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The Dhatu on fields of Meditation and Practices

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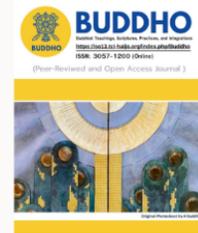


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The Dhatu on fields of Meditation and Practices

Le Cai Yu*

Abstract

The concept of Dhātu (Pāli: धातु), commonly translated as “element” or “constituent,” occupies a central position in early Buddhist philosophical analysis and meditative praxis. This study aims (1) to examine the conceptual foundations of Dhātu as presented in early Buddhist canonical and commentarial texts, particularly in relation to meditation and insight practice; (2) to analyze the role of the Four Great Elements (Mahābhūta earth, water, fire, and air) in meditative contemplation and their function in cultivating direct understanding of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā); and (3) to critically assess the extent to which Dhātu theory is integrated into modern meditation practices, especially contemporary mindfulness-based approaches.

Employing a qualitative documentary research methodology, the study systematically analyzes primary sources from the Pāli Canon, including the Nikāyas and Abhidhamma, alongside key commentarial texts such as the Visuddhimagga. Secondary sources include modern scholarly interpretations and contemporary meditation manuals. Textual analysis and thematic comparison are used as the primary research tools to trace doctrinal continuity, interpretive developments, and practical applications of Dhātu contemplation across historical and modern contexts.

The findings indicate that, in early Buddhism, Dhātu functions as both an analytical framework and a practical meditative method aimed at deconstructing the notion of a permanent self through direct experiential insight. However, modern mindfulness-based practices tend to marginalize elemental analysis, favoring generalized attentional techniques. This study concludes that the diminished emphasis on Dhātu represents a significant doctrinal and practical gap. By highlighting its meditative efficacy and philosophical depth, the research argues for the reintegration of Dhātu-based contemplation into contemporary meditation frameworks, thereby enriching both theoretical understanding and experiential insight within modern Buddhist practice.

Keywords: Dhātu, Mahābhūta, Buddhist meditation, Vipassanā

Introduction

In the rich tapestry of Buddhist philosophy, the concept of Dhātu (Pāli: धातु; Sanskrit: धातु), commonly translated as “element,” “constituent,” or “basic property,” occupies a foundational position in both metaphysical and phenomenological analyses of existence. Dhātu refers to the fundamental components that constitute the physical and mental dimensions of reality, serving as an essential analytical framework through which Buddhist thought explicates the nature of experience. Across Buddhist traditions, the doctrine of Dhātu functions not merely as a classificatory system but as a crucial means for understanding conditioned phenomena and the path toward liberation. Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2000).

Within Theravāda Buddhism, the theory of Dhātu is closely interwoven with the doctrines of the Five Aggregates (Pañcakkhandha) and the Four Great Elements (Mahābhūta), offering a systematic analysis of corporeal and mental processes. In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, Dhātu assumes broader ontological and cosmological dimensions, often associated with concepts such as emptiness (Śūnyatā), Buddha-nature (Tathāgatagarbha), and the dynamic interdependence of phenomena. Across these traditions, Dhātu serves as a critical lens through which impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā) are examined and experientially realized. Williams, P. (2009).

Scholarly engagement with Dhātu has traditionally focused on textual analysis, doctrinal classification, and philosophical interpretation. Canonical scriptures, commentarial literature, and later scholastic treatises provide detailed expositions of the elements and their functions within Buddhist systems of thought. However, while these sources elucidate the theoretical dimensions of Dhātu, comparatively less attention has been paid to its practical application, particularly in relation to meditation and lived spiritual practice. As a result, a gap remains between doctrinal understanding and experiential implementation.

This study seeks to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Dhātu by examining its interpretations and applications across major Buddhist traditions, drawing upon canonical texts, commentarial sources, and contemporary scholarly perspectives. By situating Dhātu within both historical and modern contexts, the research aims to illuminate its continued relevance to Buddhist practice and philosophical inquiry. In doing so, the study emphasizes Dhātu not only as a theoretical construct but also as a practical framework for cultivating insight and wisdom on the path to liberation. Ñāṇamoli, B., & Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (1995).

