

Pheṇa,piṇḍa Sutta

The Lump of Froth Discourse

[The true nature of the aggregates]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.95/3:140-143)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

The Saṃyutta Commentary says that one evening, the Buddha, while dwelling beside the Ganges, in Ayodhya [Ayojjhā],¹ comes out of his fragrant cell and sat down on the river bank. He sees a great lump of froth floating downstream, and thinks, “I will give a Dharma talk regarding the five aggregates.” Then he addresses the monks sitting around him. (SA 2:320). **Bodhi**, in his own translation of this sutta, makes this insightful observation:

This sutta is one of the most radical discourses on the empty nature of conditioned phenomena; its imagery (especially the similes of the mirage and the magical illusion) has been taken up by later Buddhist thinkers, most persistently by the Mādhyamikas. Some of the images are found elsewhere in the Pali Canon, eg at Dh 46, 170. In the context of early Buddhist thought these similes have to be handled with care. They are not intended to suggest an illusionist view of the world but to show that our conceptions of the world, and of our own existence, are largely distorted by the processes of cognition.

Just as the mirage and magical illusion are based on real existents—the sand of the desert, the magician’s appurtenances—so these false conceptions arise from a base that objectively exists, namely, the five aggregates; but when seen through a mind subject to conceptual distortion, the aggregates appear in a way that deviates from their actual nature. Instead of being seen as transient and selfless, they appear as substantial and as a self. (Bodhi S:B 1085 n188)

<u>Aggregate</u>	<u>Background</u>	<u>Simile</u>
form	the river Ganges	a great lump of froth
feeling	autumn	a water-bubble
perception	late summer noon	a mirage
mental formations	forest	a large plantain trunk
consciousness	a crossroads	a magical illusion

Table. The aggregates similes

These similes are discussed at length in **the Sāraththa-p,pakāsīnī** (Saṃyutta Commentary)² and **the Sammoha,vinodanī** (the Commentary to the Vibhaṅga),³ and much of the following notes are based on them, and with other notes:⁴

¹ An ancient capital of Southern Kosala. Kosala, also called “the kingdom of the Kosalas,” was divided into Northern Kosala (*Uttara Kosala*) on the banks of the Sarayu river (the modern Gaghara) and extending northward to the foothills of the Himalaya, and Southern Kosala (*Dakkhiṇa Kosala*) extending southward to the Vindhya mountains. During the Buddha’s time, Kosala (under king Pasenadi) was the most powerful kingdom in north India, but eventually it was overshadowed by Magadha. In **Pheṇa,piṇḍa S** (S 22.95/3:140) the Buddha visits Ayojjhā (Skt Ayodhyā) and the city is said to be located beside the Ganges, whereas Ayodhyā was actually on the Sarayu. However, the Sarayu was a tributary of the Ganges which may justify the reference (J Finegan, *An Archaeological History of Religions of Indian Asia*, NY: Paragon House, 1989:92). See EJ Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, 1949:15. One must allow that ancient rivers might have taken courses different from today’s.

² SA 2:321-324.

1 A GREAT LUMP OF FROTH (*mahantaṃ pheṇa,piṇḍaṃ*). Just as a lump of froth is unsubstantial, so too **form** is unsubstantial due to its lack of any abiding entity, permanent substance or self-essence. The froth cannot be used to make such physical things as a bowl or a saucer, but it merely breaks up. Even so, form cannot be taken as permanent or lasting, or as “I” or as “mine.” It is merely a lump of froth, impermanent, unsatisfactory, not self and foul.

Just as a lump of froth is full of holes, joined together with many parts, and is the abode of such creatures as the water-snake, etc, even so, form [the physical body] is full of holes and joined together with many parts. Some eight families of worms [bugs] (*kimi*) live there, too. It is their birth-chamber, toilet, sick bay and cemetery.⁵

And just as a lump of froth begins with the size of a ripe jujube fruit,⁶ and gradually becomes mountainous, even so, the human body begins as a tiny foetus, and gradually grows a full fathom.⁷ And in the case of animals like oxen, buffaloes, elephants, etc, they become gigantic, and pile up to form mountains. Water creatures, such as fish and turtles, similarly gathered together can measure several hundred leagues.⁸

But a lump of froth ever breaks up as soon as it has arisen, and even if it lasts for a while, on reaching the sea, it always breaks up. Even so, this body is continually breaking up and changing, but breaks up finally within a century, and after death, it disintegrates into tiny fragments.

