

CLASSIFICATION OF MATERIAL ELEMENTS

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The Four Great Material Elements: earth (pathavi), water (apo), fire (tejo), air (vayo).

The Five Physical Sense-Organs: eye (cakkhu), ear (sota), nose (ghana), tongue (jivha), body (kaya).

The Four Objective Sense-Fields: visible (rupa), sound (sadda), smell (gandha), taste (rasa). The sense-field of touch (photthabba) consists of earth, fire, air.

The Three Faculties: Faculty of Femininity (itthindriya), Faculty of masculinity (purisindriya), Material Faculty of Life (rupa-jivitindriya)

The Physical Base of Mental Activity (hadaya-vatthu)

Nutriment (rupa-ahara)

Space-Element (akasa-dhatu)

The Two Modes of Self-Expression: Bodily Expression (kaya-vinnatti), and Vocal Expression (vacī-vinnatti)

Three Characteristics of Matter: Lightness of Matter (rupassa lahuta), Malleability of Matter (rupassa muduta), Wioldiness of Matter (rupassa kammannata)

The Four Phases Matter: Production of Matter (rupassa upacaya), Continuity of Matter (rupassa santati), Decay of Matter (rupassa jarata), Impermanence of Matter (rupassa aniccata).

The Sixteen Dhammayatana-Rupa: Water-Element, Three Faculties, Physical Base of Mental Activity, Nutriment, Space-Element, Two Modes of Self-Expression, Three Characteristics of Matter, Four Phases of Matter.

Eighteen Concretely Produced Material Elements (Nippahanna-Rupa): Four Great Elements, Five Physical Sense-Organs, Four Objective Sense-Fields, Three Faculties, Physical Base of Mental Activity, and Nutriment.

Ten Non-Concretely Produced (Nominal: Two Means of Self-Expression, Space-Element, Three Characteristics of Matter and, Four Phases of Matter.

THE REAL DEPENDENT MATERIAL ELEMENTS:

This group consists of 14 material elements: Five Sense-Organs, Four Sense-Fields, Three Faculties, Nutriment, and Physical Base of Mental Activity.

Sensitive Matter (Pasada-Rupa)

This group includes the Five Physical Sense-Organs. “Pasada” in “pasada-rupa” literally means clearness, serenity, or faith. In this context, it is suggestive of the sense organs’ receptivity to external sense data, and the part they play in the gratification of sensual pleasures. Each Sense Organ has two parts: the composite or peripheral organ (sasambhara) and, the sentient organ (pasada). The first is what we generally mean by eye, ear, and so on. The second is the real sense organ. It has the first as its basis (vatthu). Unlike the first Four Sense Organs, the Body Sensitivity is not located in a particular locus, but is diffused all over the organic body.

Professor Th. Stcherbatsky observes that the Buddhist conception of the sense organs as composed of materiality subtler than the sense objects is similar to the Samkhya view, namely, that matter developed along two different lines, one with the predominance of the translucent intelligence-stuff (sattva), and the other, with the predominance of dead matter (tamas). But as Professor Stcherbatsky himself admits, unlike in the Samkhya, in Buddhism the two groups are not conceived “as modifications or appurtenances of an eternal substance”.

The conception of Sense Organs in this manner is common to many other Indian Religions and Philosophies. Jainism recognizes two kinds of Sense Organs: the physical sense organs (dravyendriya), and their psychical correlates (bhavendriya). The Indian Medical Tradition believes that the real Sense Organs are distinct from their peripheral seats, The Mimamsakas maintain that the real Sense Organs are the potencies (sakti) abiding in the sockets.

Sense-Field Materiality (Gocara-Rupa)

This group includes Five Sense Objects: the visible, sound, smell, taste, and the tangible. As to the senses of touch, taste, and smell, the sensory contact is not difficult to understand. For, in these three cases the objects come in direct contact with the sense organs. In the case of seeing and hearing, how sensory contact occurs is not so evident. On this issue there were two views within the Theravada Exegesis. Earlier is the one recorded in the Sihala Atthakatha (Commentary). It says that both colour/light and sound travel and directly impinge on the eye and the ear. Sound travels in an elemental series (dhatu-parampara) and impinges on the ear. It goes on to say: “The bodily movements of men felling trees or of washer-men washing clothes are seen quickly. On the other hand, the sound they make is relatively slow of ascertainment (vavatthana), because it comes in an elemental series and strikes the auditory organ”.

