

# *The Things called ‘Elements’ (Dhātu)*

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa gave regular talks during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the volunteer and the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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Today, we will be talking about the *thatu* [Thai] or *dhātu*. *Dhātu* is the Pāli word often translated ‘elements’ into English. Some of you may think it’s a lot of nonsense.

So please listen very carefully. Set yourself to listening as closely as possible otherwise what is said will go past you and will only seem like nonsense. The word *dhātu* is, or it is impossible to find a complete translation of this word. The word ‘element,’ we use primarily for physical or material things, but the word *dhātu* are not limited to the material. It includes mental things and spiritual things. So the word *dhātu* incorporates and refers to both material and non-material things.

On the first day, we spoke about a new life which is related to today’s topic of ‘dhātu’ because if anyone is able of seeing everything as just dhātu – nothing but dhātu – then that will be the same as a ‘new life’ – that will be a new life.

If we see everything as just dhātu, then we won’t see anything and attach to anything as a self or a soul and there will be no selfishness.

Let’s recall that selfishness is the most immediate concern we have. It’s because of selfishness that all the world’s problems (the present world’s problems) are derived from selfishness. All the crises and all the innumerable tragedies are because of selfishness and arise from selfishness.

We hope that non-selfishness is the end of problems and that selfishness is the cause of all the crises in the world. Therefore, if we destroy the ‘self’ and kill it by finding out that it isn’t real and that it’s only an illusion, and then all this crises will be taken care of. So the way to destroy the ‘self’ or selfishness is to see that everything is just dhātu – natural dhātu – that’s all.

If we uphold a faith or a religion that believes in a God or in one God, we limit selfishness by giving up to God. Instead of being selfish, we are goddish and oriented towards God, this allows us to more and more give up selfishness. In Buddhism, there is no belief in a personal creator God. The way that Buddhists limit and deal with the problem of selfishness is to realize, that in reality, there is no ‘self’ to be selfish about. We can do this by beginning to understand and realize that everything is just dhātu.

So the way we deal with selfishness is to realize that there is no self – to see that there are only natural elements, natural arising phenomena, that just follow the law of nature and that we must live according to this law of nature and then we can take this law of nature as our God – as an impersonal God – and more and more orient oneself towards the law of nature rather than orienting towards a ‘self.’ This way, through following and living according to by being oriented to the law of nature, the idea of belief in a ‘self’ is let go of.

Therefore, the thing we need to see is that there are only these natural dhātu and nothing else just natural dhātu, and then nowhere is there a part or portion that is a self or a soul. We need to see and realize this so please set your minds to this task of understanding that there are only natural dhātu arising and passing away according to the law of nature.

So we will look at the meaning of the word *dhātu*. When we separate and divide things into smaller and smaller bits – the smallest portion or division after this long process of dividing – the smallest portion which we cannot divide anymore is a dhātu. Now this is a usual definition and it works with material things. But with the mental phenomena, it doesn’t work because mental things are much too fine and subtle.

Even more than what was just said, *thatu* or dhātu are both natural things but also supernatural. Dhātu[s] are the naturally occurring phenomena and that which is above nature – supernatural.

According to the literary root of the word *dhātu*, it means something that can maintain itself by itself and something that can stand by itself whether referring to natural or supernatural things.

Things which are subject to change, impermanent, that is compounded things, stand in a way appropriate to changing things. Then the supernatural, or things we can't say, or that we probably shouldn't say are changing, these stand or maintain themselves in the way appropriate to supernatural things. So changing things, impermanent things, conditioned things maintain or stand by themselves in a way appropriate to change. And supernatural, unconditioned things, non-conditioned things, will maintain themselves in a way appropriate to the fact that they are not conditioned.

So in Buddhism, we ask the apologies of some, we have to say that even God is a *dhātu*. The God element – that is only a *dhātu*. By seeing everything as only elements, just *dhātu*, then we are able to let go of the self.

Even that mother instinct of egoism can be seen correctly by realizing that everything is only *dhātu*. And this way, selfishness is done away with also.

Now when we look at the word *dhātu* – at the beginning we see that there are two kinds of *dhātu*. There are *kāya dhātu*, physical and material *dhātu*, [and] *mano dhātu* which is mental or spiritual *dhātu*.