Buddhaghosa,⁹ in his encyclopaedic work, the Visuddhi,magga, gives this delightful reflection on the ten stages of human aging:

The decades

(1) Herein, as to these decades: firstly, the first ten years of a person living for a hundred years are called the tender decade (*manda,dasaka*). For he is a tender unsteady child then.

(2) The next ten are called the playful decade (*khiḍḍā,dasaka*). For he delights in play then.

(3) The next ten are called the beautiful decade (*vaṇṇa,dasaka*). For his beauty reaches full bloom then.

(4) The next ten are called the strong decade (*bala,dasaka*). For his power and strength reach full abundance then.

(5) The next ten are called the wise decade (*paññā,dasaka*). For by then his wisdom is well established. Even in one naturally weak in wisdom at this time, there arises at least some wisdom.

(6) The next ten are called the declining decade (*hāni,dasaka*). For his fondness for play, his beauty, strength and wisdom decline then.

(7) The next ten are called the stooping decade (*pabbhāra,dasaka*). For his figure [620] stoops forward then.

(8) The next ten are called the bent decade (*pavaṅka,dasaka*). For his figure is bent like the tip of a plough then.

(9) The next ten are called the silly decade (*momūha,dasaka*). For he becomes silly and forgets whatever he does then.

(10) The next ten are called the prone decade (*sayana,dasaka*). For a centenarian mostly lies prone.

³ VbhA §§143-159/32-35.

⁴ See **Araka S** (A 22.70/4:136-139) = SD 16.17 Intro 3.

⁵ VbhA §146/33, cf §1125/242.

⁶ Jujube (*badara*), ie the Indian jujube, *Ziziphus mauritiana*; the common jujube (*Ziziphus jujube*) is native to China. While the common jujube leaves are smooth beneath, those of the Indian jujube are woolly, and its fruits (looking like Chinese dates) are also smaller and not so sweet. They are eaten fresh, boiled (sometimes in honey or sugar syrup), stewed or baked. Juice obtained from the fruits is used in making small candies called jujubes.

⁷ A fathom (*vyāma*) is the length from finger-tip to finger-tip with both arms stretched out, and this refers to the average height of a human being.

⁸ A league (*yojana*) is about 1.6 km = 7 mi.

⁹ Early 5th cent.

Applying the three characteristics

Herein, in order to apply the three characteristics according to “the progressive disappearance of youth” (*vayo, vuddh’atthagamato*)¹⁰ by means of these decades, the meditator (*yogī*) considers thus:

The form occurring in the first decade ceases right there without reaching the second decade. Therefore it is impermanent, unsatisfactory [painful], not self.

The form occurring in the second decade ceases right there...etc.

The form occurring in the ninth decade ceases right there without reaching the tenth decade. Therefore it is impermanent, unsatisfactory, not self.

The form occurring in the tenth decade ceases right there without reaching the next existence. Therefore it is impermanent, unsatisfactory, not self.

This is how he applies the three characteristics. (Vism 20.51-52/619 f)

Compare Buddhaghosa’s “ten ages” with Shakespeare’s “the seven ages of man” written about a thousand years later:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits, and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;
And then, the whining school-boy, with his satchel,
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school: And then the lover;
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier;
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice;
In fair round belly, with good capon lin’d,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part: The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose well sav’d, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice.
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound: Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing.

As You Like It (1599) act 2, sc 7, l 139

Such a reflection constantly done and being ever mindful of impermanence, keeps the mind wholesome, and keeps evil away, as stated in **the Dhammapada**:

*pheṇūpamaṃ kāyam imaṃ viditvā
marīci, dhammaṃ abhisambuddham
chetvāna māraṣṣa papupphakāni*

Knowing this body to be like froth,
Awakening to its mirage-like nature,
Cutting off the flowers of Māra,

¹⁰ Lit “the disappearance of what grows in stages.”

adassanam maccu,rājassa gacche

One would go where the king of death sees not.

(Dh 46)

2 A WATER-BUBBLE (*udake bubbulam*). Just as a bubble (*bubbula*) is unsubstantial, so is **feeling**. It is feeble¹¹ and ungraspable, and cannot be used to make a plank or a seat, but breaks up as soon as it is seized. Even so, feeling is feeble and ungraspable, and as such cannot be taken as permanent or lasting, but when seized, does not remain as it was.

