THE CONCEPT OF MATTER IN EARLY BUDDHISM

Prof. Angraj Chaudhary

Nav Nalanda Mahavihar, Nalanda

In early Buddhism, analysis of matter has been made with an express ethical purpose in view. Buddhist Ethics lays emphasis on getting rid of taṇhā which is at the root of our repeated existence and sufferings of all kinds, physical, mental and cosmic. Taṇhā is caused by our desire for the various objects of the world. We are attached to the various forms of rūpa (matter) and our passionate attachment to them gives rise to taṇhā. The irony is that no amount of the enjoyment of the worldly objects can quench our thirst for them. The more we have of them, the more we still desire of them. Taṇhā, as a matter of fact, is an ever going dynamo; the more it is constantly fed on by objects of taṇhā the more it produces ever increasing taṇhā.

Lord Buddha, unlike other theoretical Philosophers, was a practical Philosopher and the dharma preached by him contains practical doctrine. Lord Buddha’s greatest purpose was to get rid of suffering which are heir to. Suffering, as we have seen, is caused by our attachment to rūpa i.e. by our chandarāga for it. But we are hardly aware that the rūpa, we attach ourselves to, is in a constant state of flux. Though it looks permanent and unchanging, it is merely appearance. The reality is far otherwise. Therefore attachment to rūpa would inevitably lead to unrest and sorrow. In the Saṁyutta Nikāya Buddha advises us to give up all kinds of desire and passion in respect of rūpa.

Yo, Bhikkave, rupasmim chandarāgo tam pajahatha.¹

Rūpa (matter) is not a saṁyojana (fetter) in itself, but it is Saṁyojanīya i.e., it creates fetters. So long as we have avid greed and passion in our mind for the various objects of the world, we will always be bound by fetters created by them. Therefore if we want to put an end to suffering, we must destroy the various warps and woofs of our passion for the objects of the world. Rūpa is productive of fetters that bind the living being to Saṁsārika existence. Rūpa saṁyojanīyo dhammo.²

It is chiefly and perhaps solely in this context that the Buddhists have made an analysis of matter. Because rūpa is saṁyojanīya, so its true nature must be comprehended. Our ignorance of its true nature will make us crave for it, remain attached to it and as a consequence our spiritual progress will be impeded.

There are a number of passages in the Pali canon which describe this aspect of rūpa. It is a source of dangers that arise from attachment to it. How do we

- 426 -
get attached to it? Because we are ignorant of its real nature. Ajīnavo apassamā sarajjati. In the Samyutta Nikāya Lord Buddha says: Rūpam, Bhikkhave, anabhijānam, aparijñam abhabbo dukkhackkhayā.

Rūpa (matter) is not permanent. Its origination and dissolution are manifested. In the Samyutta Nikāya its true nature is described. It is Paṭiccassamuppanna, samkhīta, aśāthā bhāvi, khayadhāmmā, vayadhāmmā and also it is nirodha dhamma.

In the profoundly religious context, it has been described as māra, roga gaṇḍa salla ogha and aditta. Suṇānam, tucchā, ritta and asāra form another set of characteristics describing rūpa. It has been compared to Phenapinḍa (bubble) to bring out its impermanent nature.

Analysis of matter by the Early Buddhists has been done in the above mentioned way so that no one may feel like being attached to Rūpa which is short-lived like froth.

The early Buddhists do not so much describe the metaphysical concept of rūpa as they describe its that aspect which causes our worldly existence. Human personality is made up of nāma (Consciousness) and rūpa (matter). The Early Buddhists have described both of them from a pragmatic point of view which is to end our suffering.

The Buddhists like the Vedantins do not regard this external world as non-existent. Nor like the other idealists, do they show that the world is mind-made or a projection of subjective thought as held by Berkeley. Throughout the Pali texts it is maintained that matter or rūpa does exist independent of one’s mind.

This is the position taken by the early Buddhists. They start from the obvious. According to them when an individual comes into being in this world, he comes in contact with this external world which acts on him and to which he reacts. Thus, attachment to those objects of the world which are pleasing to him and repugnance for the objects which do not do so arise in him. As a consequence, he gets inextricably bound by his passions and desires.

