma*). What is not “preconditioned” is either nirvana or a mere designation (*paññatti*) without any reality of its own.

Seven of the 11 classes of matter [I-VII] are called “concrete matter” (*nippahanna, rūpa*)¹⁴⁷ or the real elements of matter (*rūpa, dhamma*), because they have intrinsic characteristics and are therefore suitable for contemplation and comprehension by insight. The other 4 classes [VIII-XI], being more abstract, are called “non-concrete matter” (*anippahanna, rūpa*), or nominal elements of matter. They comprise merely terms for different modes or aspects of the 18 forms of concrete matter in combination. The 10 forms of non-concrete matter do not arise directly from the 4 primary elements: they are merely positions, phases, characteristics or aspects of concrete matter. They have no objective reality of their own, existing only secondarily to concrete matter, “following it” (*tag, gatika*); hence, they are only conventionally regarded as elements of matter.¹⁴⁸ Non-concrete matter, in other words, does not comprise separate realities in its own right, and is not an object for insight development.¹⁴⁹

In Table 10, only (1)-(4)—that is, the primary elements (*mahā, bhūtā*)—are fully listed in the Suttas, but the rest (the 24 derived elements) are only listed in the Abhidhamma.¹⁵⁰ **The Visuddhi-magga**, after discussing these 28 aspects of derived matter or material phenomena, goes on to classify them according to an extended “totality formula,” thus:

Herein, the 5, beginning with the eye, are internal (*ajjhātika*) because they occur in close connection with selfhood [in oneself]. The rest are external (*bāhira*) because they are external to it. The 9 beginning with the eyes and the three elements, except for the water element, making 12 kinds in all, are to be taken as gross (*olārika*) because of impinging (on the sense-faculties). The rest are subtle (*sukhuma*) because they are the opposite of it. What is subtle is far (*dūre*), that is, it is difficult to penetrate [comprehend]. The other is near (*santike*) because it is easy to penetrate.

The 18 kinds of matter—namely, the 4 elements, the 13 beginning with the eye, and material food—are derived [concrete] (*nippahanna*) because they can be discerned through their own essence, having exceeded the (purely conceptual) states of (matter as) delimitation, alteration and characteristic.¹⁵¹ The rest, being the opposite, are underived [non-concrete] (*anippahanna*).

The 5 kinds beginning with the eye are sensitive matter (*pasāda, rūpa*) through their being conditions for the apprehension of visible data, etc, because they are, as it were, bright like the surface of a mirror. The rest are insensitive matter (*na, pasāda, rūpa*) because they are the opposite of it.

¹⁴⁶ Kvu 459-462, 626 f.

¹⁴⁷ Or, alternatively, “concretely produced matter” or “concretely derived matter.”

¹⁴⁸ Dhammapāla: *nippahanna, rūpassa pariccheda, vikāra, lakkaṇa, bhāvato taggatikam evā ti rūpant-v-eva vuccati* (VismṬ 459 f).

¹⁴⁹ See Karunadasa 1967:67 f.

¹⁵⁰ Their analysis first appears in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka (Dhs 596, 980; Tikap 3, qu at Vism 535; Tikap 89, 109; Vism 444). See BDict: *Khandha* & also *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (Abhds:ÑB 6.2-5). For a useful discussion, see Harvey 1993:3-5 (digital ed); also Karunadasa 1967:38 f & Boisvert 1995:37-42.

¹⁵¹ Here I follow Vism:Ñ. See Vism 14.77/451.

Table 10**THE 28 MATERIAL PHENOMENA (RŪPA)**

(Dhs 127; Vism 443; Abhs:SR 159; Abhs:BRS 6.2-5/235-242; Abhs:WG 216-228)

Concretely produced form*(nipphanna,rūpa)***I. The primary elements (mahā,bhūtā)**

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Earth element | <i>paṭhavī dhātu</i> |
| 2. Water element | <i>āpo dhātu</i> |
| 3. Fire element | <i>teja dhātu</i> |
| 4. Wind element | <i>vāyo dhātu</i> |

II. Sensitive phenomena¹⁵² (pāsāda,rūpa)

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| 5. Eye-sensitivity | <i>cakkhu</i> |
| 6. Ear-sensitivity | <i>sota</i> |
| 7. Nose-sensitivity | <i>ghāna</i> |
| 8. Tongue-sensitivity | <i>jivhā</i> |
| 9. Body-sensitivity | <i>kāya</i> |

