

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 12-29-2015.

This is the second of a series of talks on the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging, *pañc' upādāna-kkhandhā*, in Pāli. Tonight I want to focus on the aggregate of *rūpa*, usually translated as form, materiality or body. The key questions here are:

1. How do we know our bodies?
2. How do we construct a sense of "body"?

Let's begin with a definition from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Connected Discourses) 22.56: "And what, bhikkhus, is form [*rūpa*]? The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. "<sup>1</sup>

I'm not sure whether it is completely clear from the quote, but later tradition took this to mean that there are two types of form or materiality. There is form that is simply a combination of the four great elements; and there is form that is more complex combinations of these simpler forms.

So what are the Four Great Elements, *cattāro mahābhūtā* in Pāli?

1. Earth (*paṭhavī-dhātu*)
2. Water (*āpo-dhātu*),
3. Fire (*tejo-dhātu*),
4. Wind (*vāyo-dhātu*).<sup>2</sup>

Sue Hamilton, the British scholar, states that:

"In the commentarial tradition, these are explicitly understood to have the abstract meanings solidity, fluidity, heat and motion. In the *Sutta Piṭaka*, such abstract meanings are only implicit, though in the more detailed descriptions<sup>3</sup> of each of the elements the implication is quite clear."<sup>4</sup>

Shaila Catherine, drawing on the *Visuddhimagga*, the fifth century CE commentary, and the system of the contemporary Burmese master Pa-Auk Sayadaw, further clarifies these four elements as have the following qualities:

- Earth - hardness/softness; roughness/smoothness; heaviness/lightness;
- Water - flowing/cohesion;

- Fire - heat/cold;
- Wind - supporting/pushing.<sup>5</sup>

Hamilton also notes that by defining *rūpa* as the Four Great Elements, with these abstract meanings, the suttas and the commentaries are making it clear that *rūpa* is a collection of states and processes, rather than an enduring substance.<sup>6</sup> Another way of saying this is that the body, or form, is empty of enduring essence, or that it is not-self. The Buddha illustrates the empty, not-self nature of body through this simile:

"Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?"<sup>7</sup>

So how do we know the body? How do we know when we are experiencing "body"? And beyond that, how do we come to recognize when we are grasping at experiences of "body" creating the sense of them being "I, me or mine"?

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on four fields for establishing mindfulness, we find instructions on working with the aggregates:

"... how does one dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena in terms of the five aggregates subject to clinging? Here one understands: 'Such is form, such its origin, such its passing away....'"<sup>8</sup>

"Such is form" means, first recognizing/perceiving an experience of "form" or of "body." So we begin by bringing mindfulness -- clear knowing without evaluation, grasping or aversion -- to our bodily sensations. Then we might notice that this is a sensation of hardness, or of softness, as we sit on our cushions, benches, chairs and so forth. Or we might notice that this is a sensation of tightness in the hand, knee, belly or elsewhere. We might become aware that this is a sensation of pushing and support as we straighten our backs. These are just a few possibilities.

If you take the time for getting to know the body at this basic level, in this intimate way, you may also notice that these qualities, these sensations come and go. You may notice that they are impermanent and that this is the nature of our *experience* of body.

Then you may want to explore how we take these experiences of the elements and combine them with thoughts, memories or mental images to construct a sense of "my body." When a sensation arises, is there simply a mindful knowing of it? Or is it accompanied by an image of some aspect of body that has the function of placing the sensation in a location in space? Look to see for yourselves.

As you meet bodily sensations how are you relating to them? Are they simply sensations, arising and passing? Or are they being perceived as *my* sensations, *my* body? Look to see.

Explore the experience of "boundary" of the body. With your eyes closed and giving attention to sensations in or around the skin, notice if there is no image of skin or "my body" where exactly is the boundary between inside and outside? Look to see for yourself.

As we investigate in this way, we are also seeing the ways that the five aggregates interact to construct or fabricate the sense of I.

As you're going through the next week, I'd encourage you to just keep remembering to notice the aggregate of body, form or materiality. After spending some time in this way getting grounded in recognizing the four elements and form derived from the four elements, you can then also explore the empty or not-self nature of *rūpa* with the practice of inquiry. When attention is drawn to an experience in or of the body, ask "Where in this is there an "I" that is experiencing or possessing the experience?" This inquiry is most successfully done after one has come to recognize each of the aggregates in one's experience, and has confirmed for oneself that all of one's experience can be understood or explained as the result of the operation of these five aggregates together.

1. SN 22.56, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 895, {PTS III.22 59}.

Note: Text in brackets [ ] is mine.

2. Hamilton, Sue. *Identity and Experience*, London: Luzac Oriental, 1996.

Hamilton, Sue. *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*, Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000, p. 5.

3. MN.I.185f, 421f; III.240f

4. Hamilton, op. cit.

5. Catherine, Shaila, *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011, p. 219.

6. Hamilton, op.cit.

7. SN 22.95, *ibid*, p. 951, {PTS III.22 140-141}.

8. *ibid.*, p. 287.

Note: Changed "monk" to "one".