As far as the physical *dhātu*, we can see four types of *dhātu*. The first is the earth *dhātu* which is the solid or the *dhātu* that takes up space. The second is water *dhātu* which is the *dhātu* of cohesion of holding together. The third is the fire *dhātu* – the *dhātu* of temperature. The fourth is the air *dhātu* or wind *dhātu* – the *dhātu* of movement. So these four physical *dhātu* appear in all material things whether they are solid, liquid, or gases. These are the four physical or material *dhātu*.

Then there is the fifth *dhātu* – *ākāsa dhātu* or 'space *dhātu*' or 'emptiness *dhātu*.' This is the voidness or emptiness that all the physical *dhātu* are founded on and established on this space *dhātu*. Without a space *dhātu*, none of the other *dhātu* could be anywhere or could exist.

The sixth *dhātu* is unlike the first five and that it is nowhere material or physical. The first five had to do with physical or material things. The sixth one has to do with the mind, spirit – we call it *viññāṇa dhātu* – it's mental or spiritual. You can say it's the mind, or the brain, or the heart, whichever you

prefer. What we are talking about here is that which knows what is aware, and what thinks. This is what is referred to by *viññāṇa dhātu*.

So if all we see are the six dhātu, then there is no ‘self’ or selfishness. And when there is no selfishness, there is peace and there is joy. Both inwardly, one-self is peaceful, calm, and tranquil, and also society around one is also peaceful by seeing that all is just dhātu – no ‘self,’ no ‘soul.’

If you look, you will see that the goal of all religions is the control and end of selfishness. All religions have this aim and are the same in this way. The only differences are in method. Different religions have different methods of controlling and ending selfishness. In Buddhism, selfishness is dealt with as we are describing here by seeing that there is no self, selfishness ends. Other religions have the same goal of ending selfishness, they just use different methods.

Another finer, deeper, and more lofty and more profound way of looking at dhātu is to see three kinds of dhātu. The first is *kāma dhātu*. *Kāma* is things having to do with senses, sensuality, lust, or coarse material dhātu – sensuality or coarse material dhātu. Then there is the second kind of dhātu which is material but not associated with sensuality or lust – this is *rūpa dhātu* often translated as ‘fine material dhātu.’ Then there is the third one which is in no way material. This is the *arūpa dhātu* – formless or the immaterial dhātu. All the things in the universe can be seen as these three dhātu.<sup>1</sup>

The mind can find happiness in the *kāma dhātu* – in sensuality, in sex. This is one kind of happiness the mind can experience through, based on the coarse material or the sensual realm dhātu. Or, happiness can be found in pure matter – in fine material dhātu such as the concentration of absorption through the practice of *ānāpānasati*. This is a finer kind of happiness based on pure matter rather than on sensuality. And then the mind can also experience happiness based on what is not material and what is formless or immaterial such as the space dhātu and the consciousness or spiritual dhātu.

This is a third type of happiness and this third kind is a kind of concentration (*samādhi*) which we have not yet studied or looked at.

If we look closely and carefully, we will see that *kāma dhātu* (the coarse material dhātu) can be attached to as a ‘self’ or ‘soul.’ For this reason, it is

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<sup>1</sup> ‘I am sorry, in English its is usually spelled ‘d-h-a-t-u,’ so it’s pronounced dhātu. In Thai, it’s pronounced thatu so that’s why I mix these up.’ [added by the translator]

*dukkha*. We can see that *rūpa dhātu* can also be attached to as ‘self’ or ‘soul’ and therefore is *dukkha*. And *arūpa dhātu* (formless *dhātu*) can also be attached to as ‘self’ or ‘soul’ and therefore is *dukkha*. All of these three *dhātu*, if attached to, are *dukkha*.

These three *dhātu* or *thatu* are basis for attachment – we attach to them and they are *dukkha*. Now there is a fourth *dhātu* which opposes these three – this is *nirodha dhātu*. *Nirodha dhātu* is the end of the other three *dhātu*. The word *nirodha* can cause problems in English. Literally, it means to extinguish, to put out. So *nirodha dhātu* puts out or extinguishes *kāma dhātu*, *rūpa dhātu*, and *arūpa dhātu*. And in doing so, it extinguishes *dukkha*, on unsatisfactoriness, and suffering.