III. Objective phenomena (gocara,rūpa)¹⁵⁴

- | | | |
|--|---------------------|-----|
| 10. Visible form | <i>rūpa</i> | 25. |
| 11. Sound | <i>sadda</i> | |
| 12. Smell | <i>gandha</i> | |
| 13. Taste | <i>rasa</i> | |
| [Touch = 3 elements:
earth, fire, wind | <i>phoṭṭhabba</i>] | |

IV. Sexual phenomena (bhāva,rūpa)

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 14. Femininity | <i>itthatta</i> |
| 15. Masculinity | <i>purisatta</i> |

V. Heart phenomenon

- | | |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| 16. Heart-base | <i>hadaya,vatthu¹⁵⁵</i> |
|----------------|------------------------------------|

VI. Life phenomenon (jīvita,rūpa)

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 17. Life faculty | <i>jīvit'indriya</i> |
|------------------|----------------------|

VII. Nutritional phenomenon (āhāra,rūpa)

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 18. Edible food | <i>kavaḷiṅk'āhāra</i> |
|-----------------|-----------------------|

Non-concretely produced form*(anipphanna,rūpa)***VIII. Limiting phenomena (pariccheda,rūpa)**

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| 19. Space element | <i>ākāsa,dhātu</i> |
|-------------------|--------------------|

IX. Communicating phenomena (viññātti,rūpa)

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 20. Bodily intimation | <i>kāya,viññatti</i> |
| 21. Vocal intimation | <i>vacī,viññatti</i> |

X. Mutable phenomena (vikāra,rūpa)¹⁵³

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 22. Lightness (agility) | <i>lahutā</i> |
| 23. Plasticity (malleability) | <i>mudutā</i> |
| 24. Wieldiness (adaptability) | <i>kammaññatā</i>
(plus 2 intimations, 20-21) |

XI. Characteristics of form (lakkhaṇa,rūpa)

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Growth (production) | <i>upacaya</i> |
| 26. Continuity | <i>santati</i> |
| 27. Decay | <i>jaratā</i> |
| 28. Impermanence | <i>aniccatā</i> |

Only the primary elements are the real states of matter. All the others are derived or secondary states of matter, dependent on the primary elements, without any real separate existence or reality.

¹⁵² These are the internal senses (*ajjhattik'āyatana*) as faculties of perception (*cakkhu, sota, ghana, jivhā, kāya*). See 8.2 above.

¹⁵³ These are the 3 characteristics of the living body. **The Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** defines lightness as "light transformability" (*lahu, pariṇāmatā*), lack of heaviness (*adandhatā*), non-rigidity (*avitathatā*); plasticity (*mudutā*) is softness (*maddavatā*), lack of hardness (*akakkhaḷatā*); and wieldiness (*kammaññatā*) (Dhs 144). These defs may seem to apply to all forms of matter, but later scholiasts say that they only refer to certain characteristics of a living body, and are not found apart from one another (*na aññam-aññam vijahati*) (Abhvk 281). The terms *lahu* and *kammañña* often occur in the Suttas in reference to bodily health and efficiency (D 1:204, 3:257 = A 4:335,6 = 335,14; M 1:437, 473; U 15). *Mudu* mostly occurs in reference to bodily beauty (A 1:9, 4:421; M 3:243; S 2:268). See Karunadasa 1967:77 f.

¹⁵⁴ Also called *visaya,rūpa*.

¹⁵⁵ This term is not found in the Canon, but only occurs as *vatthu* in **Paṭṭhāna** (Paṭ 1,4). See Vism 8.111-113/256; Abhs:BRS 6.3/239 (5).

Sensitive matter itself, together with the three, beginning with the femininity faculty, is faculty (*indriya*) in the sense of predominance. The rest are not-faculty (*anindriya*) because they are the opposite of it. What we shall later point out as “karma-born”¹⁵⁶ is clung to (*upādiṇṇa*), that is, acquired by karma. The rest are not clung to (*anupādiṇṇa*) because they are the opposite of it. (Vism 14.73/450 f)

The main points of the 28 material phenomena are summarized in **Table 10** for easy reference.

