

# The Relation of Human Existence and External World in Theravada Buddhism

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## Abstract

Although the life of a human being is essentially constituted of the five khandhas as already explained, nevertheless we are in a particular state of diary life or worldly experiences not directly concerned with them; we are practically ignorant of them as they are not essential. But in reality they still function as they really are. The reason for this is that normally the process of living is mostly related to the world or the life in connection with the world, that which is classified under two parts, namely, (i) that part of perceiving or receiving the world through the six sense-doors, viz., eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, which exist for the purpose of apprehending or sensing the world as appearing to human beings in various ways. These are formally called the ‘six sense objects’ (ārammanas), viz., visible object, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental object ; and (ii) Another part is that of performing with the world by the way of three channels of action, viz., body (kāyadvāra), speech (vacīdvāra) and mind (manodvāra), for reacting to the world in the three ways of ‘bodily action’ (kāyakamma), ‘verbal action’ (vacīkamma) and mental action (manokamma).

**Keywords:** Relation, Human Existence, External World

## Introduction

At present, we are dealing with the first part of the living-process as ‘the part of receiving the world through six doors (dvāra), in other words, six āyatanas’. We must bear in mind here that the word dvāra (door) in the working system of life-process is used instead of the word āyatana (bases or sources). For this academic article, the emphasis is that the signified by the fourth khandha, that is, sañkhārakkhāṇḍha. But the term ‘sañkhāra’ here is newly classified in accordance with three characteristics: (i) from the point of its ‘expressing door’ it is named kāyasañkhāra, vacīsañkhāra and manosañkhāra; (ii) from the aspect of being ‘representative’ it is known as kāyasañcetanā, vacīsañcetanā and manosañcetanā; and (iii) from the characteristic of its ‘function’ it is of three kinds as kāyakamma, vacīkamma and manokamma. The analysis of Āyatanas also aims at penetrating into the true nature of phenomenal existence, as a second classification to khandhas. The word ‘āyatanas’ means ‘base’, perhaps, ‘source’ would be a more appropriate equivalent. Āyatana is described as a set of six internal sense-organs (ajjhattikāyatana) along with their corresponding numbers of sense-objects known as six external sense objects (bāhirāyatana), which constitute the bases

of their respective types of consciousness. The āyatanas are therefore, twelve in number referred to as six internal sense bases and six external sense bases. The term ayatana also means the scope of faculty or sense–organ, when faculty is not functioning, say, ‘eye’, for example, in sleep, it is simply called dhātu, e.g. cakkhudhātu or cakkhavāyatana. But when it is functioning in this case, it is called ‘indriya’, such as, cakkhundriya.

Through a medium, that is, phassa ‘contact or sense–impression’ between the internal sense–bases and the external ones, we gain the knowledge (viññāna) of things or sense–objects. For example, the eye comes into contact with colour such as blue, then visual consciousness arises by mere awareness of the presence of this colour. We get the knowledge of colour because of the combination or conjunction of three constituents, viz., sense–organs, sense–objects and consciousness. The combination or conjunction of the three constituents is called phassa (contact). The phassa is of six kinds in accordance with six sense–organs. It is said that in the perceiving process phassa is the most important, because when phassa arises, the process goes on. The interesting thing next to phassa is vedanā (feeling) that arises due to the phassa. The vedanā is the perceiver or the feeler of the sense object. The diagrammatic representation will be as :

$$\text{Āyatana} + \text{ārammana} + \text{viññāna} = \text{phassa vedanā}$$

### The Combination of Khandhas, Āyatanas and Dhātus

It should be emphasized here that the term ‘khandhas’ in their second classification is known as āyatanas. The twelve āyatanas can also be classified into eighteen dhātus as in the process discussed above. The difference between āyatanas and dhātus exists only in the matter of arrangement of mental and material states in various ways. The point to be understood is that Buddhism admits mind as a sense–organ. Manāyatana stands as manodvāra (mind–door) of consciousness. The consciousness can reflect upon itself through mind–door; without mind–door consciousness cannot know itself. Consciousness can grasp mental objects through mind–door, hence the consciousness is the consciousness of an object; consciousness knows itself as an object, not as a subject. “That is, consciousness by nature is not self–conscious, it is not implicitly aware of itself as is aware of the objects.”

