

## *Rūpa* (Form)

### A study of the 1<sup>st</sup> aggregate

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#### 1. Einstein and matter

1.1 EINSTEIN. What attracts thinkers and scientists like **Albert Einstein** (1879-1955) to Buddhism is, in his own words, “a cosmic religious feeling...which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man’s image” (Wilber, 1985:102). For this reason, some informed Buddhist enthusiasts have often quoted (and misquoted) Einstein *ad nauseum* as a champion of the religion, 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)<sup>1</sup>

The year 2005 marks the centenary of Einstein’s publication of his famous “special theory of relativity”<sup>2</sup>—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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

1.2 FORM AND MATTER. **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) as form (*rūpa*);
- (2) as what is visible [*rūpāyatana*];
- (3) as a sentient realm (*rūpa, dhātu* or *rūpāvacara*); and
- (4) as dhyana or meditation absorption (*rūpa-jjhāna*).

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

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<sup>1</sup> A similar remark is made by **Bertrand Russell**, the greatest philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who despite his rejection of all religions, has this to say of immediate relevance here: “Philosophical conceptions are a product of two factors: one, inherited religious and ethical conceptions; the other called the Scientific. Seen thus, Buddhism is a combination of both speculative and scientific philosophy. It advocates the Scientific Method and pursues that to a finality that may be called the Rationalistic. In it are to be found answers to such question of interest as “What are mind and matter? Of them which is of greater importance? Is the Universe moving towards a goal? What is man’s position? Is there living that is noble? It takes up where science cannot lead because of the limitations of the latter’s physical instruments. Its conquests are those of the mind.” (Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 1945)

<sup>2</sup> 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 Brian Greene, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> 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 totally destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the other hand, this same power, is mentally cultivated by the accomplished meditator as “psychic powers” (*iddhi, vidhā*) but used in peaceful ways and 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

<sup>4</sup> 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 ( $c^2$ ). Since the speed of light is a few hundred million metres per second,  $c^2$ , in these familiar units, comes to about 100,000, 000,000, 000,000 (US, 100 trillion; British, 100,000 billion)!

<sup>5</sup> See also Boisvert 1995:31-34.

Here, we shall examine the first, *rūpa*, as “form,” that is, physical or material form.<sup>6</sup> In the Pali Canon stock passages, *rūpa* is defined as the four elements, earth, water, fire and wind, [2] and *rūpa* derived or dependent upon (*upādāya*) them [10]. 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*).<sup>7</sup> In view of this, the tendency to understand and translate *rūpa* as “matter” is rather misleading.<sup>8</sup> 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)

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*.<sup>9</sup>

**The Khajjaniya Sutta** (S 22.79)<sup>10</sup> gives an instructive definitive of form, thus:

*Kiñ ca bhikkhave rūpaṃ vadetha.*

*Ruppatī ti kho bhikkhave tasmā rūpaṃ ti vuccati.*

*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 vuccati.*

And what, bhikshus, do you call **form**?<sup>11</sup>

It is transformed [molested], bhikshus, therefore it is called form.<sup>12</sup>

Transformed [molested] by what?

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

<sup>7</sup> Cf the foll passages: M 1:185-190; S 3:86; Dhs 134-146. Gethin’s fn.

<sup>8</sup> “Taken for granted and left largely unquestioned in Y Karunadasa’s study, *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter*, Colombo, 1967.” (Gethin’s fn)

<sup>9</sup> See SD 17.2d.

<sup>10</sup> S 22.79/3:86.

<sup>11</sup> *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 discussed. It merely introduces the characteristic of emptiness. Using the simile of a cow, Comy says that the cow is like emptiness, and the cow’s characteristics are like the characteristic of emptiness: one discerns 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.

<sup>12</sup> *Ruppatī ti kho bhikkhave tasmā rūpaṃ 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 ruppati 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 not self (SA 2:292). See S:B 1070 n110 (where Bodhi also points out Woodward’s misunderstanding of comy).

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 matter, but as *sentience*, the capacity for experiencing sensations. Matter and the external world are not denied, but taken as having a conditioned and relative existence. The rule of thumb is that “form” relates to a mental or psychological state, while “matter” refers to a purely physical state.<sup>13</sup>

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 an exemplary 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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1985:20 f; underscore added)

Such a misunderstanding, modern scholars like **Sue Hamilton**, would often point 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.

...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.<sup>14</sup> 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)

## 2. The four great elements

This scientific explanation is at once clear to one familiar with Abhidhamma or Buddhist scholastic psychology, especially in connection with the model of the four great [or primary] elements (*mahā, bhūta*). In the **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22; M 10) they are only briefly defined,<sup>15</sup> the reason

<sup>13</sup> See E Sarachchandra 1994: 103 & Sue Hamilton 2000:158-165.

<sup>14</sup> 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]

<sup>15</sup> 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 28.6-27/1185-191 = SD 6.16), **Mahā Rāhul’-**

being (according to traditional Buddhists) that it is meant for meditators with quick intuition (*ugghaṭitaññū*),<sup>16</sup> thus:

Furthermore, bhikshus, a monk reviews<sup>17</sup> this body, however it may be placed or disposed, in terms of the elements:<sup>18</sup>

“There are in this body

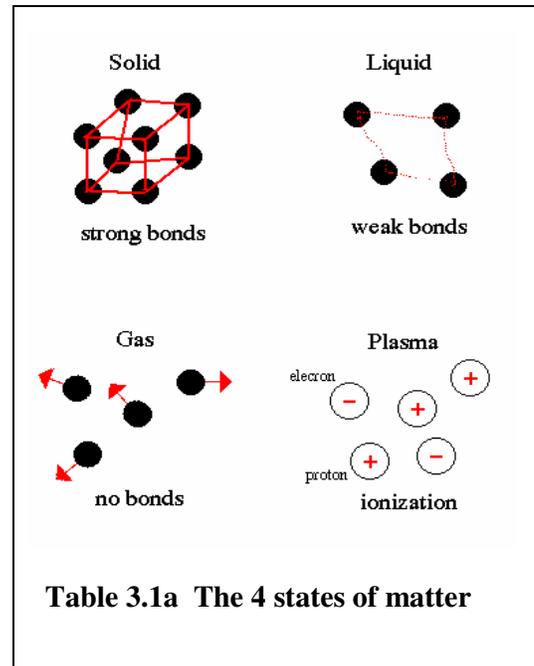
- (1) the earth-element (*paṭhavi*),
- (2) the water-element (*āpo*),
- (3) the fire-element (*tejo*),
- (4) the wind-element (*vāyo*).”

(D 22.6; M 10.12)<sup>19</sup>

These four elements—earth, water, fire, and wind element—are the ancient Indian names for the four “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 Hatthipadopama Sutta** (M 28),<sup>20</sup> the **Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62)<sup>21</sup> and the **Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140)<sup>22</sup>—the four elements are explained in greater detail.