Just as a bubble arises and ends in the same drop of water, and has no duration, even so, feeling, too arises and ends without duration. In a finger-snap, it arises and ends 100,000 crore¹² times. A water bubble arises on account of four conditions: the water surface [surface tension], a drop of water, wetness, and the air that holds it together like a bag (*puṇa*). Feeling, too, arises from four conditions: the physical basis, the object, the fire of defilements, and the impact of the sense-impression.

yathā bubbulakam passe
yathā passe marīcikam
evam lokam avekkhantam
maccu,rājā na passati

Just as one would look upon a bubble,
Just as one would look upon a mirage,
One who considers the world thus
The king of death sees not.

(Dh 170)

3 A MIRAGE (*marīcikā*, Vedic *marīci*).¹³ The Vedic form of the Buddhist word *marīcikā* is *marīci* (probably connected with the Vedic *marut*, “the flashing ones,” an old term for gods in general). The Sanskrit-English Dictionary defines *marīci* as “a particle of light, shining mote or speck in the air; a ray of light (of the sun or moon); a mirage.” Of these two words, *marīcikā* is more specifically Buddhist and is closer to the sense of a desert mirage. It can also refer to light patterns that sometimes form on photographs.

Perception is like a mirage in the sense of being unsubstantial, and in the sense of being ungraspable. For one cannot grasp it to drink it or wash with it or bathe in it or fill a pot with it. Furthermore, just as a mirage shimmers and seems to move in waves, even so, **perception**, too, divided up as perception of blue, etc, for the purpose of experiencing of blue, etc, shakes and shimmers.

A mirage deceives many and makes them think that they see a full lake or full river; even so, perception fools them and make them say, “This is blue, beautiful, pleasant, permanent.” So, too, in the case of yellow, and other colours.

4 A PLANTAIN PLANT (*kadali*). Both the plantain and the banana plants¹⁴ always die or are cut down after fruiting or after the fruits are harvested. Then new plants grow from the suckers of the rhizomes

¹¹ *Abala*. VbhA:Ñ reads *aphala* and tr it as “leaves nothing behind.”

¹² A crore is a modern word of *koṭi*, which is 10 million, so the above number totals as 1,000,000,000,000, ie one million million or trillion.

¹³ In optics, **mirage** is the deceptive appearance of a distant object or objects caused by the bending of light rays (refraction) in layers of air of varying density and temperature. Under certain conditions, such as over a stretch of pavement or desert air heated by intense sunshine, the air rapidly cools with elevation and therefore increases in density and refractive power. When sunlight reflected downward from the upper portion of an object—such as a tree-top—will be directed through the cool air in such a way that there is a double image of the tree (one being its reflection), so that the tree appears as if reflected in a body of water. See Nm 2:410; Nc:Be 183.

Sometimes, in an opposite situation, a **looming** occurs, such as over a body of water, a cool dense layer of air underlies a heated layer, so that the light rays will reach the eye that are originally directed above the line of sight. Thus, an object ordinarily out of view, like a ship or oasis below the horizon, will appear lifted into the sky.

¹⁴ Plantain, *kadali*. SED, PED & CPD say this is *Musa sapientum*, but it is prob ***Musa paradisiaca*** (Ency Brit, 15th ed Macro). The plantain tree is tall (3-20 m/10-33 ft), with a “trunk” of overlapping leaf-bases, and has large fleshy treelike stems, having bright green leaves, 1.5-3 m long and about 0.5 m broad. Its fruit is green and larger than the banana. The plantain fruit has more starch than the banana, and is not eaten raw. Because plantain has a maximum of starch before it ripens, it is usu cooked green, or may be dried for storage. Like the plantain, the closely related **common banana** (*Musa sapientum*) is a gigantic herb rising from an underground stem or rhizome, forms a false trunk 3-6 m (10-20 ft) high, composed of leaf sheaths and crowned with a rosette of 10-20 oblong elliptic leaves. After plantain and banana plants have fruited, they die and are replaced by others (suckers) arising from the

(underground storage roots). The plant, as it were, is destroyed by its own fruit, and as such is a fit simile for an evil person who is destroyed by the fruit of his own deeds,¹⁵ and they are reborn into similar circumstances. Moreover, as the plant has no pith, it is often used as a simile for insubstantiality, as in this Sutta.

5 A MAGICAL ILLUSION (*māyā*). **Ñāṇananda**, in the very first chapter of his book, *The Magic of the Mind: an exposition of the Kālakārāma Sutta*, delightfully relates his own parable of “the magic show” (1974:5-7). As professional magicians often declare, their performances are not really “magic” in the mediaeval sense, but simply illusions; hence, they are “illusionists.” The entertainment derived from such a show is proportionate to the level of the audience’s ignorance or gullibility.