The immediate problem before the Early Buddhists was how to annihilate passions and desires. It was, therefore, very necessary for them to understand the real nature of rūpa which acts on human beings and causes interminable grief.

According to Buddhist Philosophy, human personality is composed of five Khandas in their dynamic relationship with one another. They are rūpa, vedanā, saññā, samkhāra, and viññāṇa. The last four are mind and the first one is matter. How the two entirely opposite elements are related has been graphically described by Buddhaghosa. He gives the illustration of a lame man going on the Path on the shoulders of a blind man. None of them can do without the help of other. Both depend on each other.

Such a human personality naturally reacts to the external world with the six sense organs he is endowed with. The dynamic contact between the sense

- 427 -
organs and their objects gives rise to myriads of complex sensations which cause fetters that bind an individual to the wheel of existence unmistakably characterised by suffering.

The summum bonum, according to Buddhist Philosophy, is nibbāna which means the extinction of all passions and desires. It has been time and again pointed out that whatever is in a state of constant flux can hardly afford any lasting happiness. Rūpa has been defined in the following words:

Ruppatī kho, Bhikkhave, tasmaṁ rupam ti vuccati. kena ruppati? siten pi ruppati, unhen pi ruppati, jīgaechāya pi ruppati, daṁsa makasa vātātapa sirinsapa samphassena pi ruppati!

T. W. Rhys Davids explains the most important word ruppati in this passage as “to be vexed, oppressed, hurt, molested”. According to the Vibhanga Aṭṭhakatā, it is kuppati, piliyati and bhijjati. Although ruppati refers to a psychological disturbance, it also refers to the physical change that an object undergoes. The whole purpose is to show the changeable and transmutable nature of rūpa. There is nothing like the metaphysical entity called matter. But any given material is analysable into rūpadhammas, which have been regarded as the ultimate reducible factors that make up the physical world. A rūpa dhamma does not have any independent existence. It always exists inseparably with a set of other dhammas. It is for this reason that the mahābhūtas are called sahajāta.

According to Buddhist Philosophy, there are twenty eight types of rūpas, four of them are primary and the rest twenty four are secondary.

Pathavī, āpo, tejo and vāyo are primary elements and they are called mahābhūtas. Pathavī dhatu is characterised by kakkhalatā and kharigatā. One may say that kakkhalatā is itself Pathavi. So is the case with āpo dhatu which is defined as rūpassa bandhanatta i.e. viscosity and cohesion that bind the matter together. There are two other characteristics of water, paggharana i.e. flowing and nissandabhāva i.e. state of streaming.

In the Nikāyas, the mahābhūtas are defined in simple and general terms and they are illustrated with reference to the constituents of body. Hair of the head and body, nails, teeth, flesh and skin etc. are examples of pathavī dhatu, because they are hard and rigid. Blood, bile, cough and phlegm are examples of āpodhatu. Heat in the body is an example of Tejo dhatu and inhalings and exhalings and other kinds of winds are examples of vāyo dhatu which is airy.

Such definitions of the mahābhūtas may be called popular. It is only in the Abhidhamma that abstract and detailed definitions of these mahābhūtas are given. According to the Nikāyas what is kakkhala is pathavī, whereas according to the Abhidhammika definition kakkhalatā itself is pathavī. Not only kakkhalatā but kharatva and gurutva also are said to be pathavī. It is also defined as that which spreads up,
paṭṭharatāti paṭhāvī. Buddhaghosa says that paṭhāvī dhātu acts as a foundation in so far as the other three elements are established on it.

Āpo dhātu is rūpasā handhanattā i. e. it is that which binds the rūpa kalāpas together. It is represented by the fact of sineha or viscosity. How are the particles of iron or for that matter the particles of stone closely bound together? It is the function of āpo dhātu to bind all the particles together. Two other characteristics of āpo dhātu are flowing and streaming. These account for the fact that vāyo dhātu and tejo dhātu also have āpo dhātu in them, because they spread and flow. According to the Vaiśeṣika philosophy, āpo has two characteristics i. e. Liquidity and viscosity, Āpo dravah snigdhah but unlike the Vaiśeṣikas, the Buddhists do not recognize the dichotomy between substance and quality.

