

Lump of Foam Sutra - Pheṇapiṇḍūpama-sutta of the Samyuttanikāya - 95
(Pali - pheṇapiṇḍa = lump of foam - Tibetan - dbu ba brospa)
Translation from Bhikhu Bodhi - Samyutta Nikaya - 95 (3) A Lump of Foam

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodjhā (Sanskrit अयोध्य Ayodhyá) on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: **188**

“Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?**189**

“Suppose, bhikkhus, that in the autumn, when it is raining and big rain drops are falling, a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?**190**

“Suppose, bhikkhus, that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?**191**

“Suppose, bhikkhus, that a man needing heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There he would see the trunk of a large plantain tree, straight, fresh, without a fruit-bud core.**192** He would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As he unrolls the coil, he would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a plantain tree? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of volitional formations there are, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects them, ponders them, and carefully investigates them. As he investigates them, they appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in volitional formations?**193**

“Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician or a magician’s apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of consciousness there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness? **194**

“Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards form, revulsion towards feeling, revulsion towards perception, revulsion towards volitional formations, revulsion towards consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’ “

This is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Fortunate One, the Teacher, further said this:

“Form is like a lump of foam, Feeling like a water bubble;
Perception is like a mirage, Volitions like a plantain trunk,
And consciousness like an illusion, So explained the Kinsman of the Sun.

“However one may ponder it And carefully investigate it,
It appears but hollow and void When one views it carefully.

“With reference to this body The One of Broad Wisdom has taught
That with the abandoning of three things One sees this form discarded.

“When vitality, heat, and consciousness Depart from this physical body,
Then it lies there cast away: Food for others, without volition. **195**

“Such is this continuum, This illusion, beguiler of fools.
It is taught to be a murderer; Here no substance can be found. 196

“A bhikkhu with energy aroused Should look upon the aggregates thus,
Whether by day or at night, 197 Comprehending, ever mindful.

“He should discard all the fetters And make a refuge for himself;
Let him fare as with head ablaze, Yearning for the imperishable state.”

Notes

One of two commentaries to the Samyuttanikāya, explained as the authorized commentary, is the Samyutta Nikāya-aṭṭhakathā, also known by its proper name, the Sāratthappakāsinī (abbreviated as Spk), “The Elucidator of the Essential Meaning.” This is ascribed to the great Buddhist commentator, Ācariya Buddhaghosa, who came from South India to Sri Lanka in the fifth century C.E. and compiled the commentaries to the canonical texts on the basis of the ancient Sinhala commentaries (no longer extant) that had been preserved at the Mahāvihāra in Anuradhapura. In the following notes, Spk indicates commentary from that text by Buddhaghosa.

188 Spk: One evening, while dwelling in that abode, the Blessed One came out from his “fragrant cottage and sat down by the bank of the Ganges. He saw a great lump of foam coming downstream and thought, “I will give a Dhamma talk relating to the five aggregates.” Then he addressed the bhikkhus sitting around him. The sutta is one of the most radical discourses on the empty nature of conditioned phenomena; its imagery (especially the similes of the mirage and the magical illusion) has been taken up by later Buddhist thinkers, most persistently by the Mādhyamikas. Some of the images are found elsewhere in the Pāli Canon. In the context of early Buddhist thought these similes have to be handled with care. They are not intended to suggest an illusionist view of the world but to show that our conceptions of the world, and of our own existence, are largely distorted by the process of cognition. Just as the mirage and magical illusion are based on real existents—the sand of the desert, the magician’s appurtenances—so these false conceptions arise from a base that objectively exists, namely, the five aggregates; but when seen through a mind subject to conceptual distortion, the aggregates appear in a way that deviates from their actual nature. Instead of being seen as transient and selfless, they appear as substantial and as a self.

189 Spk explains at length how form (i.e., the body) is like a lump of foam (pheṇapiṇḍa). I give merely the highlights: as a lump of foam lacks any substance (sāra), so form lacks any substance that is permanent, stable, a self; as the lump of foam is full of holes and fissures and the abode of many creatures, so too form; as the lump of foam, after expanding, breaks up, so does form, which is pulverized in the mouth of death.

190 Spk: A bubble (bubbuḷa) is feeble and cannot be grasped, for it breaks up as soon as it is seized; so too feeling is feeble and cannot be grasped as permanent and stable. As a bubble arises and ceases in a drop of water and does not last long, so too with feeling: 100,000 koṭis of feelings arise and cease in the time of a finger-snap (one koṭi = 10 million). As a bubble arises in dependence on conditions, so feeling arises in dependence on a sense base, an object, the defilements, and contact.

191 Spk: Perception is like a mirage (marīcikā) in the sense that it is insubstantial, for one cannot grasp a mirage to drink or bathe or fill a pitcher. As a mirage deceives the multitude, so does perception, which entices people with the idea that the colourful object is beautiful, pleasurable, and permanent.

192 Akukkukajātaṃ. Spk: There is no pith growing inside (anto asañjātaghanadaṇḍakaṃ).
[My own note drawn from the internet: Despite the fact that plantain plants are commonly referred to as “trees” and can grow to heights up to 20 to 25 feet, they are not actually trees. What appears to be a tree trunk at the base of the plant is actually a pseudostem made up of layers of leaf sheaths.]



193 The simile is used for a different purpose at MN I 233,15-23. Spk: As a plantain trunk (kadalikkhandha) is an assemblage of many sheaths, each with its own characteristic, so the aggregate of volitional formations is an assemblage of many phenomena, each with its own characteristic.

194 Spk: Consciousness is like a magical illusion (māyā) in the sense that it is insubstantial and cannot be grasped. Consciousness is even more transient and fleeting than a magical illusion. For it gives the impression that a person comes and goes, stands and sits, with the same mind, but the mind is different in each of these activities. Consciousness deceives the multitude like a magical illusion.

195 See MN I 296,9-11, spoken by Sāriputta. I cannot trace a parallel spoken by the Buddha himself, but see DhP 41.

196 Spk explains that māyāyaṃ bālalāpinī, in pāda b, refers specifically to the aggregate of consciousness. The aggregate-mass is a murderer in two ways: (i) because the aggregates slay each other; and (ii) because murder appears in dependence on the aggregates. As to (i), when the earth element breaks up it takes along the other elements, and when the form aggregate breaks up it takes along the mental aggregates. As to (ii), when the aggregates exist such things as murder, bondage, injury, etc., come into being. On the comparison of the aggregates to murderers.