

CONFLICTING TRANSLATIONS OF RŪPA



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ABSTRACT

Rūpa is a well common concept within Buddhist literature found in teachings covering all aspects of the *Dhamma*. From meditation teachers to academics, it is one of the staples of how objects of consciousness are explained. What may be uncertain though is its intended meaning when in use over two millennia ago. While the accepted literal translation of the word is shape, or color, there are various interpretations of what that means, ranging from the ‘physical body’ to all that is ‘matter’. This disagreement may imply confusion from Buddhist scholars, as such, an attempt at a more unified and accepted meaning of *rūpa* should be considered. This article will look at the various translations of *rūpa* in the Pāli Canon made by Rhys Davids, Walshe, Bhikkhu Bodhi and others as well as post canonical texts, such as the *Vissudhimagga*, to show possible confusion concerning *rūpa* and the importance for a solution. It is suggested that *rūpa* is a most difficult concept to translate into contemporary English and that further usage should be done with great care and consideration. This paper aims to exhibit the possible confusion of the modern day understanding of *rūpa* and hopes to stress that while the use of the word is necessary, a consensus in its meaning is also important for the sake of understanding.

Keywords: *Rūpa*, Body, Matter, Form

INTRODUCTION

What did the Buddha mean when he said *rūpa*? The amount of varying definitions of this concept may suggest that we are not sure what he meant at all. It appears that the understanding of *rūpa* may not be as clear as one would like, this may be due to confusion about what was implied by the Buddha when he used it. This paper shows possible misunderstandings of the word by referring to the translations of Thomas William Rhys Davids, Maurice Walsh and Bhikkhu Bodhi in an effort to show the importance of a unified definition. By examining and comparing these translations, this article only wants to convey the state of confusion surrounding *rūpa* and in no way wish for the reader to think there is an endorsement of one translation over the other. The aim is to express the need for an accord in dealing with *rūpa* as a necessary and difficult concept that must be defined adequately. *Rūpa* itself is a subtle concept that helps express deeper ideas within the *Dhamma*, some ideas that require massive amounts of attention to detail and conceptualization. Having various translations of *rūpa*, such as ‘matter’ or ‘body’, may confuse broader ideas before any serious investigation is started. It is important that attention be brought back to *rūpa* as a concept in itself, a concept that supports the foundation of greater ideas such as dependent origination and the five aggregates, ideas that can never hoped to be fully understood unless their foundation is understood. When comparing these translations, as *rūpa* has such a broad meaning, only what scholars have translated *rūpa* as in the sense of *nāma-rūpa* will be shown, particularly in the dependent origination. The search has been narrowed to such a small topic in order to show confusion that may surround *rūpa*. In showing different translations of the same concept as it relates to the same idea, the hope is to show possible problems in how we understand it.

The intention of this paper is not to define *rūpa* so much as to help clarify the difficulties in understanding it, difficulties that might become worse if there is not a consensus on how to translate it. In fact, it may very well be that *rūpa* is impossible to translate correctly into English, as it is an ancient term that referred to objects of consciousness, modern day language may not be able to sufficiently account for all the nuances of the word. Although suggestions are offered as to how we should treat this fundamental concept, my main focus is only to clarify the possible confusion surrounding *rūpa* as it stands today.

This article will explore various possible conceptions of *rūpa*: 1) That *rūpa* is defined as the physical body; 2) That *rūpa* implies all that is matter; 3) That *rūpa* itself means materiality; 4) That *rūpa* can simply be defined as form. Not all scholars that use one or more of the above mentioned conceptions share the unease that is expressed, though many do. This paper attempts to show that the wide range of accepted meanings presented is grounds for concern.

