

Matter and Moments

The phases of matter & the theory of moments

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1 Phases of matter

In terms of spiritual practice, the last four of the 28 material phenomena are the most significant,¹ namely:

growth (production)	<i>rūpassa upacaya</i> , “growth of matter”;
continuity	<i>rūpassa santati</i> , “continuity of matter”;
decay	<i>rūpassa jaratā</i> , “decay of matter”; and
impermanence	<i>rūpassa aniccatā</i> , “impermanence of matter.”

Although these phases clearly apply to matter in general, in the Abhidhamma scheme, they tacitly apply only to living matter. Understandably, this is because its purpose is that of seeing the three characteristics within oneself for the sake of training towards spiritual liberation. **The Dhamma,saṅgaṇī** defines these four terms as follows:

Characteristic of matter	Dhamma,saṅgaṇī (Dhs 153 f)	Visuddhi,magga ²
(1) growth or production of matter (<i>rūpassa upacaya</i>)	“the increase [piling up] of the sense-bases is the growth of matter” (<i>yo āyatanānaṃ ācayo, so rūpassa upacayo</i>)	<i>Production of matter</i> has the characteristic of piling up [increase]. Its function is to make material instances emerge for the first time. It is manifested as launching or as the completed state. Its proximate cause is produced matter.
(2) continuity of matter (<i>rūpassa santati</i>)	“the growth of matter is its continuity” (<i>yo rūpassa upacayo, sā rūpassa santati</i>)	<i>Continuity of matter</i> has the characteristic of occurrence. Its function is to anchor. It is manifested as non-interruption. Its proximate cause is matter to be anchored. ³
(3) decay of matter (<i>rūpassa jaratā</i>)	“the ageing, decaying, broken teeth, grey hair, wrinkled skin, the dwindling away of one’s years, the weakness of the sense-faculties of matter” ⁴ (<i>yā rūpassa jarā jīranatā khaṇḍiccam pāliccam valittacatā āyuno saṃhāni indriyānaṃ paripāko</i>)	<i>Decay</i> has the characteristic of the maturing [aging] of material phenomena. Its function is to lead them on towards their termination. It is manifested as loss of newness without loss of being, like the state of old paddy. Its proximate cause is decaying matter. ⁵
(4) impermanence of matter (<i>rūpassa aniccatā</i>)	“the destruction, decay [loss], breaking up, disintegrating, impermanence, disappearance of matter” (<i>yo rūpassa khayō vayo bhedo paribhedo aniccatā antarahānam</i>)	<i>Impermanence</i> has the characteristic of the complete breaking up of material phenomena. Its function is to make them subside. It is manifested as destruction and falling away. ⁶ Its proximate cause is matter that is breaking up completely.

¹ See SD 17.2a, Table 9.

² Vism 14.66-69/449 f; also at Abhs:BRS (Guide to §4) p242.

³ Cf Dhs 133, 144.

⁴ Dhs 144: this is stock: **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.18(2)/2:305) = SD 13.2; **Sammā,diṭṭhi S** (M 9.22/1:49) = SD 14.2; (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (S 12.2/2:2) = 5.15.

⁵ This is said in reference to decay evident in changes in teeth, etc, as their brokenness, etc (cf Dhs 644). Vism also refers to inanimate decay: changes in the formless dharmas is called “hidden decay” (*paṭicchanna jarā*); changes in the earth, water, rocks, the moon, the sun, etc is called “incessant decay” (*avīci jarā*). (Vism 14.68/449)

⁶ Cf Dhs 645.

Let us first examine (1) and (2). While the first factor, “growth” is defined as “the increase of sense-bases” (*āyatanānam ācayo*), the second factor, “continuity” is simply identified with the first, “growth.” Both appear to express the same thing, but they are separately listed. In fact, the first refers to “the growth or integration of matter and the second its continuity or subsistence.” (Karunadasa 1967:79)

The Visuddhi, magga explains that both (1) “growth of matter” and (2) “continuity of matter” refer to matter at its birth (*jāti*).⁷ **The Abhidhamm’attha, saṅgaha Vibhāvini Tīkā** clarifies further that the first refers to the bodily growth (of the embryo) from conception until the full development of the ten physical senses beginning with the eyes.⁸ This is understandable because when the term *āyatana* is used by itself, it usually refers to the six internal (*ajjhatika*) sense-faculties. However, here, it is used in a more restricted sense to refer to only the five physical sense-faculties.

