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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A COMPREHENSIVE INVESTIGATION OF GREAT MATTER (MAHARŪPA) IN ABHIDHAMMA

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ABSTRACT

Rūpa is one of important parts of the ultimate truth from Buddhist perspective. It is closely related to the issue of mind. It can be said that once one understands the inner links between rūpa and mind, he or she can realize the truth which helps himself or herself to be free from suffering. In this paper, I only cover the main idea of the first part, that is, rūpa. It is necessary to have a comprehensive investigation of great matter in Buddhism, especially in Abhidhamma. Through it, one can have a wisdom on this important matter.

INTRODUCTION

Rūpa is one of important parts of the ultimate truth from Buddhist perspective. It is closely related to the issue of mind. It can be said that once one understands the inner links between rūpa and mind, he or she can realize the truth which helps himself or herself to be free from suffering. In this paper, I only cover the main idea of the first part, that is, rūpa. It is necessary to have a comprehensive investigation of great matter in Buddhism, especially in Abhidhamma. Through it, one can have a wisdom on this important matter.

Definition of Rūpa: Rūpa is the third ultimate truth (*paramattha*) mentioned in the Abhidhamma and is one of the two composite factors of this so-called being, the other being *Nāma* (mind). *Rūpa* is derived from √ rup, to break up, to perish (*nāsa*).¹ The Pāli word for matter, *rūpa*, is explained by derivation from the verb *ruppati*. *Rūpa* is defined as something, which "becomes deformed, disturbed, knocked about, oppressed or broken."² The commentators maintain that "matter is so called because it undergoes and imposes alteration owing to adverse physical conditions such as cold and heat, etc."³

The Buddha himself, in explanation of the term "matter" or "material form," declares: "And why, monks, do you say material form (*rūpa*)? It is deformed (*ruppati*); therefore, it is called material form. Deformed by what? Deformed by cold, by heat, by hunger, by thirst, by flies, mosquitoes, wind, sunburn, and creeping things"⁴ The change of *rūpa* means the evident change, change that is discernible. The change of mental properties, the change of *citta* and *cetasikas* is not so easily discernible. Only matter is called *Rūpa* and not *citta* and *cetasikas*. The *Abhidhamma* enumerates twenty-eight types of material phenomena, which are in twofold:⁵ (1) the four great essentials (*mahābhūta*) and (2) material phenomena (*upādāyarūpa*) derived from the four great essentials.

The four great essentials (*mahābhūta*): Are the four primary material elements: The earth element (*paṭhavī-dhātu*), the water element (*āpo-dhātu*), the fire element (*tejo-dhātu*), and the air element (*vāyodhātu*). 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 to the most massive mountain.

The material phenomena (*upādāyarūpa*) are material phenomena derived from, or dependent upon the four great

¹ Narada Maha Thera, *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, Buddhist Missionary Society, Malaysia, 1987, P. 317

² According to the *Mahāniddesa*: *ruppati, kuppati, ghaṭṭiyati, pīḷiyati, bhijjati*.

³ Venerable Sayādaw U Sīlānanda, *Handbook of Abhidhamma Studies*,

Volume II, Selangor Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Society (SBVMS), Malaysia, 2012, p.276.

⁴ *Samyutta Nikāya*, 22:79/iii, p.86.

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi, CMA, Chapter VI, §2, P. 235

essentials. Material phenomena (*upādāyarūpa*) consists twenty-four types of material phenomena. The great essentials may be compared to the earth, and the derivative phenomena to trees and shrubs that grow in dependence upon the earth.

Classification of Matter (*rūpavibhāga*): The twenty-eight types of material phenomena are distributed into twofold and eleven general classes. Seven of these are called “concretely produced matter” (*nipp hannarūpa*), since they possess intrinsic natures and are thus suitable for contemplation and comprehension by insight. The other four classes, being more abstract in nature, are called “non-concretely produced matter” (*anipp hannarūpa*).