The use of *rūpa* will be looked at from many different sources, but will primarily focus on Theravāda interpretations. As it has been used by many schools of thought it should be clarified that my comments are to be understood from a perspective of the Theravāda tradition only, as this is where my skills lie. Although it is exploring *rūpa* as it is used in the concept *nāma-rūpa*, it should be understood that this paper is not concerned with the definition of *nāma*, and accepts that the literal translation of *nāma* as ‘name’ and the understanding of that to mean consciousness, or the functions of consciousness, to be broadly correct. For the purpose of this paper there is no interest in the different connotations consciousness may entail as *nāma* is only discussed for the sake of *rūpa*, this paper assumes that mind, consciousness, name and cognition are interchangeable and does not wish for the reader to be distracted from the consideration of *rūpa*.

WHAT IS RŪPA?

Rūpa is a significant element in many of the Buddha’s teachings, from the *pañcakhanda* to the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, as a description of the objects we experience. It seems clear that *rūpa*, at least in part, describes an entity involved in experiences, what is less clear is what that actual entity is. The Buddha talked about *rūpa* many times and described what *rūpa* is in experience, an important part of who we are as conscious beings.

The object of consciousness conditions what a being’s interpretation is, which then conditions its reaction; it is a vital element to the process of experience. Before discussing the consequences of explaining *rūpa* as an entity in-itself, one should first be clear as to what was meant by the Buddha when he discussed *rūpa*.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes *rūpa* in his translation of the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* as follows:

There are twenty-eight types of material phenomena, which are briefly comprised in two general categories. The four great essentials (*mahābhūta*) are the primary material elements – earth, water, fire, and air. These are the fundamental constituents of matter which are inseparable and which, in their various combinations, enter into the composition of all material substances, from the most minute particle to the most massive mountain. The great essentials are called elements (*dhātu*) in the sense that they bear their own intrinsic natures (*attano sabhāvam dhārenti*).

Derived material phenomena (*upādāya rūpa*) are material phenomena derived from, or dependent upon, the four great essentials. These are twenty-four in number. The great essentials may be compared to the earth, the derivative phenomena to trees and shrubs that grow in dependence on the earth.¹

The *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* is describing *rūpa* by discussing its classification. It states that *rūpa* is of two categories, the *rūpa* that are great and the *rūpa* that are derived. These classifications deal with qualities of an object, the four *rūpa* that are great being inseparable to that object and the other 24 being derived from those four. The individual *rūpa* are not explaining an individual object here, but rather describing the characteristics of any given object.²

The *Dhammasaṅgani* describes *rūpa* as follows:

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.³

This explanation says that *rūpa* is something separate from consciousness, something outside, though still associated with it. The *Dhammasaṅgani* goes on to characterize *rūpa* as being involved in the process of how one experiences the results of good and bad states, in other words, *vipāka* of past *kamma*. This description describes *rūpa* as form; form that is not included with consciousness but still connected to experience. This experience includes feeling, perception, syntheses and intellect.

RŪPA IN PAṬCCASAMUPPĀDA

The *paṭiccasamuppāda* contains twelve factors and eleven rounds of conditioning where these twelve factors interact, within which *rūpa* always arises with *nāma*. Where *rūpa* is present, *nāma* is also present. They are conditioned together from the *viññāṇa* and

¹Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012), p. 235.

²*ibid.*, p. 235.

³C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, (Bristol: PTS, 1900), p. 198

they condition the *saḷāyatana* together, existing as a single presence within the cycle of conditions.

The original Pāli will be shown following varying translations of the rounds of conditioning that deal with *rūpa*.

The standard formula of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* is as follows:

*Tattha avijjāpaccā saṅkhārā, saṅkhāra-paccayā viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇa-paccayā namārupāṃ, namārupā-paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ, saḷāyatana-paccayā phasso, phassa-paccayā vedenā, vedenā-paccayā taṇhā, taṇhā-paccayā upādānaṃ, upādāna-paccayā bhava, bhava-paccayā jāti, jāti-paccayā jarā-marana-soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass' upāyāsā sambhavanti.*⁴

This paper will only focus on the rounds of conditioning that deal with *nāma-rūpa*.

