

Appearance of That Which We Call Physical: An Analytical Study of the Concept of Rûpa From the Theravada Perspective

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Abstract

The objectives in this research paper seek to correctly define Rûpa as the Buddha intended, and show common misconceptions in understanding the concept. The trend to define Rûpa as an objective object from a modern scientific approach is misleading, and not what the Buddha intended when discussing Rûpa. Instead, Rûpa is meant to be understood as objects of consciousness that appear through experience. As such, this article suggests using -appearance of that which we call physical- as an alternate translation. This paper gives the intended meaning of Rûpa in the Buddha's teachings as well as showing the importance of its correct understanding, from the Theravada perspective. The results not only show how intrinsic Rûpa is to the teachings of the Buddha, as an object of experience rather than an entity of matter, but also how foundational Rûpa is when considering the Dhamma as a whole.

1. Background and Significance of the Problem

The importance of Rûpa cannot be overstated as it is literally everywhere in the Buddha's teachings. The foundation of our being is completely dependent upon it, as Buddhagossa put it "our very existence is bound up with Rûpa". We exist as Rûpa in the physical world, our bodies are our place in the world, without it we would not be here, we would not be present. Our physical existence is the foundation for everything we do, even thought processes are dependent upon a body to house the tools which our consciousness uses in order to think. Rûpa is the hard evidence of us, it is the concrete essential nature in which we exist. As important as this body is, Rûpa is much more than that. It is the experience of all that we call physical, the outside objects of consciousness that appear in experience.

Consciousness is how we are, in a sense how we exist, through our interpretations, and our reactions to those interpretations, our very being is defined; through consciousness we become. A clear explanation of consciousness is impossible without discussing what consciousness is conscious of, the objects of consciousness is as important to experience as consciousness itself. Without Rûpa consciousness would not be possible, as there would be nothing to interpret and react to. Rûpa and consciousness are intertwined in that which we call experience.

A clear understanding of the Buddha's teaching of reality as a whole, whether it be the objects of consciousness or consciousness itself, is impossible without a strong grasp on the concept of Rûpa. The common translation of Rûpa as body or matter may be a modern misinterpretation guided by the tendency to think of physical objects of consciousness as objective entities that exist on their own. This article hopes to clear this possible confusion while suggesting that one of the underlying qualities of Rûpa

is that it is an object of consciousness, and does not exist alone in the world as Rûpa. The Dhammasangani explains that Rûpa is the results of good and bad states taking effect in the universe of sense, in that of form and as connected with the skandhas of feeling, perception, syntheses, and intellect. The Dhammasangani goes on to say that Rûpa is that which has been seen, is seen, or will be seen. These explanations describe Rûpa as being experienced, not as objective matter from a scientific point of view.

The best way to approach Rûpa may be to forgo translation. Describing what was meant by the Buddha when he used it and simply using the word Rûpa could be the best course of action when dealing with this concept. Like many words, there doesn't seem to be an exact translation into English for Rûpa, an object that originates from outside consciousness that is making contact with consciousness. Perhaps not translating it at all is the best way to translate it, however, if Rûpa must be translated into English I propose using the word appearance. Appearance implies that it is experienced, not just that it is an existing object that may be experienced. The underlying quality of Rupa in that it makes contact with consciousness is also fulfilled by the term appearance, defining it as an object of perception.

Since Rûpa is something that originates from outside, yet is something that is making contact with consciousness, people tend to call it physical. We can avoid any metaphysical problems physicality implies, such as an objectified object that exists in itself, by calling the object -that which we call physical. This would reiterate that the object is originating outside of consciousness. That this same object may or may not exist outside of experience is not in question. In calling an object Rûpa, we define it as being experienced, what the object exists as, if it does exist, outside of that experience would be something other than Rûpa. The exact translation of Rûpa that this paper suggests is- the appearance of that which we call physical. This translation adequately explains that the object originated outside of the consciousness yet still depends on consciousness to exist as it is, Rûpa.

2. Objective of the Research

2.1 To clearly demonstrate the importance of conceptualizing Rûpa correctly, in order to understand the significance of its broad nature as it relates to experience.

2.2 To show that Rupa should not be thought of as an objectified object that exists in the world on its own, from a modern scientific perspective.

