

GESTURE AND SPEECH IN THE ABHIDHAMMA PITAKA, THE CONCEPT OF THE HIGHER DOCTRINE

Thanyarat Panakul
Ramkhamhaeng University

1. Introduction

Linguists and language learners agree that language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols. Man uses language as a tool for communication. Among the properties that are most characteristic of human language, sound is one. However, sign languages, which make use of the visual channel, are considered languages as well, since they have the same level of complexity and expressiveness as spoken languages. The early 20th century witnessed a new proposal in language theory. That is the Speech Act theory. Its main theme describes how man uses speech to accomplish an action. Every time a speaker makes an utterance, he aims that an action be carried out. In this way a speaker performs a speech act.

From the above definition of language and the Speech Act theory, one can determine the function of language, or how man uses language as a tool for communication in order to obtain a result according to his free will. Such knowledge is interesting and deepens our understanding of human language as a whole. The writer hopes that a study of Viññatti-rūpa, or gesture and speech, in the Abhidhamma Pitaka will offer another overview of the language system. Eventually an exploration into the two modes of communication found in the Lord Buddha's concept of the Higher Doctrine will help us to advance our knowledge and understanding of the nature of language and its function.

Where is Viññatti-rūpa from?

Vinnatti-rupa or mode of communication, is one class of 28 forms. A form is a component in the Ultimate Reality or Abhidhamma.

What is the Ultimate Reality?

Our Lord Buddha has explained that dhamma or nature can be classified into two types:

1. The Conventional Reality is something that we coin, what we assume exists but it does not. We coin a word to name it, e.g., man, table, chair.

2. The Ultimate Reality means the existing nature, the real nature that will not alter, the real thing. There are four Ultimate Realities. They are Citta or mind, Cetasika or mental coefficients, Rūpa or form, and Nirvana or the extinction of all defilements and suffering.

Citta, or mind, is dhamma-- or nature that acknowledges the sense-object. Mind is the one who knows. What mind knows is sense-objects. Citta experiences its objects. There are altogether eighty-nine types of Citta.

Cetasika (mental coefficients) is nature that goes together with Citta and leads Citta to behave as it should. There are altogether fifty-two kinds of Cetasika.

Rūpa or form is nature that breaks or falls away by cold and heat.

Nirvana is nature that is the end of defilements and suffering.

Citta, Cetasika, Rūpa and Nirvana constitute the nature that is real, that really exists. They are Ultimate Realities. The Four Ultimates can be verified and learned. They are sense-objects for wisdom which can be reached through research, reflection, realization, and practice.

In order to understand Viññatti-rūpa, we have to study two characteristics of the Ultimate Reality:

1. The Common Characteristics are the general characteristics of all components. They are impermanence, state of conflict, and not-self. The Common Characteristics are composed of three characteristics:

- a) Anicca-lakkhana, impermanence, is the state or characteristic that is not stable, that does not exist forever.
- b) Dukkha-lakkhana, illness or suffering, is the state or characteristic that cannot endure, that has to break and decompose.
- c) Anatta-lakkhana, the not-self, is the state or characteristic that is empty, that is non-self, that cannot be commanded.

The three characteristics of the Common Characteristics are called Tri-lakkhana or the Three Characteristics of Existence.

Citta, Cetasika, and Rūpa possess all three characteristics, or the common characteristics, completely, but Nirvana has only one common characteristic, that is the Anatta-lakkhana.

2. The Specific Characteristics are special features that regularly and specifically stay in nature or dhamma. They are special states of each nature, which are never alike. The specific characteristics are composed of four parts:

- a) Lakkhana, or Characteristic, means the quality, mark, or specific state for such nature.
- b) Rasa, or Function, means the function of such dhamma or nature which the functions according to its characteristic.
- c) Paccupatthana, or Manifestation, means the consequence that comes from such a function.
- d) Padatthana, or Proximate Cause, means a factor which directly causes such a characteristic. In other words, proximate cause is the cause that immediately precedes and produces an effect on such a manifestation.

Since the Specific Characteristics have four parts, they may be called Lakkhanaticcatuka or the Qualifiers, which means dhamma or nature that has four parts or characteristics.

Citta, Cetasika, and Rūpa possess all the Qualifiers or the Specific Characteristics, but Nirvana has only three: characteristic, function, and manifestation.

Nirvana has no proximate cause because it is nature that is beyond all factor-causes.

As for Conventional Reality, it has neither Common Characteristics nor Specific Characteristics because Conventional Reality does not have its own state of being. It is named or coined according to man's conventions.

Rūpa, or Form, is the nature that can break or fall away. To know which is Rūpa, one of the Four Ultimates ruled by Citta, one has to rely on the specific characteristic, i.e., the four specific parts described above.

There are altogether 28 classes of Rūpa, all of which can be divided into smaller categories. They are 7 Nipphannarupa, or the formed, and 4 Anipphanna-rūpa or the nonformed.

Nipphanna-rūpa is the form that has its own state. There are 18 of them. Nos. I-VII are called nipphanna-rūpa.

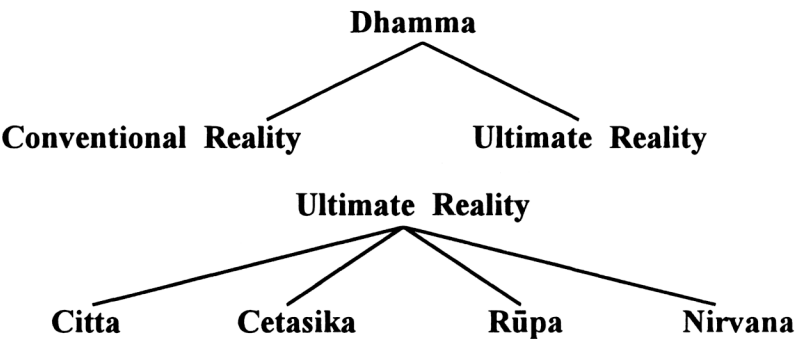


Figure 1 : Dhamma in terms of Reality

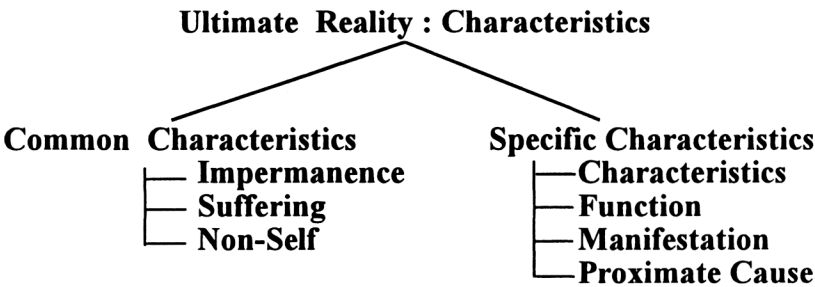


Figure 2 : Ultimate Reality in terms of Characteristics