- The first class is the four essential phenomena, *mahābhūta* or *bhūta-rūpa*.
- The second class is sensitive phenomena, *pasāda-rūpa*
- The third class is objective phenomena, *gocara-rūpa*
- The fourth class issexual phenomena, *bhāva-rūpa*
- The fifth is heart-base, *hadaya-rūpa*,
- The sixth class is life faculty, *jīvita-rūpa*,
- The seventh class is nutriment, *āhāra*
- The eighth class is limiting phenomenon, *pariccheda-rūpa*.
- The ninth class is communicatingphenomena, *vinnatti-rūpa*.
- The tenth class is mutable phenomena, *vikāra-rūpa*.
- The eleventh class is characteristics of matter, *lakkhaṇa-rūpa*.

By class there are eleven and counting separately there are 28 material properties.

Concretely Produced Matter (*nipp hanna rūpa*) & Non-Concretely Produced Matter (*anipp hannarūpa*)

a. Concretely Produced Matter (*nipp hanna rūpa*):

(1) Essential material phenomena (*bhūtarūpa*): The great essentials are called “elements” (*dhātu*) in the sense that they bear their own intrinsic natures (*sabhāva*):

The earth element (*paṭhavīdhātu*): The earth element is so called because, like the earth, it serves as a support or foundation for the coexisting material phenomena. The word *paṭhavī* comes from a root meaning ‘to expand or spread out,’ and, thus, the earth element represents the principle of extension. The earth element has the characteristic of hardness, the function of acting as a foundation (for the other primary elements and derived matter), and manifestation as receiving.⁶ Its proximate cause is the other three great essentials. Both hardness and softness are modes in which the earth element is experienced by the sense of touch.

The water element (*āpodhātu*): The water element, or fluidity, is the material factor that makes different particles of matter cohere, thereby preventing them from being scattered about. Its characteristic is trickling or oozing, its function is to intensify the coexisting material states, and it is manifested as

the holding together or cohesion of material phenomena. Its proximate cause is the other three great essentials. The Abhidhamma holds that, unlike the other three great essentials, the water element cannot be physically sensed but must be known inferentially from the cohesion of observed matter.

The fire element (*tejo dhātu*): The fire element has the characteristic of heat. Its function is to mature or ripen other material phenomena, and it is manifested as a continuous supply of softness. Both heat and cold are modes in which the fire element is experienced.

The air element (*vāyodhātu*): The air element is the principle of motion and pressure. Its characteristic is distension (*vitthambana*), its function is to cause motion in the other material phenomena, and it is manifested as conveyance to other places. Its proximate cause is the other three great essentials. It is experienced as tangible pressure.

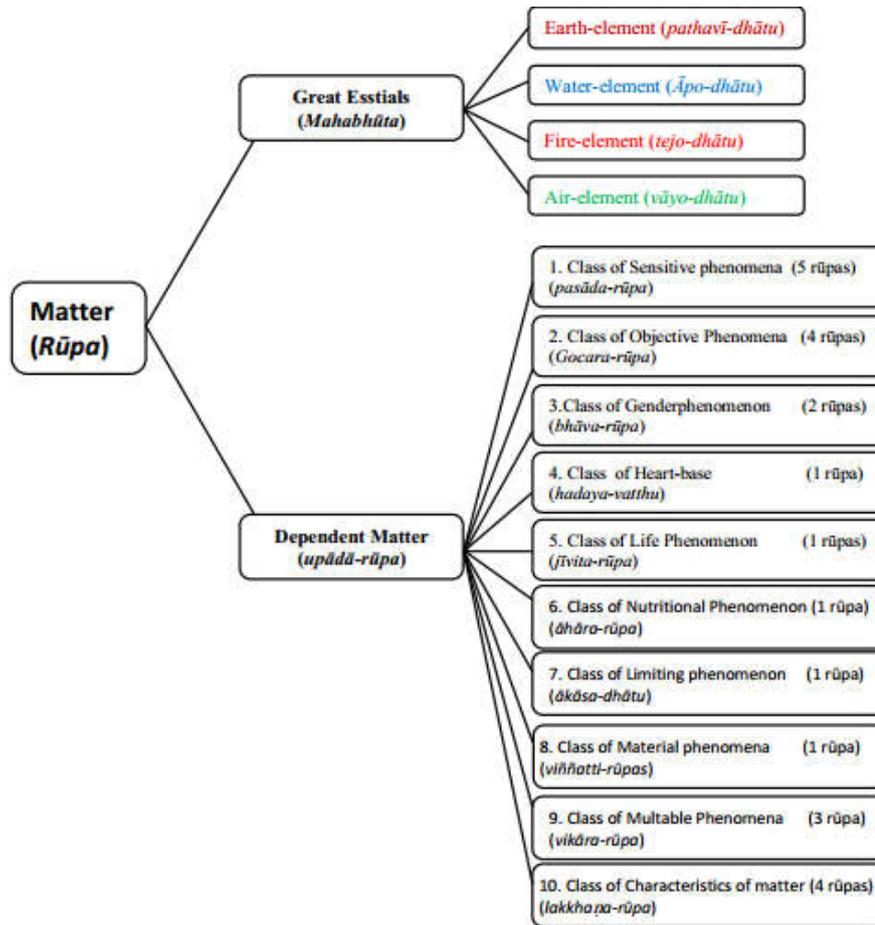
Taken together, the four great essentials are founded upon the earth element, held together by the water element, maintained by the fire element, and distended by the air element.