Similarly, in connection with sense-pleasures, the Buddha declares in **the Aneñja,sappāya Sutta** (M 106):

*Aniccā bhikkhave kāmā tucchā musā mogha,dhammā, māyā,katam etaṃ bhikkhave bālā,-
lāpanaṃ.*

Impermanent, bhikshus, are sense-pleasures. They are hollow, false, empty by nature. They are a magical illusion, bhikshus, a fool’s prattle [deceiving fools].¹⁶ (M 106.2/2:261)

A similar reflection is lyrically echoed by Robert Burns (1759-1796), the best known of Scottish poets:

But pleasures are like poppies spread, | You seize the flow’r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river, | A moment white—then melts for ever.

Tam O’ Shanter (1790)

REFRAIN. Each of these five simile passages has this refrain:

“A man with good eyes would look at it, ponder over it, and wisely examine it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in a (lump of froth...etc).”

Buddhist mental training is to help one cultivate those “good eyes” so that we can better see through surface reality into true reality, and gain spiritual liberation.

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rhizomes. The life of one stool, or clump, thus continues for many years. “The oldest records of edible bananas come from India (600 BC), described in the Epics of the Pali Buddhist canon” <http://www.botgard.ucla.edu/html/-botanytextbooks/economicbotany/Musa/index.html>. See R Syed, *Die Flora Altindiens in Literatur und Kunst*, 1990: 162 f.

¹⁵ V 2:188 = S 1:154 = 2:241 = A 2:73 = DhA 3:156

¹⁶ “The talk of fools,” *bāla,lāpana*, which Norman resolves as *bāla ullāpana* and renders it as “deceiving fools” at Thī 73 = Thī:N 73/11 n. A vl *bāla,lāpinī* appears in a closing stanza (5)b, see below. Cf *lapanā*: see Vbh §862/-352 (qu at Vism 23,10), Vism 26,32-27,10; Sn:N 344 (ad Sn 929).

The Lump of Froth Discourse

(S 22.95/3:140-143)

- 1 At one time the Blessed One was dwelling on the bank of the river Ganges at Ayodhya [Ayojjhā].
2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:¹⁷

The lump of froth

- 3 (1) “Bhikshus, suppose that this river Ganges were carrying along a great lump of froth.

A man with good eyes would look at it, ponder over it, and wisely examine it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in a lump of froth?

4 So, too, bhikshus, whatever kind of **form** there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near,¹⁸ [141] a monk looks at it, ponders over it, and wisely examines it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in form?

The water bubble

- 5 (2) Bhikshus, suppose that in autumn, when it is raining and large rain-drops are falling, a water bubble appears and bursts on the water surface.

A man with good eyes would look at it, ponder over it, and wisely examine it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in a water bubble?

6 So, too, bhikshus, whatever kind of **feeling** there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk looks at it, ponders over it, and wisely examines it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in feelings?

The mirage

- 7 (3) Bhikshus, suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a mirage appears.

A man with good eyes would look at it, ponder over it, and wisely examine it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in a mirage?

8 So, too, bhikshus, whatever kind of **perception** there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk looks at it, ponders over it, and wisely examines it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in perception?

The plantain trunk

9 (4) Bhikshus, suppose that a man needing heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. Then he would see the trunk of a large plantain tree,¹⁹ straight, fresh, without a solid pith.²⁰ He would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As he unrolls the coil, he would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood.

¹⁷ On the narrative background of this sutta, see Introd.

¹⁸ On this “totality formula,” see **Khandha S** (S 22.48/3:47) = SD 17.1a.

¹⁹ Plantain, *kadali*: see Intro (2).

²⁰ “Without any defect...” *akukkaka,jātām*, “grown without fault or defect” (CPD). Comy: Without any solid core inside (*anto asañjāta,ghana,daṇḍakām*) (SA 2:323). MA: at flowering time, a shoot, the size of a thumb (or large toe) appears inside the pith; the meaning is that there is no such shoot (*akukkaka,jātan ti puppha.gahaṇa,kāle anto aṅguṭṭha-p,pamāṇo eko ghana,daṇḍako nibbattati, tena virahitan ti attho*, MA 2:279). “Without shoots” (*akukkaka,jātām*) (DP). Also at M 1:233,¹⁸ = S 3:141,²⁸ = 4:167,³² ≠ A 2:220,²². See (**Anattā**) **Udāyī S** (35.234.10/-4:167) = SD 26.4.

10 A man with good eyes would look at it, ponder over it, and wisely examine it, [142] and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in a plantain tree?

11 So, too, bhikshus, whatever kind of **formations** there are, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk looks at it, ponders over it, and wisely examines it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in formations?

The magical illusion

12 (5) Bhikshus, suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice were to display a magical illusion at a crossroads.

A man with good eyes would look at it, ponder over it, and wisely examine it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in a magical illusion?

13 So, too, bhikshus, whatever kind of **consciousness** there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk looks at it, ponders over it, and wisely examines it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, without essence. For what essence could there be in consciousness?

Revulsion

14 Seeing thus, bhikshus, the instructed noble disciple is revulsed [disillusioned] towards form;
he is revulsed towards feelings, too;
he is revulsed towards perception, too;
he is revulsed towards formations, too;
he is revulsed towards consciousness, too.

Through revulsion, he becomes dispassionate [abandons lust].

Through dispassion, his mind is freed.

When it is freed, there arises the knowledge: 'Freed am I!'

He understands: 'Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.'"

15 This what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Well-gone One, the Teacher, further said this:

(1) Like a lump of froth is form,
Like a water bubble are feelings,
Like a mirage, perception,
Formations, like a plantain trunk,
And like an illusion is consciousness—
So the Kinsman of the Sun has shown.²¹

(2) However one may ponder over it,
When wisely one examines it,
It appears hollow and empty
When one sees it wisely. [143]

(3) And regarding this body,
The One of Wisdom Vast has taught
That with the abandoning of three things
You see this form discarded.

(4) When vitality, heat and consciousness
Leave this physical body,

²¹ Cf Dh 170.

Then it lies there cast away:
Food for others, without volition,²²

- (5) That is to say, just this continuum,²³
This illusion, a fool's prattle [deceiving fools].²⁴
A murderer, this is shown to be:
Here no substance is found.²⁵
- (6) A monk with energy roused
Should look upon the aggregates thus,
Whether by day or by night,²⁶
Fully aware, ever mindful.
- (7) He should abandon all the fetters
And make himself a refuge;
Let him fare as with head ablaze,
Yearning for the undying state.

— evaṃ —

Bibliography

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050927; 060725; 070626; 081020; 090804a

²² *Āyu usmā ca viññānaṃ | yadā kāyaṃ jahantimaṃ | apaviddho tadā seti | parabhattaṃ acetanaṃ*. This is a hapax legomenon (found nowhere else), but cf Sāriputta: *āyu usmā ca viññānaṃ, athāyaṃ kāyo ujjhito avakkhito seti yathā kaṭṭhaṃ acetanaṃ* (When this body discards vitality, heat and consciousness, it then lies like a log without volition) in **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43.24/1:296,9-11), whose comy qu the S 3:143 stanza (MA 2:351; also at PmA 1:153). Cf *aciraṃ vat'ayaṃ kāyo | paṭhaviṃ adhisessati | chuddho apeta,viññāṇo | niratthaṃ va kalingaraṃ* (Dh 41).

²³ *Etādisāyaṃ santano*. A “continuum” (*santāna*) means a single beginningless series of life-processes extending into the indefinite future, and contains within itself a number of individual life-terms. The word “continuity” (*santati*) is used for this individual life-term, with its distinct birth, life and death. Each continuity, in turn, comprises of a rapid succession of dharmas or momentary mental and physical factors, held together by laws of causal relationship. (Summarized from Bodhi, *The All-embracing Net of Views*, 1978:192 n1.) See SD 25.3.49.

²⁴ “A trickster of fools,” *bāla, lāpinī*, which Comy glosses as the consciousness aggregate (SA 2:324). See Intro (“A Magical Illusion” n) & foll n.

²⁵ *Etādisāyaṃ santano | māyāyaṃ bāla, lāpinī | vadhako eso akkhāto | sāro ettha na vijjati*. Comy: *māyāyaṃ bāla, lāpinī* (see prec n) refers specifically to the aggregate of consciousness. The mass of aggregates are a murderer in two ways: (1) they slay each other, and (2) murder appears on account of the aggregates. As for (1), when the earth element breaks up, it takes along the other elements, and when the form element breaks up, it takes along the other (mental) aggregates. As for (2), when the aggregates exist, such things as murder, bondage, injury, etc, arise. (SA 2:324). On the aggregates as murderers, see also **Yamaka S** (S 22.85.48/3:114,20-24).

²⁶ Reading: *divā vā yadi vā rattim*, as suggested by Bodhi (S:B 1087 n197).