

## The Five Aggregates

Tonight I wanted to talk about the five aggregates. When I first heard the term "five aggregates" - it didn't make a lot of sense to me: the word aggregate didn't resonate with me - I didn't have a feel for what an aggregate was. My understanding is that the Buddha divided up the range of all possible subjective experiences into five groups, which he called "khandhas" - which is also translated as "mass," "bulk," or "substance." The phrase dukkakhanda, for example, refers to "this whole mass of suffering." These five groups can be used to describe the subjective experience of being human.

These five khandhas were very important in the Buddha's teachings. His second discourse was a teaching on the five khandhas. There are over 200 discourses on the five khandhas recorded in the scriptures. Clearly recognizing and understanding the five khandhas is considered a necessary condition to gain complete freedom from dukkha. And, detachment and dispassion of these five khandhas is said to lead directly to realization. Many discourses and verses record cases where a penetrative understanding of the true nature of these five khandhas culminated in full awakening.

So, what are these five khandhas?

They are form, feeling, perception (recognition), mental formations (fabrications), and consciousness.

The instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta are to:

know "such is material form, such its arising, such its passing away;  
such is feeling, such its arising, such its passing away;  
such is perception...  
such is formation...  
such is consciousness..."

When we examine these different khandhas, we begin to see how they are impermanent (they arise and pass away according to conditions).

Form is the physical experience affected by things like heat, cold, pressure, hunger, thirst, "mosquitoes and snakes"... the subjective experience that comes from having a material, physical form. The Buddha used the image of "sea-foam" - when we think of how things are made of atoms, there is a lot of empty space in things that we think are solid. For example, we might notice that pain is made up of lots of sensations and that it is not solid. Or that the breath is made up of lots of sensations. The mind makes it seem solid, but it is insubstantial.

Feeling is the experience in the body of external and internal sensations of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. It is our relationship to something that we experience, but it is not inherent in the object. For example, we might experience a cool breeze (material form) as pleasant when it is hot outside, but it might be unpleasant if it is cold or if we are cold. Again, we can see that the quality of feeling tone is not substantial and is impermanent and changing. The Buddha used the image of bubbles. If we pay attention to feeling tone in our experience, we can see how rapidly changing the feeling tone changes - just try doing eating meditation - you'll notice how rapidly the sensations of pleasant, unpleasant, neither come - so fragile like a bubble - or how bubbles pop and disappear.

Perception is the recognition or recalling the memory of past experience - being able to recognize what is being perceived (sound of a car, seeing a color, feeling something soft or hard). However, what we perceive is dependent on conditions... for example, if we are walking along a trail and the light is dim, we might see something on the trail and be alarmed that it's a snake, yet, if we look more closely, we see it's just a twig or branch on the ground. We see things as solid or as something they are not. Our perception of hand might

change - for example, we might experience it as warm or cold or vibrating or tingling, but it is not always so - it's not solid, but changing. When we name something, we apply a concept to it, which makes it seem solid - we confuse the concept for the thing. The Buddha used the image of a mirage - from a distance, it looks like water, but as we get closer, it disappears and we see something different - we see what might look like smooth ground, but if we get closer, we see rocks and stones, then we get closer and we see individual grains of sand, etc. The mind makes it look solid and real.

Formation or fabrications come about through our response to contact with the experience. We relate to the experience with intention or volition - we think about our experience and then that triggers our response to it - to change it or to do something. The Buddha used the image of a plantain stem (hollow) - they are constructions in our mind, but there is nothing really there. We have an idea about what to do in response to our experience - it's all created in the mind.

Consciousness is the knowing of the experience. It's the knowing of the form, the knowing of the feeling tone, the knowing of the perception, the knowing of formations/intentions, the knowing of consciousness. We can know through the six sense doors - there is eye consciousness, ear consciousness, touch, nose, tongue, mind. Eye consciousness is not there until there is contact with an image. Ear consciousness arises when sound arises. The Buddha used the image of a conjuring trick for consciousness. We think that these are always there, but they are arising and passing - so like a magic trick, we can start to see how they are insubstantial and impermanent.

For example, when we read something,  
consciousness is aware of each word through the physical sense door of the eye  
cognition understands the meaning of the word  
feelings are responsible for our mood as we read the words  
intention is involved in whether we continue reading or if we stop to ponder the passage or to do something else

We can also break our experience up into six categories - Joseph Goldstein says there are only six things happening: thinking, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing, seeing - when we break up our experience this way, we release the identification with our experience - just thinking, just tasting, just touching... is what is happening now.

Sometimes, one of these khandhas is predominant - maybe the physicality of our experience (hardness, softness, coldness, etc.), or perception (imagining what we are seeing in dim conditions).

We can also notice how we appropriate something as ours or how we take things as "I am".

material is "where I am"  
feeling "how I am"  
cognition "what I am (perceiving)"  
intention "why I am (acting)"  
consciousness "whereby I am (experiencing)"

We create the experience of "I am"

But, in practice, we can learn not to cling to "I am" - to not own the experience