Despite the central role of Dhātu in Buddhist philosophy, its systematic integration into meditation practices and daily spiritual disciplines remains underexplored. Analayo, B. (2003). Several significant gaps in the existing literature warrant focused investigation:

1. Limited Integration into Contemporary Meditation Practices Although classical Buddhist texts provide extensive discussions of Dhātu, contemporary meditation approaches often prioritize mindfulness and concentration techniques without explicit engagement with elemental analysis. There is a lack of empirical and practical studies demonstrating how Dhātu-based contemplations can be effectively incorporated into modern meditative frameworks.

2. **Insufficient Comparative Analysis Across Buddhist Traditions** Interpretations and applications of Dhātu differ substantially among Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions. However, comparative research examining how these doctrinal variations influence meditation methodologies and experiential outcomes remains limited. A cross-traditional analysis could enrich contemporary practice by integrating diverse doctrinal insights.

3. **Limited Engagement with Modern Psychology and Neuroscience** The potential intersections between Dhātu-based meditation and contemporary psychological or neuroscientific models of cognition and embodiment have received minimal scholarly attention. Exploring these connections may provide innovative ways to bridge traditional Buddhist contemplative frameworks with modern scientific understandings of mind and experience.

4. **Lack of Longitudinal Studies on Meditative Practice and Transformation** Long-term empirical studies examining how sustained Dhātu-focused meditation influences spiritual development, psychological well-being, and ethical transformation are notably absent. Such research could offer valuable insights into the stages of contemplative progress and the practical benefits of Dhātu-oriented practice over time. Wallace, B. A. (2007).

Addressing these gaps through rigorous textual analysis, comparative study, and interdisciplinary inquiry can significantly advance the understanding of Dhātu as both a doctrinal and practical framework. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a more holistic and integrative approach to Buddhist meditation, benefiting practitioners, scholars, and the broader field of Buddhist studies.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Scholarly engagement with the concept of Dhātu has primarily focused on its doctrinal role within early Buddhist ontological and phenomenological analyses. Canonical sources such as the Majjhima Nikāya, Saṃyutta Nikāya, and Dīgha Nikāya present Dhātu as a fundamental classificatory principle for understanding both material (rūpa) and mental phenomena. The Mahābhūta earth (paṭhavī), water (āpo), fire (tejo), and air (vāyo) are frequently employed as analytical categories in meditation instructions aimed at dismantling the notion of a substantial self (Ñāṇamoli, 1995; Bodhi, 2000).

Commentarial literature, most notably Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, further systematizes Dhātu-based contemplation by integrating it into structured insight (vipassanā) practices. Scholars such as Gethin (1998) and Cousins (2001) emphasize that elemental meditation serves not merely as a theoretical abstraction but as a direct experiential method for realizing impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Abhidhamma traditions expand this analysis by framing Dhātu within a broader matrix of conditionality and momentariness, reinforcing its soteriological function.

In contrast, contemporary meditation research particularly within mindfulness-based interventions tends to emphasize present-moment awareness, attention regulation, and affective balance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Analayo, 2017). While these approaches draw inspiration from early Buddhist practices, several scholars argue that they often abstract mindfulness from its original analytical frameworks, including Dhātu contemplation (Sharf, 2015; Dreyfus, 2011).

Consequently, the practical and doctrinal depth of elemental analysis is frequently underrepresented in modern applications.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates a strong doctrinal foundation for Dhātu in early Buddhism but reveals a notable gap in its sustained application and scholarly discussion within contemporary meditation paradigms. This gap underscores the need for a systematic reassessment of Dhātu as both a theoretical and practical meditative tool.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the early Buddhist phenomenological and analytical framework, particularly as articulated through Dhātu-vibhaṅga (analysis of elements) and insight meditation theory. The theoretical foundation integrates three interrelated constructs: Dhātu as an analytical principle, the Mahābhūta as objects of meditative contemplation, and vipassanā as the method through which experiential insight is cultivated.

Within this framework, Dhātu is understood not as a metaphysical substance but as a heuristic device for deconstructing experience into impersonal processes. The contemplation of the Four Great Elements functions as a method for observing conditionality, change, and non-ownership in bodily and mental phenomena. This approach aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the three characteristics of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*).

The framework also incorporates a critical comparative dimension, juxtaposing classical Dhātu-based meditation with contemporary mindfulness-based practices. This allows for an evaluative analysis of how doctrinal simplification and secular adaptation influence meditative depth and insight outcomes.