Nāma-rūpa is included in the third and fourth rounds of conditioning in the *Paṭiccasamuppāda*:

viññāṇa-paccayā namārupāṃ namārupā-paccayā saḷāyatanaṃ

In the case of the *Mahānidānasutta* there is a variant formula of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *nāma-rūpa* is discussed in the first, second and third rounds, which is as follows:

*namārupā-paccayā viññāṇaṃ
viññāṇa -paccayā namārupāṃ,
namārupā-paccayā phasso*⁵

The paper focuses on only these particular rounds because they are the rounds that mention the concept in question, *rūpa*. The translations of *viññāṇa* and *saḷāyatana* (or *phasso*) should not distract the reader from the concept in question.

⁴Narada Maha Thera, **A Manual of Abhidha mma**, (Colombo: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1979), p. 396.

⁵T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **Dīghanikāya**, Vol 2, p. 56.

TRANSLATIONS OF RŪPA

As already clarified, when comparing these translations, I will only show what the scholars have translated *rūpa* as in the sense of *nāma-rūpa*, particularly as it is used in the considering the *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

When considering the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the aim is to make it clear to the reader that this paper is only concerned with the translation of *rūpa*. Although the understanding of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* is of the utmost importance, the meaning of this teaching as a whole is not discussed, nor is the translation of any other concepts that appear, even the ones that may be translated in context with *rūpa*.

MAHĀNIDĀNASUTTA

Rhys Davids and Walsh have produced translations of the Mahānidānasutta with varying renditions of *rūpa*:

Walsh:

mind-and-body conditions consciousness
and consciousness conditions mind-and-body,
mind-and-body conditions contact.⁶

Rhys David:

cognition, with name-and-form as its cause;
name-and-form, with cognition as its cause;
contact, with name-and-form as its cause.⁷

The two different translations of *rūpa* act in different ways within *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

⁶ Maurice Walsh (tr.), **Have I Heard: the Long Discourses of the Buddha**, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1987), p. 107.

⁷T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol 2, (Bristol: PTS, 1899), p. 52.

BAHUDHĀTUKASUTTA

Horner and Bodhi's translations of the Bahudhātukasutta add yet two more interpretations of the same concept:

Horner:

Conditioned by consciousness is name shape; conditioned by name shape is the field of six senses.⁸

Bhikkhu Bodhi:

with consciousness as condition, mentality- materiality; with mentality- materiality as condition, the sixfold base.⁹

Varying translations do not necessarily mean confusion in understanding a particular concept. Translating *nāma*, for example, as consciousness or mind may not imply confusion on the part of the translators at all. However, the differences between 'form', 'body', 'name' and 'shape' seem to be too vast to assume the translators mean the same thing.

VISUDDHIMAGGA

The pinnacle of post canonical texts is the masterpiece of Buddhagosa, the Visuddhimagga, also known as the path to purification, it is the road map to enlightenment with detailed explanations for all the stops in between. The importance of this work is so great that it is sometimes considered alongside the Canon when discussing the necessary books of Theravāda. As such, it is essential that the translation of the Visuddhimagga be as exact as possible. The examples I provide are from *nāma-rūpa* as it appears in the *paṭiccasamuppāda* to keep the constancy of the paper.

⁸I.B. Horner (tr.), **The Book of Middle Length Sayings**, Vol 3, (Bristol: PTS, 1954), p. 107.

⁹Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.), **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya**, (Somerville, Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 115.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli:

with consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality; with mentality-materiality as condition, the sixfold base.¹⁰

The Burmese scholar Pe Muang Tin's rendition of the Vissuddhimagga:

Conditioned by consciousness is Name-and-Form

Conditioned by Name-and-Form is Sense.¹¹

These two translations show possible disagreement between the writers as to what it actually means.