11 Meditating on the elements

11.1 NOTING THE ELEMENTS IN YOUR BODY. An easy way to meditate on the elements internally is to note them in your own body in the following way:

earth element	the hardness felt when you press your tongue against the palate or teeth;
water element	the feel of saliva in your mouth or tears in your eyes or sweat on your body;
fire element	the heat or cold on your skin or a general bodily sense of the temperature;
wind element	the in-and-out-breath (eg at the nose-tip), or the feel of air touching your skin;
space element	the mouth cavity, the nose cavity, the alimentary canal, the stomach, the space your physical body take up.

This is only a preliminary exercise that should be repeated in this sequence over and over until we are fully familiar with the processes. We could do this before doing the breath meditation, or at any time when we feel like it; for example, after a good meditation when the mind is calm and clear.

Another variation of the internal-element meditation is to combine it with breath meditation. As we watch the breath, that is, the wind element; note or label it as “wind, wind.” However, if we are watching the breath by way of *a contact-point* of the breath at the nose-tip, etc (Paṭisambhidā, magga way), then we should note it as “earth, earth.” Or, if we are watching “the rising and falling of the belly” (Mahasi vipassana method), then we can either note it as *wind* (watching the movement) or as *earth* (noticing the hardness or distension of the belly). It should be noted that such mental noting can be dispensed with once we can notice the phenomenon directly, so that we find mental focus faster.

At any suitable point, especially during the longer pauses between breaths or when the breathing is very subtle and hardly noticeable, go on to watch the other three (or four) elements as above. If we find difficulty noticing the space element, we can omit it, until such time we are able to notice it. Always close the practice with at least a short session of lovingkindness cultivation.¹⁵⁷

11.2 WALKING WITH THE ELEMENTS. An interesting and beneficial variation of walking meditation is called “walking with the elements.”¹⁵⁸ Before we try walking with the elements, it is advisable that we have some experience with the traditional walking meditation sequence, that is, mindfully noting the whole walking process labelling (subverbally) all the stages (for example, “standing ... lifting, pushing, stepping,” etc), or noting them subliminally (without any subverbalizing).¹⁵⁹

When we are familiar with the traditional walking meditation, then, we may go on to practise walking with the elements. We should be sure that we have understood the basic theory regarding how the steps and the elements are connected before actually going on to walk the elements. While

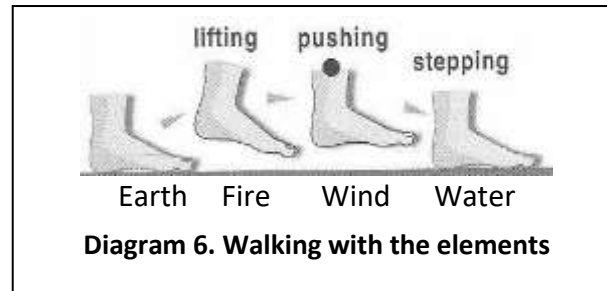
¹⁵⁶ See Vism 14.75/451 & 20.27/614.

¹⁵⁷ For a more elaborate practice, see Pa-Auk 2003:144-148, or its summary in Susīlā 2005:241-250 (ch 10).

¹⁵⁸ This practice is common enough, but I am not sure if this name has been used as such. See Silananda 1990: 75 f = 2004:77 f.

¹⁵⁹ The former is what is usually regarded as the Vipassana (Insight) method; the latter is common in the forest method of Ajahn Chah,

standing, the earth element is easily noticed when the foot presses against the ground. The lightness we feel when the foot is being lifted off the ground is the fire element. The “pushing” or forward movement of the foot is the wind element. As we lower our foot to the ground, the feeling of its getting heavier is the water element. All this is illustrated in this diagram:



11.3 PRACTICE. The first step in walking with the element is to note the earth element while standing: notice the hardness of the floor, how it is supporting our weight, how the sole is pressing against the ground, the feel of the ground, and so on. Go on noting the earth element first until we are very familiar with it before going on to the next element.

After noting the earth element in our standing, we go on to note as fire element as the lightness in the process of lifting the foot off the ground. Continue with only this two-step sequence until we are fully familiar with it.

Then, after noting the earth element in the standing, followed by the fire element in the lifting, we go on to note the wind element in the forward movement (“pushing”) of the foot. Go on practising this three-step sequence until we are fully familiar with it.

