

The Buddhist Concept of the Five Aggregates

Introduction:

The five aggregates are the scheme that the Buddha chose to describe the nature of the individual human existence. It is the basic doctrine accepted in all schools of Buddhist's thought. It is sometime called the aggregates of clinging. Buddha revealed that our physical and mental make up as an individual is a composite of five factors which are called the five aggregates of clinging. Whatever we cling to can be found in these five aggregates of clinging. To us as an individual, everything thing is in the five aggregates of clinging. After the dissolution of this life we form another set of new five aggregates. So the process continues on making new sets of aggregates, one after another in the cycle of birth and rebirth – (samsara.)

Buddha in his four Noble Truths, stated the first Noble truth – the truth of Dukha – Dukha Secca (Dukha Thitsar) or the truth of suffering. So the truth of suffering is to know in its entirety the five aggregates. Then and only then you will be able to comprehend how to bring this suffering to an end.

The remarkable aspect of it is that it describes the human existence as a combination of physical and mental elements without recourse to the idea of a **soul** as distinct from any governing agent that can be identified as a self within the individual. That is to say, each of the five aggregates is an equal component in itself and will function only in combination of all five components.

Briefly, the five aggregates are:

- the material organism (*ruupa*);
- sensation or feeling (*vedana*);
- conception or perception (*sanna*);
- volition , mental formation or fabrication (*sankhara*); and
- Consciousness (*vinnana*).

So analyzing these five aggregates, Buddha said that you will not find in the mental and physical processes of our lives, there is nothing that lies outside of the five aggregates. Hence, we need to know and understand clearly what these five aggregates mean and only then, we could realize the all the five aggregates in terms of the three characteristics of existence – impermanence (**anicca**), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (**Dukha**), and selflessness or No-self (**Anatta**).

This Buddhist concept of the five aggregates is the corner stone of the Buddhist doctrine that applies to all sentient beings within the Buddhist cosmology – within the thirty one planes of existence. All Buddhist must understand this clearly – **the five aggregates** – (**Panca Khanadha**) – **Pyinsa Lhandha** – (**Khandha Ngar Par.**)

1. **Material** – the material organism (**rupa**)

Form (*rupa*) is made up of

- a. earth (*pathavi*)
- b. water (*Apo*)

- c. fire (tejo)
- d. wind (Vayo)

2. Sensation: Sensation involves the process of data collection by the senses. The six sense organs in Buddhist thought include eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and brain. The brain is included as a 'sixth' sense organ because it senses sensations (such as memories) that arise internally and not directly from an external source (though they may have come originally from an external source). Certain emotions, such as sorrow and happiness, may also be considered mental sensations in some situations. Also, the sensations that occur in the dream state are sensed by the brain. The sensory objects of these sense organs are rendered into data, which is transmitted to the brain. There it is rendered into a mental representation. This rendering is the first step of conception.

Example, the retina of the eye is struck by light and it sends a data transmission through the optic nerve to the brain. The brain takes this data and converts it into colors, shapes, and images. This process produces a constant visual field (visual consciousness), so long as the eyes, nerve, and brain are all functionally properly.

3. Conception - Conception is the process of deriving general concepts from the sensory fields and using them as templates in abstract thought and also as a means of recognition.

Example - the concept of redness is drawn from the visual sensations of certain hues of color, representing a certain band of wavelengths of light, which we call 'red'. One difference between the sensation of red and the concept of red is that the sensations of red are all slightly different and are merely the red hues that appear in the visual field.

A ball may be red, or there may be red on a billboard. The concept of redness, however, is an idea lifted out of the images of our vision and generalized. It does not represent a specific hue of color, but is a very general notion that encompasses a multitude of hues that fall within a certain range of color. In essence, the sensation of red is seen, while the notion of red is thought about. We find certain red fruits on certain trees and generalize them, calling them apples on apple trees. Later when we find another tree with the same fruits, we know that it is an apple tree. It is because of the concept of apples and apple trees that we are able to recognize it again. This is why this aggregate is sometimes translated as **perception rather than conception**.