The Sihala Atthakatha (Commentary) view, as noted by Professor E. R Sarathchandra, is similar to the view held by the Nyaya-Vaisesikas: “Either sounds reach the ear in concentric circles of waves like the waves of water, or they shoot out in all directions like the filaments of a kadamba”(E. R. Sarathchandra, Buddhist Psychology of Perception, p. 34). According to the Theravada view, both sound and light travel, but light travels faster than sound. “The colour/light of the discs of the moon and sun situated above 42,000 yojanas away, strikes the sensitive visual organ. That colour, although it appears to be far, is known to be in physical contact. Because it has such a range, the eye is said to have attained range contact” (Dhammasangani Commentary, PTS, p. 314).

Another issue was whether the object of visibility is both colour (vanna) as well as shape (figure). In its definition in the Dhammasangani, we find instances of both colour (yellow, red, blue, etc.) and figure (circular, square, hexagonal, etc.). On the other hand, its commentary, the Atthasalini, says that the mention of figure is a concession to popular parlance (vohara), because only colour is visible, not figure. All instances of figure are conceptual constructs that one superimposes on the difference of coloration. This is why such manuals as the Abhidhammatthavikasini, use the more specific “the sense-field of colour” (vannayatana), in place of the earlier term “the sense-field of the visible” (rupayatana) to refer to the sense-field of the visual organ.

This was an issue that led to controversies between the Vaibhasikas and the Sautrantikas. While the Vaibhasikas insisted that both colour and figure were visible, the Sautrantikas maintained that only colour was the object of sight. Since the Sautrantikas believed in the principle of parsimony they interpreted as “nominal” some of the items recognized by other Schools of Buddhist Philosophy, as “real”. It is very likely, therefore, that this new interpretation in the Theravada commentarial exegesis was due to Sautrantika influence.

Faculty of Femininity (Itthindriya) and Faculty of Masculinity (Purisindriya)

In the Canonical Abhidhamma, the first is defined as the physical appearance, marks, traits, and deportment peculiar to a female. Likewise the second is defined as the physical appearance, marks, traits, and deportment peculiar to a male. However, the commentarial exegesis says that physical features, etc. are not the two faculties. They are what result from them. Thus the “that” (yam) of the Canonical Abhidhamma is interpreted as “that through which” (yena) in the commentarial exegesis.

For the Sarvastivada, the two Faculties of Sex are not distinct from the Organ of Touch. The Theravadins seem to have had this in mind when they say that some entertain the wrong view that the Faculty of Sex is only a part of the physical body (sarirekadesavutti).

Material Faculty of Life (Rupa-Jivitindriya)

The Theravada recognizes two Life Faculties. One is the psychic life faculty (arupa-jivitindriya), the factor that sustains and stabilizes consciousness and concomitant mental factors. It is listed as one of the seven universal mental factors (sabba-citta-sadharana). The other is the material life faculty (rupa-jivitindriya), the factor that sustains and stabilizes materiality that comes into being as a result of kamma. It refers to all instances of organic matter that enters into the composition of a living being, namely, physical Sense Organs, the Faculties of Sex, and the Physical Base of Mental Activity.

Material Nutriment

What is called Material Nutriment (ahara) denotes not only edible material food or its nutritive essence but also three other factors, namely, Sensory Contact (phassa), Mental Volition (mano sancetana), and Consciousness (vinnana). They are all called “nutriment” because they sustain and keep going the empiric individuality in the cycle of samsara. Accordingly, an individual is a process of nutriment, a process of alimentation, kept going by four kinds of nutriment.

The Pali expression for Material Food is “kabalinkara-ahara,” “morsel-made-food”. The Buddhist Discourses understand it in a general sense to mean solid material food. The Abhidhamma interprets it in a more abstract sense to mean nutritive aspect of matter, the quality of nutrition. The Canonical Dhammasangani defines it by citing examples of solid food. But as the commentary observes this is a definition in terms of its embodiment (vatthu-vasena). This interpretation is supported by the fact that elsewhere in the Dhammasangani Material Food is included in the objective field of mental objects (dhammayatana-rupa).

The Physical Base of Mental Activity

The first ever allusion to a Physical Base of Mental Activity is found in the Patthanappakarana of the Abhidhamma Pitaka:

“That materiality based on which the mind element and the mind consciousness element occur, that materiality is a condition by way of base for the mind element and the mind consciousness element and the mental phenomena associated with them.” (Patthanappakarana).

Here the Physical Base of mental activity is not specified. It is alluded to in a circuitous way as “whatever materiality on which mental activity depends.” In the commentarial exegesis what the Patthana has left unspecified is identified as the Heart-Base (hadaya-vatthu). It functions as a pre-nascence-condition (purejata-paccaya) for mental activity. A pre-nascence condition is a condition that arises first and becomes a condition to something else that arises later. This is based on the view that the life-span of matter is longer than that of mind.