Finally, after noting the earth element in the standing, the fire element in the lifting, the wind element in the “pushing” of the foot, we note the water element in the heaviness in the lowering of the foot, just before it touches the ground. With this, the full sequence is complete, and we should go on practising it as necessary.

As mentioned earlier, we should mindfully note the whole walking process by labelling or noting (subverbally) all the stages (for example, “standing ... lifting, pushing, stepping,” etc), or noting them subliminally (with any subverbalizing). Generally, is it easier to begin with the labelling method, which helps in easily identifying each stage of the sequence. When we can easily discern the stages and walking process, then we go on to note the sequence without any subverbalizing, that is, by silent mental noting.

It is vital to understand that this practice is not a ritual of identifying the walking process, but that of being more aware of how we are constituted of the elements and how they function in ourselves. When we see the elements clearly in ourselves, it is easier for us to let go of the false conception of a “being.” There are only the 4 elements standing, the 4 elements walking, and so on.¹⁶⁰

12 Nāma,rūpa

12.1 A very important point regarding form or matter is its close relationship with the mind. In fact, so important is this interconnection, there is a special early Buddhist term for it: *nāma,rūpa*, “name-and-form,” a singular compound.¹⁶¹ The fact that the term is a singular noun shows that the two components—name and form—are not separate realities, but an interdependent reality: that the

¹⁶⁰ See Silananda 2004:78.

¹⁶¹ See Sue Hamilton 1996a:121-137 (ch 6).

name (the word) and the form (the thing) are interrelated. It helps at the start to say that a key point of this singular compound is the notion that “the word is *not* the thing.”

12.2 In more concrete terms, *nāma,rūpa* is about the interbeing or interrelationship amongst the 4 elements and personal experience. It is important to understand here that the 4 elements are not concepts, but are “ultimate reality” (*paramattha,dhamma*),¹⁶² as contrasted against “conventional reality (*sammuti,dhamma*), such as notions of a person, things and names, which gives them a conceptual identity.¹⁶³ In other words, as **Sue Hamilton** puts in,

nāma is described as giving rise to a verbal or conceptual, that is, abstract, impression on *rūpa*, and *rūpa* is described as giving rise to a sensory impression on *nāma*, and that there are thus these two aspects to the compound as a whole. (1996a:127)

12.3 Technically, “form” (*rūpa*) [4; 11] refers to the 4 great elements [2], both internal (as the body) and external (as another’s body and as nature). **The Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2)¹⁶⁴ gives this definition of name-and-form:¹⁶⁵

And what, bhikshus, is **name-and-form**?

Feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention. This is called name. And the 4 great elements and the material form derived from the 4 great elements. This is called form.

Thus this is name and this is form—this is called name-and-form.

(S 12.2,12/2:3), SD 5.11

12.4 The Pali term *nāma* is usually rendered as “name,” but this should not be taken literally. In fact, it is practically synonymous with what we generally understand as “mind”:

Nāma is the assemblage of mental factors involved in cognition: feeling, perception, volition, contact and attention (*vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phassa, manasikāra*, S 12.2).¹⁶⁶

These are called “name” (*nāma*) because they contribute to the process of cognition by which objects are subsumed under the conceptual designations. (Bodhi, S:B 48)

12.5 In other words, while *nāma* is centred on the mind (*citta*) and *rūpa* is centred on the 4 primary elements, **Peter Harvey** notes that “there is no dualism of a mental ‘substance’ versus a physical ‘substance’: both *nāma* and *rūpa* each refer to clusters of changing, interacting processes.”¹⁶⁷ It should be noted that in the Nikāyas, *nāma,rūpa* does not include *viññāṇa* (consciousness), which is actually its condition, that *nāma* and *rūpa* are mutually dependent, like two sheaves of reeds leaning against one another.¹⁶⁸ We shall examine *viññāṇa* in due course (SD 17.8a).

13 Where no element leaves any trace

13.1 We have so far seen how the elements exist in terms of space and time: they are a spatio-temporal reality. By that very nature, they are constructed or mind-made, and therefore

¹⁶² The Abhidhamma tradition speaks of these 4 ultimate realities: consciousness (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*), matter (*rūpa*) and nirvana (*nibbāna*) (Abhs 1.2 = Abhs:BRS 25-27 = Abhs:SR 81).

