

FUNDAMENTALS OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

Part 5



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Ajatakasa (Space) and Rupaparicchedokasa (Gap between Kalapas)

Space, *ajatakasa* is infinite and has no temporal beginning or end according to Theravada explanations. It is the empty space where all conditioned realities are located. This idea contradicts with the latest theory of Big History according to which the Universe originated with the Big Bang. Both Time and Space, which is called Space-time, according to Einstein, occurred with it. However, as Theravadins concern, space has no beginning nor end.

Within the Theravada, *ajatakasa* is not considered as an ultimate reality, but Paramatthadipani states that it appears to be something that exists. According to the commen-

tary on *Kathavatthu*, *ajatakasa* is a concept (*atthapannatti*).

Is *Ajatakasa* a concept? Can it not be the mere absence of physical objects? If there is no space, conditioned realities would not have the opportunity to arise. If we focus on *rupas*, one *kalapa* will not be able to occur in a location that has been occupied by another *kalapa*. For a *kalapa* to occur there should be a free space. That space which facilitates the arising of conditioned realities is called the *ajatakasa*. *Ajatakasa* has to be something that has been existing prior to conditioned realities. In this regard, it is not a mere object synthesized by mind looking into the gaps between physical objects.

If *Ajatakasa* is an *atthapannatti* (concept), following questions can be raised?

- ◆ First, on which basis do we observe empty space? It is not easy to postulate such a phenomenon based on which we may observe empty space as a mentally synthesized object (*pannatti*).
- ◆ Second, if *ajatakasa* is a concept how could it be that space above and under the mother Earth is considered infinite in the *Dhammasangani* commentary? The *Commentary Dhammasangani* mentions the space above and under Earth to be infinite.
- ◆ Third, if *ajatakasa* is not existing physical objects are constant



as there cannot be any gap between *kalapas*. Is it accurate to consider so? It is very clear that physical objects are not constant, and they do have gaps between each other.

- ◆ Fourth, how could the phenomenon of proportional increase of pressure with the reduction of volume of a body of air which has a constant number of particles be explained, if space is just a conceptual object synthesized by mind? If space is merely a concept, such an increase of pressure would not be possible.

Evidence, within the tradition, supports the claim for *ajatakasa* to be something existing. Therefore, some Theravada scholars such as late Most Ven. Rerukane Chandawimale Thera has considered *ajatakasa* to be existing even the commentary on *Kathavatthu* has mentioned it to be a concept. But the Thera has stated that *ajatakasa* has not been considered as a *paramatthadhamma* within the Theravada tradition. That is mainly due to the fact that it does not arise together with conditioned realities.

If *ajatakasa* exists, can it be termed an *asankhatadhamma*? According to the above explanation, if *ajatakasa* does not have a beginning and if its existence can be known with wisdom, it seems like it can be termed as an unconditioned (*asankhata*) reality. It is true that *ajatakasa* does not have a beginning

or an end, but it is not the freedom from the suffering that has not arisen yet but was possible to arise.

Hence, it does not suit to be termed as *asankhata*. *Kathavatthu* has rejected the idea of another Buddhist sect which considered *ajatakasa* to be an *asankhata* reality.

Another difference between Nibbana and *ajatakasa* is that the latter does not have the capacity to become an object of reason (*arammanupanissaya paccaya*) for noble paths to eradicate defilements like the prior.

Looking into all these information, it seems that it is not a fault to coin *ajatakasa* as an existing unconditioned reality which is different from Nibbanas. *Sarvastivadins*, another Buddhist sect, consider *ajatakasa* to be an unconditioned reality.

Akasadhātu, Rupaparicchedokasa and Paricchedarupa

Rupakalapas normally appear with gaps between them. It is the infinite space that has already existed. However, instead of calling this gap the *ajatakasa*, Theravadins name it as *rupaparicchedokasa*. *Akasadhātu* and *paricchedarupa* are synonyms for *rupaparicchedokasa*.

One understands the limitation of a *kalapa* due to this empty space which surrounds it.

Sometimes, *rupakalapas* appear in contact with each other. In such cases, there is no special gap between *kalapas*. Though *kalapas* are touching each other, they still have their own independent existence without merging into a single unit. In other words, each *kalapa* has its own border. This border is also referred as *rupaparicchedokasa*, *akasadhatu* and *paricchedarupa*.

Rupaparicchedokasa, *akasadhatu* and *paricchedarupa* are not concretely produced matter, hence falls into the category of *anipphannarupas*.