These primary elements, “great elements” or “great essentials” (*mahā, bhūta*), are called “elements” (*dhātu*) in the sense that they have their own characteristics (*attano sabhavaṃ dhārenti*).<sup>23</sup> 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 four 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.

**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, pariyaṇa 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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).

<sup>17</sup> “Reviews,” *paccavekkhati*, see Introd (3.9b).

<sup>18</sup> 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, 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.

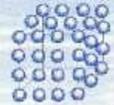
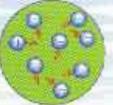
<sup>19</sup> D 22.6/2:294; M 10.12/1:62 = SD 13.3.

<sup>20</sup> M 28.6-27/1185-191 = SD 6.16.

<sup>21</sup> M 62.8-17/1:421-426 = SD 3.11.

<sup>22</sup> M 140.13-18/3:240-242 = SD 4.17.

<sup>23</sup> See Vism 11.93, 109; Abhs:BRS 1999:234-246.

| Solid   | Liquid  | Gas   | Plasma  |
|---|---|---|---|
| Example<br><b>Ice</b><br>H <sub>2</sub> O   | Example<br><b>Water</b><br>H <sub>2</sub> O                                       | Example<br><b>Steam</b><br>H <sub>2</sub> O                                       | Example<br><b>Ionized Gas</b><br>H <sub>2</sub> → H <sup>+</sup> + H <sup>+</sup> + 2e <sup>-</sup> |
| <b>Cold</b><br>T < 0°C  | <b>Warm</b><br>0 < T < 100°C  | <b>Hot</b><br>T > 100°C   | <b>Hotter</b><br>T > 100,000°C<br>I > 10 electron<br>Volts!   |
|  |  |  |                    |
| Molecules<br>Fixed in<br>Lattice  | Molecules<br>Free to<br>Move  | Molecules<br>Free to<br>Move, Large<br>Spacing                                    | Ions and<br>Electrons<br>Move<br>Independently,<br>Large<br>Spacing                                 |

**Table 3.1b.**  
**The four phases (states) of matter**  
<http://www.plasmas.org/rot-plasmas.htm>

### 3. The four states of matter according to 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 properties as ice, liquid, and vapour (gas) are dramatically different within the temperature and pressure ranges of everyday experience. (See 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.

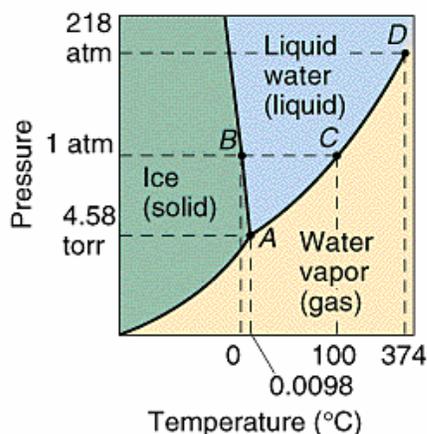
Modern science still has not fully understood the nature of non-solid states. Distinction between a solid and the two fluid states (gas and liquid) is clear only for those substances whose molecules are composed of a small number of atoms. When the number exceeds about 20 atoms, the liquid may often cool below the true melting point to form *glass*, which has the mechanical properties of a solid but lacks crystalline order. If the number 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

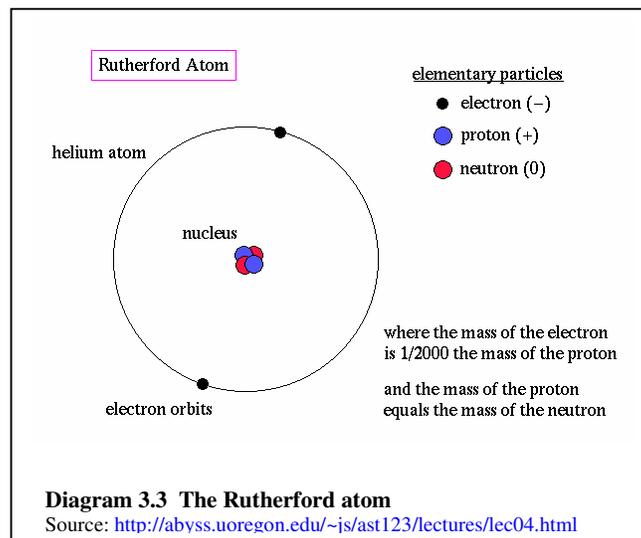


**Table 3.2. The phases of water**  
[http://itl.chem.ufl.edu/2045\\_s00/lectures/lec\\_f.html](http://itl.chem.ufl.edu/2045_s00/lectures/lec_f.html)

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”<sup>24</sup> (point A, “the triple point”). At 0°C and 1 atm,<sup>25</sup> 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”).<sup>26</sup>

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 ångström, 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 four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> See Ency Brit (15<sup>th</sup> ed) 14:206 (Phase Changes and Equilibria), and also [http://itl.chem.ufl.edu/2045\\_s00-lectures/lec\\_f.html](http://itl.chem.ufl.edu/2045_s00-lectures/lec_f.html).

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.

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”)<sup>28</sup> and *rūpa,kalāpa* (“material unit”).<sup>29</sup> 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,”<sup>30</sup> when we should properly be counting our own cows.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> See eg Ken Wilber (ed), *Quantum Questions*. Boston: Shambhala, 1985 esp pp5-8.

<sup>28</sup> VbhA 343 = VbhA:Ñ 2:67.

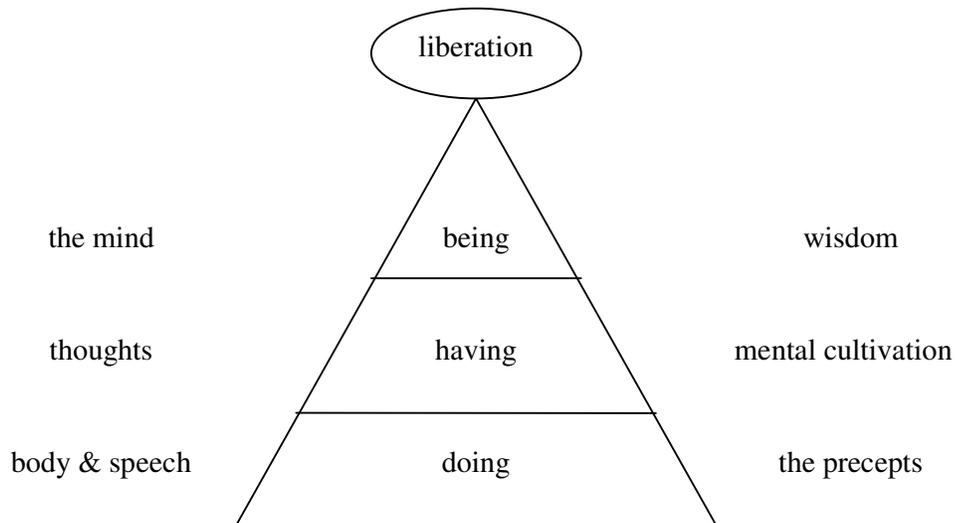
<sup>29</sup> Vism 18.4/587 f; Abhs 6.8 = Abhs:SR 164, 250; DhsA 316 = DhsA:PR 2:413 f. See BDict: *kalāpa & rūpa-kalāpa*. See SD 17.2d.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> “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)

<sup>32</sup> 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.