ABHIDHAMMATTHA-SAṄGAHA AND OTHER TEXTS

Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha is a work explaining consciousness, it is only natural that it spends a great deal of time with its objects. One of the objectives of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha is, in fact, to define and explore *rūpa*, but I believe this was done with the assumption that the student would already be comfortable with the concept. Keeping that in mind, the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha delves into subject matter that requires an understanding of the overall meaning of *rūpa* before any detailed investigation into the subject can be achieved. Again, we see discrepancies across translations, as *rūpa* is being communicated in different ways.

In Mehm Ti Mon's version of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, *The Buddha Abhidhamma - Ultimate Science*, translates *rūpa* as follows:

Dependent on rebirth consciousness arise the mental and physical phenomena,
Dependent on the mental and physical phenomena arise the six (sense) bases.¹²

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), **The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011), p. 439.

¹¹ Pe Maung Tin, **The Path of Purification**, (Bristol: PTS, 1922), p. vi.

¹² Mehm Tin Mon, **Buddha Abhidhamma - Ultimate Science**, (Penang: Suki Hotu, 2002), p. 298.

Narada Maha Thera's translation in his version of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha:

Dependent on (Rebirth) Consciousness arise Mind and Matter.
Dependent on Mind and Matter arise the six (Sense) Bases.¹³

Nyanatiloka Maha Thera's Guide to the Abhidhamma:

thereon consciousness
thereon mentality and corporeality (*nāma-rūpa*);
thereon the 6 sense-bases.¹⁴

.Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha:

Dependent on consciousness arises mind-and-matter
Dependent on mind-and-matter arises the six sense bases¹⁵

It is interesting to note that Bhikkhu Bodhi himself decided on another translation for *rūpa* in the Majjhimanikāya when discussing *nāma-rūpa*, with a detailed explanation, "In this edition the compound has been changed back to the rendering used in his [Ñāṇamoli] translation of the Visuddhimagga, 'mentality-materiality', though with regret that this cumbersome Latinate expression lacks the concision and punch of 'name-and-form'¹⁶. This shows Bhikkhu Bodhi in some ways prefers the translation of form, yet chooses a subtler translation to better express the nuances of the word, however, Bhikkhu Bodhi does not stick with the same translation, using materiality in one translation, and matter, or material phenomena, in another. This points to possible problems as one translation, which is preferred for its 'punch', is bypassed for what he believes is a clearer definition. It appears though that materiality may not have been clear enough. In a later translation of the Khandha-vagga in the Saṃyuttanikāya Bhikkhu Bodhi translates Rūpa as 'form' throughout, having apparently changed his mind again. It may also be noted that Bhikkhu Bodhi was Ñāṇamoli's protégé; in

¹³Narada Maha Thera, *op.cit.*, p. 398.

¹⁴Nyanatiloka Maha Thera, **Guide to the Abhidhamma**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publications, 1983), p. 34.

¹⁵Bhikkhu Bodhi, **A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012), p. 294.

¹⁶Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.), *op.cit.*, p. 21.

fact, Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of Majjhimanikāya was a revision of Ñāṇamoli's version. This may explain why their translations are similar.

This article does not mean to nitpick when pointing out these different translations, as one could say that matter and corporeality are similar, or that materiality and form may be related, but why use the different terms if not to convey the different nuances of each? I do not see how it would be possible that all these different interpretations could be valid while being used to discuss the same topic.