Sensitive material phenomena (*pasādarūpa*): Sensitive material phenomena are five types of matter located in each of the five sense organs.⁷ The sensitivity is to be distinguished from the gross sense organ that functions as its support. What is conventionally called the “eye” is spoken of in the *Abhidhamma* as the “composite eye” (*sasambhāra-cakkhu*), a compound of various material phenomena. Among these is eyesensitivity (*cakkhu-pasāda*), the sensitive substance in the retina that registers light and color and serves as a physical base and door for eye-consciousness. Ear-sensitivity (*sota-pasāda*) is to be found inside the ear-hole, “in the place shaped like a finger-stall and surrounded by the fine brown hairs”; it is the sensitive substance that registers sounds and serves as a physical base and door for ear-consciousness. Nose-sensitivity (*ghānapasāda*) is to be found inside the nasal orifice, as the substance that registers smells. Tongue-sensitivity (*jivhā-pasāda*) is to be found diffused over the tongue, serving to register tastes. And body-sensitivity (*kāya-pasāda*) extends all over the organic body “like a liquid that soaks a layer of cotton,” and serves to register tactile sensations. The eye’s characteristic is sensitivity of the primary elements that is ready for the impact of visible data; or its characteristic is sensitivity of the primary elements springing from a desire to see. Its function is to pick up a visible datum as object. It is manifested as the foundation of eye-consciousness. Its proximate cause is the primary elements born of *kamma* springing from a desire to see. Each of the other sensitive material phenomena — the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body — should be similarly understood, with appropriate substitutions.

Objective material phenomena (*gocararūpa*): These are the five sense fields that serve as the objective supports for the corresponding types of sense consciousness. It should be noted that the tangible object is constituted by three of the great essentials: the earth element, experienced as hardness or softness; the fire element, experienced as heat or cold; and the air element, experienced as pressure.

⁶ This explanation of the characteristics, etc., of the great essentials is taken from the *Visuddhimagga* XI, p.93 and p.109.

⁷ A detailed exposition of derived matter is found at *Visuddhimagga* XIV, p.36-70, on which the account given here is based



The Twenty-Eight Material Phenomena at a Glance

Concretely Produced Matter (18)	Non-Concretely Produced Matter (10)
I. <i>Great Essentials</i>	VIII. <i>Limiting Phenomenon</i>
1. Earth element	19. Element of space.
2. Water element	IX. <i>Communicating Phenomena</i>
3. Fire element	20. Bodily intimation
4. Air element.	21. Vocal intimation.
II. <i>Sensitive Phenomena</i>	X. <i>Mutable Phenomena</i>
5. Eye-sensitive	22. Lightness
6. Ear-sensitive	23. Malleability
7. Nose-sensitive	24. Wieldiness
8. Tongue-sensitive	(plus two intimations)
9. Body-sensitive	XI. <i>Characteristics of Matter</i>
III. <i>Objective Phenomena</i>	25. Production
10. Visible form,	26. Continuity
11. Sound	27. Decay
12. Smell	28. Impermanence
13. Taste	
*. Tangibility(=three elements: earth, fire, air)	
IV. <i>Sexual Phenomena</i>	
14. Femininity	
15. Masculinity.	
V. <i>Heart phenomena</i>	
16. Heart-base.	
VI. <i>Life Phenomena</i>	
17. Life faculty.	
VII. <i>Nutritional Phenomena</i>	
18. Nutriement	