4. Volition - is that function of the mind that might also be called the '**will**'. It involves an agent of action, what we typically refer to as the psychological 'I'. Volition does not merely involve intent, but **simply consists of actions that originate in the mind** and have an agent that performs them.

This aggregate includes a broad group of fifty two activities. They include things like:

Habits, reactions, and intentional acts.

Volition is very important in Buddhist thought because it is this that is the origin of karma. In fact, karma is itself defined as a volitional act. All volitional acts have results, which is sometimes called the fruits of *karma*. Of course, these results are not always ethical in nature.

Example - If I am thirsty and choose to pick up a glass of water and drink from it, the volitional act has the result of alleviating thirst and putting water in my body. But there is probably nothing ethical about it. If instead I come across someone in a desert who is suffering from extreme thirst and I give him water (or chose intentionally to withhold my water from him), that would constitute a *karma* with an ethical quality.

Karmic acts are generally divided into three categories in Buddhist writings, these being **mental, verbal, and physical acts**.

Example -

2. If I form hateful thoughts about someone I met, that is a **mental act**.

3. If I tell the person hateful things to express those hateful thoughts, that is a **verbal act**.
4. If I strike that person with a stick or fist, that is a **physical act**.

Each of these types of acts has different consequences and gravities. Mental acts tend to function to condition our attitudes and opinions. Verbal acts tend to condition our relationships with others, and usually will also reinforce mental conditioning. Physical acts are often the most powerful, because they can go so far as taking or preserving life.

They have results that condition our physical environment. Generally, *karmic* acts tend to have their seeds in mental acts that, if nurtured, blossom into verbal and physical acts. To speak and behave compassionately, on a consistent basis at least, one needs to begin with compassionate mental acts.

5. Consciousness (*vinnana*) grasps the characteristics of the six external objects. They are

- a. **Visual** consciousness
- b. **Hearing** or Auditory consciousness
- c. **Smell** or Olfactory consciousness
- d. **Taste** or Gustatory consciousness
- e. **Physical** or Tactile consciousness
- f. **Mental** consciousness

This is the basic scheme of the five aggregates that make up the individual personality. While it broken up into five distinct components, when we take them all as a whole, we can see it as a complete system. Note Buddhists do not accept the SOUL theory or the Annihilation concept.

Illustration - Samitigutta Thera

Samitigutta Thera belonged to a brahmin family of Sávatthi and entered the Order after hearing the Buddha preach. He attained to entire purity of conduct, but, because of some action in his former life, was suffering from Leprosy, and his limbs gradually decayed. He therefore lived in the infirmary. One day Sáriputta, while visiting the sick, saw him and gave him an exercise on contemplation of feeling.

"Friend, so long as the five aggregates continue, all feeling is just suffering. Only when the aggregates are no more is there no more suffering."

Practicing this, Samitigutta developed insight and became an arahant. Then he remembered his past action and uttered a verse...

In the past he was a householder and offered jasmine flowers to **Vipassí Buddha**. In another birth he saw a Pacceka Buddha and insulted him, calling him a "leprous starveling" and spitting in his presence. For this he suffered long in hell, and was reborn on earth in the time of **Kassapa Buddha**. He became a **Paribbájaka**¹, and, losing his temper with a follower of the Buddha, cursed him "May you become a leper." He also soiled the bath powders placed by people at bathing places; hence his affliction in the present age.

Note – here, Samitigutta Thera, practicing on the aggregate of feeling (Vedana) on one of the five aggregates, he attained the Arahathship. Note also the bad kamma that he accrued in his past for insulting a follower of Buddha.

Lesson – we should never be subject to other people curses, because A curse by some one is the worse of the bad kamma that one could accrue in the samsara, because it is very hard to avoid or erase a curse.

1. **Paribbájaka** a name given to the ascetics and recluses