Unlike the other schools of thought which admit five sense–organs with the exception of mind and accept the subjective consciousness, Buddhism admits six kinds of sense–organs and objective consciousness. According to Buddhism, the khandhas, āyatanas and dhātus have the same content, that is, their substancelessness. Again, the Buddhist term ‘dhātu’ covers both the conditioned (saṅkhata) and unconditioned (asaṅkhata) things. The conditioned dhātus signify all living beings and objects of the world, but the unconditioned dhātus refer to space and Nirvana. The point is that the twelve āyatanas can be

rendered into five khandhas as under : (i) the first five pairs of āyatana from cakkhu and rūpa to kāya and phoṭṭhabba are grouped in rūpakhandha ; (ii) the sixth internal sense-organ, that is, Dhammāyatana is included in four khandhas, namely, in three nāmakhandhas (vedanā, saññā, and saṅkhāra) and in rūpakhandha (only the subtle elements) and also Nirvāna (which is free from the state of khandha).

The twelve āyatana are further rendered into nāma-and-rūpa : of the twelve āyatana, those that stand for the first five sense-organs and their respective sense-objects, cover only rūpa, that is, the material plane of existence being gross in nature, whereas manāyatana, that stands for the sixth sense organ, comprises viññānakhandha, i.e. all the 89 or 121 types of consciousness. The eighteen dhātus also can be rendered into nāma-and-rūpa as follows : rūpa-group refers to the five sense-organs and their corresponding objects, whereas nāma-group means the seven numbers of 6 and 13–18, which represent the 89 or 121 kinds of consciousness, namely, (i) manodhātu consist of three kinds of consciousness of which one is the pañcadvāravajjanacitta (the five sense-doors turning (for impressions) consciousness) ; and the other two kinds of sampaticchannacitta (receiving (the object) consciousness), (ii) from cakkhuvīññādhātu to kāyavīññādhātu, these five viññāna-dhātus contain two types each and hence represent ten types, and (iii) it is the manovīññādhātu that includes the remaining seventy-six types of consciousness. This is the only difference between dhātu-group and āyatana-group. The remaining factors exhibit no material difference between the two groups.

## The Reality in Abhidhamma of Theravada Buddhism

As we have already seen, Buddhism admits two kinds of truths, of which one is conventional truth (sammutisacca) and the other one is ultimate truth (paramatthasacca). The former indicates things that are conventionalized by people for the sake of recognition. The things are not real in themselves, such as a man, a cat, a dog, etc., the latter refers to the ultimate truth or reality as they are. The Abhidhamma classifies the so-called ultimate truth into citta, cetasika, rūpa and Nibbāna. These states even without the convention exist according to their nature. The Theravāda Buddhist philosophy advocates that the first three states of ultimate truth known as five khandhas conditionally exist (saṅkhatadhamma), the last one unconditionally exists (asaṅkhatadhamma). In this way the Theravada philosophy is called realism which upholds the reality of the ultimate truths as they are. As the Buddha said : Everybody, feeling, perception, mental activities, or consciousness, whatever be it past, future, present, inward, or outward, gross or subtle, low or high, far or near, it should be regarded as it really is by right insight.”

The analysis of the being into five khandhas, on the one hand, and twelve āyatana, on the other, is only for investigation and comprehension of the true nature of beings. The five khandhas and twelve

āyatanas do not function in isolation in the way we have described. But we have discussed them in isolating one from another in order to comprehend their relative positions that constitute personality. We may briefly point out here that the personality can be viewed both in its synthetic and analytical aspects. When the four elements (mahābhūtarūpas) and the five khandhas take place, then we synthetically understand man. But when we analytically separate the constituents from one another, then the so-called personality disappears. The personality is constituted by nāma and rūpa, is in a state of flux. It is subject to the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha and anatta. The Buddha in his discourse on khandhas and āyatanas, presented in the khandhavagga and salāyatanavagga, characterized all the five khandhas and twelve āyatanas transitory in nature. The attachment to these khandhas and āyatanas can hardly yield anything, but suffering. The only escape from suffering, the Buddha recommends, is renunciation of ignorance, desire and attachment that rule over the domain of khandhas and āyatanas.

### **The Relation of Mind and Body in Theravada Buddhism**

In studying nāma and rūpa, the following points should be brought into our notice. Theravāda Buddhism cannot be called materialism, because the materialists, like the Cārvākas and Ajita Kesakambala hold that the reality is one, that is, matter, the so-called mind or consciousness is the only product resulting from the proportional combination of matter. Unlike materialism, the Buddhist philosophy in the conventional sense admits the reality of both matter and consciousness. The consciousness or mind (citta) does not occur because of the mixture between the four elements, hence it does not disappear merely because of the dissolution of them. Buddhism cannot be called annihilationism (ucchedavāda) as well, because it accepts the doctrine of rebirth. However, by accepting the reality of citta, Buddhism cannot be regarded as idealism, which upholds only the existence of mind. For example, the idealists such as the Vijñānavādins of Yogācāra Buddhism assert that matter is nothing but idea that is created by citta ; mind alone exists, and the external world does not exist at all. The western idealist, Berkeley, said that ‘to be is to be perceived’, i.e. the existence of matter depends on the perception of citta. Theravāda Buddhist philosophy is not idealism, because it holds that matter or form really exists outside consciousness or name. This is tantamount to saying that no matter, whether citta thinks of the matter or not, the matter is still present in the external world ; matter is independent of the awareness of citta or viññāna.

Another thing is that though the Theravāda Buddhist philosophy accepted the reality of both consciousness (citta) and matter (vatthu) known as nāma and rūpa, it is not dualism which holds that both mind and matter are real substances, that they equally exist, and are independent of other. Rene Descartes is a dualist. And he laid down that mind and body are two independent substances. The clear and distinct

perception of the external world shows that it is extended. But extension is known only through our ideas of it. Matter has an extension for its nature of extension. The problem that cannot be solved in Descartes' dualism is how do matter and mind that categorically differ from each other relate to each other? The Theravāda Buddhist philosophy does not face this problem, for it holds that *nāma*–and–*rūpa* or mind–and–matter are not permanent, they always change in accordance with Tilakkhana. Moreover, *nāma* and *rūpa* dependently originate according to the doctrine of dependent origination. *Nāma* arises dependent on *rūpa* and *rūpa* on *nāma*, and their functions go on dependently just like the boat and the boatman, the lame and the blind and the sound and the drum. It is beautifully explained with a comparison of a marionette (*dāruyanta*) in the *Visuddhimagga* thus:

Just as marionette is void, soulless and without curiosity, and while it walks and stands merely through the combination of strings and wood, yet it seems as if it had curiosity and interestedness, so too, this mentality–materiality is void, soulless and without curiosity, and while it walks and stands merely through the combination of the two together, yet it seems as if it had curiosity and interestedness.

In India, the Samkhya is also known as a typical representative of dualism just as does Cartesianism in the west. According to the Samkhya, there two categories, *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* that are different from each other. The former is conceived to be 'matter', while the latter to be 'consciousness'. It also differentiates mind from consciousness, by regarding mind (*antahkarana*) as the product of *prakṛti*. The relation between the self or consciousness and the mind is not rationally conceived by the Samkhya. If the *puruṣa* is infinite (*vibhu*), as mentioned by Samkhya, how can it come into contact with a particular mind in exclusion to other minds? The *puruṣa* is immaterial ; if so, how can it be reflected in the mind or any aspect of it ? whereas the Samkhya regards both *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* as external and unconditioned, in the view of Buddhist philosophy both matter and mind are ever–changing and conditioned.

In Buddhism, the terms “mind” and “consciousness” are one and the same, and there is no permanent entity that transcends them. The Buddhists have no problem in explaining the relation between *nāma* and *rūpa* as mentioned earlier. Moreover, according to the theory of relation (*paccaya*), consciousness is related to matter by way of *pacchājāta*–*paccaya* (the relation of post–existence), and matter to consciousness by means of *purejāta*–*paccaya* (the relation of pre–existence). That is, consciousness and its psychic factors arise after the arising of the body and the sense–organs and their objects must exist prior to arising of consciousness. Therefore, consciousness in the Buddhist philosophy is the knowledge of the objects.

Jainism, like Cartesianism and the Samkhya, advocates dualism, i.e. the doctrine of *jīva* and *ajīva*. *Jīva* or soul, according to Jainism, is in its pure existence all–conscious. But it is made unconscious by the covering of *karma*–*puggala* (the particle of matter). Jainism regards *karma* as matter that always binds the

soul, hence Jainism always worries about freeing the soul from karma by self-mortification more than by the moral cultivation of soul. But unlike Jainism, Buddhism accepts karma as the state of mind, not that of the matter. There is no permanent soul, only the combination of *nāma* and *rūpa* that are related to karma (*kammāpaccaya*). Buddhism regards karma as the co-existent state of *nāma* and *rūpa*, and it can be removed by the practice of insight.

## The Arising of Personality in Buddhism

As stated earlier, through the contact between sense organs and their corresponding objects arise consciousness. Consciousness, according to the realistic Buddhist philosophy, is not substance because the substantial thing will endure permanently by itself, but consciousness always undergoes change and it is impermanent and changes every moment, that is, it is subject to the law of *Tilakkhana*. According to the Theravāda Buddhist philosophy, not only consciousness but also matter arises and perishes every moment. The duration of matter in each moment lasts longer than that of consciousness, namely, the seventeen moments of consciousness is equivalent to a mere single moment of matter (*tāni pana sattarasa cittakkhanāni rūpadhammanāmaya*). The moment of consciousness is called consciousness-stream. Apart from the ever-flowing of mental stream, there is no soul which subsists as an unchanging entity. Like the modern psychologists, the Buddhists are concerned only with the ever-changing process of body and mind. But unlike the former, the latter holds That the flow of mental activities (*cetanākamma*) do not come at an end at the time of the death of the body. Residual effect of the past karmas are potentially present in the form of *saṅkhāras* at every moment of consciousness-stream.

With the denial of permanence of mind and matter, the Theravāda Buddhist philosophy is, therefore, opposed to that of Puggalavāda ; Vijñānavāda ; and especially Upanisads which hold the permanence of soul known as Atman. As is mentioned earlier, the Buddha rejects the soul for the reason that its existence cannot be proved by means of experience, both mundane and super mundane. It is understood that the Buddha's position is similar to that of the empiricist or experientialist. Hume, like the Buddha, rejects the existence of soul or self after analysing the notion of personal identity. While Hume destroys the concept of mind as set forth in Berkely's idealism, the Buddha disproves the idea of self in the Upanisad's idealism. Hume's analysis has similarities to that of the Buddha in several respects. The concepts of "impression" and "idea" can be compared with that of "*vedanā*" and "*saññā*". The most important similarity between Hume and the Buddha is their discovery that human reason is the slave of the passions. The Buddha concentrates on human being and finds nothing, but the ever-changing elements of *nāma* and *rūpa*, then he concludes thus : "All recluses and brāhmins who regard the soul in diverse ways, regard it as the body-mass of five

khandhas based on attachment or as one of them. In the Samyutta–Nikāya, Khemaka Thera, when asked by Dasaka Bhikkhu whether in this five khandhas he discerns the self or anything pertaining to the self, replies thus : “In these five khandhas, friend, I discern no–self nor anything pertaining to the self. Hume, like the Buddha, rejects the existence of the self, because he cannot discover it after reflecting upon it, what he finds is the ever–changing perception, then he concludes thus :

Setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perceptual flux and movement... there is no any single power of the soul which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment... there is no any single power of the soul which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment... there is properly no simplicity in it at one time, not identity in different, whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that, the comparison of the theatre must not mislead us, they are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind.

However, Hume fails to explain the connection among the distinct perceptions, as he confesses thus :“In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent, namely, ‘that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives a real connection among distinct existences... For my part, I must plead the privilege of a skeptic, and confess that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding”. Hume’s dilemma was solved by the Buddha 2500 years ago by the elaborate ‘Law of Relations’ (paccaya), called Paticcasamuppāda, which will be stated in detail in the sequel. Hume, like the Buddha, sets aside metaphysics and contends that the self is a product of man’s propensity to obsessions, or illusion (vipallāsa) according to the Buddhist terminology, but the Buddha goes even further by providing its solution : “Whatever, monks, is the origin of the number of obsessions and perceptions which assail a man, if there is nothing to rejoice, to welcome, to catch hold of, this is itself an end of a propensity to attachment, to repugnance... to ignorance, this is itself an end of taking a weapon, ... of lying speech”. We can say that the Buddha’s analysis of experience is for the purpose of eradicating that experience, while Hume intends the improvement of understanding and the sharpening of perception.

The problem of personal identity is solved by the Buddha with the help of the doctrine of Dependent Organization. The personal–identity process is nothing but that of perception. The process of perception is also known as the process of rebirth. The process of rebirth is the process of name and form. To know the latter, the doctrine of Dependent Origination should be taken into account at length.

## Conclusion

The Theravāda Buddhist philosophy is not materialism or dualism, but realism in the sense that it recognizes the reality of consciousness and the external objects independent of their cognitions. It believes in the reality of consciousness and the reality of external world, but not in their permanence like dualism. Buddhism admits the reality of momentary consciousness and the objects. Consciousness is consciousness of the object (*ārammanam cinctīti cittam*). It occurs dependent on the objects; without the objects consciousness cannot arise.

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