By situating Dhātu within both its traditional doctrinal context and modern meditative discourse, the theoretical framework provides a coherent lens for analyzing textual sources and contemporary practices. It thereby supports the study's aim of clarifying the enduring relevance of Dhātu for insight-oriented meditation and its potential reintegration into modern contemplative frameworks.

Objectives

The objectives of this documentary research are as follows:

1. To examine the conceptual foundations of Dhātu as presented in early Buddhist canonical and commentarial texts, particularly in relation to meditation and insight practice.
2. To analyze the role of the Four Great Elements (Mahābhūta) in meditative contemplation and their function in cultivating understanding of impermanence, suffering, and non-self.
3. To critically assess the extent to which Dhātu is integrated into modern meditation practices, especially mindfulness-based approaches.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Type

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design, employing systematic textual analysis to examine the concept of Dhātu (elements) within Buddhist meditation theory and practice. The research is grounded in textual hermeneutics and interpretive analysis, consistent with established methodologies in Buddhist Studies and religious scholarship. No empirical or experimental methods are utilized.

Study Population

The study population consists of Buddhist textual traditions that articulate doctrines and practices related to Dhātu, including early Buddhist, commentarial, and selected later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources. Contemporary academic and practitioner-oriented literature is also included to contextualize modern interpretations.

Sample Selection and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique is employed to select texts that are doctrinally authoritative, thematically relevant, and frequently cited in discussions of elemental meditation. The sample includes:

1. Core canonical discourses explicitly addressing Dhātu analysis
2. Classical commentarial texts elaborating meditative applications
3. Representative later Buddhist materials where elemental practices are discussed
4. Modern scholarly and meditation literature engaging with Dhātu conceptually or practically

The selection prioritizes texts with clear relevance to meditation theory, embodiment, and insight practices.

Data Sources

1. Primary Sources
 - 1) Canonical texts from the Pāli Canon, particularly the Sutta Piṭaka (e.g., Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta, MN 28)
 - 2) Classical Theravāda commentaries, especially Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, with emphasis on dhātuvavatthāna (analysis of elements)
2. Secondary Sources
 - 1) Selected Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts addressing elemental meditation where relevant
 - 2) Contemporary academic research in Buddhist Studies

3) Modern meditation manuals and scholarly interpretations discussing mindfulness and contemplative practice

Research Instruments and Tools

The primary research instruments consist of critical textual reading, thematic coding, and comparative analytical frameworks. Secondary tools include established scholarly translations, commentarial cross-referencing, and conceptual mapping of doctrinal themes.

Research Procedure

The research follows a structured analytical procedure:

1. Identification and collection of relevant primary and secondary texts
2. Close reading and textual segmentation focused on Dhātu-related passages
3. Thematic categorization of key concepts (e.g., embodiment, impermanence, non-self)
4. Comparative analysis across historical periods and traditions
5. Synthesis of findings to articulate doctrinal continuity and interpretive variation

Data Collection Method

Data are collected through documentary analysis, involving systematic extraction of relevant passages, doctrinal explanations, and meditative instructions from selected texts. No human participants or observational data are involved.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs qualitative textual analysis and comparative interpretation. Hermeneutical methods are used to interpret doctrinal meanings within their historical and soteriological contexts. Cross-textual comparison assesses how Dhātu is conceptualized and operationalized across traditions and time periods. Key analytical themes include:

1. Embodiment and materiality
2. Non-self (anattā) and insight development
3. Contemplative transformation and meditative function

Scope and Limitations

This research is limited to textual and conceptual analysis and does not include empirical fieldwork, practitioner interviews, or experimental meditation studies. While psychological and neuroscientific perspectives are referenced for conceptual enrichment, they are not empirically evaluated within the scope of this study.

Research Significance

By employing a documentary research methodology, this study preserves the integrity of classical Buddhist teachings while critically engaging with contemporary interpretations. The approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of Dhātu as both doctrinal principle and meditative practice, contributing to scholarly discourse in Buddhist Studies and offering insights relevant to modern contemplative applications.

Results**Conceptual Foundations of Dhātu in Early Buddhist Canonical and Commentarial Texts**

Analysis of early Buddhist canonical and commentarial sources demonstrates that Dhātu occupies a foundational position in classical Buddhist ontology and meditative praxis. Textual examination of the Pāli Canon, particularly the Sutta Piṭaka, reveals that Dhātu is consistently employed as an analytical framework for deconstructing the apparent unity of bodily and mental phenomena. In discourses such as the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta (MN 28), Dhātu functions as a meditative lens through which practitioners are instructed to observe experience in terms of elemental processes rather than as a coherent self.