The word *ācaya* means “heaping, piling up, accumulation.” As such, *āyatanānam ācayo* refers the gradual development of the five sense-faculties. This is confirmed by **the Kathā, vatthu** discussion on the development of the senses. The Kathā, vatthu Commentary says that the Pubba, seliya and the Aparā, seliya⁹ hold the view that the sixfold sense-spheres arise in a being all at once (*apubbaṃ acarimāṃ*). The Theravādins reject this view on the grounds that it is neither logical nor supported by scripture. Their view is that only the mind-base (*manāyatana*) and the body-base (*kāyāyatana*)—that is, only the mental processes and the physical body—arise at the moment of conception. The other four—the eye-base (*cakkh’āyatana*), ear-base (*soṭ’āyatana*), nose-base (*ghan’āyatana*), and tongue-base (*jivh’āyatana*)—arise subsequently in this order.¹⁰

Based on this understanding, the fact that *āyatanānam ācaya* = *rūpassa upacaya* becomes clear. The sequential arising of the first five senses is the growth and integration of the body (*rūpassa upacaya*). To borrow a simile from the Commentaries, increase is like the welling up of water in a spring, and growth is the overflowing of the spring.¹¹ In other words, “growth” (or production) refers to the arising and full development of the sense-faculties, and “continuity” refers to their continued maintenance and functionality. It should, however, be understood that these sense-faculties do not have any independent existence as they are derived matter (*upādā, rūpa*), that is to say, they only rise along with the four elements.

Now we come to (3) “decay of matter,” which is a well known stock passage. The general sense of the passage, especially suggested by the phrase “the dwindling away of one’s years” (*āyuno saṃhāni*), is that this is a new stage: while the previous stages have to do with production, continuity and maturity, this third stage is that of the beginning of decline.

⁷ Vism 14.66 f/449.

⁸ *Tattha paṭisandhito paṭṭhāya yāva cakkh’ādi, dasakānam uppati, etthantare rūp’uppādo upacayo nāma* (AbhsVT 114).

⁹ Skt Pūrvaśaila, and Aparā, śaila; KvuA 148.

¹⁰ Comy adds that the remaining physical senses (eye and ear, smell and taste) take 77 days to arise, which is partly due to the karma that brought about the conception, and partly due to other karma (KvuA 148). The former is generative (or productive) karma (*janaka kamma*), and the latter supportive karma (*upaṭṭhambhaka kamma*) (Abhs: SR 143 f; Abhs:BRS 5.18/200-202). Generative karma (ie wholesome or unwholesome volition) produces resultant mental states and karma-born materiality, both at the moment of rebirth (generates rebirth-linking consciousness and the materiality of the new being) and in the course of existence (maintaining the sense-faculties, sexual determination, and heart-base). Supportive karma does not produce its own results, but augments some other karmic results. For example, when one is reborn a human, wholesome supportive karma may contribute to a longer life-span, better health and living conditions. Or, if one is reborn as an animal, unwholesome supportive karma may facilitate the ripening of more unwholesome karma, and may also extend one’s lifespan so that the unwholesome results endure longer.

¹¹ Vism 14.67/449; DhsA 327. Karunadasa’s simile is “the gathering of people is the growth of the crowd” (1967:79).

The last stage, (4) “the impermanence of matter” signifies the break-up of the body with life’s end (Dhs 144). The moment of death is when the “material life-faculty” (*rūpa, jīvit’indriya*), or more simply “life-force,” ceases to function.¹²

2 The three characteristics of existence

These four types of derived matter, expressed as the four phases of matter, are clearly an elaboration of three “characteristics of the conditions” (*saṅkhata, lakkaṇa*) as stated in **the Saṅkhata, lakkaṇa Sutta** (A 3.48).¹³ All conditioned things—all existence, animate and inanimate (but not nirvana)—have these three characteristics: those of arising (*uppāda*), of ending (*vaya*) and of change in state (*thitassa aññathatta*).