If the “doing” world is dominated by language and words, then the “having” world is one mostly of thoughts, ideas and joy. Only when one sees and enjoys the full potential of one’s goodness that one has attained to a true level of “being.” And yet all this is only the tools for wisdom, the key to total liberation. One simple way of describing this liberation is that one is emotionally independent of the world.<sup>33</sup> one is no more troubled by rain or rainbows. One is happy simply for *being* oneself, and it is a contagious joy that that benefits others, too. One has broken out of the created world.



**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:

Bhikshus, having known the parable of the raft, you should abandon even the Dharma,  
 how much more that which is not Dharma!<sup>34</sup> (M 22.14/1:135) = SD 3.13

#### 4. The six elements: definitions

Let us now return to our discussion on the elements. Thus far, we have seen that four 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*).<sup>35</sup> 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 here.

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

<sup>33</sup> See eg **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 20.4/1:56 etc, the insight refrain) = SD 13.3 esp SD 13.1(3.10) on “Independence.”

<sup>34</sup> *Dhammā pi vo pahātabbā pag’eva adhammā*. Comy takes *dhammā* here to mean “good states,” ie calm and insight (*samatha,vipassanā*), citing **Laṭutikôpama S** (M 66.26-33/1:455) as an example of the teaching of the abandonment of attachment to calm, and **Mahā Taṇhāsankhaya 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*.

<sup>35</sup> 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.

established anywhere<sup>36</sup> [8(5)], which, in fact, succinctly defines the nature of space: while all the manifestations of the four 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. 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. 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 spacially 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].

**The Dhātu,vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140) actually lists six elements (*cha dhātu*) and instructs on how they should be treated. A major section of the Sutta deals with the four foundations (*adhiṭṭhāna*) as the contemplation of mind-objects (*dharmānupassanā*). The uniqueness of this Sutta is that the contemplation of mind-objects here describes the nature of arhathood (M 140.12-29). These foundations are what make 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 six elements:<sup>37</sup>

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

### WISDOM: THE SIX ELEMENTS

“How, bhikshu, does one not neglect wisdom?”<sup>38</sup> 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]<sup>39</sup> and clung to<sup>40</sup> internally and individually [belonging to oneself], namely, *head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin*;<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> M 62.17/1:424 = SD 3.11.

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> Comy: Wisdom is not neglected by way of the meditation on the four elements. Here the meditation on the 4 elements is as found in **Mahā Hatthi,padōpama S** (M 28.6, 11) and **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62.8-12).

<sup>39</sup> “Solid, solidified [rigid],” *kakkhaḷaṃ kharigataṃ*. The former is the element’s characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) and the latter its mode (*ākāra*) (Vism 286). In the Abhidhamma, the hardness (*kakkhaḷatta*) itself is the earth element (VismT 362 f). See Karunadasa 1967:17 f.

<sup>40</sup> “Clung to,” *upādinna*. 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.

<sup>41</sup> The meditation on these five 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.

*flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys;*<sup>42</sup>  
*heart, liver, membranes (around the lungs),*<sup>43</sup> *spleen, lungs;*<sup>44</sup>  
*large intestines, small intestines, stomach-contents,*<sup>45</sup> *dung;*<sup>46</sup>  
 or whatever else<sup>47</sup> 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].<sup>48</sup> 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.’<sup>49</sup>

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed at the earth element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the earth element.

(2) THE WATER ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the water element** [cohesion]?<sup>50</sup>

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;*<sup>51</sup>

*tears, skin-grease [tallow], saliva, snot, oil of the joints,*<sup>52</sup> *urine.*<sup>53</sup>

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

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed at the water element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the water element.

(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,

<sup>42</sup> *Maṁsaṁ nahāru aṭṭhi aṭṭhi, mūñjā vakkam.*

<sup>43</sup> “Membranes,” alt tr “pleura,” *kilomaka*, ie a pair of membranous sacs surrounding the lungs.

<sup>44</sup> *Hadayaṁ yakanam kilomakam pihakam papphasam.*

<sup>45</sup> *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).

<sup>46</sup> *Antam anta, guṇam udariyam karisanam.* See M 3:90; KhpA 38. Later traditions add the 32<sup>nd</sup> part—*matthake mattha, lungam* (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.

<sup>47</sup> The phrase “whatever else” (*aññam pi kiñci*) is intended to include the earth element as comprised in those parts of the body not included in the above enumeration. According to the Abhidhamma the four 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.

<sup>48</sup> 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*).

<sup>49</sup> See §3n.

<sup>50</sup> “Water,” *āpo*. Abhidhamma characterizes it by cohesion (*ābandhana*).

<sup>51</sup> *Pittam semham pubbo lohitaṁ sedo medo.*

<sup>52</sup> *Lasikā*, ie synovial fluid.

<sup>53</sup> *Assu vasā khelo siṅghāṇikā lasikā muttam.* Here there are a total of 31 parts of the body. See here (4)n.

that by which one is warmed, ages, and burns,<sup>54</sup> and that by which what is eaten, drunk, chewed and tasted<sup>55</sup> gets completely digested, or whatever else that is fire, fiery and clung to internally and individually [belonging to oneself]—this, bhikshu, is called 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.’

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed at the fire element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the fire element.

(4) THE WIND ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the wind element** [motion]?<sup>56</sup>

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,

<sup>57</sup>*up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds that course through the limbs,*<sup>58</sup> *in-breath,*

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

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed at the wind element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the wind element.

(5) THE SPACE ELEMENT. What, bhikshu, is **the space element**?<sup>59</sup>

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) 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 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.’

When one sees it thus as it really is with right wisdom, one is revulsed at the space element and the mind becomes dispassionate towards the space element.

(6) CONSCIOUSNESS. Then there remains only **consciousness**,<sup>60</sup> pure and bright.<sup>61</sup> What does one know [cognize] with that consciousness?

<sup>54</sup> Apparently, these preceding three terms—*santappati, jiriyati, pariḍayhati*—refer to the body metabolism. In fact, the whole section refers to the body metabolism.