2.3 To suggest a translation for Rupa, appearance of that which we call physical, that better represents what the concept meant to the Buddha.

3. Statement of the Research Questions

3.1 How can the importance of conceptualizing Rûpa be clearly demonstrated so that the significance of its broad nature, as it relates to experience, can be understood?

3.2 How can the modern scientific definition of Rûpa, as an objectified object that exists in the world on its own, be shown to be misleading?

3.3 How to suggest, appearance of that which we call physical, as a translation for Rûpa that better represents what the concept meant to the Buddha?

4. Scope of the Research

4.1 Target Buddhist School:

4.1.2 Theravada Buddhism

Theravada, or the “Doctrine of the Elders”, is the school of Buddhism that draws its scriptural inspiration from the Tipiṭaka, or Pāli Canon, which scholars generally agree contains the earliest surviving record of the Buddha’s teachings. For many centuries, Theravada has been the predominant religion of continental Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, Cambodia, and Laos) and Sri Lanka. Theravada is the oldest surviving school of Buddhism and has carried the traditions of early followers of the Buddha into the modern age.

4.2 Target Buddhist Text

4.2.1 Canonical: the Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is the complete scripture collection of the Theravada school. As such, it is the only set of scriptures preserved in the language of its composition. It is called the Tipiṭaka or “Three Baskets” because it includes the Vināya Piṭaka or “Basket of Discipline,” the Sutta Piṭaka or “Basket of Discourses,” and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka or “Basket of Higher Teachings”.

4.2.2 Post Canonical : Atthasālinī

Atthasālinī (Pali) is a Buddhist text composed by Buddhaghosa in the Theravada Abhidharma tradition. The title has been translated as “The Expositor” or “Providing the Meaning”. In the Atthasālinī, Buddhaghosa explains the meaning of terms that occur in the Dhammasangani, a Buddhist text that is part of the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism.

4.2.3 Post Canonical : Sammohavinodani

Sammohavinodani, which is a commentary to the Vibhanga, the second book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, attributed to Buddhaghosa. It includes probably the most detailed account of dependent origination in ancient Pali literature.

4.2.4 Post Canonical : Pañcappakaranatthakatha

This commentary covers all five books. English translations exist for the portions concerning the Katthavatthu (B.C. Law, 1940, PTS), Dhatukatha (U Narada, 1962, PTS), and Patthana (U Narada, 1969, PTS).

4.2.5 Post Canonical : The Abhidahmmatasaṅgaha

The nucleus of the present book is a medieval compendium of Buddhist philosophy entitled the Abhidahmmatasaṅgaha. This work is ascribed to Acariya Anuruddha, a Buddhist savant about whom so little is known that even his country of origin and the exact century in which he lived remain in question. Nevertheless, despite the personal obscurity that surrounds the author, his little manual has become one of the most important and influential textbooks of Theravada Buddhism. In nine short chapters occupying about fifty pages in print, the author provides a masterly summary of that abstruse body of Buddhist doctrine called the Abhidhamma. Such is his skill in capturing the essentials of that system, and in arranging them in a format suitable for easy comprehension, that his work has become the

standard primer for Abhidhamma studies throughout the Theravada Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia. In these countries, particularly in Burma where the study of Abhidhamma is pursued most assiduously, the Abhidhammatasaṅgaha is regarded as the indispensable key to unlock this great treasure-store of Buddhist wisdom.

4.2.6 Post Canonical : The Visudhimagga

A compendium of the Theravada Buddhist philosophy and meditation, the Visuddhimagga, meaning “Path of Purification”, was written in Sri-Lanka in the early 5th Century CE by the great Indian scholar monk Buddhaghosa. An elaboration of the seven purifications taught by the Buddha in the Rathaviniṭṭa Sutta of the Pāli Tipiṭaka and divided under the headings of virtue, concentration and wisdom, the work is a detailed description of the way to Nibbāna. It has long been and remains today the most authoritative text in Theravada apart from the Tipiṭaka itself.