Here, arising (*uppāda*) clearly corresponds with (1) “growth of matter,” and ending (*vaya*) with (4) “impermanence of matter.” *Thitassa aññathatta* literally translates as “the otherwiseness of that which exists,” or continuous change. This third characteristic needs some elaboration: it has to do with the notion of the moment (*khaṇa*; Skt *kṣana*). If the final, irreducible, state of matter is the “atom” (*paramāṇu* or *kalāpa*),¹⁴ then the final, irreducible, state of the mind is the “dharma” (*dhamma*; Skt *dharma*), or a “mind-moment” (*citta-k, khaṇa*).¹⁵ This theory is not found in the early texts, but as Mrs Rhys Davids notes, “it was inevitable that later exegesis would so develop the theme.”¹⁶ The rationale behind her insight is clear enough from the spirit of early Buddhism as reflected as such passages at this excerpt from **the Assutavā Sutta 1** (S 12.61):

Bhikshus, it would be better that the uninstructed worldling were to take this body comprising the four elements, rather than the mind (*citta*), to be the self [soul] (*attā*).

What is the reason for this?

The four-element body, bhikshus, is seen persisting for a year, or two, or three, or four, or five, or ten, or twenty, or forty, or fifty, or for a hundred years, or even longer. But, bhikshus, that which is called the mind (*citta*), or mentation (*mano*), or consciousness (*viññāṇa*), arises as one thing, ceases as another, night and day.¹⁷ (S 12.61.6 f/2:94) = SD 20.2

Or, this passage from **the Paṇihita Acchanna Vagga** of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A 1.5.8):

Bhikshus, I do not see any other single state (*eka, dhamma*) that is so quick to change, that is to say, bhikshus, as this mind. (A 1.5.8/1:10)

The early and mediaeval Theravadin Abhidhammists (c 300 BCE-300) all agree on the momentariness of the mental elements,¹⁸ and do not reject the relative permanence of the body or matter in general. This was also generally the case with the other early Indian Buddhist schools. However, there were many, notably the Sarvāstivāda, the Mahīśāsaka, the Pūrvaśāila, and the Aparāśāila, who rejected this distinction, postulating that *both* mental and physical elements are instantaneous.¹⁹ As such, the early Buddhist

¹² Cf Kathā, vatthu Comy, which says that at the moment of death, both form (*rūpa*) and the formless life-faculties (*arūpa jīvit’indriya*) cease to function simultaneously (*cuti-k, khaṇasmim dve pi jīvitāni sah’eva bhijjanti*) (KvuA 113).

¹³ A 3.48/1:152.

¹⁴ See SD 17.2d.

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion, see Karunadasa 1967:81-91.

¹⁶ CAF Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Psychology*, London, 1918:14.

¹⁷ *Yañ ca kho etaṃ bhikkhave vuccati cittam iti pi mano iti pi viññāṇam iti pi taṃ rattiya ca divassa ca divasassa ca aññad eva uppajjati aññam nirujjhati*. It is possible to freely render this as: “But, bhikshus, that which is called consciousness...arises as one thing, ceases as another, light night and day.” See Bodhi’s n: S:B 769 n154.

¹⁸ See CAF Rhys Davids 1914:204-208. 458 f, 620 f.

¹⁹ *Origin and doctrines of early Indian Buddhist Schools* (Xuanzang’s version of Vasumitra’s treatise), tr J Masuda, *Asia Major* 2 1925:54; A Barea, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques de Petit Véhicule*, BEFEO 38, 1955:103, 105,

sectarians were divided into two general groups: (1) those who accepted the momentariness of mental elements but relative permanence to material elements, and (2) those who rejected such a distinction, postulating that both mental *and* physical elements were momentary.

