

Difference Between Physical Rūpa and Rūpakkhandha

Introduction

1. Translation of *rūpakkhandha* as “form aggregate” may give the wrong impression that it is a “collection of solid objects.” It is critical to understand the difference between *rūpa* and *rūpakkhandha*. Innumerable *rūpa* exist worldwide, and **only those experienced by a person are included in their *rūpakkhandha*.**

- Therefore, one person’s *rūpakkhandha* is different from another person’s *rūpakkhandha*.
- Instead of memorizing Pāli words, **we need to understand what is meant by such Pāli words and use the Pāli words when there is ambiguity.** Many key Pāli words do not have equivalent English words.

What Is a Rūpa?

2. Before we understand the difference between a “*rūpa*” and “*rūpakkhandha*,” we need to understand what the Buddha meant by a “*rūpa*.” The Pāli word “*rūpa*” is customarily translated as “form.”

- The definition of a *rūpa* is in many places in *Tiṭṭaka*, for example, SN 22.56 and SN 22.57. Simply put, ” A *rūpa* consists of the four great elements, derived from the four great elements.”
- A *rūpa* made of the four great elements is not necessarily a solid object like a tree (those are *vaṇṇa rūpa*.) **Types of energy (like light and sound) are included in the *rūpa* category. All sensory inputs to the five physical senses are *rūpa*.**
- The Buddha defined *rūpa* as ALL those that can provide a sensory experience (*viññāṇa*.) **Therefore, dhammā that we experience with the mind are also a type of *rūpa*.** See, [“What are Rūpa? – Dhammā are Rūpa too!”](#) That subject is a bit deep. Don’t worry about that right now if you are not familiar with it.

3. Therefore, we can see that light, sound, odors, taste, and touch are all types of *rūpa*. It is only within the past 100 years or so that scientists admitted that matter and energy are the same.

- In modern-day terms, physical *rūpa* are “solid matter” (human bodies, trees, houses, etc.) OR “energy” (light, sound, heat, etc.). With Einstein’s famous equation $E = mc^2$, modern science acknowledged that matter and energy are intrinsically the same.
- In terms of Buddha Dhamma, all those *rūpa* are **collections** of *suddhaṭṭhaka*, the “smallest unit of *rūpa*.” We usually call visible objects “matter.” And invisible energy forms (like heat, sound) “energy.” Both types consist of *suddhaṭṭhaka*. A *suddhaṭṭhaka* is the smallest unit of energy/matter in Buddha Dhamma. It is unimaginably tiny, billions of times smaller than an atom or even an electron in modern science.

▪By the way, *dhammā* that we detect directly with the mind are *rūpa* below the *suddhaṭṭhaka* stage (just energy.)

▪The 28 types of *rūpa* are listed in “[Rūpa \(Material Form\) – Table](#).” We can see that the ten types of *rūpa* on the right-hand side of the Table are not what we usually think of as “matter.”

Khandha Is a “Collection” or an “Aggregate” of *Rūpa* Experienced

4. Before we discuss *rūpakkhandha*, it also helps to understand what a “*khandha*” is. In Pāli (and Sinhala), it means a “heap” or a “pile.” In Sinhala, a hill or a “pile of things” is called a “*kanda*” (කන්ද). So, aggregate is not a bad translation for *khandha* (කන්ධ in Sinhala for the Pāli word).

▪*Rūpakkhandha* includes all types of *rūpa* that one has experienced/expects to experience/is experiencing now, as discussed below.

▪We see an object in a series of high-speed “seeing events.” Those individual “snapshots” don’t register in our minds. Only the overall effect of a large number of snapshots is registered and added to *rūpa khandha*. It rhymes like “*rūpakkhandha*.” We have seen such a combination of words (*sandhi*) in Pāli terms like *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the same as *Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutta*.

▪Another example is *dhammassavana*. “*Dhamma savana*” rhymes with *dhammassavana*. “*Dhamma savana*” is listening to the *dhamma* (discourse).”

Rūpakkhandha is All Mental

5. **It is essential to realize that *rūpakkhandha* is all mental.** It is NOT a “collection of material things,” as the term “form aggregate” may imply. Towards the end of the “[WebLink: suttacentral: Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta \(MN 28\)](#),” Ven. Sāriputta explains *rūpakkhandha*.

▪Just the presence of an object, a sound, odor, taste, or touch is not enough to be included in *rūpakkhandha*. For example, if X is sitting in a pitch dark room, X will not see anything there, even though there may be many objects in the room. If X shines a flashlight on a chair, then X can see that chair. **If the chair’s image registers in X’s mind, then it becomes a part of the *rūpakkhandha* for X.**

▪Let us take another example. X and Y are in a room reading books, and X is fully absorbed in reading, but Y has not had much interest in his book. Y hears a dog barking and that sound registers in his mind, i.e., the “dog bark” becomes a part of his *rūpakkhandha*. However, even though that sound would have reached X’s ears too, he had his attention entirely focused on the book and did not hear that “dog bark.” Thus, the “dog bark” is NOT a part of X’s *rūpakkhandha*.

▪Now it should be quite clear that each person has their *rūpakkhandha*.

Rūpakkhandha is Unimaginably Huge!

6. Let us look in more detail to see that these *rūpakkhanda* are “mental impressions” of *rūpa* and NOT the *rūpa* out there.