IMPLICATIONS OF VARYING TRANSLATIONS

Translation	Translator
Body	Walsh
Matter	Bhikkhu Bodhi
Materiality	Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli
Corporeality	Nyanatiloka Maha Thera
Form	Rhys Davids
Shape	I.B. Horner
Physical Phenomenon	Mehm Ti Mon

Rūpa is used many times in the Pāli Canon by the Buddha and his close disciples as a fundamental concept within more detailed teachings. As *rūpa* was explained and investigated in the Suttas, in the Mahahattipadopamasutta for example, when Sariputta explains the four great *rūpas*¹⁷, it was likely more understood than it is today, allowing teachers, such as Sariputta, spend more time on the subtleties and nuances of *rūpa*. The Buddha and his disciples may have been able to spend very little time with the explanation of *rūpa* itself, as the Pāli Canon does not deal with *rūpa* with the same amount of precision and detail as *nāma*, and use it as a staple in very complex teachings where much more time and effort was applied. One does not have that luxury today, it is not an easy task to simply take *rūpa* for what it is. Put another way, one may not have a clear idea of what *rūpa* 'is'.

¹⁷ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.), *op. cit.*, p. 158.

Below is an examination of some possible implications regarding the varying translations of *rūpa* as well as an evaluation of how each translation of *rūpa* is interpreted as it arises with *nāma*; this arising being an intricate part of the concept within the *paṭiccasamuppāda* as discussed above. In doing this, the problems regarding how *rūpa* is conceptualized will be clear.

BODY

Walsh translates *rūpa* as body in the Mahānidānasutta.¹⁸ The single word ‘body’ is ambiguous, as it could mean for example ‘our physical presence in the world’ in a phenomenological sense, or the objective body in an anatomical sense. From a phenomenological perspective, body would be that which is experienced as the observer in the world, the physical quality of what a person is. Body would be experienced as an object as well as being the tool in which a person experiences. From an anatomical sense, body would seem to just mean the material construct of a being. Keeping this mind, body seems to point to three possible interpretations. The body of existence, being the body in which one lives as a being. The body as an object, being the body as we perceive it as a physical entity. The body of experience, being the body as it is used as a tool in order to experience.

The body of existence implies that the teaching is dealing with *nāma-rūpa* as it only applies to the body of a being. In this sense body would appear to be the mass that is our body that exists in the physical world, our material casing, whether it is involved in experience or not. It implies a being of matter that does not need to be part of a process of interpretation at all and exists in and of itself. This sense of body seems to assume that its primary quality of being *rūpa* is that it is a material extension of a conscious being. It does not account for the nuances that body plays in experience. This interpretation of body is not accounting for any objects of experience either; neither the body as an object of experience, such as a being seeing their own hand, or otherwise such as the sight of an apple or the smell of a flower.

The body as an object would be similar to the body of existence in that it is just dealing with the physical qualities of body, the material aspects. However, the body as an object is not the body as it exists alone, rather the body as it is experienced as an object. The body as a walking man is seen crossing the street. My body as the reflection in the mirror. The body as

¹⁸ Maurice Walsh (tr.), *op.cit.*, p. 107.

an object is the body as it is perceived. Here *rūpa* would be the feel of the body, or the sight of my arm moving. Much like the body of existence, the body as an object doesn't seem to account for other objects of perception, e.g. flower or apple.

The body of experience is a more phenomenological explanation. it accounts for the physical body as well as the body's ability to sense objects, both itself and outside entities. Here *rūpa* would be a body that both physically exists and is experiencing its surrounding. However, this body, just like the body of existents and the body as an object, does not account for those outside objects the body may be experiencing. This interpretation of *rūpa* seems to only allow for the body to experience the body.

Within the explanation of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* the body would come into existence with the mind, the mind and body would arise together in one step as they are conditioned from *viññāna*, mind and body arising together then conditions *saḷāyatana*. This seems to be a good explanation for birth, but again, it doesn't seem to account for the objects a being perceives outside of body.

MATTER

Narada Maha Thera translates *rūpa* as matter in his rendition of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha.¹⁹ Matter can have many meanings. Not all of these meaning are wholly dependent on physicality either, for example: the matter of dispute, the matter at hand, what is the matter with someone? -etc. Matter can also be a more philosophical term, such as Socratic matter, that being demerge. This matter is what the transcendental forms take their physical appearance from. A common definition of matter is the physical element that an object is made from. This interpretation that it is the stuff that makes up an object is the one I will use as it seems to be the most relevant.