¹⁶³ On “naming and recognizing,” see SD 17.4(1).

¹⁶⁴ See SD 5.11.

¹⁶⁵ See also **Mahā Rāhu’ovāda Sutta** (M 62.8-12) [8] and **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56.7/3:59), SD 3.7. See also **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15), SD 5.17(3) on the Sutta’s application of *nāma,rūpa*.

¹⁶⁶ S 12.2.12/2:3; cf M 9.26/1:50. For details based on a Myanmar method, see Pa-Auk 2003: Talk 4 esp pp142-148.

¹⁶⁷ Harvey 1993:11 digital ed.

¹⁶⁸ See **Nala,kalapiya S** (S 12.67/2:114) & **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15.21-22/2:63); see also S:B 48 & Hamilton 1996a:126 f.

impermanent, unsatisfactory and without any abiding entity (non-self). It is therefore profoundly significant that nirvana has neither temporal nor spatial referents: nirvana is the highest reality, beyond time and space. **The Udāna** describes nirvana in various ways, such as these:

There is, bhikshus, that place where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind. (U 8.1), SD 50.1
 Bhikshus, there is the unborn, unbecome, uncreated, unconditioned.¹⁶⁹ (U 8.3), SD 50.3

13.2 The Kevaḍḍha Sutta (D 11) records the same teaching by way of this question posed by a “certain monk”: “Where do the 4 primary elements—earth, water, fire, wind element—cease without remainder?”¹⁷⁰ These elements, although physical as opposed to mental, do not merely refer to the “elemental” forces that we are, but are the very structure of the universe and life itself, that is, the four phases of matter. In this question, the adverb *where* should be well noted. It is interesting that while the ancient Indian sages and seekers generally discuss existence in external or *spatial* terms,¹⁷¹ the Buddha speaks in terms of inner space, of the 6 senses, especially the mind.¹⁷² This spatial notion is clearly evident in the question.

13.3 The primary elements clearly cannot cease in a universe, physical or non-physical, existing in time and space, that is, a universe made up of the 4 primary elements themselves. This is where matter is neither created nor destroyed, but only shifts in their form.¹⁷³ This universe comprises **the 3 worlds**: the sense-world (*kāma, dhātu*), the form world (*rūpa, dhātu*) and the formless world (*arūpa, dhātu*).

Early Upaniṣadic asseverations place the realm of the immortal, the liberated, variously in the *brahmaloka*, *svargaloka*, or the trans-solar region. It is quite literally and spatially the highest cosmic plane. In cosmological *suttas* such the *Devaddha* [sic, Kevaḍḍha Sutta, D 13], the paradise of the god *Brahmā* is merely a *devaloka*, and *devaloka* is not the abode of immortality. (R H Robinson 1972:321)

Obviously, the answer has to lie outside of such a universe, as something non-temporal and non-spatial, or what is sometimes called “the realm of cessation” (*nirodha, dhātu*),¹⁷⁴ that is, a non-spatial (*apatiṭṭhita*) realm.¹⁷⁵ In other words, the 4 primary elements cease to exist in nirvana.¹⁷⁶

14 Not identifying with the body

14.1 It is interesting, even today, to see how people identify with their physical body.¹⁷⁷ So they make a lot of effort to beautify it by physically building it, by slimming it, by adorning it, by spraying

¹⁶⁹ More lit, “ ... there is the non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned ... ,” or “not-born ... ” etc.

¹⁷⁰ D 11,67b/1:215 to the end @ SD 1.7.

¹⁷¹ See, eg, S Schayer, “Das mahāyānistische Absolutum nach der Lehre der Mādhyamikas,” *Orientalische Literaturzeitung*, 1935:401-415; and RH Robinson, “Some methodological approaches to the unexplained points,” 1972: 321 f.

¹⁷² See, eg, E J Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London: Routledge & KeganPaul, 1933:128.

¹⁷³ In science, this is known as the law of the conservation of mass (discovered by Antoine Lavoisier, c1785). Since, according to Albert Einstein (1905), matter and energy are interchangeable, this law is also called “the law of the conservation of mass and energy”: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservation_of_mass & <http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/earth/geophysics/can-we-manufacture-matter.htm>.

¹⁷⁴ D 33,1.10(14)/3:215.