<sup>55</sup> *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.

<sup>56</sup> “Wind,” *vāyo*, or “air” element, that is, motion, in Abhidhamma, said to be “strengthening” or “supporting” (*viṭṭhambhana, lakkaṇa*). On how winds cause pains, see **Dhānañjāni S** (M 97.28-29/2:193) = SD 4.9.

<sup>57</sup> According to **Visuddhi, magga**, “winds” are responsible for the various internal motions of the body, namely, “up-going winds” (*uddhañ, 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.

<sup>58</sup> “Winds that course through the limbs,” *aṅga-m-aṅgānūsārino 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.

<sup>59</sup> “Space,” *ākāsa*, according to Abhidhamma, is not a primary element but is classified under “derivative material form” (*upādā rūpa*).

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.’<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> 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.’<sup>64</sup>

(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*).<sup>65</sup> The actual delimitation is so minute that it is 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.<sup>66</sup> Hence, space is said to manifest itself as “untouchedness” (*asamphuṭṭha, paccupaṭṭhāna*).<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Nature of the elements

**The Dhātu, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140) [4]—like the **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62)<sup>68</sup> [8] and **Mahā Hatthi, pādōpama Sutta** (M 28)<sup>69</sup>—presents the four primary elements both as internal (comprising the body) and as external (comprising another’s body and as nature or the universe). The

<sup>60</sup> 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)

<sup>61</sup> Cf “Monks, this mind is bright, but it is soiled by external impurities.” (A 1.6.1/1:10).

<sup>62</sup> “Ceases... is stilled,” *nirujjhati... vūpasammati*.

<sup>63</sup> Although in English, it appears contradictory in terms to speak of “neutral feeling”, this oxymoron obtains 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).

<sup>64</sup> **A simile of the fire-sticks** follows (M 140.19c/3:243 f = SD 4.17) follows, illustrating how contact arouses pleasure, pain or neutral feeling, just as fire is produced when the stick are rubbed together. One should merely note the feeling without comment, which would lead to equanimity (§20) and mental development.

<sup>65</sup> VismṬ 453; AbhsVṬ 98; Abhv 279; VismSn 5:67.

<sup>66</sup> VismṬ 453.

<sup>67</sup> VismṬ 453. See Karunadasa 1967:152 f.

<sup>68</sup> M 62.8-12/1:421-423 = SD 3.11, with §12 on “space,” the 4<sup>th</sup> element. Only 5 elements are mentioned here.

<sup>69</sup> M 28.5-25/1:185-190 = SD 6.16. On the 4 elements are mentioned, each in connection with the parable of the saw (M 21.20/1:129).

elements are systematically defined and discussed in **the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī**,<sup>70</sup> and elaborated in **the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha**<sup>71</sup> and **the Visuddhi,magga**.<sup>72</sup> Let us further examine the nature and characteristics of the elements and summarizing them in connection with meditation practice.

(1) **THE EARTH ELEMENT** (*paṭhavī,dhātu*), that is, hardness, softness, roughness, smoothness, heaviness, lightness,<sup>73</sup> is so called because, like the earth, it serves as a support or foundation for physical phenomena. The word *paṭhavi* (Skt *prthivī*) 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 in one’s own body there is of karmically acquired hardness or firmness—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 one’s own earth element.

According to Commentaries, the earth element has the characteristic of hardness (*kakkhāḷatta,lakkhaṇa*), the function of acting as a foundation (*paṭiṭṭhāna,rasa*) for the other primary elements and derived matter [11], and manifests itself as receiving (*sampaṭicchana,paccupaṭṭhāna*).<sup>74</sup> 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].

**THE EARTH SYMBOLISM IN THE BUDDHA LEGEND.** 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 paṭiṭṭhānam*) represents the Buddha’s attaining of the four paths of accomplishment (*iddhi,pada*).<sup>75</sup>

The earth symbolism appears again in the Bodhisattva’s childhood: during the ploughing festival (*vappa maṅgala*), it is said, 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.<sup>76</sup> 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 jambu tree (*Eugenia jambolana*), and in the tree’s unmoving shade attains the first dhyāna (Mvst 2:45).<sup>77</sup> 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 the breath meditation, and so wins his awakening, as recorded in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta**.<sup>78</sup>

Another important episode in the Buddha’s life where the earth plays a significant role is just before the Great Awakening, when Māra the evil 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 all



Fig 5. The 4 elements in graphics

<sup>70</sup> Book 2 (*rūpa,kaṇḍa* or *rūpa,saṅgaha*), Dhs §§583-980/124-179 = Dhs:R 153-229.

<sup>71</sup> In ch 6: *Rūpa,saṅgaha,vibhāga*, see Abhs:BRS 234-263.

<sup>72</sup> Vism 11.85-117/364-370.

<sup>73</sup> These are amongst the characteristics mentioned at Dhs §648/165, see also Dhs 962/177.

<sup>74</sup> Vism 93/365.

<sup>75</sup> 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.

<sup>76</sup> MA 2:290; J 1:57 f.

<sup>77</sup> See Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 §13d/31 f.

<sup>78</sup> 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.

his efforts fail, Māra 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 (Sthāvarā)—Gaia, or Mother Earth—emerges from underneath in witness of his unsurpassed virtues. Some say that Māra’s evil host sinks into the ground; others say that Thāvarā wrings her long hair from which a great flood emerges and washes the demons away. Māra himself, surprised and terrified, flees. This event is known as “the victory over Māra” (*Māra, vijaya*).<sup>79</sup>

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 dedication<sup>80</sup> 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, Thailand.

(2) **THE WATER ELEMENT** (*āpo, dhātu*), that is, cohesion, stickiness (viscosity), thickness (viscosity), and liquidity. Whatever in one’s own body there is of karmically acquired liquidity or fluidity; bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, urine, and so on—this is called one’s own water element.

According to Commentaries, the water element has the characteristic of flowing [trickling] (*paggharāna, lakkhāna*), and the function of intensifying (*brūhana, rasa*) the other elements and derived matter [10], and manifests itself as holding together [cohesion] (*saṅgaha, paccupaṭṭhāna*).<sup>81</sup> 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.

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.<sup>82</sup> This happens because the water element holds the molecules together in even larger groups.

(3) **THE FIRE ELEMENT** (*tejo, dhātu*), that is, decay, heat, cold, oxidation, combustion, and digestion (metabolism). Whatever in one’s own body that is of karmically acquired heat or warmth, 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.

According to Commentaries, the fire element has the characteristic of heat (*unḥatta, lakkhāna*), 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*).<sup>83</sup> The fire element is experienced both as heat (eg a fever) and as cold (the weather).

