

## **Nama Rupa: Name and Form by Stephen and Martine Batchelor** (Toronto, June 19, 2011)

**Stephen:** The term the Buddha uses is nama rupa, which is an Upanishadic term, a pre-Buddhist term. Nama rupa in the Upanishads refers to the diversity and differentiation, the multiplicity of experience. So what the Buddha does is to take as the starting point of his teaching the multiplicity and complexity of experience, rather than seeking to find some sort of unitary truth or consciousness that might underpin it. And what this model presents us with is a spectrum of experience, in other words, it breaks down the idea that there is a subject and object, a mind and an object, and opens up a phenomenological approach to what is actually apparent. In appearance there is no dividing line between the object and the subject, between body and mind, there is simply what some philosophers would call sitting-listening-to-the-bird, all hyphenated. Nama rupa describes that spectrum. It starts with rupa which refers to what we see, smell, taste, touch — whatever impacts the organism through the senses. The contact is basically that moment where whatever is out there in the world, or rising up from within oneself, becomes present. And again you can't mark it off with a line, but there is a point when something impacts you or touches you. The Pali word phasso literally means touch. As soon as you are touched then you feel a certain way, subjectively: it's agreeable, it's disagreeable, it's neutral.

Then you perceive it. It makes sense to you. You recognize it, or you don't recognize it. But it doesn't just arrive as a bewildering array of sensations. You don't hear a funny noise and say, Oh that's a piano. You hear a piano play. You hear the shuffling of people in the room. In other words the meaning comes to you already formed and that's called perception or recognition.

As the world impacts us there is contact, we feel a certain way, it's always emotionally coloured. It makes sense, it's intelligible, it's recognizable, it's named, it's labeled linguistically, although that's often a second step, and then we move into habitual proliferation which is not what we necessarily want to do. But also what is present to us is experience is an arena of possibilities, in other words, we are moved to respond to it. This is called intention. If it's unpleasant there will be a movement to push it away, if it's pleasant there is a movement to keep it. If you hear someone crying in the meditation room you might feel compassion or concern, or you might wish they would keep their emotions to themselves while people are trying to meditate. Even keeping still and unmoving would be a response. Intention is the responsive aspect of experience, which is called sankhara in the five khandha model, usually badly translated as "mental formations," but it actually means something like inclinations, or tendencies to respond, something like that.

And then you have attention, which you don't find explicitly mentioned among the khandhas. Attention recognizes that with all experience we tend to select or focus on a particular element within a field, or if we're doing open awareness meditation, to attend to the totality of the field. But there's always an attention, we attend to something. Again we can do it consciously, we can deliberately come back to the breath, or very often it's the case that we attend to something habitually. We get drawn to something, or sometimes the mind just jumps all over the place. Both are "attention."

It's that frame of data impacting the organism, experienced subjectively, as having an emotional colouring, as making sense, as presenting you with an opportunity to respond, and then the mind attending to a particular field, that is the basis for what is called consciousness. Consciousness emerges out of that. Consciousness is the way that each of us becomes a unified self, aware of knowing all of that. These are considered to be the constituent elements or the source out of which one might say, "I am conscious." Consciousness is more than perception, it's more than feeling, it's the unifying totality of what we might call awareness. So you then have nama rupa vinnana. Name, form, consciousness. Vinnana is Pali for consciousness. These cover exactly the same ground as the five aggregates or the five khandhas, but in a way that is more detailed and, I think, more practical in terms of attending to the complexity of experience. But remember that this is not intended to be an exact description of "reality." It's presented as a model that is useful in achieving the goals of this particular practice we're engaged in. It's a working model.

**Martine:** This model can be interesting, especially in terms of the practice in daily life... once we did this with a group reporting via skype, being more aware of contact. And next month being more aware of feeling tone. And next month being more aware of what you're focusing on. Do you focus on what is positive or what is negative? How do you perceive? We had a huge discussion about perception and how it's constructed. What you perceive and how you interpret it is often very culturally determined, it's very conditioned. The practice invites us to notice where the mind moves. Does it move more to the positive or more to the negative? As Stephen says: this model is not a literal exact description, but it can be a useful framework to see how things happen.

**Stephen:** As I understand perception, the way we understand the world is already pre-programmed by what we've learned. So concepts and ideas are already built into the fabric of perception. There's a piece of art over there that says, "I really should." As English speakers we don't have to do anything to know what that means. It appears as if it just jumps off the wall. But obviously it doesn't, because if I was Chinese it would just be a bunch of squiggles. And that shows I think quite clearly that when we say "I see something," or "I know something" or "I understand what you mean," that in a sense we're reading the world. The meanings are already implicit in what's coming to us. Language is already built into that. And then you have thoughts, which can be intentions, or attentions, or both of those. The word attention (manasikara) literally means mental activity. Wise attention is a term used to describe an appropriate reflection upon something. An intention could be a conscious decision to do something. Both would entail some degree of reflexive linguistic consciousness.

**Martine:** What's important to see is that all the steps get together to take you this way or that way. To see what are the ones that take you into proliferation. What's interesting about proliferation is that if you didn't have the contact, you wouldn't have proliferated about that. If you hadn't had unpleasant feeling upon contact, you wouldn't have amplified it.

**Stephen:** Yesterday we spoke about the Buddha saying that one needs to fully know dukkha. There's another text where he asks: what does that mean? And he says that to fully know dukkha means to fully know the five aggregates. In other words, to fully know what we've just been talking about (nama rupa vinnana). That is the practice of the first noble truth. The word dukkha here isn't very helpful really. It's really just a generic term to describe the totality of experience. The important thing is to recognize that each of the elements we've been discussing is the basis for the cultivation of certain virtues and understandings, or the opposite. Feeling tone: this is the basis for how we get caught up in reactions, it's also how we can then transform our response to a situation. Perception is important because a lot of the core problems that Buddhism addresses are misperceptions. We think of things that are impermanent as being permanent, of things that are dukkha as being sukkha (pleasurable), of things that are not-self as self. So the practice of vipassana is basically a practice of learning to perceive in a different way. Intention has to do with action: ethics, morality, choice. Attention has to do with cultivating a stability and focus in mindfulness and samadhi. They're all elements that are valuable in terms of cultivating the purposes and goals of the practice.