The water element, being the principle of cohesion, is not, according to the *Abhidhamma*, included in the tangible datum. The other four sense objects - visible forms, etc., are types of derived matter. Collectively, objective material phenomena have the characteristic of impinging on the sense bases. Their function is to be the objects of sense consciousness. They are manifested as the resort of the respective sense consciousness. Their proximate cause is the four great essentials.

Material phenomena of sex (*bhāvarūpa*): Included here are the two faculties of femininity (*itthi*) and masculinity (*purisa*). These faculties have, respectively, the characteristics of the female sex and of the male sex. Their function is to show femininity and masculinity. They are manifested as the reason for the mark, sign, work, and ways of the female and of the male; that is, for the sexual structure of the body, for its feminine or masculine features, for the typical feminine or

masculine occupations, and for the typical feminine and masculine deportment.

Material phenomenon of the heart (*hadayarūpa*): On the heart-base,⁸ The heart-base has the characteristic of being the material support for the mind element and the mind-consciousness element.⁹ Its function is to uphold them. It is manifested as the carrying of these elements. It is to be found in dependence on the blood inside the heart and is assisted by the four great essentials and maintained by the life faculty.

The life faculty (*jīvitindriya*): The life faculty is the material counterpart of the mental life faculty, one of the seven universal *cetasikas*. Life, or vitality, is called a “faculty” (*indriya*) because it has a dominating influence over its objects. The life faculty has the characteristic of maintaining the coexistent kinds of matter at the moment of their presence. Its function is to make them occur. It is manifested as the establishment of their presence. Its proximate cause is the four great essentials that are to be maintained.

Edible food (*kabaḷīkārahāra*): Edible food has the characteristic of essence (*ōja*), that is, the nutritional substance contained in gross edible food. Its function is to sustain the physical body. It is manifested as the fortifying of the body. Its proximate cause is gross edible food, which is the base of nutritive essence.

These eighteen kinds of material phenomena: The eighteen material phenomena just enumerated are grouped together as matter possessing intrinsic nature (*sabhāvarūpa*) because each type has a distinct objective nature such as hardness in the case of the earth element, etc.; as matter possessing real characteristics (*salakkhaṇarūpa*) because they are marked by the three general characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self; as concretely produced matter (*nippannarūpa*) because they are directly produced by conditions such as kamma, etc.; as material matter (*rūparūpa*) because they possess matter’s essential characteristic of undergoing deformation; and as matter to be comprehended by insight (*sammasanarūpa*) because they are to be made the objects of insight contemplation by way of the three characteristics.

Non-concretely produced matter (*anippannarūpa*): The types of matter in groups (8)-(11) are designated “non-concretely produced matter” (*anippannarūpa*), because they do not arise directly from the four main causes of matter¹⁰ but exist as modalities or attributes of concretely produced matter. Thus, they are not included among the ultimate realities (*paramatthadhamma*).

The space element (*ākāśadhātu*): Space, as understood in the Abhidhamma, is not bare geometric extension but the void region that delimits and separates objects and groups of material phenomena, enabling them to be perceived as distinct. The space element has the characteristic of delimiting matter.

⁸Bhikhu Bodhi, *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2006, chapter 3, §20, p.144

⁹Bhikhu Bodhi, *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2006, chapter 3, §21, p.146

¹⁰ Bhikhu Bodhi, *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, p.246: “*Kammaṃ, cittaṃ, utu, āhāro cā ti cattāri rūpasamuṭṭhānāni nāma.*”

Material phenomena originate in four ways: from kamma, from consciousness, from temperature, and from nutriment.”

Its function is to display the boundaries of matter. Its proximate cause is the matter delimited.