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, pariyāya Sutta** (S 35.28): all the six senses are burning with greed, hate and delusion.<sup>84</sup> In a positive sense, fire has a “purifying” sense, as reflected in fire-like meditation taught in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 62).<sup>85</sup> [8(3)]

(4) **THE WIND [OR AIR] ELEMENT** (*vāyo, dhātu*), that is, motion, vibration, distension, and pressure. There are six 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);

<sup>79</sup> J 1:72-75; BA 8.

<sup>80</sup> P *dakkhiṇ’odaka*, Skt *dakṣiṇ’odaka*.

<sup>81</sup> Vism 93/365.

<sup>82</sup> Cf the lather simile 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 powder—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.

<sup>83</sup> Vism 11.93/365.

<sup>84</sup> S 35.28/4:19 f = S 1:34 f = SD 1.3, where see esp Introd (1) for other fire symbolisms in the Suttas.

<sup>85</sup> M 62.10/1:422 = SD 3.11.

the wind in the belly;  
 the wind outside the belly;  
 the wind in all the limbs; and  
 the in-breath and out-breath—

all these are together called one's own wind element.

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 (*abhinīhara, paccupaṭṭhāna*).<sup>86</sup> 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) **SPACE** (*ākāsa, dhātu*), that is, 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, *viññāna*) (as described in **the Dhātu, vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140) [4]. 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.<sup>87</sup> 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, across, with regards to that." (Vism 14.63/448)

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.<sup>88</sup>

## 6. The interbeing of the elements

All these elements are found in all existence everywhere. Taken together, the four 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.<sup>89</sup>

When you touch water, for example, you 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 your clothes stick to your skin (water element). Similarly, wind is moving air (wind element), cools you (fire element), it fills the sail (earth element) and moves a boat (wind element).

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 liquid water element and flows, but when the fire is taken away, it returns to its 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 pressured wind element. When it is near fire, it becomes moving wind and expands, but when the fire is taken away, it hardens again with the pressing wind element.<sup>90</sup>

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.

<sup>86</sup> Vism 93/365.

<sup>87</sup> See *Bhāvanā* = SD 15(9.2).

<sup>88</sup> See BDict: *ākāsa*.

<sup>89</sup> Vism 11.109/368 f; Abhs 6.3.

<sup>90</sup> Ledi Sayadaw 1965:438 f = 2005:235; see also 1965:457-467 = 2005:245-250.

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 four 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.”<sup>91</sup>

| Element        | Name  | Principle        | Characteristics   | Function      | Manifestation    | Proximate cause    |
|----------------|-------|------------------|-------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Pathavi</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 four elements (a summary)

## 7. The similes of the elements

7.1 THE BUTCHERED COW SIMILE. **The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22; M 10) contains a very important simile for understanding the purpose of meditating on the four elements, that is, the simile 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 simile of the butchered cow in terms of meditation of the four 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 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.”<sup>92</sup>

In the same way, when we analyze [“cut”] ourselves up into the four elements, whatever we are, whatever is in our body, whatever we have, is merely the four elements. We abandon the notion of a person or being. When we understand the true nature of the four elements, we let go of the notion of a “being.” The physical being is just a composite of the four elements: it is the four elements that is standing, going, sitting, lying down, or doing whatever action. It is important to understand here that the four elements here are not concepts, but are “ultimate reality” (*paramattha, dhamma*),<sup>93</sup> as contrasted against “conventional reality (*sammuti, dhamma*), such as notions of “person,” things and names.

<sup>91</sup> **Mahā Hatthipadopama S** (M 28.6-22/1:185-189) = SD 6.16.

<sup>92</sup> Paraphrased, DA 3:770 f = MA 1:271 f = Vism 11.30/348.

<sup>93</sup> 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).

7.2 THE FIVE MURDERERS. **The Āsivisopama Sutta** (S 35.238)<sup>94</sup> 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, 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 four serpents of fierce and deadly venom | The 4 primary elements: <sup>95</sup><br>the wooden-mouthed serpent = the earth element;<br>the putrid-mouthed serpent = the water element;<br>the fiery-mouthed serpent = the fire element;<br>the dagger-mouthed serpent = the wind element. |
| The five murderers                           | <u>the 5 aggregates of clinging.</u>   |
| The sixth murderer <sup>96</sup>             | delight and lust ( <i>nandi,rāga</i> ).  |
| The empty village                            | the six internal sense-bases.  |
| The village-attacking dacoits                | the six 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.   |

In this parable, the first five murderers refer to the five aggregates. They are like murderers because they are impermanent, suffering and not self,<sup>97</sup> and they bind one to samsara, wherein one is repeatedly reborn and dies. 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)

<sup>94</sup> S 35.238.5/4:173 = SD 28.1. See S:W 4:107 n3.

<sup>95</sup> These 4 types of serpents are listed in **Āsivisa 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 of 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 four 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 sting 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).

<sup>96</sup> An erstwhile intimate companion or spy (*antara,cara*), closely pursuing with a drawn sword.

<sup>97</sup> See **Yamaka S** (S 22.85/3:114 f): see foll para.

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

That is to say, just this continuum,<sup>98</sup>  
This illusion, a fool's prattle [deceiving fools].<sup>99</sup>  
A murderer, this is shown to be:  
Here no substance is found.<sup>100</sup> (S 22.95/143\*) = SD 17.12

The Commentary to this stanza explains that the five 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)

A similar parable is used by Sāriputta, in the same context of the aggregates, in **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85).<sup>101</sup> The Sutta's Commentary, interpreting the parable, says that the uninstructed 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 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)

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 four primary elements, since each of them is but a quality of the same tree.<sup>102</sup> Since it is a short sutta, it is give in full here:

## (Sāriputta) Dāru-k,khandha Sutta

### The Log of Wood Discourse (by Sāriputta)

(A 6.41/3:340 f)

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 (*saṅghāṭī*), was coming down from Mount Vulture Peak with some monks when he saw a large log of wood<sup>103</sup> 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.

<sup>98</sup> *Etādisāyaṃ santano*. A "continuum" (*santāna*) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and contains 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.

<sup>99</sup> "A trickster of fools," *bāla,lāpinī*, which Comy glosses as the consciousness aggregate (SA 2:324). See Introd ("A Magical Illusion" n) & foll n.

<sup>100</sup> *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.

<sup>101</sup> S 22.85/3:112 f = SD 12.12.

<sup>102</sup> A 6.41/3:340 f.

<sup>103</sup> *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."

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

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

**3b** Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could will 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 will that log of wood to be just fire

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

**3d** Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could will that log of wood to be just the beautiful.<sup>104</sup>

What is the reason for that?

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

**3e** Avuso, a monk with psychic power, if he wishes to, having attained mastery of his mind, he could will that log of wood to be just the foul.<sup>105</sup>

What is the reason for that?