Tejo dhātu means the phenomenon of heat or ughattā. The Buddhists, unlike the upholders of Vaiśeṣika philosophy, believe that usṣpa and sīra really come under tejo dhātu. It is true that cold or sīra is known by the sense of touch, it is really tejo dhātu because cold is really relative absence of heat. This is indeed an ingenious explanation given by the Theravādin.

The Dhammasangani defines vāyo dhātu in terms of thambhitatta (inflation) and chambhitatta (mobility). As distinct from the rest three of mahābhūtas, it represents the dynamic aspect.

Thus seen, the mahābhūtas are not qualities and attributes of the bhūta rūpa i. e. they are qualities not inhering in any substance. In other words the qualities themselves constitute the mahā bhūtas.

One of the fundamental features of the mahābhūtas is that none of them can exist in isolation. In fact no mahābhūta (Primary element) can exist independently of the other three mahābhūtas. They are, therefore, called sahaṁjata and sahaṁbhū. On further analysis it becomes clear that the upapatti (origination), thiti (existence) and bhanga (dissolution) of one always synchronize with those of the others. The mahā bhūtas cannot be separated from one another. In short, they rise together, exist together and are destroyed together. They are, therefore, called abhinibhoga rūpa. It means that every instance of matter contains all the four primary elements. Thus all material aggregates are tetrabhaudtic. Although the Vedānta philosophy believes in monobhaudtic substance, it holds that in each mahābhūta there are five sūkṣama (subtle) bhūtas present.

As against the sāmkhya system of philosophy where mahābhūtas are not ultimate constituents of matter (they are believed to evolve immediately from the tamātras and ultimately from the prakṛti which is the uncaused first cause of the world of non-self), the Early Buddhists assign them a comparatively primary position.

Vedānta philosophy, as we have seen holds that mahābhūtas are gross which come into being from the sūkṣama bhūtas. According to Jain philosophy, not the
four elements but the paramāṇus are the constituents of pudgala. So according to them paramāṇu is given a comparatively primary position. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika system of philosophy has postulated four kinds of atoms corresponding to earth, water, air and fire.

Besides the above explained four primary elements (mahābhūtas) there are twenty four secondary rūpas. They are called upāda rūpas in so far as they depend on the mahābhūtas. Five sense organs, four objects of the senses, two faculties of sex, one faculty of life, āhāra, hadaya vatthu (the physical basis of mental activity), the two modes of self expression (kāyaviṃśati and vaci viṃśati), three characteristics like lahutā; mudutā and kamaṁññata, four phases of matter like upacaya, santati, jaratā and aniccatā and the element of space are the twenty four upāda rūpas.

The first five sense organs viz; cakkhu, sota, ghāna, jīvha and kāya are respectively the organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. In the Abhidhamma they have been described as pasāda which means clearness and brightness. These sense organs are not only receptive, but they also gratify our sensual pleasures. They react as well as gratify. They are very subtle and delicate and they can be known by no other sense organ than by mind which is the subtlest of all. They are composed of subtler matter and their corresponding objects are made of gross ones.

According to the early Buddhists, the relationship between the sense organs and their corresponding objects is that between the subtle and the gross. The Sāmkhya philosophy holds more or less the same view. According to it, the development of matter takes place along two different lines. Where there is predominance of sattea that evolves into sense organs and where there is predominance of tamas or dead matter that becomes sense objects. But there is a basic difference. As Prof. Stcherbatsky has pointed out the two groups of matter are not conceived as modification of an eternal substance by the Buddhists.

It has been held by most of the systems of Indian thought that the sense organs are something which are very fine and very subtle. The Jains speak of two kinds of indriyas viz., dravya indriyas (the physical sense organs) and bhāvendriyas their psychical correlates. The Mimāṃsakas mention that “the sense organs consist in the faculty of potency abiding in their sockets.” According to the Vedānta system of philosophy, different sense organs consist of sāttvic parts of light, ether, earth, water and air.