5. Definitions of the Terms used in the Research

5.1 Rūpa

That which is the object of consciousness and exists outside of the mind. Rūpa literally means that which changes its nature. The causes of change are many; they include heat and cold. In very cold climate your skin cracks, and the pigment changes; you catch cold and fall ill. In the group of purgatories called Lokantarika, the sinners drop into very cold water and are crushed to death. In hot climate your skin get inflamed and redden; you get burns and scalds; you get sunstroke. Moreover you may be bitten by mosquitoes, pests, dogs or snake; some of these bites may be fatal. Hunger and thirst may also kill you. These are examples of the changing nature of Rūpa.

5.2 Theravada Buddhism

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5.3 Analytical study

Involves different methods such as hermeneutics and semiotics, and a different more relativist epistemology. Humanities scholars usually do not search for the ultimate correct answer to a question, but instead explore the issues and details that surround it. Context is always important, and context can be social, historical, political, cultural or ethnic. An example of research in the humanities is historical research, which is embodied in historical method. Historians use primary sources and other evidence to systematically investigate a topic, and then to write histories in the form of accounts of the past.

6. Literature Review and Research Works Concerned

6.1 Post Canonical

6.2.1 Visuddhimagga

The Visuddhimagga is the “great treatise” of Theravada Buddhism, an encyclopedic manual of Buddhist doctrine and meditation written in the fifth century by the great Buddhist commentator, Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa. The author’s intention in composing this book is to organize the various teachings of the Buddha, found throughout the Pāli Canon, into a clear and comprehensive path leading to the final Buddhist goal, Nibbāna, the state of complete purification. In the course of his treatise Buddhaghosa gives full and detailed instructions on the forty subjects of meditation aimed at concentration, an elaborate account of the Buddhist Abhīdhamma philosophy, and detailed descriptions of the stages of insight culminating in final liberation.

6.2.3 The Buddha and His Teachings

This Treatise, written by a member of the Order of the Sangha, is based on the Pāli Canon, Commentaries and traditions prevailing in Buddhist countries. This first part of the book deals with the life of the Buddha, the second part with the Dhamma

6.2.4 Abhīdahmmatasaṅgaha

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6.2.8 Post Canonical Vimmuttimagga

The Vimmuttimagga (“Path of Freedom”) is a Buddhist practice manual, traditionally attributed to the Arahant Upatissa (c. 1st or 2nd century). It was translated into Chinese in the sixth

century as the Jietuo dao lun 解脱道論 by Sanghapala. The original text (possibly Pali or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit) is no longer extant, but the work has survived in Chinese. The book was probably written in India and then later brought to Sri Lanka.

The Vimuttimaggā recommends various meditation practices such as Anapanasati, Kasina meditation and Buddha-anussati - recollection of the virtues of the Buddha.

7. Research Method

7.1 Documentary Research

7.1.1 Scholasticism

Reading of the primary sources extensively, including the Pāli Canon and its Commentaries as well as vigorously investigation of the secondary sources, such as; books, journals, articles and electronic media.

7.1.2 Metaphysical interpretation

Conceptualize a working ontology based on my readings that agree with the Buddha's teachings. To take that ontology and examine the details and nuances of the structure of truth in order to come up with a specific hypothesis of reality.

7.1.3 Empirical method

Analyze my own interpretation of Rūpa as empirical data of the 5 senses are experienced

7.1.4 Meditation

Investigate Rūpa in meditation to see the interaction and details of my own interpretations.

7.1.5 Analytical thinking

Construct ideas from my research and compare my findings from reading, metaphysical interpretation, analysis of empirical data and meditation into a concise and understandable framework.

7.1.6 Methodical Doubt

Use a systematic process of being skeptical about the truth of interpretations regarding Rūpa.

7.1.7 Argument

Provide an argument supporting a possible solution of how we can correctly view Rūpa.

7.1.8 Dialectic

Present the solution and arguments for criticism by other philosophers.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

7.2.1 State suggestions for fellow scholars in order for them to do further research on the ideas and points I presented in the research paper.

8. Expect Benefits

8.1 The reader will understand the importance of conceptualizing Rûpa correctly in order to understand the significance of its broad nature as it relates to experience.

8.2 The reader will understand that Rupa should not be thought of as an objectified object that exists in the world on its own from a modern scientific perspective.

8.3 The reader will be presented a translation for Rupa- appearance of that which we call physical- that better represents what the concept meant to the Buddha.

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