We can see that there are two kinds of *dhātu* – *dhātu* that cause *dukkha* and *dhātu* which extinguish *dukkha*. There are *dhātu* which are the basis of cause for, lead to the arising of the birth of *dukkha*, of suffering, or of unsatisfactoriness. On the other hand, there is *dhātu* which is the extinguishing of this other *dhātu*. So there is the *dhātu* that causes *dukkha* and *dhātu* that extinguishes *dukkha*.

There are many different ways of classifying the elements (the *dhātu[s]*), so listen very carefully to understand properly. We can also see that there is *kāma dhātu* and *akāma dhātu*. There are many kinds of *dhātu* which are associated with the senses that are connected with sensuality. These are the *kāma dhātu*. Then there are *akāma dhātu* – *dhātu* that are not associated with the senses or with sensuality. So there are very many different kinds of sensual *dhātu* and then there are non-sensual *dhātu* which are *rūpa dhātu*, *arūpa dhātu*, and *nirodha dhātu*, or fine material, non-material, and extinction *dhātu*. This is another way of classifying the *dhātu*.

We can see that all things are *dhātu*. Even that which we call ‘*Nibbāna*’ in Pāli or ‘*Nirvana*’ in Sanskrit, even this is a *dhātu*. Sometimes we call it *nibbāna dhātu* or the ‘coolness *dhātu*.’ It corresponds with *nirodha dhātu* – the extinguishing of heat and the extinguishing of *dukkha* – this is *nibbāna dhātu*. So even the highest thing – the *Nibbāna* – is a *dhātu*. Everything from the highest *nibbāna dhātu* to the smallest particle of dust or dirt, all these are *dhātu*, everything is *dhātu*.

To summarize all this in another way, we can see that there are two *dhātu*. There is *sankhata dhātu* (conditioned-ness *dhātu*). All things that arise and

change and pass away through conditions and causes – things that are formed and pass away – which have beginnings and the ends – these are *sankhata dhātu* (the conditioned-ness dhātu). And then there is *asankhata dhātu* (the unconditioned-ness dhātu). When there are no things, when there is no conditioning, no forming, no causes and effects, this dhātu maintains itself without change – it is eternal. We can see these two dhātu – the conditioned-ness dhātu and the unconditionedness dhātu. Everything can be seen according to these two dhātu and if you fully understand this *asankhata dhātu* and *sankhata dhātu*, then you will understand everything that there is to know about dhātu.

This is the same as in the beginning when we spoke of *dhātu* which go according to nature and proceed according to nature, and *dhātu* which are above nature.

So there are the natural dhātu and supernatural dhātu – the natural ones proceeding, arising, and passing according to nature. The supernatural dhātu is freedom; it is liberation from this arising and passing away. This is a new life, so new that it's newer than new. It's really stretching the meaning of the word 'new.' But the supernatural dhātu is the base of freedom of being above natural conditions and conditioning – this is a new life. Now whether you understand this or not is another matter. Please try to understand it so that you don't see it all as a bunch of nonsense. By seeing that there are only dhātu, that that's all there is, just dhātu, then, there is within all these dhātu, there is no state or condition of soul or some permanent entity, some permanent essence. When we see this, then there is new life and there is the understanding of things as they are. This is coolness and the mind is liberated. It is saved and delivered.

You may think that this teaching is very bizarre and that it is strange and we are quite certain that Buddhism is the only religion that teaches this kind of thing. This is because all the religions which believe in a God and a soul and things associated with a soul are coming from that point of view. Everything is based on, related to, and associated with the soul. But in Buddhism, we don't use that point of view. We come to see that there is no 'self' and no 'soul,' we uproot this idea, this concept, this way of perceiving reality, and thereby see that everything is only dhātu.