There is, avuso, the foul element in that log of wood, depending on which he could will that log of wood to be just the foul.”<sup>106</sup>

## 8. The 5 elements: Practices promoting impartiality<sup>107</sup>

The **Mahā Rahul’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*).<sup>108</sup>

(1) Rāhula, cultivate **an earth-like meditation**. For when you cultivate an earth-like meditation, agreeable and disagreeable contacts<sup>109</sup> that have arisen will not overpower your mind and remain.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>104</sup> 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).

<sup>105</sup> Comy: “A foul element” refers (for example) to rotting and pulverized, unattractive, inner wood or dry pieces of bark (*pūti, bhūte cunṇe c’eva pheggu, papaṭikāsu ca amanuñña, vaṇṇā asubha, dhātu*) (AA 3:367).

<sup>106</sup> For an example of how such a psychic phenomena, see **Mahaka S** (S 41.4/4:288-291) = SD 27.

<sup>107</sup> Comy: The methods given in §§13-17—the meditation on the elements and on space—are given to Rāhula so that he would experience the quality of 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 similes to each of them (A 9.11/4:374 f). See Dh 81. It is important to note that space (*ākāsa*)—and sometimes, consciousness (*viññāna*)—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.

<sup>108</sup> See eg **Brahma, vihāra S** (A 10.208/5:299) = SD 2.10.

<sup>109</sup> “Contacts,” *phassa*, ie all experiences through the six sense-bases: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind.

Rāhula, just as people throw things clean and foul<sup>111</sup>—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.

(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**.<sup>112</sup> 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.<sup>113</sup> (M 62.13-17/1:423 f) = SD 3.11<sup>114</sup>

— — —

<sup>110</sup> “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.

<sup>111</sup> “Things clean and foul,” *sucim pi... asucim pi*. Here I follow Nina van Gorkom, email 23 May 2003.

<sup>112</sup> “Wind-like meditation,” *vāyo, sama bhāvana*, alt tr “air-like meditation.”

<sup>113</sup> **Milinda, pañha** qu this para (Miln 388).

<sup>114</sup> See also SD 3.11 Introd 1.3 for textual criticism.

As Buddhaghosa explains, these five element-like meditations—on the four elements and on space—are given to the 18-year-old Rāhula so that he would train himself in impartiality (*tādī,bhāva*) or “suchness”<sup>115</sup> 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 four primary elements in this manner, but adding his own similes to each of them.<sup>116</sup>

It is important to note here that space (*ākāsa*)—and sometimes, consciousness (*viññāna*)<sup>117</sup>—are listed with the 4 primary elements (*mahā,bhūta*) [4]. However, as a set (of 5 or 6, as such), they are called *dhātu*, while the term *mahā,bhūta* is used only for the first four.<sup>118</sup>

Each of the four or five 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. A common way of looking at the living human body is in terms of sensitive phenomena and objective phenomena, that is, as sense-faculties and sense-objects. A fully-endowed human being comprises of 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 |

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

The 12 “bases” or “sources” on which depend the mental processes, consist of five physical sense-organs and consciousness, being the six personal (*ajjhātika*) bases, and the six objects, the so-called external (*bāhira*) bases.<sup>119</sup>

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.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Vism 1.10/5, 7.71/214.

<sup>116</sup> A 9.11/4:374 f; see also Dh 81.

<sup>117</sup> On consciousness, see **Khandha 4 Viññāna** = SD 18.8a.

<sup>118</sup> See Karunadasa 1967:16, 91-98

<sup>119</sup> See BDict: *āyatana* (2).

<sup>120</sup> VbhA 45; PmA 1:83; Vism 15.4/481; in place of *atīva āyata*, PTS has *atīta,āyatam* “extends to the past.”

The Commentaries<sup>121</sup> further give the following commonsensical etymologies for each of the six sense-faculties:

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Cakkhatī ti cakkhu</i>        | It relishes, thus it is an eye.                       |
| <i>Suṇātī ti sotaṃ</i>           | It hears, thus it is an ear.                          |
| <i>Ghāyatī ti ghānaṃ</i>         | It smells [senses a smell], thus it is a nose.        |
| <i>Jīvitam avhayatī ti jivhā</i> | It summons life, thus it is a tongue.                 |
| <i>Kucchitānaṃ āyoti kāyo</i>    | It is the source of vile states, thus it is the body. |
| <i>Manate vijānātī ti mano</i>   | It knows how to think, thus it is the mind.           |
| <i>Manayatī ti mano</i>          | It causes one to think, thus it is the mind.          |
| <i>Muṇātī ti mano (Porāṇa)</i>   | It measures, thus it is the mind. (The ancients)      |

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.

9.2 THE FIVE PHYSICAL SENSE-ORGANS, The six 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>  | <i>akkhi</i> | <i>cakkhu</i> |
| <u>ear</u>  | <i>kaṇṇa</i> | <i>sota</i>   |
| <u>nose</u> | <i>nāsā</i>  | <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 9.2 Physical organs and faculties**

The fact that the former set (the faculties) is more common in the discourses shows that the emphasis is on the subjective, that is, one's 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.<sup>122</sup>

**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."<sup>123</sup> **Analayo** adds this insightful observation here:

Regarding **contemplation of the sense-spheres**, the Pali versions begin with the meditator knowing each sense and its respective object.<sup>124</sup> Their counterpart in the *Madhyama āgama*, however, does not direct mindfulness to the senses and their respective objects, but mention both merely as conditions for the arising of the fetter, beginning with its actual instruction

<sup>121</sup> 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.

<sup>122</sup> *A Thinker's Notebook*, 1971:159.

<sup>123</sup> Ency Bsm 470 "Āyatana."

<sup>124</sup> D 22/12:302,18; M 10.1:61,15.

only after this point.<sup>125</sup>

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.]” (Analyo 2005:12; emphases added)

9.3 THE SENSES AS FACULTIES. 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” (Analyo 2005:12). Even then, **Hamilton** argues further,

it is still difficult to accept the inclusion *here* of “some thoughts or ideas or conceptions.”<sup>126</sup> 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)

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 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,

<sup>125</sup> Analyo'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.)