The Theravadin Abhidhammists did not accept that material elements, too, were momentary like mental events. They seem to have taken *ñhitassa aññathatta* (“continuous change”) in a general sense, and kept faithful to the early doctrine of “the characteristics of the conditioned” (*sankhata, lakkhaṇa*), where both the mental and the material are treated as equally impermanent. Their view of the three characteristics in terms of the four derived matter may be diagrammatically summarized as follows:²⁰

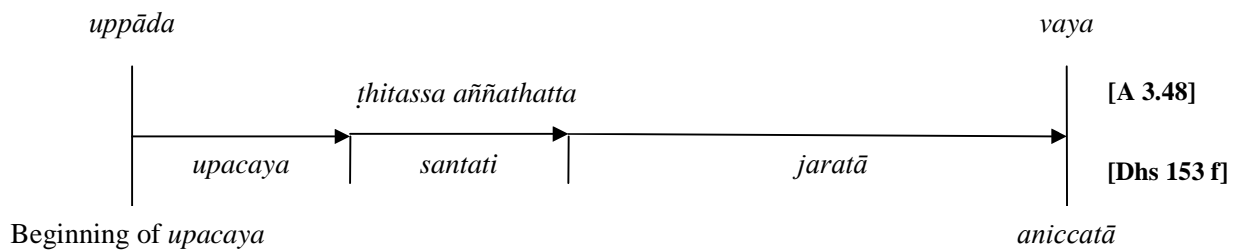


Table 2 The early Abhidhammist view of impermanence (based on Karunadasa 1967:83)

[Key: *aniccatā* = impermanence; *jaratā* = decay; *santati* = continuity; *ñhitassa aññathatta* = continuity of change; *upacaya* = growth or production; *uppāda* = arising; *vaya* = ending.]

3 The theory of moments

One of the most remarkable developments in world philosophy is the application by the Abhidhamma scholiasts of the atomic theory to time.²¹ Long before modern science, perhaps for the first time in human history, “[t]ime was reduced to a series of atomic moments, and the only actually existent time was the present moment.”²² Interestingly, the idea was actually rejected by the Theravadins at first: towards the end of the **Kathāvatthu** (a mid-3rd century BCE work),²³ the notion that “all things are single mind-moments” (*eka, citta-k, khaṇikā sabbe dhammā*), held by the Pūrvaśāila, and the Aparāśāila, is criticized and refuted.²⁴ In due course, however, as history has witnessed, the Theravadins would go on not only to adopt that mental dharmas are momentary—as we will be examining here—but, after Buddhaghosa’s time, accept that even material dharmas, too, are momentary (that is, the theory of the *kalāpa*).²⁵

What is most striking about the Theravāda theory of moments (*khaṇika, vāda*) is that each dharma (state) has three moments (or sub-moments), namely,

- the nascent moment (arising) (*uppāda-k, khaṇa*);
- the static moment (staying) (*ñhiti-k, khaṇa*); and
- the cessant moment (ending) (*bhaṅga-k, khaṇa*).

144, 186. See *Documents d’Abhidharma*, tr L de la Vallée Poussin, *Mélanges Chinoises et Bouddhiques* 5 1937:137-140, where Saṅghabhadra strongly criticizes the thesis that matter is not of momentary duration. See also L Silburn, *Instant et Cause*, Paris, 1955:227-274.

²⁰ See Karunadasa 1967:78-91.

²¹ For a more detailed treatment, see SD 26.1-2. Discussed in detail by Collins, 1982:237-261.

²² Thomas 1933:165.

²³ The text is said to have been composed “218 years after the Nirvana” (DhsA 4,25). On the date of Kvu, see E Frauwallner, “Die buddhistischen Konzile,” ZDMG 102,2 1952:258 (= Kleine Schriften, Wiesbaden, 1982).

²⁴ Kvu 22.8/620 f; KvuA 195 f.

²⁵ See SD 17.2d.