From all this, it is clear that sense organs as they are subtle, transparent and translucent, develop sensitivity to external world of objects as a looking glass does to all objects.

The sense objects have been enumerated as four viz., rūpa (the visible), sadda (sound), ganāha (smell) and rasa (taste). Although there is another sense object called the phoṭṭabba (the tangible), it has not been enumerated here because it
consists of three of the four primary elements, water being excluded. The rūpa-
tana (the sphere of the visible) includes colour like blue, yellow, red, etc. and figures like circular, oval, square, hexagonal etc. The saddāyatana (the sphere of the audible) includes different kinds of sounds of drum, of tabors, of conch shells etc. The gandhāyatana (the sphere of the odorous) includes all kinds of odour sugandha and durgandha and the rasaṅyatana (the sphere of the savoury) includes tastes like bitter, pungent, saline and acrid etc.

It is interesting to note here that the earlier Buddhists have discussed the problem as to how does the sound travel? Does it require a medium to travel? The answer is in the affirmative.

The two faculties of sex which are responsible for distinguishing the male and the female also come under upāda rūpa (secondary matter). According to the Dhammasangani, the purisindriya (faculty of masculinity) is responsible for the physical appearance, mark, traits and department that are peculiar to a male. Similarly the itthindriya (faculty of femininity) gives rise to the marks and traits of a female.

Jīvitindriya (the faculty of life) is also a kind of upāda rūpa. Its function is to stabilize and sustain the kammasamutthana rūpa i.e. matter that rises as a result of kamma. There is Jīvitindriya in a piece of paper so long as it is not friable. The moment it becomes so, it has lost the faculty of life. Kaballkara ōhara is also a form of secondary rūpa. Although it literally means gross food taken in morsels, its Abhidhammika meaning is that aspect of matter which is nutritive i.e. which helps one in growth.

Hadaya vatthu, not recognized as a form of rūpa even in the Dhammasangani but mentioned in the Paṭṭhara, is a post canonical development. It is called the heart basis which is the physical basis of mano dhātu (mind) and mano viññāna dhātu (mind consciousness).

The two modes of self expression (viññati rūpa) kāyaviññati (bodily expression) and vaci viññati (vocal expression) are also upāda rūpas. Because they make the thoughts known or they help in communicating thoughts, they are called viññati. Kāyaviññati is not identical with bodily expression but it refers to the bodily tension that rises in response to a thought moral (kusala), immoral (akusaia) or indeterminate (avyākata). In the Dhammasangani, it has been defined as the state of bodily tension or excitement (kāyassa thambhanā sanīhanbhana samthambhitattam). Vaci viññati means expression or communication through voice of speech or articulate sound. It rises like Kāyaviññati in response to a kusala, akusala or avyākata thought.

The three characteristics of matter viz., lahutā (lightness), mudutā (softness) and kammaññatā (pliability) are qualities of matter in general. This triad of lahutā, mudutā, and kammaññatā represents the healthy and efficient position of a being.
There are also phases of matter which are four in number viz., *rupassa upacaya* (growth of matter), *rupassa santati* (continuity of matter), *rupassa jarata* (decay of matter) and *rupassa aniccatā* (inpermanence of matter). Obviously these four phases indicate growth of matter, its continuity, its decaying state and its complete annihilation.

These phases of matter clearly point out that there is no justification for our being attached to any object for true happiness. They rise only in order to be annihilated. When they are in a constant state of flux, how can they give true happiness?

The last item of *upāda rūpa* is *ākāsa* (element of space). It is *ākāsa dhātu* which gives room to all material things for movement. It is regarded as a bounded space.

Thus, it is clear that the early Buddhists have defined matter more from the ethical point of view than from the metaphysical point of view. In spite of this bias, however, the metaphysical point of view is also not blurred and indistinct.

