

The Five Aggregates of Clinging

During the Buddha's investigations into the cause of suffering, he found that human experience can be described in terms of The Five Aggregates. To be more precise, the human experience can be entirely encapsulated by The Five Aggregates, that is, there is not one single facet of the human experience which falls outside of The Five Aggregates.

The Five Aggregates consist of: form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. These aggregates are often referred to as "The Five Aggregates of Clinging" because the Buddha taught that suffering is caused by our tendency to cling to these aggregates as self, that is, we claim these aggregates as "me" or "mine" and suffer as a result. The Buddha found each of The Five Aggregates to be in a constant state of change (impermanent), and not-self.

*Notice the interconnectedness of the Buddha's teachings. To speak of the Five Aggregates is to speak of The Three Marks of Existence.

The Aggregate of Form (*rupak-khanda*)

The Aggregate of Form includes the four primary elements and the secondary physical phenomena derived from them.

Primary Elements:

1. Solidity or Earth element;
2. Fluidity or water element;
3. Heat or fire element; and,
4. Motion or air element.

These four elements are the fundamental matter present in all physical phenomena. This includes our physical bodies, the physical bodies of other beings, as well as all in-animate physical objects that exist. Seeing the body in terms of these four elements allows us to let go of any unwise attachment to the body that we may have, as we see beyond the concept of "body". In doing this we develop insight into the impermanent and not-self nature of the body.

The Aggregate of Feeling (*vedanak-khanda*)

The word "feeling" has a very specific meaning here, referring to the tonal quality of the mind. "Sensation" is also commonly used. The three kinds of feelings are: pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. Note that these are different to "emotions". There are six kinds of feelings, dependent on the sense faculty through which contact is made:

- Feelings experienced through the contact of the eye with visible forms;
- Through the ear with sounds;
- Through the nose with odours;
- Through the body with tangible objects;
- Through the mind with mind-objects (such as thoughts and ideas).

Note that the mind is considered as the sixth sense faculty. In Buddhism, the mind is understood to be a sense organ or faculty like the eye, ear, nose and body. The mind is one of the six doors through which we experience the world. We experience different fields of the world with different senses.

Through the eye we only experience visible forms. Through the ear we only experience sounds. Through the nose we only experience odours. Through the body we only experience tangible objects. It is through the mind that we experience thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions and so on.

For a feeling tone to come into being, contact through one of the six doors must occur first. If contact does not occur, then feeling does not come into being. In this way, feeling is dependent on contact made through the sense faculties.

Buddhist practice encourages us to become more aware of those moments when the feeling tone is present in the mind. We can do this when sitting in meditation, and also while we are getting on with our daily lives. Over time, we will become more aware of their arising as it happens. In this moment of awareness of feeling arising, we then look for it's passing away. We do this to see the impermanence of the feeling aggregate. In doing this, we prevent unwholesome habitual reactions from coming into being, that is, desiring more of pleasant feelings, wanting to get rid of unpleasant feelings, or becoming complacent/bored/apathetic when neutral feelings arise.

The Aggregate of Perception (*sanyak-khanda*)

Perception performs the function of recognising or identifying objects which enter through the six sense doors. Through the experience of living and interacting with the world, our perceptions tend to change over time. While perceiving an object, the mind searches for any memories regarding the object in question. For this reason, perception is often referred to as memory-recall. For example, for us to recognise/identify a snake as being a "snake", we need to have been taught that this squiggly thing in our field of vision is in fact a "snake". In this way, we are projecting meaning out into the world. This process has an illusionary quality to it as we tend to assume that what is being projected by us onto the external object is actually an intrinsic quality of the object being projected towards us. The snake has no idea at all that it is a "snake". In perceiving an object, we are recognising a concept of the object rather than the reality of the object. If we don't look beyond the concept, then our experience of the object becomes very shallow and unrealistic. For example, while walking on alms round in the village I come across a series of many different dogs. When I first see a dog walking towards me, visual perception tells me that this object is a "dog". At this point, my experience of the dog is very superficial and conceptual. However, if I keep my conscious awareness focused on the "dog" I begin to perceive more details about the dog, like it's fur, eyes, tail, legs etc. I also become more aware of the emotional state of the dog. And eventually, I see beyond the concept - making the experience into a more enriching one. I am now in the moment of interacting with another living being. As the concept of "dog" is dropped, my heart opens to the reality of the experience.

