

Rūpa: Corporeality

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 13:04

*Namo tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto
samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa*

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

So we were going through the *khandha*, which is these five heaps that the Buddha talks about, these five aggregates in which he deconstructs the psychophysical organism. And today we'll do the word *rūpa*.

So *rūpa* translates as corporeality, or your body, basically. And the first question that you have to ask yourself is, what do we actually know? What do we actually know in terms of direct experience of the body itself, save through the senses?

So if you take just a simple example like your toenails, because every so often you cut them off. What do you know about your toenails? You know how they look, you know how they feel, hard and all that. But you don't know what it is to be a toenail. If there were nerves within your toenail, can you imagine the agony of having to cut them off every so often? The same with your hair.

So our direct experience of the body is still dependent on these outer senses. If there are no nerve senses, if there are no nerves there, we don't know what it is. And we don't even know the inside of things. We don't know what makes a nail or what makes your hair. I mean, we know scientifically, but we don't know by direct experience.

So we know, for instance, science tells us that every time we breathe there's this exchange of carbon dioxide for oxygen, but you don't know it. At least I don't know anyway—I should talk for myself. I've never, I don't know oxygen. I mean I'm told it's there and I'd die without it, but I haven't a clue. I've never experienced it as a direct experience.

So when it comes to understanding what the Buddha means by the body, he's not talking about the physicality of the body. This is the point—he's talking about how we experience the body, the direct experience of the body. And what it comes down to is the four basic elements, the *mahābhūta*, the four basic elements. And they're described in a metaphorical way: the earth, fire, water and air.

Now earth are those feelings that we experience as pressure, heaviness, lightness, that sort of sensation. The fire is heat—it also includes cold of course, the whole gamut of temperature. Water is cohesive, elasticity, what joins things. And air is movement.

And what the Buddha is saying—and this is fairly straightforward in the ancient world, it would seem—if you go into a sensation deep enough, you'll be able to describe it in those sorts of ways. Now don't confuse this with the four great forces in science: electromagnetism, gravity, strong and weak force. Those are completely different. What science is describing is matter, as it were, the laws of matter in itself. I mean, we experience gravity in terms of weight, but the others don't seem to fit.

So what the Buddha's talking about when he talks about the four great elements is how we experience matter, not that matter is like that in itself. It's just the way the mind experiences matter. So there's two things, isn't there? There's matter in itself, and there's matter how mind experiences matter. So that's what he's talking about.

And then from there—I'll just mention them quickly because there's no real time to go into it—there arises the derivatives. So from that you get your seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. And then there are further ones that are put as femininity or virility, physical base of mind, which is the brain. Actually, I won't go into that just yet. Then there's bodily, verbal expression—so that's the body. These are all secondary to this original contact that the mind has with the body.

The physical life itself—so we know that the body has its own energy, its own force. Each cell has its own little life, you might say. And there's a space element, that's part of it—there's holes in the body. And then there's physical agility, elasticity, adaptability, growth, continuity. There's decay, there's impermanence, and finally there's those things that are nutrients to the body. All that is secondary.

What we're interested in, in terms of the process of awakening, is the fact that although we experience the body as a whole, as an entirety, as an experience, when you go into it, it's made up of all these little bits and pieces, and therefore it loses that substantiality. It feels substantial if you fall over on a mountain and bang your head on the floor. But in fact, it's just feeling, different types of feelings that arise. At a physical level, it's just a bunch of subatomic particles touching another bunch of stuff. But in terms of our normal reality, it's a person who's hit his head on the floor and is hurt.

So this is part of the Buddhist strategy of undermining this mistake, this delusion, this belief that I am the body, by knowing what you're not. It's by realising what you're not that you begin to realise what you are. So that's his methodology. He's not turning us around to look at something which is the unconditioned or *nirvāṇa*. He says that will arise naturally when you realise what you're not.

So let me leave you with one or two exercises that you can do sometimes. So we did the standing. So even there, just that very simple thing. Normally speaking, there's just the feeling of standing. But when we go into those feelings in the feet, we find actually, we can distinguish this heat from the pressure. At one level it's just feeling of standing, and at a different level we see it's made up of all these bits and pieces.

When you get pain, you might have pain, you might have a sharp pain from, say, the sitting, or a headache. When you go into it, when you stop using the word headache or pain and you go in to describe

the sensations that are there, you are using different words. You might use heat or pressure, tightness or something else. The word pain disappears.

Also, how do we know the difference between the touch of metal and the touch of wood? If you go into that touch, you'll be able to discern what it is that's actually different at that feeling level. People, of course, these wine tasters and tea tasters, they do that, don't they? They get very into the distinctly different little bits that go into making this fullness of taste.

At a more subtle level, it's the eyes. The eyes are the heat element, fire. And in a moment of sharp meditation, you might actually experience what is happening in the mind when it takes in the stuff from the eyes. And it's actually imaging it as little flames.

It's the same with hearing, when you actually put your attention on the ear drum, on the actual process of hearing. And you can get right down to that basis of that first impact. All that is, is the touch of the air wave on the ear drum, which is then taken inward, as it were, to the next perception. You see it drawn into the mind until it actually takes on the sound of a bell. But that's not what's actually at that base. It's just contact. It's just pressure.

So that's what the Buddha means when he's talking about *rūpa*, about corporeality. You may also, just as an aside, come across another meaning when you're reading, and that is the subtle material that's within the mind itself that creates images. And through meditation, through concentration meditation, these become very bright, very obvious images in the mind, like a light. And these *nimitta*, as they're called, are then used for these absorption meditations to create an inner sense of bliss. So those also are known as *rūpa*.

And so taking that as a basis for those types of mental states that we call the absorptions, there's a further stage when even that image disappears. And they're known as the *arūpa*, the no-image state. So there's the fullness, really, of this word *rūpa*. And often you'll hear a Buddha *rūpa*, so it's the Buddha statue. So it's used in that sense too. With Easterners, that's a normal way of referring to a statue, a *rūpa*.

But the main thing is to, in your meditation, occasionally when you feel nicely concentrated, nicely investigative, curious, is to go into a sensation and begin to deconstruct it. And that's one of the purposes why the Buddha points out these different elements, these different four elements.

I can only hope my words are clarified not modified. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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