If matter is understood as the common interpretation of that which makes up physical entities in themselves, then *rūpa*, as understood as matter would be that which things in themselves are made of. Taking an apple for a physical object, the *rūpa* would be the matter that makes up the apple.

If *rūpa* understood as matter within the *paṭiccasamuppāda* then this may suggest that some entity that exists in-itself is playing a role in the process of *nāma-rūpa*, and that it may

¹⁹Narada Maha Thera, *op.cit.*, p. 324.

not be necessary to be aware of this entity. In this interpretation the matter which makes up an apple that exists on top of a table would be *rūpa* whether or not it is being experienced. It would be *rūpa* just for being the matter which makes up the apple in-itself. This matter which makes up the apple existing outside of experience would somehow arise with mind, as *rūpa* and mind arise together. The matter which makes up the apple, as it exists in itself, would be conditioned from *viññāṇa* as it arises with the mind and the matter which makes up the apple, as it exists in-itself, along with the mind, would condition the *saḷāyatana*.

MATERIALITY

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli chooses to translate *rūpa* as materiality²⁰ in the *Visuddhimagga*; this may indicate that he wanted something that transcends matter in describing *rūpa*. Materiality is the quality of having matter, meaning that *rūpa* is in a state of being matter, but again, the meaning of materiality, much like matter, is ambiguous.

Materiality is another term that can mean many things. The physicality of an object, the quality of having material characteristic, the quality of having matter. taking this interpretation of materiality as a translation of *rūpa* allows for a more abstract description that is not as limiting as simply translating it as matter, yet it still describes it as being made of material. This may carry the same assumptions that matter does, placing *rūpa* in the world alone existing as an object in-itself. The materiality of the apple is an underlying part of the apple as it exists as an apple.

Taking a common definition of materiality, the quality of having matter, this being the quality of having that which makes up physical entities, *rūpa* is then an object having the state of being made from matter.

If *rūpa* is understood as materiality with the *paṭiccasamuppāda* then materiality arises with mind. *Rūpa* would be the quality of having the matter that makes up the apple and would come into existence with mind as it is conditioned from *viññāṇa*. Mind and the quality of matter that makes up the apple would then condition *saḷāyatana*. The quality of having the matter which makes up the apple would somehow be associated with the mind as a quality of being *rūpa*, even though its description appears to be that of a thing in-itself.

²⁰ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), *op.cit.*, p. 439.

CORPOREALITY

Nyanatiloka Maha Thera translates *rūpa* in Guide to the Abhidhamma as corporeality.²¹ This may be an attempt to reach for something beyond matter, perhaps even further than the use of materiality. In regards to *nāma-rūpa* corporality could be viewed in a couple of ways. Interpretations of corporeality could include the quality of being in regards to having matter or it could mean the quality of having a body.

Defining *rūpa* as the quality of being in regards to having matter, while having nuances that are different, carries the same implications of calling *rūpa* matter, an object existing as *rūpa* as it exists in-itself. *Rūpa* in this interpretation would be the quality of being that has the matter that makes up the apple.

This quality of being that has the matter that makes up the apple would arise with the mind within the *paṭiccasamuppāda*. The quality of being that has the matter that makes up the apple and the mind would both be conditioned from the *viññāna* and the quality of being that has the matter that makes up the apple and the mind would both condition the *saḷāyatana*. This quality of being that has the matter that makes up the apple would have the quality of being connected to the mind as it is *rūpa*.

It should be noted that guessing at what Nyantiloka Maha Thera means by ‘corporeality’ may be no better than a distraction from the investigation into the meaning of *rūpa*, this concern would apply to the interpretations of many translators.

FORM

Rhys Davids translates *rūpa* as form in his translation of *rūpa* as form in Mahānidānasutta.²² This seems to simplify the translation to -being which has form-, and could imply the form that objects imprint upon us, or that which we interpret. The house one see is a form that imprints itself upon a being.