These are not three different dharmas, but are three phases (*avatthā*) of a single dharma.²⁶ The Theravadins, however, continue to hold that the static moment (*thiti-k, khaṇa*) of matter is longer than that of the mental dharma.²⁷

The Aṅguttara Commentary explains the three characteristics of the conditioned (*saṅkhata lakkhaṇa*) [2], thus:

arising (*uppāda*) = birth (*jāti*);
 ending (*vaya*) = destruction (*bheda*); and
 continued change (*thitassa aññathatta*) = decay (*jaratā*),

and goes on to say that these three are represented by the nascent moment (*uppāda-k, khaṇa*), the cessant moment (*bhaṅga-k, khaṇa*) and the static moment (*thiti-k, khaṇa*) respectively (AA 2:252). This means that the static moment is also the moment of decay, and that there is some kind of change even during the static moment. This table summarizes the explanation:

Aṅguttara ²⁸	Aṅguttara Commentary (AA 2:252)	
arising (<i>uppāda</i>)	birth (<i>jāti</i>)	nascent moment (<i>uppāda-k, khaṇa</i>)
ending (<i>vaya</i>)	destruction (<i>bheda</i>)	cessant moment (<i>bhaṅga-k, khaṇa</i>)
continued change (<i>thitassa aññathatta</i>)	decay (<i>jaratā</i>)	static moment (<i>thiti-k, khaṇa</i>)

Table 3 The 3 characteristics of the conditioned and the 3 moments

Both Buddhaghosa (author of **the Visuddhi, magga**, early 5th century) and Buddhadatta (author of **the Abhidhammāvatāra**, 5th century), in almost identical words, however, are careful to note that “decay” (*jaratā*) is manifested as “the loss of ‘newness’ (*nava, bhāva*) (of a dharma), not the loss of its intrinsic nature (*sabhāva*): it is like new paddy becoming old (*vīhi, purāṇa, bhāvo viya*).”²⁹

4 Impermanence of all existence

The open secret of the phenomenal success of early Buddhism as a philosophy of the mind, or more importantly, as a system of self-awakening, is that in its discourse, the spirit always given priority over the letter: the meaning is above the means.³⁰ This is especially true of the development of the Buddhist teachings regarding the phases of matter and the theory of moments.

The four phases of matter, despite their ordered sequence, and also the canonical three characteristics of existence, are really only one and the same process, that of **decay**. From the moment of conception, decay begins: all the developmental terms of the four stages are simply stages of decay. Decay is the first half of an average life-span is conventionally called “growth,” while the latter half, “decline”; but they are decay all the same: decay by any other name works just the same.

The Ratha, vīnita Sutta (M 24)³¹ contains a delightful dialogue between two great disciples of the Buddha, Sāriputta and Puṇṇa Mantāni,putta. Sāriputta questions Puṇṇa on the purpose of the spiritual life, and this dialogue ensues:

Seated thus at one side, the venerable Sāriputta said this to the venerable Puṇṇa Mantāni,-
 putta:

“Avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One?”

²⁶ VbhA 7 f, 25-29; Vism 291 f, 613 f. On how the theory of perception is explained on the basis of the theory of moments, see Sarachandra, *Buddhist Psychology of Perception*, 1958:42 ff.

²⁷ See Karunadasa 1967:85 f, 132 f.

²⁸ **Saṅkhata Lakkhaṇa S** (A 3.48/1:52) [10.2].

²⁹ Vism 14.68/449; Abhv 71. See Karunadasa 1967:85-87.

³⁰ See **The Dhamma Theory** = SD 26.1.

³¹ M 24/1:145-151 = SD 28.3.

“Yes, avuso.”

“And is the holy life, lived under the Blessed One, for the sake of the purification of moral virtue?”

“No, avuso.”

“Then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One for the sake of the purification of mind?”

“No, avuso.”

“Then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One for the sake of the purification of view?”

“No, avuso.”

“Then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One for the sake of the purification by overcoming doubt?”

“No, avuso.”

“Then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One for the sake of the purification by knowledge and vision of what is and is not the path?”

“No, avuso.”

“Then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One for the sake of the purification by knowledge and vision of the path?”

“No, avuso.”

“Then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One for the sake of the purification of knowledge and vision?”

“No, avuso.”

“... For the sake of what, then, avuso, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One?”

“The holy life, avuso, is lived under the Blessed One for the sake of final nirvana without clinging.”
(M 24.8-10/1:147 f) = SD 28.3

Punṇa then presents the parable of the relay of chariots to illustrate how through the different stages of inner purification, the true goal, final nirvana without clinging, is attained. The import of this important dialogue is very clear: all wholesome states other than nirvana itself serve as means to attain it.

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Bibliography

[See SD 17.2a]

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