

## Form, the Formless and the Cessation

This was said by the Blessed One...

“Monks, there are these three elements – what three? The form element, the formless element and the element of cessation, these are the three.

“By fully understanding form, and not getting stuck in formless states, they are released into cessation, with Death left in their wake.

“Having touched with his own person the Deathless realm that can’t be owned, all grasping relinquished, the taints all gone, the Awakened One displays the sorrow-less state that’s free from stain.”  
~ Iti 51<sup>1</sup>

The first element is ‘the Form’. This, the Buddha says, we have to understand. In Pali the term *rupa*, is usually expressed as *nama/rupa*, which includes the name or the recognition and the form. We are conscious beings, conscious of name and form. Looking out, I am aware of numerous forms and through familiarity, I recognise each object and to these I give a name. The form of the room, the people, myself, etc. and this informs my life. Some may say this is my reality, in other words -reality is restricted to the forms that consciousness is conscious of. This also includes the inner world of name and form, my feelings, emotions, thoughts etc. We can easily fall into the trap of limiting our reality to just this consciousness of name and form.

In each moment there are a vast number of forms being presented to our consciousness and from this vast number, we only pick out a very small number. These are the ones that grab our attention. Some forms matter more than others, some land and affect us. Some bring joy and happiness and others pain and sorrow. We tend to invest and exaggerate the importance of some forms over others.

A clear example of this is the wanting mind. We can have an idea of what we want: we have the name in our head for the form that we desire and we want to get the world to match up with the image. This is the world of consumerism and advertising. If I get what I want then I will be happy, but this is just temporary relief and will only be replaced by another desire. Lasting happiness is not found in matching up the world of name and form with what I want.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Iti’ from *Wikipedia*: The **Itivuttaka** (Pali for "as it was said") is a **Buddhist** scripture, part of the **Pali Canon** of **Theravada** Buddhism and is attributed to **Khujjuttara's** recollection of Buddha's discourses. It is included there in the **Sutta Pitaka's Khuddaka Nikaya**. It comprises 112 short teachings ascribed in the text to the **Buddha**, each consisting of a prose portion followed by a verse portion. The latter

may be a paraphrase of the former, or complementary. Some scholars consider it one of the earliest of all Buddhist scriptures, while others consider it somewhat later.

We can have a preference for what we want. We enjoy getting and when we can't find what we want or we don't get what we want, we are disappointed. But if we understand the form of the wanting mind, then there is no disappointment when things don't play out as we would like them.

When we cling to the form, this is a contraction that brings about a pressure and results in stress and anxiety.

All forms are continually arising, maintaining and dissolving due to specific causes and conditions. There is no such thing as a separate independent form. This world of name and form is just held together by our combined agreement. The world of form is just a convention, just an agreement.

This name and form of "I" or in Dharma language *the self*, arises due to conditions just like any other form. It arises and lands on this body, feelings, thoughts, perceptions and consciousness.

We can see that this sense of self is not a fixed entity; it seeks identity in the form of role, name, feelings and thoughts etc.

We are constantly seeking security in an insecure world. There is no security in this life, we are all going to die. We need to acknowledge that fact and let go of continually trying to find some form to hold on to.

The sense of self appears to arise when there is a conflict in the relationship between consciousness, and name and form. The more problematic the relationship, the more contracted, and hence the more pronounced is the sense of self. This is when I become self-obsessed; my problem is what is important. This is when I become isolated and disconnected from the world and the other.

This isolation and separation can create intense suffering, as well as suffocating all love, joy and compassion.

So it is in the relationship between consciousness and form that suffering arises.

Life has its difficulties from birth to death. Although we would like to maximise the pleasant and minimise the unpleasant, the world does not care what we want.

Human beings are never content with being limited to the world of name and form. At the end of the day we just want to go to sleep, we have had enough of relating to the form.

No matter what the form, sooner or later we will get tired of it. This includes the form of dharma practice. We don't want to be a prisoner to the form.

We may ask is the world of name and form all there is? Where is the element of 'the formless' in our life.

It is in the silence that we can discover the formless, where there is an absence of involvement in the form. The silence reveals that spaciousness that comes when there is no contraction around the form called 'self'.

Another aspect of the formless can be described as the stillness. This is present in our meditation, and sometimes in the forest late at night when we look up at the vast sky, where there is no concern for any form: no concern for the personal story.

Looking out at the vast ocean we also get a feeling for the infinite space that dwells within and without. We seem to put all our attention on the form and neglect the formless. We notice the forms in the room, forgetting the space that contains the form. All form is contained and made possible by the formless. This is our limitless nature. It is such a pity that man is so caught up in the form of his own little problems that he loses sight and touch with his or her limitless nature.

Although human beings continually get caught in the form, they also love the formless. They love the sense of space where life is not limited or restricted to any form. That is why people take drugs, sail across oceans, climb mountains and jump out of aeroplanes.

This love of the formless can become problematic, can become an addiction when we cling and want these experiences repeated over and over. Then the natural freedom of life is restricted. Then we tend to neglect the form, shutting down emotionally and disconnecting from the world.

Meditation practice for some can become a form of addiction to the formless.

But when experienced freely, the formless expresses itself in our life through love, compassion, joy, appreciation, wonder and gratitude. These expressions cannot be confined or measured: they are true expression of the infinite.

In our meditation when the world of name and form goes very quiet, then these expressions bubble up naturally. Sensations of bliss, joy and profound peace are possible.

Whether we experience the complete falling away of the form, or whether our awareness expands to the point where we get just a taste of the vast nature. Either way, this experience can contribute to a freer relationship to life.

Because of this vast formless nature we could form the view, as many have, that this is the Ultimate reality - awareness or consciousness with capital letters and inverted commas. However the Dharma teachings are not concerned with attributing ultimate status on any experience, the ultimate can never be limited by any description.

Dharma teachings are more concerned with the third element: the cessation of all suffering. This cessation can be realized through our relationship to both the form and

the formless. It is the freedom and understanding that emerges when we no longer cling to either.

It is in this freedom that we get a taste or hint of what the Buddha calls the deathless realm: the realm not touched by birth or death.

This cessation, *Nirodha* in Pali, is the ending of the division between subject and object: the ending of the duality of self and other. We are no longer disturbed by the dualities of the mind - success and failure, praise and blame, gain and loss or even life and death.

Then in each experience there is just the experience. No investment and no embellishment.

It is the miracle of "just this!" "this undivided life.

If we are not bound to form or the formless then something precious shines through, something unconstructed - where the fire of becoming is extinguished.

And if we have just a taste of this, it is as the Buddha said: one taste of a drop of water is the same taste as the whole lake.

This is seeing deeply into the true nature of how life unfolds. Where life can freely express itself through each of us.

"Having touched with his own person the Deathless realm that can't be owned, all grasping relinquished, the taints all gone, the Awakened One displays the sorrow less state that's free from stain."

May all beings awaken to the Deathless realm.

Will James