The Heart-Base is not absolutely identical with the heart as such. Like the physical Sense Organs, it is a subtle and delicate species of matter, which is located inside the heart. However, unlike the physical Sense Organs, the Heart Base is not elevated to the level of a Faculty (indriya). According to Abhidhamma Psychology, a Faculty is that which exercises a dominating influence on the mental and physical phenomena associated with them. The Eye-Organ is called a Faculty (cakkhu-indriya), because its relative strength or weakness influences the consciousness that is named after it. The non-recognition of the Heart Base as a Faculty shows that mental activities are not controlled or determined by the Heart Base, although they depend on it. It is the mind that depends on the Heart Base which is recognized as a Faculty (manindriya). Through this strategy the pre-eminence of the mind is maintained, although it depends on a physical base. The commentaries seek to provide some empirical evidence in support of the cardiac theory of the seat of mental activity: “When someone thinks on something, bringing it to mind intently and directing his whole mind to it, he experiences exhaustion (khijjana) in his heart. Therefore, it is to be inferred that the Seat of Mental Activity is inside the heart.” (Abhidhammatthavikasini, 279)

THE NOMINAL DEPENDENT MATTER

This category includes Ten Items, namely, Space-Element (akasa-dhatu) as the principle of material delimitation (pariccheda-rupa), two Means of Self-Expression, Bodily Expression (kaya-vinnatti) and Vocal Expression (vacī-vinnatti), three Special Modes of Matter (vikara-rupa), namely, Lightness of Matter

(rupassa lahuta), Malleability of Matter (rupassa muduta) and Wieldiness of Matter (rupassa kammannata); and Four Characteristics or Phases of Matter (lakkhana-rupa), namely, Integration of Matter (rupassa upacaya), Continuity of Matter (rupassa santati), Decay of Matter (rupassa jarata), and Impermanence of Matter (rupassa aniccata).

Space-Element (akasa-dhatu):

What the Abhidhamma means by space-element is not space as a kind of receptivity for the existence and movement of matter. The reference is to void region, the space bound or limited by matter. If it is brought under matter, it is because our notion of the void is determined by the environing matter and in this sense it is dependent on matter. All matter has the Four Great Material Elements as its necessary base. Therefore, in terms of the elemental analysis, the Space-Element is ultimately dependent on the Four Great Material Elements.

Space-Element is the material phenomenon of delimitation (pariccheda-rupa). Delimitation signifies not only that which delimits (paricchindati), but also that which is delimited (paricchijjati). Since the Space-Element means void region, the space bound by matter, it sets limits to and is itself limited by the surrounding matter. It is because of the Space-Element that we have our notions of “below”, “above”, “across” and so on. By delimiting and separating material objects, the Space-Element enables us to perceive them as distinct entities.

Means of Self Expression

There are two Means of Self Expression. One is Bodily Expression (kaya-vinnatti). The other is Vocal Expression (vacī-vinnatti). Both refer to material phenomena involved in communicating our thoughts or feelings to others.

According to its definition given in the Dhammasangani, Bodily Expression is “that tension (thambhana), that intentness (santhambhana), that state of making the body tense (santhambhitatta) in response to a thought, kammically wholesome, unwholesome, or indeterminate, on the part of a person who advances or recedes, or fixes the gaze or glances around, or retracts an arm, or stretches it forth.” (Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics, tr. Dhammasangani, Mrs. Rhys David).

It is called consciousness-originated (citta-samutthana), because it is set up by that thought in response to which it arises. It is called occurring together with consciousness (citta-sahabhu), because it lasts as long as that consciousness. It is called following the pattern of consciousness (cittanuparivatti), because as a physical phenomenon it conforms to that particular consciousness. It is called bodily expression because it is the means by which that thought in response to which it arises, is communicated. (Dhammasangani).

In the commentarial exegesis, the “state of bodily tension” is described as a special mode of the consciousness-originated Air-Element. If it is described so that does not mean that the other three Great Elements are absent. What it means is that the Air-Element has a higher degree of intensity. It is called

Bodily Expression because it has the capacity for communicating. Bodily Expression is, however, not visible. It is known only by mind, through a process of inference.

Bodily Expression is not a separate material element (dhamma). It is a name given to a special mode of the consciousness-originated Air-Element. If Bodily Expression and the consciousness in response to which it arises, occur for the same length of time, this means that their life span is the same. But according to Theravada, the life span of matter is longer than that of mind. If Bodily Expression has the same life span as that of consciousness, it is because Bodily Expression is not a separate material dhamma, but a name given to the air element when it functions as a means of communicating the thought. This is why Bodily Expression is brought under nominal dependent matter (Dhammasangani Atthakatha).

The other means of communication is Vocal Expression (vacī-vinnatti).

Vocal Expression is defined in the Dhammasangani as “utterance, enunciation, vocal emission, noise, act of making noise, broken or articulate speech, which arises in response to a morally qualified thought”. However, vocal sound is not Vocal Expression. The mention of vocal sound suggests that it is closely connected with Vocal Expression, just as bodily movements are with Bodily Expression.