Form can also be understood from a Platonic or Aristotelian point of view. The transcendental form of Plato is something that is beyond this world, something that is not so much experienced as it is known already.

²¹Nyanatiloka, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

²²T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), *op.cit.*, p. 52.

The house, while existing as a house in our mundane world is a house because it shares in the otherworldly form of the perfect house. The Aristotelian form on the other hand is worldly, residing in the object itself. It is in fact that which we experience of an object. The material chunk of existence is interpreted as a house because that chunk of material exists as the form of a house. One may object to these comparisons to the Greek ontology of Plato and Aristotle, though if one were to take a closer look, these interpretations may be conceivable, esp. Aristotle.

It is also possible to interpret form as a characteristic of an entity in itself, separate from interpretation completely. The form of an apple can easily be thought to exist outside of perception. Its form being a characteristic of the apple itself.

If *rūpa* is understood as form, then within the *paṭiccasamuppāda* mind arises with the form of an apple. The form of an apple and the mind would be conditioned form *viññāṇa*, and the form of an apple and the mind would then condition *saḷāyatana*.

SHAPE

Horner decides to translate *rūpa* as shape in her version of the Bahudhātukasutta,²³ Shape is similar to form yet does not contain the broad qualities that the later possesses. Shape tends to deal with the immediate interpretation of an object, its physical characteristics. Where form could be a transcendental quality as mentioned above. Shape can be the shape of an apple as it is observed. The shape being how the apple is viewed in space. Though, much like form, shape can also suggest to a quality of a thing-in itself. The shape of the apple being as it is, a quality of the apple as it exists as that apple.

Shape as a physical characteristic of an apple would have actual physical existence within space. Its shape is a part of it's being an apple. This interpretation of shape is not dependent on being perceived and is a quality of a thing in-itself. *Rūpa* in this sense would be how the apple exists in space, as the apple, how the apple is shaped as the apple.

Shape as a characteristic of perception would be dependent on being observed. The shape of the apple would be what the perception of the shape is. This shape is how the apple is seen in space.

²³ I.B. Horner (tr.) *op.cit.*, p. 107.

If *rūpa* is defined as shape, then shape arises with mind within *paṭiccasamuppāda*. The shape of the apple and mind are conditioned from *viññāṇa*. The shape of the apple and mind together condition *saḷāyatana*. The shape of the apple would always be associated with mind as it exists as *rūpa*.

PHENOMENON

Mehm Ti Mon translates *rūpa* as physical phenomenon in his version of the Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha, The Buddha Abhidhamma -Ultimate Science.²⁴ Translating *rūpa* as physical phenomena, assuming the philosophical definition of phenomenon,²⁵ considers *rūpa* as something that is being observed as well. Physical phenomenon, while still having implications of being physical, is something described as an appearance in experience.

Defining *rūpa* as something experienced may represent the translators wish to take it out of the realm of an object that exists in-itself, even though it is still described as having matter. The physical phenomenon of the apple is a physical apple existing as it is being observed.

From the perspective of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the phenomenon of the apple would arise with the mind. The phenomenon of the apple and mind would arise together as they are conditioned from *viññāṇa*, the phenomenon of the apple and mind would then condition the *saḷāyatana*. The phenomenon of the apple would always arise with mind, would always be associated with mind, as *rūpa* is always associated with mind.

COMPARISON OF TRANSLATIONS

We are left with seven translations; Body, Matter, Materiality, Corporeality, Form, Shape, Phenomenon.

²⁴Mehm Tin Mon, *op.cit.*, p. 298.

²⁵*ibid.* p. 298.

