

Lesson Two
Mindfulness of Material Form Aggregate (Rupa)

This is the second lesson of our Mindfulness of the 5 Aggregates series.

I'll explain the first Aggregate and that is the material form (Rupa) to enable you to recognise it because without recognition, you can't build a strong perception of it. The Buddha began in this section as follows:

*"Bhikhavve Bhikkhu, Iti Rupam
Iti rupassa samudayo
Iti rupassa atthangamo"*

*(Monks, this is material form.
Thus is the arising of material form.
Thus is the disappearing of material form.)*

What is material form (Rupa)?

From the Abhidhamma (Higher Teaching of the Buddha), we know all material forms, which includes, body are made of 4 great elements with 24 derivatives. These 4 great elements are namely earth (pathavi), water (apo), wind (vayo) and fire (tejo). This is what material form is in ultimate reality. That is all.

But, we don't normally see or experience and understand material form as such. Normally, we experience (see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think of) form with concept, discrimination, preferences and fantasies.

It is like seeing through rose tinted lens.
The pink shade superimposes our vision.

For example, the moment we see somebody, we associate that person with some notions, like a friend or a stranger. You might even have discriminations such as he is of such race because his skin colour is of such tone, he is tall or short or handsome or chubby, and so on. These are concepts, being the rose tint.

With concepts, preferences, likes with pleasant feeling or dislikes with unpleasant arises.

It goes on to condition thought, speech and action of attachment or rejection or hate. In reality, what were experienced (seen) were merely colours. Colour is a derivative of the earth element. That is all.

How to practise mindfulness of material form?

There are as always two aspects to the practice, namely internally and externally.

Internally

Internally refers to material form experiences arising from one's body. These are the direct experiences of the basic elements, which are realities of the body. We have explained much of it in the Beginners Handbook. For instance, the rising and falling movement in the abdominal area is a direct experience of the wind (vayo) element. Occasionally, you might experience a cooling or heat sensation and that is the direct experience of the temperature element.

Sitting Posture

In the sitting posture, it is good to begin the practice with something gross. Grosser objects are easier to perceive and strong perception of the meditation objects builds up mindfulness quickly. Therefore meditator should direct and anchor his attention on the elements for a while before moving on to the other Aggregates, which can be even subtler. So we typically start with rising and falling of the abdomen (wind element) as the preliminary starting point until concentration is built up before switching to subtler elements or Aggregates.

Walking and other postures

In walking and other postures, the meditator continues to be mindful of the elements that he can directly experience in that posture. It is good to begin with a small area to build up mindfulness first. For example, while walking, he is mindful of the feet like lifting movement, pushing movement, putting movement, which are all wind element. He is mindful of the temperature element or earth element in the touching when placing his foot or shifting his weight.

As mindfulness is developed, so will the concentration and, clarity of mind follows.
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The meditator will then be able to perceive more than just the realities in the feet area. His scope of perception of realities widens. The concept of foot, leg, abdomen, hands and etc. will also begin to fall away as the mind is anchored and sustained more and more on realities of material form.

When the mind perceives the body material form as it is,
the expectations, presumptions, fantasies or concepts
with regard to the body material form disappear.

Externally

Externally, refers to material form realities that is experienced other than from one's body. How to practise mindfulness of material form externally?

For instance

I'll use this story I picked out from the news to illustrate the practice. There was an immobile old lady who was grumpy most of the time. She often picked on her maid, who unfortunately was the only one with her mostly. Her grumbling finally gotten into the maid and she strangled the old lady to death.

Obviously both are not meditators. A meditator who had to face such grumbling whether at work or home should practise recognising it as wind element. That is the reality. The meaning that comes along with it is concept. Imagine if someone scolded you in another language that you don't understand especially if it doesn't sound like scolding at all. The concept of being scolded would not arise in such instance. It would just be noise to you. Perhaps other concepts like a romantic idea might arise. And you like it and want to listen more.

If no concept arises, likes or dislikes
cannot arise.

In that example above, the concept of scolding brought out dislike and anger. The idea of romance brought out likes and attachment. For the meditator, he should be mindful or aware of it as wind element. If he does so, anger or attachment could never arise since air element is neutral.

If the meditator is unaware and concept-word arises in the mental formations, he should then remind himself as such: "concept, concept, concept". Learn to recognise that those thoughts that brought out the angry feelings are merely concept. Then re-anchor the mind to reality, which is wind element and noting it as merely wind element. In this instance of noting, you could pay attention to the high and low pitch or its intensity in vibration, which are the characteristics of that element.