Commentarial literature, especially Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, further systematizes Dhātu analysis through practices such as dhātuvavatthāna (element discrimination). These sources present Dhātu not merely as a theoretical classification but as an experiential method aimed at cultivating insight (*vipassanā*). The findings indicate that, within early Buddhist thought, Dhātu is inseparable from meditative development and is explicitly linked to the realization of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*).

Role of the Four Great Elements (Mahābhūta) in Meditative Contemplation

The Four Great Elements—earth (*paṭhavī*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*), and air (*vāyo*) emerge from the textual analysis as central operative categories in Buddhist meditation. Canonical sources describe these elements not as external substances but as directly observable qualities within bodily and mental experience, such as solidity, cohesion, temperature, and movement.

Findings show that elemental contemplation serves a dual function. First, it provides a concrete experiential framework that enables practitioners to systematically observe bodily processes. Second, it acts as a cognitive deconstructive tool that undermines identification with the body by revealing it as a dynamic aggregation of impersonal processes. The data indicate that sustained contemplation of the Mahābhūta facilitates insight into the impermanent and conditioned nature of experience, thereby supporting the cultivation of liberating wisdom (*paññā*).

However, the results also indicate that while canonical texts articulate the philosophical significance of elemental contemplation in detail, explicit step-by-step meditative instructions

are often implicit rather than fully elaborated. This suggests a reliance on oral transmission and teacher-guided practice within traditional contexts.

Integration of Dhātu in Contemporary Meditation Practices

The analysis of modern meditation literature and mindfulness-based interventions reveals a marked reduction in explicit engagement with Dhātu. Contemporary practices, particularly those associated with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and related approaches, prioritize present-moment awareness, stress reduction, and emotional regulation. While these methods draw indirectly from Buddhist meditative traditions, they generally omit formal elemental analysis.

Results indicate that modern meditation manuals and instructional texts rarely incorporate systematic contemplation of the Four Great Elements. Instead, practices such as mindfulness of breathing and body scanning are presented in phenomenological terms without reference to Dhātu as an analytical framework. This omission reflects broader trends of secularization and simplification aimed at accessibility and therapeutic applicability.

Comparative analysis suggests that this selective adaptation results in a functional but conceptually narrower form of meditation. While contemporary practices effectively cultivate attention and emotional balance, they engage less directly with the ontological and insight-oriented dimensions emphasized in traditional Dhātu-based meditation. Consequently, the transformative potential associated with deep insight into non-self and conditionality appears underrepresented in modern implementations.

Discussion

This documentary research demonstrates that Dhātu occupies a foundational yet comparatively underemphasized position within both classical Buddhist meditation theory and contemporary meditative practice. In line with the study's objectives, the following discussion critically interprets the findings through engagement with canonical sources, commentarial exegesis, and modern scholarly discourse, while also evaluating the implications for present-day meditation frameworks.

Conceptual Foundations of Dhātu in Early Buddhist Thought

With respect to the first objective, the findings confirm that Dhātu functions as a central analytical framework within early Buddhist canonical and commentarial literature. The Pāli Canon consistently presents elemental analysis as a method for dismantling identification with bodily and mental phenomena. Notably, the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta (MN 28) explicitly frames contemplation of the Four Great Elements (mahābhūta) as a direct means for realizing non-self (anattā), thereby situating Dhātu contemplation at the core of insight-oriented practice.

This canonical emphasis is further systematized in Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, where dhātuvavatthāna is articulated as a structured analytical meditation designed to weaken self-

view and prepare the practitioner for advanced vipassanā. The present findings reinforce scholarly consensus that Dhātu is not a peripheral doctrinal concept but an integral component of classical Buddhist meditative theory, functioning as both an ontological analysis and a practical contemplative strategy.

Role of the Four Great Elements in Meditative Contemplation

Addressing the second objective, the findings indicate that meditation on the Four Great Elements provides a concrete experiential framework for cultivating insight into impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā). Anālayo, B. (2020). By directing attention to elemental qualities solidity, cohesion, temperature, and motion practitioners are guided away from conceptual narratives of embodiment toward direct observation of conditioned processes.