- The critical point is that when we experience a *rūpa*, that present moment is quickly gone. Most of *rūpakkhanda* is what one has already experienced. **Everything we have experienced in all our past rebirths is in the *rūpakkhanda*!**
- Those *rūpā* that one has seen in the past are one’s *atīta rūpā*, including anything that one ever saw (including in previous births). These cannot be physical *rūpā*. They are just memories of a *rūpa* that existed in the past. For example, one may remember a tree in the backyard as a child. That tree is no longer there, but one can still “see” that tree in one’s mind. Same for one’s dead parents or grandparents who may be no longer alive.
- Any *rūpa* about the future or an *anāgata rūpa* (for example, a sketch of the type of house one is thinking about building) can change with time. **That does not even involve a real physical *rūpa*.**
- Any *rūpa* that one sees at present (*paccuppanna rūpa*) goes to the category of *atīta rūpa* in a split second. Even if we never see that object again, that memory will remain.

More Types of *Rūpa* in *Rūpakkhanda*

7. Internal (*ajjhatta*) *rūpa* are part of oneself: all body parts, including the ones inside the body. External (*bahiddha*) *rūpa* are, of course, anything outside of one’s body. Coarse (*oḷārika*) *rūpa* are what we call “solid matter,” and fine/subtle (*sukuma*) *rūpa* are “energy” (heat, sound, *dhammā*, etc.).

- There are *rūpa* that are “bad” (*hīna*), and there are others that are “good” (*pañīta*).
- Some *rūpa* are far (*dūre*), and some are near (*santike*).
- Therefore, we see that there could be some overlaps between these categories.
- Many of these in the *rūpakkhanda* we have not even seen. For example, we have a mental impression of our hearts, but we have not seen our hearts. We may not have seen some landmarks like the Chinese Great Wall, but only pictures of them. Yet, we do have mental impressions of those.
- Altogether there are **11 types** included in *rūpakkhanda*. The [WebLink: suttacentral: Khandha Sutta \(SN 22.48\)](#) (among many other *suttā*) summarizes what is included in *rūpakkhanda*. “*Yaṃ kiñci, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ (atīta, anāgata, paccuppanna) ajjhattaṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukumaṃ vā hīnaṃ vā pañītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā, ayaṃ vuccati rūpakkhandaṃ.*”
- The 11 types are **past, future, current, internal, external, coarse, subtle, good, bad, far, and near.**

Difference Between *Rūpa* and *Rūpakkhanda*

8. Now we can see the main difference between physical *rūpa* and *rūpakkhanda*.

▪ A **physical rūpa** is either of the following two kinds. A solid object that one sees with one’s eyes or touches with one’s body (a person, a person’s body or a body part, a tree, a planet, a star, etc.) Those are what we usually call “solid objects.” Then, other sensory inputs come through the other three sense doors (smells, tastes, or sounds).

▪ **Rūpakkhandha** has MENTAL IMPRESSIONS of all external rūpā that one has EXPERIENCED. *Rūpakkhandha* is NOT tangible or has any energy in them. One’s *rūpakkhandha* is INFINITE. It has **records of ALL one has seen in ALL past lives going back and back in time without “an actual beginning.”**

▪ That is why those with *iddhi* (supernormal) powers can recall events that took place billions of years ago. The Buddha recalled how he received his first “*niyata vivarana*,” or confirmation that he would become a Buddha, trillions of years ago, from Buddha Dīpaṅkara. See, “[Pāramitā and Niyata Vivarana – Myths or Realities?](#)” [*vivarana* : [nt.] expansion, uncovering, showing, clarifying.]

▪ Some people can recall ANY event during their current life (for example, what one ate for lunch on a particular day ten years ago.) See “[Recent Evidence for Unbroken Memory Records \(HSAM\)](#).” That confirms that all events are “recorded” and kept intact in *viññāṇa dhātu*. See “[Where Are Memories Stored? – Viññāṇa Dhātu](#).”

9. Let us take another example to visualize this difference between actual *rūpa* and *rūpakkhandha*.

▪ The 2001 terrorist attack destroyed the twin towers in New York.

▪ If someone had seen those twin towers in New York, those towers would be in that person’s *rūpakkhandha*. That person can still recall them in his mind. Those physical structures are not there anymore but are in his *rūpakkhandha*!

▪ But those physical *rūpā* (twin towers) in New York are no longer there.

▪ Furthermore, if someone had not seen them before their destruction, those towers would not be in that person’s *rūpakkhandha*.

Rūpakkhandha Is Personal

10. Since we have seen very different things in our current lives (and in our past lives), our *rūpakkhandha* are very different. Each person’s *rūpakkhandha* is unique.

When experiencing a *rūpa* through any of the six sense faculties leads to the generation of *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra*, and *viññāṇa*. That is discussed in many *suttā*, and we have discussed in detail the *Chachakka Sutta* (MN 148). See “[Chachakka Sutta – Six Types of Vipāka Viññāṇa](#).”

▪ We can also see that each has their *vedanākkhandha*, *saññākkhandha*, *saṅkhārakkhandha*, and *viññāṇakkhandha*.

▪ They are analyzed in the same way. That is how the *pañcakkhandha* (five aggregates) arises. Therefore, *pañcakkhandha* is also unique to each person.

- An important example of crystalizing the concept of *rūpakkhandha* in “[Rūpakkhandha and Rūpa Upādānakkhandha.](#)”