¹⁷⁵ See R H Robinson 1972:322 f.

¹⁷⁶ For a related discussion in connection with the state of the Tathāgata after death, see **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā-putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8 (3.6). See also Sue Hamilton 2000:156.

¹⁷⁷ See Lily de Silva 1984. Technically, this is the basis for the self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), the first of the 3 fetters that needs to be broken before streamwinning (the first step towards awakening) can be attained: see **Emotional independence**, SD 40.8.

it with scents, by cosmetic surgery, by clothing or unclothing it, by showing it off, and so on. Very often, too, we identify and judge others by their physical appearance.

Understandably, such physical appearances are simply masks we wear to project our self-image or how we regard ourselves, or to package ourselves so that we are accepted as members of a group, or enjoy some kind of status in society, or simply, the approval of others. Therefore, we end up as marketing ourselves as products, supplying ourselves in accordance with social demands. The bottom line is that there is very little true and healthy communication amongst pieces of meat, no matter how admirable.

14.2 Most religious believers, especially those following the God-religions, identify with their bodies, and believe that when they die, they are bodily taken up into heaven. This is difficult to comprehend for a number of reasons. Firstly, the body would have rotted and dissolved away long before anything is ever physically transported into heaven. Many of them also believe that their bodies should not be cremated; otherwise, they would not, as it were, have a body to go into heaven with! This is a clear example of religious superstition. Secondly, we all know that this physical body is not perfect and often diseased, and it is this very body that is going into heaven, with its diabetes, heart problem, irritable bowel syndrome and so on!

14.3 Often, we are religious simply because of wishful thinking: we desire security in this life and some kind of survival after death. As a rule, we often turn to religion, seeking answers to questions concerning life after death because of our lack of security in this life and our fear of the future, especially death. When we fear death, we are naturally inclined to want to believe that there *is* life after death. Such beliefs are rooted in the extreme view of eternalism (*sassata, diṭṭhi*).¹⁷⁸

On the other hand, if we live immoral lives or habitually commit bad actions, we would somehow, consciously or unconsciously, fear their painful consequences. On account of such fear of the painful fruits of our bad actions, we are inclined to believe, or want to believe, that there is *no* life after death. This is a common view of the materialists, whose philosophy is rooted in annihilationism (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*).

Now we can conclude from this is that certain kinds of beliefs, especially religious beliefs, are based on fear. That fear is, in turn, based on identifying the body and mind as our immortal self or eternal soul. The God-centred religions tend to reinforce such fear through complex and subtle means through their beliefs, rituals and tribalism. Any kind of idea or practice that reinforces such fears or beliefs cannot be healthy, and should be discarded.

When we realize that neither the body nor the mind is the self, then, we have no need for such beliefs, and we lose all such fears. With that, we also see no need of finding answers to the question of whether or not there is life after death. We understand and accept that our present life is the only true reality, with which we can and must work out our own liberation and awakening.¹⁷⁹

14.4 When we truly see our own body or another's body as being made up of the 4 elements, we begin to see that it is *not* an abiding entity nor does it have any essence; it has nothing we can really identify with. It is only a dynamic composite and interbeing of the primary elements. In other words, the meditation on the elements helps us to deconstruct our false notion of a "being" (whether as ourself or as another or as others).¹⁸⁰

Our experience of the world around us—how we *sense* it—is nothing but the 4 elements—that is the *structure* of the external world—namely, the first aggregate, that of form. How we *make sense* of this experience is through the workings of the other four aggregates: feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—that is, the *fabrication* of our internal world or private reality. Thus we see a close connection between the physical world and how we experience it—as noted by **Sue Hamilton**,

¹⁷⁸ On eternalism and annihilationism, see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,2-4), SD 1.1 (3.1).

¹⁷⁹ Further see Hayes, 1991:16 f.

¹⁸⁰ Further see **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b.

What is more difficult to grasp, or what is even less obvious, is that if the *structure* of the world of experience is correlated with the cognitive process, then it is not just that we name objects, concrete and abstract, and superimpose secondary characteristics according to the senses as described. It is also that *all* the structural features of the world of experience are cognitively correlated. (Hamilton 2000:169)

We shall now go on to examine, in the following chapters of **SD 17**, how we create our worlds and construct our private realities.

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Bibliography, see SD 17.17

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