Translations	Definitions
Body	The body of entities or The body of a being
Matter	The “stuff” that makes up entities
Materiality	The quality of having the “stuff: that makes up entities
Corporeality	The quality of being that has the “stuff” that makes up entities
Form	The entity as it exists
Shape	The shape of an entity
Physical Phenomenon	The appearance of an entity

It does not seem possible that all of these translations are consistent with each other. There appears to be 3 main themes within these conflicting translations: that *rūpa* means body; that *rūpa* means matter, wherein which it makes up objects; or that *rūpa* means objects.

As discussed earlier, body can mean several different things. Assuming that body within the *paṭiccasamuppāda* either means the body of existence, that being the anatomical body, or the body of experience, that being the body that facilitates the experience of objects in the world, *rūpa* may be implying a meaning that is a foundation from which consciousness occurs. This meaning does not appear to suggest an object of consciousness, nor the matter that makes up these objects that are experienced.

Presuming the correct translation is matter, and taking the more common interpretation of that word to mean that which makes up physicality, then it appears that *rūpa* is the foundation from which physical objects occur. This would not mean objects themselves, nor the body itself. Even accepting the modern explanation of the physical world, that all physical things are made up of matter, the things that are made up of matter should not be thought of as the matter. In other words, the body, and the objects in the world the body encounters, are that which matter makes up, not matter itself.

Assuming *rūpa* simply means object, and further assuming these objects are the objects that consciousness makes contact with, would mean that *rūpa* is that which consciousness is conscious of. This meaning emphasizes the direct object of consciousness rather than the body that facilitates consciousness, being the ability to make contact, or from where consciousness makes contact from. Object also means something other than matter, being the entity that is actualized from matter, what is experienced, not that which makes up the object.

It appears that these translations are incompatible. Of the seven translations discussed, *rūpa* may mean one of these, none of these, or some of these, but cannot mean all of these. It would seem incoherent to accept all of these translations as acceptable within the same teaching, that being *paṭiccasamuppāda*, which further suggests that it is impossible to accept all of them as acceptable.

The aim of this paper has been to shed light on the possible confusion that surrounds *rūpa* more than to try and clear that confusion up. That being said, the job of clearly defining the term is one that may be in desperate need of attention. The fact remains that *rūpa* may or may not be translatable in contemporary English, but this fact should only hasten the need for possible action. If such a concept, that is necessary to use, exists that cannot be fully understood, should we not then try to understand it as well as we can? Looking at the varied translations of *rūpa* and its impact on the correct conceptualization of the concept may be a place to start in order to do just that, understand it as well as we can.

CONCLUSION

Further questions require attention if we are to come to a consensus of what we mean when we say *rūpa*. How is it that the word for shape and color was used to represent the body? Why did the explanation of consciousness using *rūpa* to experience *rūpa*, such as the body sensing the world, make sense in the time of the Buddha? How can we deal with an ancient concept that was used to express objects of consciousness in this modern day and age of science and reason?

It is clear that *rūpa* does not have a concrete meaning in contemporary usage, as it was a word used 2500 years ago to help explain experience in a world that is much different from the one we now live in. In trying to translate it correctly, one should be cautious and attempt to convey the meaning meant by the Buddha. Having varied translations of this concept may be taking ideas down paths the Buddha and his disciples would not have approved of. Modern usage is very important in representing how well we may understand an ancient idea, as such, these contrasting translations of *rūpa* may point to possible problems. One must ask, do we understand *rūpa* as it was used by the Buddha, using the best of our abilities, in a precise and accurate way. The root problem may be that *rūpa* isn't understood in the way that the Buddha meant it in the first place, not that it's variously translated. The various translations of the word in the same context may be due to the lack of understanding and may perpetuate confusion, at least among non-Pāli readers. A closer examination of the different interpretations

of the concept of *rūpa*, in the context of the same teachings, is suggested to help clear up this possible lack of understanding.

Remarks: The ideas and opinions presented in this article are the researcher's alone and are not meant to imply the consensus or agreement of JIBSC editorial staff or other contributors to the journal.

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