<sup>126</sup> Hamilton is referring to W Rahula in 1985:20: see 1.2

“does not see because it is not conscious’ nor does consciousness see, because it is not an eye.”<sup>127</sup>

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)

The functional aspects of the five physical sense-organs 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,”<sup>128</sup> 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.<sup>129</sup>

## 10. Derived matter

There are the four primary elements (*mahā, bhūta*) and the forms that take hold of or cling to the four primary elements, that is, the “derived (or derivative) forms” (*upādāya rūpā*). Although the “derived forms” are mentioned in the Suttas—such as **the Sammā, diṭṭhi Sutta** (M 9),<sup>130</sup> **the Mahā Hatthi, padopama Sutta** (M 28),<sup>131</sup> and **the (Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa Sutta** (S 22.56)<sup>132</sup>—their actual analysis first appears only in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.<sup>133</sup> According to the Abhidhamma, there are two 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 four great elements and the material forms derived from the four great elements (*upādāya rūpa*)—this is called form.”<sup>134</sup> Derived matter is discussed in some detail in **the Visuddhi.magga**.<sup>135</sup>

Nothing beyond the listing of the types of derived forms is found in the Pali Canon, not even in the Dhamma, saṅgaṇī, 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 four primary elements constitute conditions (*paccaya*) by way of conascence (*sahajāta*), support or dependence (*nissaya*), presence (*atthi*), and on-abeyance (*avigata*) in relation to the derived forms.<sup>136</sup>

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 *mahā-*

<sup>127</sup> DhsA (Attha, sālinī) 400 (said by the Ancients).

<sup>128</sup> Dhs:R 159; qu in Karunadasa 1967:44.

<sup>129</sup> See Karunadasa 1967:44-49.

<sup>130</sup> M 9.54/1:53 = SD 11.14.

<sup>131</sup> M 28.5/1:185 = SD 6.16.

<sup>132</sup> S 22.56.7/3:59 = SD 3.7.

<sup>133</sup> Dhs 596, 980; Tikap 3, qu at Vism 535; Tikap 89, 109; Vism 444. See also BDict: Khandha & also Abhs:NB 6.2-5. For a useful discussion, see Harvey 1993:3-5 (digital ed); also Karunadasa 1967:38 f & Boisvert 1995:37-42.

<sup>134</sup> S 12.2.12/2:3 f; see SD 5.11.

<sup>135</sup> Vism 14.36-73/443-451. See also Karunadasa 1967:31-98 (chs 3-5).

<sup>136</sup> Tikap 3, 4, 6, 7.

*bhūtas*, 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)

### 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 matter (*nippahanna,rūpa*)

#### Non-concretely produced matter (*anippahanna,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>    |

#### VIII. *Limiting phenomena (pariccheda,rūpa)*

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

#### IX. *Communicating phenomena (viññāṭṭi,rūpa)*

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

#### II. *Sensitive phenomena*<sup>137</sup> (*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>   |

#### X. *Mutable phenomena (vikāra,rūpa)*<sup>138</sup>

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

#### III. *Objective phenomena (gocara,rūpa)*<sup>139</sup> (*lakkhaṇa,rūpa*)

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

#### XI. *Characteristics of matter*

- |                         |                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 25. Growth (production) | <i>upacaya</i>  |
| 26. Continuity          | <i>santati</i>  |
| 27. Decay               | <i>jaratā</i>   |
| 28. Impermanence        | <i>aniccatā</i> |

#### IV. *Sexual phenomena (bhāva,rūpa)*

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

#### V. *Heart phenomenon*

- |                |                                     |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 16. Heart-base | <i>hadaya,vatthu</i> <sup>140</sup> |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|

#### VI. *Life phenomenon (jīvita,rūpa)*

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

#### VII. *Nutritional phenomenon (āhāra,rūpa)*

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

Table 10. The 28 material phenomena

<sup>137</sup> These are the internal senses (*ajjhantik'āyatana*) as faculties of perception (*cakkhu, sota, ghana, jivhā, kāya*). See 8.2 above.

<sup>138</sup> 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*) (Abhk 281). The terms *lahu* and *kammañña* often occur in the Suttas in reference to bodily health and efficiency (D

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’atthi ti attho*) (DAṬ 2:268). They are “non-concrete” in the sense that it has no real existence of its own, but arise in dependence on the “concretely produced matter.”

From *nippahanna*, we get the intensive form, *parinippahanna* (“preconditioned,” ie predetermined by karma),<sup>141</sup> a term that qualifies practically all material states (*rūpa, dhamma*), that is, they are impermanent (*anicca*), conditioned (*sankhata*), 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*)<sup>142</sup> or the real elements of matter (*rūpa, dhamma*), because they have intrinsic characteristics and are as such 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 of 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: they are merely positions, phases, characteristics or aspects of concrete matter. They have no objective reality of their own, existing only secondary to concrete matter, “following it” (*tag, gatika*); hence, they are only conventionally regarded as elements of matter.<sup>143</sup> Non-concrete matter, in other words, does not comprise separate realities in their own right, and is not an object for insight development.<sup>144</sup>

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.<sup>145</sup> **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 kinds beginning with the eye are internal (*ajjhattika*) 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 (*oḷārika*) because of impinging (on the sense-faculties). The rest are subtle (*sukhuma*) because they are the opposite to 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.<sup>146</sup> The rest, being the opposite, are underived [non-concrete] (*anippahanna*).

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.

<sup>139</sup> Also called *visaya, rūpa*.

<sup>140</sup> This term is not found in the Canon, but only occurs as *vattu* in **Paṭṭhāna** (Paṭ 1,4). See Vism 8.111-113/256; Abhs:BRS 6.3/239 (5).

<sup>141</sup> Kvu 459-462, 626 f.

<sup>142</sup> Or, alternatively, “concretely produced matter” or “concretely derived matter.”

<sup>143</sup> Dhammapāla: *nippahanna, rūpassa pariccheda, vikāra, lakkhaṇa, bhāvato taggatikam eva ti rūpant-v-eva vuccati* (VismṬ 459 f).

<sup>144</sup> See Karunadasa 1967:67 f.

<sup>145</sup> 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.

<sup>146</sup> Here I follow Vism:Ñ. See Vism 14.77/451.

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.

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”<sup>147</sup> 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 (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 again until you are fully familiar with the processes. You could do this before doing the breath meditation, or at any time when you feel like it; for example, after a good sitting when the mind is calm and clear.

Another variation of the internal-element meditation is to combine it with breath meditation. As you watch the breath, that is, the wind element; note it as “wind, wind.” However, if you are watching the breath by way of a *contact-point* of the breath at the nose-tip, etc (Paṭisambhidā,magga way), then you should note it as “earth, earth.” Or, if you are watching “the rising and falling of the belly” (Mahasi vipassana way), then you 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 you can notice the phenomenon directly, so that you 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 you find difficulty noticing the space element, you can omit it, until such time you are able to notice it. Always close the practice with at least a short session of lovingkindness cultivation.<sup>148</sup>

11.2 WALKING WITH THE ELEMENTS. An interesting and beneficial variation of walking meditation is called “walking with the elements.”<sup>149</sup> Before one tries walking with the elements, it is advisable that one has 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).<sup>150</sup>

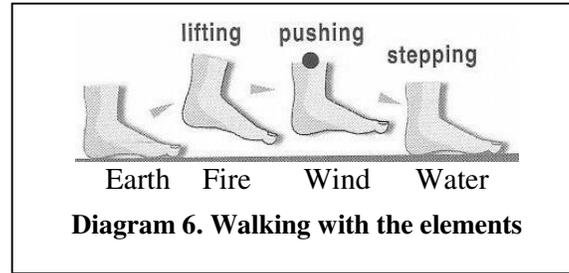
When one is familiar with the traditional walking meditation, then one may go on to practice walking with the elements. One should be sure that one has understood the basic theory regarding how the steps and the elements are connected before actually going on to walk the elements. While standing, the earth element is easily noticed when the foot presses against the ground. The lightness one feels 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 you lower your foot to the ground, the feeling of its getting heavier is the water element. All this is illustrated in this diagram:

<sup>147</sup> See Vism 14.75/451 & 20.27/614.