This elemental approach facilitates a shift from self-referential perception to phenomenological investigation, thereby supporting the development of insight as described in early Buddhist meditation theory. However, despite its doctrinal and experiential significance, the research reveals that elemental contemplation is rarely emphasized in contemporary meditation manuals. Modern pedagogical trends often favor simplified techniques aimed at accessibility, which may inadvertently marginalize analytical practices such as Dhātu contemplation that require sustained doctrinal engagement.

Integration of Dhātu in Contemporary Meditation Practices

In relation to the third objective, the study identifies a pronounced gap between traditional Buddhist meditation frameworks and contemporary mindfulness-based interventions. Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) prioritize attentional awareness, emotional regulation, and stress reduction, while largely omitting elemental analysis and ontological investigation of experience Ching, L. Y. (2024).

Although these approaches have demonstrated psychological and therapeutic benefits, their limited engagement with Dhātu may constrain the depth of insight traditionally associated with Buddhist meditation. This finding aligns with critiques advanced by Buddhist scholars who caution that secular mindfulness, when detached from its soteriological foundations, risks reducing meditation to a technique for self-optimization rather than a means for liberative transformation.

Tension Between Soteriological and Therapeutic Orientations

Finally, the findings highlight a fundamental tension between traditional Buddhist soteriological aims and contemporary therapeutic orientations. Dhātu-based meditation directly challenges entrenched notions of self, agency, and bodily identity, whereas many modern practices seek to enhance well-being without destabilizing the practitioner's self-concept. This divergence offers a compelling explanation for the marginalization of Dhātu in modern meditation contexts, despite its foundational role in early Buddhist praxis.

In sum, the discussion underscores that while Dhātu remains theoretically central within Buddhist meditation traditions, its practical application has been significantly attenuated in contemporary adaptations. Reintegrating elemental analysis into modern practice may offer a means of bridging doctrinal depth with experiential insight, thereby restoring a dimension of meditation that is essential to the Buddhist path of liberation.

Conclusion

This documentary research has examined Dhātu in the fields of meditation and practice through a systematic analysis of canonical texts, commentarial literature, and contemporary interpretations. The findings confirm that Dhātu—particularly the Four Great Elements—constitutes a core meditative framework within Buddhist tradition, serving both analytical and practical functions in the cultivation of insight.

In alignment with the research objectives, the study demonstrates that: Dhātu is deeply embedded in early Buddhist teachings as a method for understanding impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Elemental contemplation plays a crucial role in dismantling attachment to bodily and mental phenomena. Contemporary meditation practices, while effective in promoting mindfulness and mental health, often neglect Dhātu-based analysis, resulting in a partial transmission of Buddhist meditative wisdom.

The research underscores the significance of reintegrating Dhātu into modern meditation discourse—not as a purely philosophical concept, but as a lived contemplative practice. By doing so, meditation can move beyond stress reduction toward deeper transformative insight consistent with Buddhist soteriology. This study contributes to Buddhist Studies by clarifying Dhātu’s enduring relevance and advocating for a more holistic understanding of meditation that bridges classical doctrine and contemporary application.

Recommendations

Body of Knowledge and Future Directions

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge, this research contributes to the body of knowledge in Buddhist Studies by:

1. Clarifying Dhātu as both a doctrinal construct and a practical meditative method.
2. Demonstrating the continuity between early Buddhist texts and later meditative manuals regarding elemental contemplation.
3. Identifying conceptual and practical gaps between traditional Buddhist meditation and modern mindfulness movements.

For the Public

1. Approaching meditation not only as a tool for relaxation but as a method for insight into the nature of body and mind.

2. Experimenting with simple elemental awareness in daily life, such as observing bodily sensations through the lens of solidity, movement, warmth, and cohesion.
3. Engaging with Buddhist meditation teachings in their philosophical context to appreciate their full transformative potential.

For Future Research

1. Conduct empirical research on the psychological and physiological effects of Dhātu-based meditation.
2. Undertake comparative studies across Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions regarding elemental practices.
3. Explore longitudinal impacts of sustained Dhātu contemplation on ethical development and spiritual transformation.
4. Examine Dhātu through postcolonial or critical theory frameworks, analyzing how modern adaptations reshape traditional Buddhist knowledge.

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