Intimating material phenomena (*viññattirūpa*): *Viññatti*, intimation, is that by means of which one communicates one’s ideas, feelings, and attitudes to another. There are two means of intimation: bodily and vocal. The former is a special modification in the consciousness-originated air element that causes the body to move in ways that reveal one’s intentions. The latter is a special modification in the consciousness-originated earth element that issues in speech, by which one reveals one’s intentions. Both have the function of displaying intention. They are manifested, respectively, as a cause of bodily movement and of verbal expression. Their proximate causes are, respectively, the air element and the earth element born of consciousness.

Mutable material phenomena (*vikārarūpa*): This category comprises special modes or manifestations of concretely produced matter. It includes the two types of intimation and three other material phenomena: lightness, malleability, and wieldiness. Among these, lightness (*lahutā*) has the characteristic of non-sluggishness. Its function is to dispel heaviness in matter. It is manifested as light transformability. Its proximate cause is light matter. Malleability (*mudutā*) has the characteristic of non-rigidity. Its function is to dispel rigidity in matter. It is manifested as non-opposition to any kind of action. Its proximate cause is malleable matter. Wieldiness (*kammaññatā*) has the characteristic of wieldiness that is favorable to bodily action. Its function is to dispel unwieldiness. It is manifested as non-wieldiness. Its proximate cause is wieldy matter.

Characteristics of material phenomena (*lakkkhaṇarūpa*): This category includes four types of material phenomena. Of these, production (*upacaya*) and continuity (*santati*) are both terms for the genesis, arising, or birth (*jāti*) of matter. They differ in that production is the first arising of a material process, the initial launching or setting up of the process, while continuity is the repeated genesis of material phenomena in the same material process. For example, the arising of the body, sex, and heart groups at conception is production, while the subsequent arising of those same material groups throughout life is continuity. *Production of matter* has the characteristic of setting up. Its function is to make material instances emerge for the first time.

It is manifested as launching or as the completed state. Its proximate cause is the matter produced. Continuity of matter has the characteristic of occurrence. Its function is to anchor. It is manifested as non-interruption. Its proximate cause is matter to be anchored. Decay (*jaratā*) has the characteristic of maturing or aging of material phenomena. Its function is to lead them on towards their termination. It is manifested as loss of newness without loss of being. Its proximate cause is matter that is decaying. Impermanence (*aniccatā*) has the characteristic of the complete breaking up of material phenomena. Its function is to make them subside. It is manifested as destruction and falling away. Its proximate cause is matter that is completely breaking up.

Great Essentials (*Mahabhūta*) and Dependent Matter (*upādā-rūpa*): The twenty eight matter (*rūpa*) can be divided into twofolds: The first is *mahābhūta* (great essentials) and the second is *upādārūpa* (dependent matter). *Mahābhūta* is translated as great essential. *Mahābhūta* means something that

becomes great. They are the basis of all material properties. All other material properties depend upon them to arise and to exist. So they are called *mahābhūtas* (the great essentials). The great essentials (*mahābhūta*) consists four *mahābhūtas* and the dependent matter consists twenty four *Upādārūpas*. Group of The Four Great Essentials (*Mahābhūta*). This group consists the four great essentials of material:

Earth-element (*pathavī-dhātu*): Earth-element *pathavī-dhātu* here does not mean the physical earth, but some quality that is inherent in the earth. When we touch the earth, we feel hardness or softness. That hardness or softness is what we call *pathavī-dhātu* or earth-element. This is called *pathavī* because it is like the earth. The earth is the basis for trees, mountains and so on to exist. In the same way, *pathavī-dhātu* is the basis for other dependent material properties. That is why it is called *pathavī-dhātu*. It serves as a support or foundation for the coexisting material phenomena. That means other material properties especially the *upādā-rūpas* depend upon it to arise. If there were no *mahābhūtas*, then *upādā-rūpas* would not arise. The earth is extended. Therefore, some take extension to be the characteristic of *pathavī-dhātu*. Although extension is taken as a translation of *pathavī*, its characteristic is actually hardness. When we get hardness, we also get softness because hardness and softness are relative. In comparison to one thing we call it hard. If we compare it to another thing, it becomes not so hard. It becomes soft. So hardness or softness is the characteristic of the earth-element. *Abhidhamma* teaches that this earth-element can be found anywhere. In the water there is earth-element. In fire there is also earth-element. In the wind there is also earth. In everything, in every material thing we see there is this earth element.

Water-element (*Āpo-dhātu*): The second one is water-element, *āpo-dhātu*. Here also *āpo-dhātu* does not mean water, but the inherent quality of water and that is fluidity or cohesion. Its characteristic is said to be trickling or oozing. That means dripping or something like that. It is because of *āpo-dhātu* that things are kept together.

If there were no *āpo-dhātu*, we could not have these things. We could not have this book or this pen or whatever because the material properties would not stick to each other if there were no water-element. Water-element is something that keeps the material properties together. With regard to *āpo-dhātu* according to *Abhidhamma*, it cannot be touched. “The *Abhidhamma* holds that unlike the other three great essentials, the water element cannot be physically sensed but must be known inferentially from the cohesion of observed matter.”¹¹ We see something and the material particles are attached to each other. And so we infer that there must be some kind of cohesion, some kind of *āpo-dhātu* so that the thing exists as a particular object. Water-element or *āpo-dhātu* cannot be touched. When we come to *phoṭṭhabba-rūpa* later, we will see that *āpo* is excluded there. We must understand water-element or *āpo-dhātu* as distinct from water. Although we can touch water, we do not touch water-element. We touch water and say, “It is cold; it is hot.” Cold or heat is the third one, *tejo-dhātu*. We may feel the hardness or softness of water and that is the earth-element. What we feel is not the water element but earth-element or fire-element. We feel coldness or warmth, or hardness or softness. So *āpo-dhātu* is untouchable.

Fire-element (*tejo-dhātu*): The next one is fire element (or heat-element), *tejo-dhātu*. Here also heat or cold is relative. *Tejo-dhātu* does not mean fire, but the quality that is in fire. That means heater temperature. Actually temperature is what we call *tejo-dhātu* or fire-element. Just as hardness and softness are both called *pathavī-dhātu*, so also heat and cold are both called *tejo-dhātu*. *Tejo-dhātu* is relative. Heat or cold is called *tejo-dhātu*.

Air-element (*vāyo-dhātu*): Air-element (*vāyo-dhātu*) does not mean air, but something that inheres in air; that is said to be the principle of motion and pressure. Its characteristic is distension. When you put some air into a balloon, the balloon becomes extended. That extension or distension is what we call *vāyo-dhātu*. It has the nature of movement or motion. So when we move something, we can say that there is an abundance of *vāyo-dhātu*. Because of that abundance of *vāyo-dhātu* we say there is movement. Actually there is no movement at all. Nothing moves. What we call movement is material properties arising at different moments. One set of material properties disappears and another set of material properties arises. But they may arise at a very small distance from the ones that have disappeared. So we are not able to see the arising of material properties.

But when we see the material properties arising and disappearing at different places very close to each other, we say that there is motion, there is movement. We can take the movie film as an example. On the frames there are pictures. They are not moving. The picture is not moving. The picture on one frame is just a little bit different from the picture on another frame. If we make a step, then it may take thirty frames to record one step. There will be thirty frames or thirty images on the film. Each frame is just a little bit different. When the film is put into the machine and shown on the screen, we think that the picture is moving. Actually the picture does not move. *Vāyo-dhātu* or air-element has the nature of movement. Its characteristic is said to be distension, expanding. These four great essentials are founded on the earth element, held together by the water-element, maintained by the fire-element and distended by the air-element. So these four elements we find everywhere — extension, cohesion, heat and distension. *Tejo-dhātu* is explained as to mature or to ripen. When there is heat, things become cooked or things become mature. It is said to ripen other material properties.

Conclusion

These four great essentials “*mahābhūtas*” are the basis of all other material properties that follow; all other material properties that depend on these four for their arising are called *upādā-rūpa*. *Upādā-rūpa* is translated as derived materials, derived matter. They depend on the four great essentials.

For example, this is a house. People live in it. The existence of people living here is supported by this house. The people depend upon this house to live. But people are not the result of this house. People are not derived from this house. But this house is their base, their support. Here also the following material properties are not derived from the four great essentials, but they depend on these four great essentials to arise.

¹¹ CMA, VI, Guide to §3, p.238

If there were no four great essentials, they could not arise. So they are called *upādā-rūpa*, and I call them dependent matter.

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