Now we will talk about the way of practice, to penetrate to the realization that there is only dhātu. In practicing the full and complete sixteen steps of *ānāpānasati*, we see that in each step, there is no 'self,' no 'soul,' there is only dhātu. Especially, in the thirteenth step – the contemplation of *anicca* (the

contemplation of impermanence) – here all things are seen as impermanent, as ever changing, as dukkha, and as empty of ‘self’ or ‘soul.’ So this is the way to penetrate to this realization using the sixteen steps of ānāpānasati, we can come to this understanding. Or, by developing mindfulness in the movements of the body, raising up the hand, brushing teeth, eating, walking, going, sitting, lying down – through mindfulness of all this, and seeing that all these movements and everything that is happening are only dhātu. Coming to see that there is no ‘self’ or ‘soul.’ See that there is thinking, there is mental activity and mental conditioning because there is mind dhātu and there is physical movement and physical activity because there is body dhātu. And there is emptiness dhātu. So mind dhātu, body dhātu, and emptiness dhātu are going through all these different processes – thinking, movement, the mind telling the body to do things and the body doing things – all sorts of activity, conditioning, forming, passing away, arising, dying – all this is happening. Now, we tend to get really attached to this interrelationship between mind dhātu, body dhātu, and emptiness dhātu. And conceive of it as a ‘self’ or a ‘soul.’ But when we see just these elements, these dhātu interacting and compounding, then we can be aware that in truth, there is no ‘self’ or no ‘soul.’ This is how we can practice in order to come to understand this through the sixteen steps of ānāpānasati and through mindfulness of all the movements of the body and mind. And the most direct way or a very good way of doing this is through the short-cut practice of ānāpānasati as described in the small book you have been reading.

If we approach this in a scholarly or academic way, we can look at the six sense spheres – the eyes and sights, ears and sounds, nose and odors, tongue and tastes, the body and bodily sensations, and the mind and mental objects – there are these six pairs. The eyes and the sight interact and then with the arising of *viññāṇa dhātu* (the consciousness dhātu) then there is this seeing. This seeing – the interaction between the eye, sense object, and sense consciousness or eye consciousness – these are dhātu. For seeing, there is no need of a self or a soul, of any permanent fixed essence or just the dhātu. Hearing involves ears, sounds, and ear consciousness, no ‘self’ no ‘soul,’ just dhātu. The same is with smelling, tasting, sensing bodily sensing, and thinking. These are happening through dhātu and this is all independent of any ‘self’ or ‘soul.’ This is another way to look at things.

Or, we can look at just the external sense objects – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, and thoughts. We can see these as dhātu – just

conditioned things rising and falling away and that we don't have to fall into the problems of liking them or being satisfied with them, meaning that we are attaching to all these things as some self unchanging soul or some unchanging essence. And we don't dislike or be dissatisfied with these external sense objects and get into the delusion that they are permanent essences. We just realize and perceive that all these are dhātu changing and that there is nothing in them which we should perceive as an essence, a self, or a soul.

Finally, there are five things which we can use to see everything – the 'five conducts' – the 'five aggregates.' They happen one at a time. There is always one of them at work or functioning. So when the body is functioning, is doing its duty, then there is *rūpa khanda*. Then the feeling – the mental reaction to sense experience of liking or disliking – this is *vedanā khanda*. Then, if not those two, then *saññā khanda* functions – the recognizing, distinguishing the marks or signs of the sense experience of these and that details or characteristics of the experience – recognizing, perceiving, this is the third khanda. Or, *saṅkhāra khanda* functions and does its work of thinking – thinking about this, thinking about that, mentally compounding ideas and thoughts, and stringing them together – this is the fourth khanda. And if not one of these four, then the fifth khanda is functioning – the *viññāṇa khanda* (the consciousness aggregate) – the clear knowing, the clear sensing, the clear and sharp experiencing. These are the five khandas; they function one at a time. There is always one of them functioning and this is what is going on in human reality. So we can see that this is just dhātu and there is no 'self' or 'soul' involved in the process of the functioning of the khanda. In one moment we might be interested in the body khanda, in another moment the feelings, another moment the recognition, another moment thinking, another moment consciousness, but there is no 'self' involved or no 'soul' – just dhātu, only dhātu.

So when we see that there are just these natural elements proceeding just according to nature, then there is no liking or disliking, no being satisfied with or dissatisfied with things. Because by seeing in this way – by this absence of liking or disliking, then the *kilesa* (mental defilements) don't arise. By seeing things as natural dhātu, then there is no anger, or greed, or ignorance. The *kilesa[s]* don't happen by perceiving that there are only dhātu.