The conceptual cloaking that occurs in the moments of perception is something worth being mindful of as it tends to prevent us from seeing the impermanent and not-self characteristics of existence. Once we see beyond the concept, we are able to see the conditioned nature of the objects that we make contact with through the sense faculties. When we see a table, the perception process brings the concept of "table" to mind. However, when we see beyond the concept, we understand that it is in fact made up of different pieces of wood. When we see beyond the concept of "pieces of wood", we understand that it is actually made from trees. Beyond the concept of "tree", is seeds and so on. The more we see this conditioned nature of the world, the more we see the impermanent and not-self nature of existence – this is the path to wisdom and liberation.

Perception can become unreliable or problematic due to its reliance on the function of the sense faculties. For example, lighting conditions can impinge on the sense faculty of sight which makes the accurate recognition of objects less likely, like perceiving a piece of rope to be a snake.

Perception can also fail us when we are experiencing an object that we have never experienced before.

The act of perception can be seen as being an objective process – for example, perceiving the colour blue as being “blue”. However, in reality, feelings, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs tend to distort this process through memory association. Memories come with baggage. So, let’s say the shade of blue which is being perceived happens to be very similar to the colour of your school uniform. Suddenly, the seemingly objective process of perceiving a visible object with the eye gives rise to an influx of subjective mental objects (feelings, thoughts, emotions, beliefs) simply because the shade of blue happens to be similar to the colour of your school uniform. The same is true when perceiving more complex objects. For example, western people who visit the temple where I live often believe that when Buddhist monastics bows before an image of the Buddha, they are in fact praying to the Buddha as if he were a god. Notice how a brief moment of (mis)perception can lead to a fundamentally incorrect reading of a situation, an event, or in this case, an entire religion and culture.

As with the Feeling Aggregate, perception is classified into six kinds, corresponding to the six sense faculties. Perception is dependent on contact occurring through the sense doors. If sensory contact does not occur, perception does not come into being.

The Aggregate of Volition (*sankarak-khanda*)

This aggregate includes all volitional activities of the mind (wholesome, unwholesome and neutral), that rise up in response to our contact with the world through the sense faculties. Just like feeling and perceptions, volition is of six kinds, dependent on the sense faculty through which contact is made. In particular, the Buddha is encouraging us to see how volition is conditioned by the perceptions and feelings that arise, which are conditioned by the objects that we make contact with through the six sense faculties.

A note on words and meaning:

In the notes for the Intention Dhamma talk from week 1, the term “intentional action” is used – this term is interchangeable with “volitional action”. And both of these terms can also be referred to as “kammic action”. For an action to have a kammic result, it must be preceded by intention/volition. The ant example.....

The Aggregate of Consciousness (*vinnana-khanda*)

Consciousness performs the function of cognising or knowing an object. Please note that this is different to recognising or identifying an object. Consciousness knows that an object is present, and perception identifies what the object is. There are six kinds of consciousness dependent on the sense faculty through which contact is made. In fact, consciousness is one of the three factors that are required for contact to occur at all. These three factors are:

1. A functioning sense faculty;
2. A sense object; and,
3. Consciousness.

So, for us to make contact with the external visual world, we must have healthy sight, a visual object, and visual consciousness present at the same time. The same is true for the external worlds of sound, odour, taste, and tangible objects. To make contact with the internal world, we must have a healthy mind, a mind object and mental consciousness present at the same time.

It is important to understand that consciousness is impermanent and subject to change, constantly arising and passing away dependent on the six sense faculties and their respective sense objects. Due to the rapid pace of this rising and falling away, we may have the impression that consciousness is in some way permanent and self. What may seem like a constant flow of consciousness, is actually a series of moments of consciousness coming into existence, existing, and then ceasing to exist.

“Birth is suffering.

Ageing is suffering.

Illness is suffering.

Death is suffering.

Association with the unpleasant is suffering.

Disassociation with the pleasant is suffering.

Not to receive what one desires is suffering.

In short, the five aggregates of clinging is suffering.”

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta

(Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma).