

Question: Can sound or light be 'rupa'? Simple answer: No. But, as you might expect, it's not as simple as that.

Rupa and Sunyata

A rupa is a material or physical object that is MAN MADE. A statue, a picture and so on.

Sound and light are sunyata, or 'empty'. They lack substance.

Over time, man has designed and built machines and devices that can reproduce sound or make a noise ... but this does not qualify those man-made things to be sunyata.

Likewise, man has designed and built machines and devices that can produce light and flame ... but this does not mean those man-made assemblages become sunyata.

Light has a wide spectrum, and, through our human eyes we can see a just a fraction of that spectrum. Other sentient beings see things that we can't see, and they do not all 'see' the same things.

Sound is transmitted – at a little less than the speed of light - to our ears; and when these sound waves reach our eardrums, what we 'hear in our heads' is interpreted or made real by our imaginations and learnt expectations/ behaviour. Once again, other sentient beings can hear things that we can't hear.

Learnt behaviour, expectations and assumptions: We have learnt that wedding bells and funeral bells carry different messages! The same applies to the sound of a temple bell -and a fire alarm! Four different sounds, four very different impressions that bring about different emotions, reactions, and responses.

In conclusion: Rev Sato of the Three Wheels temple in London has said that when he met the Deli Lama. They exchanged souvenir bells, and the Deli Lama said, "The sound of the bell is empty". This tells us that the *sound* of the bell is therefore sunyata, but the bell itself is of course, rupa. A solid man-made object.

Postscript: When reading up on the subjects discussed above, my attention was drawn for a while towards Thesaurus definitions of the word 'Artefact'. A rock from the earth that has been erode in a way that makes it resemble a face or a figure -is not an artefact. It's just a naturally eroded rock. However, a rock from the earth that has a face or figure carved into it -is an artefact. It is an artefact because its surface has been altered by the hand of man.

In theory, in Buddhism, both types of rock might be accepted as rupa, because regardless of how it got there, the shapes on the rock are in a recognisable form and provoke a mental image.

But, a rock unaltered by man may be sunyata. After all, its just a rock with the characteristics ... of a naturally eroded rock. In other words, empty of any intrinsic meaning, and whatever we 'see' is mind-made.

And we should bear in mind that when we 'see' any image, we don't really see the thing. What we 'see' is reflected light.