Second thing that happens is that when we realize that there is no 'self' or 'soul,' then there is no burden or heavy weight to carry. By not liking or disliking through the absence of the *kilesa*, by realizing that there are only

naturally occurring dhātu that follow the law of nature, then there is no burden to carry around. When we are liking and disliking things, attaching to things as entities or permanent essences, then we are picking up heavy burdens and carrying them around with us, weighing down the mind. This can be avoided by realizing that there are only dhātu.

The shortest summary of this is that when there is no more egoism, and then there is no more dukkha. We don't cause dukkha for ourselves or for others.

The last thing we are going to say today is that this matter is something that is possible and it is a possibility and there is nothing impossible. Many people jump to the conclusion that this way of practice is beyond their limits and outside their abilities. So they are not interested in it. Or people have trouble understanding while they are listening to it so they lose interest and don't bother to do this practice. But the fact is that it's not outside our abilities and outside our limits – it's something we are capable of – we can realize that all things are just dhātu and that there is no 'self' or a 'soul' – and let go of this attachment of this concept and become free of egoism. It is possible to put down the heavy burden of the self, of the ego and realize a new life.

As far as what is possible, we can talk of three possibilities – the first is that we can understand this matter of the dhātu, the different classifications of them, and the different descriptions we can understand. We can know what they are, how they are, we can study them, and come to understand them. This is possible and this is not beyond our abilities. Second possibility is that we can practice this understanding, we can see, and we come to realize that there are only elements and that everything is just elements or dhātu – this is the second possibility. The third is to receive the benefits of this realization through understanding that there are only dhātu, achieving the freedom from egoistic, selfish consciousness and thinking. These are three possibilities which are not far-fetched things which are beyond the means of human beings – these are all possible, so please be interested in these.

Even the most difficult and most profound things, as far as our understanding goes, can still be realized. Even Nibbāna or Nirvana is something within our capabilities – we can know it, we can be aware of it, we can realize it. The Buddha said that “Nibbāna is an *āyatana*” – we've heard this word regarding the sense organs and the sense objects. *Āyatana* is something that we can know, we can be aware of, something that we can connect up with. We can know Nibbāna. It is something that is tangible because it is real. The Buddha

said we can know it – we can feel it because it truly exists. So even this most profound thing, the thing which is most difficult for a rational mind to understand, even this Nibbāna is within our capabilities. It is not something that we should lose interest in because we think it is beyond our means.

So, don't forget that Nibbāna is a dhātu. Nibbāna is something realizable and knowable – it is one of these dhātu. So please take interest in practicing and developing the mind because through practice and development, the *nibbāna dhātu* is something which can be known, felt, or realized. We can make contact with it, we can get to know it, come to know it, and be aware of it. So through the practice of developing an understanding that everything is only dhātu, we can develop and come to realize the nibbāna dhātu.

The reason which the nibbāna dhātu can be known is because it is real. Things that are not real cannot be known and we cannot make contact with them. Anything that is real is something which we can know and realize. Take for example, God, if God is real then we can know God and we can make contact with God, and we can connect up with God. Since Nibbāna is real, we can know it and realize it. We do this through correct practice, through understanding properly, and practicing correctly. Then one can come to know the nibbāna dhātu – one can realize reality by seeing that everything is only elements following the law of nature, that there is no 'self' or 'soul.' This can be realized and we can know it. This has to be *sandiṭṭhiko* – that which is known and realized within ourselves. Every step and aspect of the practice is seen and realized in ourselves and by ourselves. It is not dependent on somebody else seeing or realizing for us. To practice correctly, as we have explained, one sees for oneself – one knows and realizes all the various dhātu up through the nibbāna dhātu by oneself. This way, one's understanding is correct and one's practice is proper.

Today we have been talking about the way to meet up with and the way to find and experience a new life – this is the way of practicing in order to know a new life. A new life is real and genuine and therefore we can know it by coming to understand that there are only natural elements which are completely empty of a 'self' or 'soul.' And this way, we practice in order to have a new life. This is the distinct possibility, within the limits and capabilities of everyone here so please be interested in this practice, apply yourselves to it, and receive the benefits there are. So use this way of practice of seeing the elements, the *dhātu*,

as they are, as a means of freeing oneself from the burden of ‘self’ or ‘soul’ in order to have or live a new life. On this note, we will end today’s talk.

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Transcribed by Tripur Manandhar (tripur7@gmail.com) in Sept.-Dec. 2015  
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