The commentarial exegesis explains it as an alteration of the consciousness-originated Earth-Element. The production of vocal sound is explained as: When thought arises, “this will I speak, that will I speak”, it sets up material phenomena among which the Earth Element is more intense. This consciousness-originated Earth Element impinges on the physical apparatus (upadinnaka) that produces vocal sound. However, vocal sound is not Vocal Expression. It is a specific mode (ākara-vikara) of the consciousness-originated Earth-Element. It plays the role of a condition for the Earth-Element’s striking against that physical apparatus, where articulate sound is produced (akkharuppattitthana). Dhammasangani Commentary).

Just as Bodily Expression causes the body to move in ways that reveal one’s intentions, even so Verbal Expression causes vocal sounds to be produced in ways that communicate one’s intentions. The vocal intimation is known through inference as an object of mind-consciousness.

Special Modes of Matter

The reference is to the three material phenomena called (1) Lightness of Matter (rupassa lahuta), the capacity for changing easily, lack of heaviness, (2) Malleability of Matter (rupassa muduta), Plasticity, or absence of rigidity, (3) Wieldiness of Matter (rupassa kammannata), serviceableness, or workable condition. These three refer to three characteristics, not of matter in general, but of the matter that enters into the composition of a living being. They are not found apart from one another; they always arise as a triad. Their conditioning factors are agreeable food, suitable weather, and a wholesome mind.

The Special Modes of Matter indicate the necessity and desirability of physical health. For Buddhism the physical body is not a bondage to the mind’s freedom, but a necessary instrument for the mind’s development.

Characteristics or Phases of Matter

Here, too, the reference is not to matter in general, but to the organic matter that enters into the composition of a living being. There are four characteristics: Integration of Matter (rupassa upacaya), Continuity of Matter (rupassa santati), Decay of Matter (rupassa jarata), and Impermanence of Matter (rupassa aniccata).

The first “integration” is defined as the accumulation of the physical sense organs. The second “continuity” is defined as identical with the first: that which is integration of matter is the continuity of matter. This signifies that both refer to the same phenomenon and yet there is some difference between them. Both refer to the genesis of matter, but on two different occasions: Integration means the repeated production of matter from the moment of conception until the moment the body process is complete, with all the basic components. The second characteristic, Continuity of Matter, is repeated production of matter after the first phase called integration is over. It is growth over growth. The third characteristic, Decay of Matter is “the state of decaying, the brokenness of teeth, the grayness of hair, shrinkage in the length of days (ayuno samhani) and hyper-maturity of the faculties (indriyanam paripako).

The fourth is “Impermanence of Matter”. It is the break-up of the body at the time of death.

Both Early Buddhism and the Abhidhamma recognize the extra-mental existence of matter. In other words, both subscribe to Realism, not Idealism. Throughout the Buddhist Discourses and the Abhidhamma it is the language of realism that we encounter.

In the list of material elements given in the books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, some items, particularly those which the commentarial exegesis considered as nominal, may appear as artificial constructions. However, in the context of Buddhism’s practical doctrine and discipline, the selection of the items becomes meaningful.

Of the 28 Material Elements, the Four Great Elements, earth (pathavi), water (apo), fire (tejo), and air (vayo); the visible (rupa), smell (gandha), taste (rasa), and nutriment (ahara) explain the constitution of matter in general. They are the basic elements (avinibhoga-rupa) present in all instances of matter. Sudda stands for sound, and akasa-dhatu for delimited space, the space delimited by matter. The remaining 18 items pertain exclusively to the body of a living being. This situation, at least indirectly, suggests that it was the physical aspects of a living being more than matter in general that drew the special attention of the Abhidhamma.

Of the 18 items, the five Physical Sense Organs are the physical bases of the five kinds of consciousness named after them, or the material constituents of the cognitive apparatus. The two Faculties of Sex explain sex-distinctions. Material Faculty of Life accounts for the life-principle of kamma-caused matter. The Heart-Base is the physical seat of mental activity. The two Modes of Self-Expression, Bodily Expression and Vocal Expression explain how a person expresses himself. They are associated with the Buddhist theory of kamma. They represent the bodily and vocal manifestations of kammically qualified thoughts. The triad of Lightness, Malleability, and Wieldiness shows the special importance attached to

physical health, which is necessary for mental culture. The last four items, namely, Integration, Continuity, Decay, and Impermanence of Matter represent four phases of the history of the body, from the moment of conception to the moment of death.

The list of material elements is an attempt to explain and account for all the physical aspects, as well as certain facts connected with these physical aspects, of the individual being and his or her physical environment.