# Practicing with the Five Aggregates

The teaching of the five aggregates help us to see and understand Buddha’s core teachings on the three characteristics of existence: Impermanence, suffering due to clinging and craving, and not-self (anatta).

# Opening Discussion: What did you notice?

* What did you notice when performing/practicing the exercises?
* Did the exercises change your understanding of this teaching? If so, in what ways?
* Why do you think the Buddha highlights this teaching? What is he trying to get us to look at?

# Defining the Five Aggregates

A note on the languages (Pali, Sanskrit) and terminology we’ll read in the sutta and commentary excerpts I use in this guide (to aid further study). Five aggregates: *Khandhas* in Pali; *Skhandhas* in Sanskrit. Bhikkhu and Bhikkuni, Pali for monk and nun.

## Simile of the Chariot

The simile of the Chariot or “cart” is one the of the oldest and clearest teachings on the Five Aggregates, called *khandhas* (Pali; in Sanskrit, *Skhandhas*) and what they represent. It is a dialogue between an Enlightened Buddhist monk named Nagasena and the Indo-Greek King Menander I, who was thought to have ruled from about 160 to 130 BCE. This teaching was first presented in the *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN) as a very short dialogue between a Buddhist nun named Vijara and Mara the tempter; it was later retold in a Mahayana sutra revised and added to the cannon somewhat later, entitled *The Milindapanha* *Sutra*

Following is a summary of part of their dialog:

*Nagasena asked the King how he had come to his hermitage, on foot or by horseback? I came in a chariot, the King said.*

*But what is a chariot? Nagasena asked. Is it the wheels, or the axles, or the reigns, or the frame, or the seat, or the draught pole? Is it a combination of those elements? Or is it found outside those elements?*

*The King answered no to each question. Then there is no chariot! Nagasena said.*

*Now the King acknowledged that the designation "chariot" depended on these constituent parts, [and] that "chariot" itself is a concept, or a mere name.*

*Just so, Nagasena said, ‘Nagasena’ is a designation for something conceptual. It is a mere name. When the Five Skandhas [aggregates] are present, we call it a ‘being.’”*

Here’s a similar example, from Joseph Goldstein’s book, *Mindfulness,* pp. 181: a “storm” is an aggregate of wind, rain, lightening, thunder, etc.; separately, they are not a storm; together, they are.

**Sutta Excerpt:** From the Majima Nikaya (MN), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (MN 44), the “Culavedalla Sutta, The Shorter Series of Questions and Answers”:

Scene: Householder Visakha has a Q&A with Bukkhuni Dhammadina:

2. “Lady…What is called identity by the Blessed One?”

“Friend Visakha, the five aggregates affected by clinging are called identity by the Blessed One; that is, the material form aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling aggregate affected by clinging, the perception aggregate affected by clinging, the mental formations aggregate affected by clinging, and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.”

7. “Lady, how does identity view come to be?”

“Here, friend Visakha, an untaught person regards …material form as self, or self as possessed of material form…..feeling as self, or self as possessed of feeling…. He regards perceptions as self or as self possessed of perceptions…. mental formations as self, or self as possessed of mental formations…. consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness….”

8. “Lady, how does identity view not come to be?”

“Here, friend Visakha, a well-taught noble disciple, who has regard for the noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma….does not regard feeling as self or self as of possessed of feeling…. He does not regard perceptions as self or self as possessed of perception….He does not regard material form as self or self as possessed of material form….he does not regard mental formations as self…..does not regard consciousness as self….”

As we will see, it is when we develop mental formations in particular that identity views arise. And because mental formations tend to be delusory in some fashion, and because we often take them as “mine,” or “me” – as part of an essential, unchanging self – we can suffer emotionally as a result. The last paragraph above emphasizes the importance of not-clinging – not regarding my material form as “me,” or “mine,” my feelings as “me” or “mine,” my mental formations as “me” or “mine.” Seeing how these experiences – these aggregate processes – rise and pass away helps us to let go of them -- to see them as impermanent and non-self.

# Defining the Aggregates

* **Material Form (*rupa*):** This aggregate describes our bodies as home to the six sense bases (sense bases=sense doors): eyes, ears, nose, touch, tongue, and mind. In the context of the five aggregates, a living body is required (because the six senses can’t be accessed through a dead one).
* **Consciousness (*vinnana*):** Paired with material form, consciousness arises as awareness of a particular sense contact. Ergo: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, touch consciousness, taste consciousness, thought consciousness. Though it is always listed last in the list of aggregates, it comes second in the mental-physical cycle of awareness/response-reaction – it has to because we cannot respond or react to something we aren’t aware of. Consciousness as an aggregate refers exclusively to “awareness” in this usage of the term.

From Susan Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*, pp 74-75: “Consciousness, then, is the awareness that accompanies the operation of the *khandhas* as a whole. At its most basic, one does not see, hear, and so on, if one is not aware of it: what one actually sees when one looks at a scene… are only those aspects of it that become, whether immediately or with some effort of attention, part of one’s awareness; anything else is *not seen*. By definition, then, seeing is only seeing if one is knows one is seeing.”

Goldstein, *Mindfulness*, pp 188: “In the teachings on the aggregates, the Buddha gives special emphasis to understanding the impermanent, conditioned nature of consciousness. For example, a moment of seeing consciousness arises from the conjunction of four causes: the working organ of the eye, a visible form, light, and attention. If any of these conditions are absent, then seeing consciousness cannot arise.”

* **Feelings (*vedana*):** Typically understood as “feeling tone” in the commentary rather than “a feeling” to distinguish it from our emotions. “Feeling tone”refers to the immediate, basic sensation that arises from initial contact via one of the six sense doors to our consciousness of an object: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Joseph Goldstein, *Mindfulness*, pp. 174: “The feeling tone is so important because it is the conditioning factor of our reactions. When we experience something as pleasant, we like it, and we want to hold on to it and have it continue. So we can see how pleasant feelings condition desire, craving and grasping. When we experience something as unpleasant, we don’t like it and we try to push it away and have it end. These unpleasant feelings thus condition aversion, anger, irritation, and fear.”

* **Perceptions (*sanna*):** The process of recognizing, naming, delineating what one has made sense contact with. Memory plays an important role in perception because that is what allows us to remember or infer what an object is or might be or might be like.

Analayo, *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization,* pp. 204: “To speak of a ‘cognition’ [i.e. the aggregate of “perception”) of an object refers to the act of identifying raw sensory data with the help of concepts or labels, such as when one sees a colored object and ‘re-cognizes’ it as yellow, red, or white, etc. Cognition to some extent involves the faculty of memory, which furnishes the conceptual labels used for recognition.”

Goldstein, pp. 175: “The particular perceptions we have, the concepts we use to describe things, often condition the way we feel about different experiences. Unfortunately, in many situations our perceptions are inaccurate.”

Goldstein highlights a few areas in which this can be particularly true:

* + Place and ownership: Such as national or state borders, “my” parking spot, “my” seat at the table or in the meditation room.
  + Time: we can conceive of and react to the past as real and fixed and anguish over it, and we can conceive of future events the same way: if I do this, x will happen, or as when we have a fantasy in the present about something that is clearly not real but that we wish to be, then we act as if it were.
* **Mental Formations (*samkharas*):** The reactions and stories we create in response to sense contact, i.e. *mental constructions.* Of the five aggregates, this is the one most frequently called out as “volitional” and “intentional.” This is because it is our mental formations which can generate the consequences – the karmic results – that produce suffering. What we refer to in contemporary culture as “reactivity” is the result of the mental formations we make in response to our impressions of something pleasant or unpleasant or that we like or don’t like or that we want or don’t want.

Goldstein in *Mindfulness* does an excellent job of delineating the many mental factors identified by the Buddha and various commentators that can go into a mental formation aggregate. For example, the *Abhidhamma,* early Buddhist commentary and elucidation of the suttas, identifies 14 unwholesome factors of mind including the main three (greed, aversion and delusion) as well as “shamelessness, fearlessness of wrongdoing,” the five hindrances and several others. Goldstein suggests that we look for these unwholesome mental factors in our minds when we are about to do something unskillful (or after, if we can’t catch it before).

# **Any questions or comments about these definitions?**

# What We Can Learn from this Practice

From Sue Hamilton, in *Early Buddhism: A New Approach* Pg. 23:

“…The solution to the problem of cyclical continuity [i.e., “rebirth” or the repeating unwholesome, unskillful patterns] lies in seeing the mechanics of your situation. *That* you are is neither the question nor *in* question: you need to forget even the issue of self-hood and understand instead *how you work in a dependently originated world of experience*.” [last emphasis is mine].

How we work in this dependently originated world of experience (part of the Chain of Dependent Origination): consciousness is dependent on contact; feeling is dependent on consciousness; perception is dependent on feeling and consciousness; and mental formations are dependent on feeling and perception. By looking at our experience in this way, we can see that it is impermanent, arising and passing away many times in the space of a few minutes all during the course of a single day. There is no permanent me – there are elements of me that come and go in various ways throughout each hour, day, week, year.

Hamilton, pp 75: “….the process to which the *khandhas* refer is precisely the process by which we know anything at all.”

# In-Session Practice

These will involve a pen and paper. Please take a moment to get them if you need to.

I will say a word, slowly; twice. After I say each one twice, take a few moments to notice and write down the feeling tone, perceptions, and mental formations that arise when you hear each one. When we are done, we’ll discuss.

* Purple
* Water
* Mitch McConnell
* Coconut cream pie

What did you notice as you heard and wrote down your responses to each word?

# Practicing with Non-Clinging to the Five Aggregates

From the ***Satipatthana Sutta*, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*** (MN 10):

[How to Meditate on] the Five Aggregates:

38. “…. And how does a Bhikkhu abide contemplating ….. the Five Aggregates affected by clinging? Here a Bhikkhu understands: ‘Such is material form, such its origins, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origins, such its disappearance; such is perception, such its origins, such its disappearance; such are the formations, such their origins, such their disappearance; such is consciousness, such its origins, such its disappearance.’

39. “In this way he [the Bhikkhu or Bukkhini] abides contemplating [each aggregate] internally, externally … he abides independent, not-clinging to anything in the world. That is how a he abides contemplating [each aggregate] in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging.”

From MN 28, the ***Mahahatthipadopama Sutta, The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint***

This sutta is a dialogue between Buddha’s disciple Sariputta and some bhikkhus. Sariputta is describing the Four Noble Truths, beginning with the existence and causes of suffering, including the five aggregates.

4. “And what are the five aggregates affected by clinging? They are: the material form aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling aggregate affected by clinging, the perception aggregate… the mental formation aggregate …., and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.”

8. “So then, if others [for example] revile, scold, and harass a bhikkhu…. he understands thus: “This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. That is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact. Then he sees that contact is impermanent, that feeling is impermanent, that perception is impermanent, that formations are impermanent, and that consciousness is impermanent. And his mind…. acquires confidence, steadiness, and resolution.”

So in sum: The idea is to see things as they are: impermanent and not-self. Rather than a static, unchanging self, we are made of five aggregates that arise and pass away many times in an hour, day, week, lifetime. Even the form changes; nothing stays the same. If we cling less, we suffer less.

## Closing Circle: Comments, questions, observations?