In reality, the vibration from someone talking is no different from the vibrations of any other sound when concept does not arise. The only difference is how intense it is vibrating.

Similarly, when we see, in reality we see form (shapes) and colours. These are derivatives of earth element. That is the reality of that experience. But like I have mentioned before, concept arises and one does not see it as it is (reality). One sees concept such as friend or stranger, fat or short and so on.

So in practice especially when performing daily activities or walking from place to place or where we must encounter other objects other than sitting down, we could and should still anchor the mind on reality. How?

If concept arises from seeing, recognise and note it is merely concept in the same way explained above. Then re-anchor the mind on reality, recognise and remind yourself that it is merely earth element (colour or shape).

The same way applies to when you are eating. When eating it is merely hardness or softness, which in reality is merely earth element that is being experienced. You could also be aware of taste element. Cabbage, vegetables or whatever meat, are all concepts. The same way applies to when you smell anything. It is merely smell element. Good smell, bad smell are concepts. The same applies to body contact. This experience usually manifest as sensation of hardness, softness, pressure, tension, stiffness, which are earth element, or cooling or heat sensation or burning, which are fire element or movement, motion, vibration which are wind element.

These are examples of practising material form Aggregate externally. However, these instances only relate to present material form impinging on either one of the 5 external sense bases. Accordingly, the sense consciousness arises.

However there is also mental object that arises from the mind door directly, independent of the impingement on the external sense bases.

If your mindfulness is sharp enough, you will also become aware of it, as colours, sounds, smell, taste and touch. But these are mental, not physical therefore technically, we don't refer to it as material form but mental objects (Dhammaaramana). These mental objects could either be present, past or future, and the latter two could be although not necessarily, an imagination.

When you become aware of these, you might also notice that concept also arise together with these mental objects, similar to when you experience external material form Aggregate. Therefore, you continue to note it as you would note any of the external material form Aggregate, namely "colour, colour, colour" or "sound, sound, sound", as that is the reality of it.

In this way the perception of reality is built up
as the mind continues to anchor on reality
while disentangling itself from concepts,
internally and externally.

As you will know for yourself when you practise, concept is responsible for causing pain. When the mind is directed to reality-objects, it becomes free from pain. Knowing so, you will realise how relevant it is for us especially lay-people to go further than just the basics. Accordingly, we should distinguish between concept and reality, and direct the mind towards reality, whenever possible and appropriate in our lay life.

The Arising and Passing Away of Material Form Aggregate

The 4 great elements are sometimes referred to as the subtle form. The arising and passing way of subtle form can only be perceived when right concentration is built up through continuous mindfulness on reality objects.

When right concentration becomes strong, you should learn to direct the mind to perceive and understand how or why the material form arises.

Examples

There was a time when I was in deep meditation. I must have sat for a long time until my body felt like it was planted to the ground. It could not move at all. Then I noted that the mind has no instruction for the body to move, therefore it did not move. So comes the realisation that mind arises first then body form (movement) follows.

Like you might experience a painful feeling and the concept of hunger and food arises. So you decide to walk over to the dining room for your meal now, thus the form follows. The form that follows means the walking motion wherein there is air element, earth element and temperature arising and passing away in all moments.

You will observe such cause and effect or conditioning phenomena as you direct the mind to it when concentration is built up. Without concentration, these deep and profound phenomena cannot be perceived.

An older person tires out easily and consequently needs more energy to will the body to move or produce the form. Sometimes when you're mostly asleep and feel like you just couldn't move or make a sound even though you tried really hard. This is a good example of lacking in energy in the mind to cause or produce the form. The intention and energy mental factors are very weak in such 'dreamy' state in between Bhavanga (life continuum).

As you direct the mind to noting thus, you will eventually realise from your own practice, that there is no entity abiding within or outside or in between, that will or control the material form (including the body). You will see that it comes about because there are causes and conditions for it to be present. In a simple example above, the concepts, which are mental formations, give instructions and produce the walking motions towards the dining room. As you will understand in the later lessons that even mental formations arise due to causes and conditions, not because of any entity abiding within or outside or in between.

This profound knowledge is powerful depending on how deep your mind has gone to. If it is deep, this wisdom takes root that it starts to arise in our subsequent perception where it will affect our thoughts, decisions, speech and actions, because the mind knows the potency of cause and effect. As a consequence of the rooting of this wisdom, that person does not commit any grievous unwholesome actions that will take him down to the netherworlds.

Wisdom has the power to change us from within.