References

1. Sanyutta Nikaya, 2, PP. 375
2. Ibid, 2, PP. 262
3. Ibid, 3, PP. 389
4. Ibid, 2, PP. 262
5. Ibid, 2, PP. 261.

---

"Praamik Boodh Darsan Mein Pardarsh Ki Dharana"

Shri Om Shankaracharya, Nabanala Man Mahaveer


Boodh Na To Vayamitva Mei Samman Jagan Ke Asad Manta Hai Aur Na Hai Ve Iss Ke Mahaanik Prakritiya Manta Hai. Ve Isska Swarnt Atitiva Manta Hai. Iss Jagan Mei Man Aur Pardarsh Aanch Aur Mangde Ke Samman

- 432 -

Jain Education International For Private & Personal Use Only www.jainelibrary.org
परस्पर संबंध हैं। इस संबंध को संपन्न करने में इन्द्रियों को सहायक होती हैं। बौद्ध वर्णन में चार प्राथमिक और चौथी द्वितीय रूप (पदार्थ) माने जाते हैं। पृथ्वी, जल, तेज और वायु—ये चार प्राथमिक रूप-महामूल हैं। पृथ्वी में कब्जलता (कठोरता) और वरिष्ठता (पुष्टि) होती है, जब तक विरोधाभास, संस्कर्त और प्रतापकोश होती है। चार तेजोगुण हैं और गतिशील अवशेषधाराओं वायुरूप है। पृथ्वी पर अन्य तीन रूप सिद्ध होते हैं। विभिन्न दाताओं को वांछने वाला जलघात है। तेजोगुण और वायुरूप में भी जलघात के प्रबाह एवं प्रसरण के गुण पाये जाते हैं। ये सभी दाताओं वाले गुणों से अभिन रहते हैं। ये सभी मूलभूत रूप सहजता होते हैं और निरंगत रूप में नहीं रहते। इन्हें ‘अविनमित्वौ मूल’ कहते हैं। इस प्रकार वज्र के सभी पदार्थ जयरूपमृत्वमूल होते हैं। ये महामूल ही पदार्थ के मूल-मूल तत्त्व या ध्वंसक हैं। न्याय-वैदिकि पदार्थों का यह व्याख्या में स्पष्ट है कि जैनदर्शन के ऊपर सभी पदार्थों को मूलिक मानती है जबकि जैनदर्शन के केवल एक समान परमाणुओं को ही मूलिक मानती है। वैदिकियों के समान, बौद्धों के ये महामूल सूक्ष्मसूक्ष्मों से निम्नता नहीं होते।

इन चार मूलिक महामूलों के जैनों के प्रति द्वितीय रूप उत्पन्न होते हैं। इन्हें ‘उत्पाद’ रूप भी कहते हैं। इनमें पाँच इन्द्रियों के चार विषय, दो लिंग, जीवन, आहार, दृश्यमृत्व (मन), धरीर, वचन, वाक्यात्मक, कौशल, नम्मता, उच्चता, सत्यता, अनिवार्यता तथा आकाश समाप्त हैं। पाँच इन्द्रियों धीरों के तुल्य एवं संबंधित अलग रूप है। रूप (वर्ण और आकृति), शार्दूल, गंध और रस—ये चार विषय हैं। पृथ्वी और शीतलों—ये दो लिंग हैं जो जीवों में दो प्रकार के अभिलक्षण उत्पन्न करते हैं। जैनिक निकाश-समुदाय का नाम वज्र है। आहार विक्रम-वाज्य है। दृश्यमृत्व मन की चोटक है। धीरीर और वचन आभिषेक के माध्यम हैं। अन्य सात रूप पदार्थों के विभिन्न गुणों से विभंगवाक्यों के निर्देशित करते हैं। आकाश सभी रूपों के अवगत देखा है। बौद्ध इसे सीमित आकाश मानते हैं। इन चौबिंदों रूपों में केवल दृश्यमृत्व ही ‘ऐसा’ रूप है जो परवर्ती समाहुरण है।

इन सभी रूपों के विवरण के रूप होता है कि इनमें कोई ऐसा विशेष गुण नहीं है जिसके कारण इनके प्रति मनोभाव नहीं है। अतः मनोभावपूर्वक तृप्ति के निरोध से जीवन को कल्याणकारी बनाना चाहिये।