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

<sup>149</sup> 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.

<sup>150</sup> The former is what is usually regarded as the Vipassana (Insight) method; the latter is common in the forest method of Ajahn Chah,



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 your 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 one is very familiar with it before going on to the next element.

After noting the earth element in one's standing, then go on to note as fire element as the lightness in the process of lifting the foot off the ground. Go on doing only this two-step sequence until one is fully familiar with it.

Then, after noting the earth element in the standing, followed by the fire element in the lifting, one goes on to note the wind element in the forward movement ("pushing") of the foot. Go on practising this three-step sequence until one is 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, one notes 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 one should go on practising it as necessary.

As mentioned earlier, one should mindfully note the whole walking process by labelling (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 one can easily discern the stages and walking process, then one goes 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 one is constituted of the elements and how they function in oneself. When one sees the elements clearly in oneself, it is easier to let go of the false conception of a "being." There are merely the four elements standing, the four elements walking, and so on.<sup>151</sup>

## 12. *Nāma,rūpa*

A very important point to note about 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.<sup>152</sup> 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 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."

In more concrete terms, *nāma,rūpa* is about the interbeing amongst the four elements and personal experience. It is important to understand here that the four elements are not concepts, but are "ultimate reality" (*paramattha,dhamma*),<sup>153</sup> as contrasted against "conventional reality (*sammuti,-dhamma*), such as notions of a person, things and names, which gives them a conceptual identity.<sup>154</sup> In other words, as **Sue Hamilton** puts in,

<sup>151</sup> See Silananda 2004:78.

<sup>152</sup> See Sue Hamilton 1996a:121-137 (ch 6).

<sup>153</sup> 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).

<sup>154</sup> On "naming and recognizing," see SD 17.4(1).

*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)

More technically, “form” (*rūpa*) [4; 11] refers to the four great elements [2], both internal (as the body) and external (as another’s body and as nature). **The Vibhaṅga Sutta** (S 12.2)<sup>155</sup> gives this definition of name-and-form:<sup>156</sup>

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

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

The Pali term *nāma* is usually rendered as “name,” but this should not be taken literally.

*Nāma* is the assemblage of mental factors involved in cognition: feeling, perception, volition, contact and attention (*vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phassa, manasikāra*, S 12.2).<sup>157</sup> 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)

In other words, while *nāma* is centred on the mind (*citta*) and *rūpa* is centred on the four 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.”<sup>158</sup> It should be noted in the Nikāyas that *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.<sup>159</sup> We shall examine *viññāṇa* in due course (SD 17.8a).

### 13. Where no element leaves any trace

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 impermanent, unsatisfactory and without any abiding entity (not 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** (U 8.1) gives a well known “definition” of nirvana, thus:

*Tad āyatanam yattha n’eva paṭhavī na āpo na tejo na vāyo...  
Atthi bhikkhave ajātam abhūtam akatam asaṅkhatam...*

It is that place where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind...  
Bhikshus, there is the unborn, unbecome, uncreated, unconditioned<sup>160</sup>... (U 8.1/90)

**The Kevalā Sutta** (D 11) records the same teaching by way of this question by a “certain monk”: “Where do the four primary elements—earth, water, fire, wind element—cease without remainder?”<sup>161</sup> 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

<sup>155</sup> See SD 5.11.

<sup>156</sup> See also **Mahā Rāhul’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*.

<sup>157</sup> 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.

<sup>158</sup> Harvey 1993:11 digital ed.

<sup>159</sup> See **Nala,kalapiya S** (S 12.67/2:114) & **Mahā Nidāna S** (M 12.21-22/2:63); see also S:B 48 & Hamilton 1996a:126 f.

<sup>160</sup> More lit, “...there is the non-born, non-become, non-created, non-conditioned...,” or “not-born...” etc.

<sup>161</sup> D 11.67b/1:215 to the end = SD 1.7.

the ancient Indian sages and seekers generally discuss existence in external or *spatial* terms,<sup>162</sup> the Buddha speaks in terms of inner space, of the six senses.<sup>163</sup> This spatial notion is clearly evident in the question. 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 four primary elements themselves. This universe comprises 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, Kevaddha Sutta, D 13], the paradise of the god *Brahmā* is merely a *devaloka*, and *devaloka* is not the abode of immortality. (RH 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*),<sup>164</sup> that is, a non-spatial (*apatiṭṭhita*) realm.<sup>165</sup> In other words, the four primary elements cease to exist in nirvana.<sup>166</sup>

#### 14. Identifying with the body

It is interesting, even today, to see how people identify with their physical body.<sup>167</sup> So they make a lot of effort to beautify it by physically building it, by slimming it, by adorning it, by spraying it with scents, by cosmetic surgery, by clothing or unclothing it, 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. As such, we end up as self-marketing products supplying ourselves in accordance with the demands of the social market. The bottom line there is very little true and healthy communication here.

Some followers of religion identify themselves 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 they are ever physically transported into heaven. There is also the belief that their bodies should not be cremated; otherwise, they would not, as it were, have a body to go into heaven with! 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.

When one sees one’s body or another’s body as being made up of the four elements, one begins to see that there is no abiding entity, nothing to identify with, but only a dynamic composite and interbeing of the primary elements. In other words, the meditation on the elements helps one to deconstruct one’s false notion of a “being” (whether as oneself or as others).

Our experience of the world around us—how we *sense* it—is nothing but the four elements—that is the *structure* of the external world—namely, the first aggregate, that of form. How we *make sense* of this experience is 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**,

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

<sup>162</sup> 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.

<sup>163</sup> See eg EJ Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London: Routledge & KeganPaul, 1933:128.

<sup>164</sup> D 33.1.10(14)/3:215.

<sup>165</sup> See RH Robinson 1972:322 f.

<sup>166</sup> For a related discussion in connection with the state of the Tathāgata after death, see **Cūḷa Mālunkyā-putta S** (M 63) = SD 5.8 Introd (3.6). See also Sue Hamilton 2000:156.

<sup>167</sup> See Lily de Silva 1984.

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, how we create our worlds and construct our private realities.

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