

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 12-15-2015.

Last week I spoke about the First Noble Truth, that there is *dukkha*, unsatisfactoriness and suffering. As part of that I read from *Samyutta Nikāya* (Connected Discourses) 56.11, which is said to be a record of the Buddha's first formal teaching, including the first statement of the Four Noble Truths. The description of *dukkha* ends with the statement "the five aggregates subject to clinging are *dukkha*."¹

There was a question asked about the five aggregates last week. It is such an important part of the teaching that I want to devote a series of talks to it. So tonight I want to offer some background on the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging. Then in the coming weeks I want to explore them in more detail, including how to practice with them.

The complete phrase, in Pāli, for what we translate as "the five aggregates subject to clinging" is *pañc' upādāna-kkhandhā*. *Pañc* is translated in this phrase as "five." *Upādāna* is translated as "clinging." And *khandhā* is translated as "aggregates". (The same word in Sanskrit is *skandha*, which is used in Mahāyana Buddhist texts.) *Khandhā* literally means "a heap." But the English words "category" and "group" may be easier to understand than either "heap" or "aggregate." Anyway, what *khandhā* is pointing at is that there is a group of something.

The teachings tell us that there are these five aggregates, groups or categories of:

1. *Rūpa*, which is translated as Form, Body or Materiality;
2. *Vedanā*, Feeling or Feeling-tone;
3. *Saññā*, Perception;
4. *Saṅkhārā*, Volitional Formations or Mental Fabrications; and
5. *Viññāṇa*, *Citta*, or *Manas*, all of which are sometimes translated as Consciousness.

The five aggregates of clinging are mentioned throughout the early Buddhist discourses. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, there's a whole book of discourses devoted to the *khandhās*. Here's two quotes from that book:

"And how, bhikkhus, is there agitation through clinging? ... the uninstructed worldling regards form [*rūpa*] thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.' That form of his changes and alters. With the

change and alteration of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair...."

"And how, bhikkhus, is there nonagitation through nonclinging? Here, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple does not regard form thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self.' That form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair."

And then the Buddha says the say things about the four remaining aggregates.²

This next quote gives a little more of the detail of what is involved in developing non-clinging towards the aggregates.

"Bhikkhus, form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional formations [*saṅkhārā*: intention, mental formations or fabrications] are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, disenchantment towards volitional formations, disenchantment towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated."³

The Awakening poems of the early bhikkhus and bhikkhunis describe this very process. In this poem, the translator uses the term "elements" rather than "aggregates." This is a poem of the bhikkhu Uttara.

I know the elements of existence;
my craving has been completely rooted out;
my constituents of enlightenment have been developed;
I have gained the annihilation of the āsavas.
... I shall be quenched without āsavas.⁴

(The word *āsavas* is sometimes translated as "taints," "fermentations," "influxes, in-flows" or "effluents, out-flows." It refers to the three primary forms of craving that have to be overcome for complete Awakening: craving for sense experiences; craving for being or existence -- a sense of "I am" something; and Ignorance, not knowing things as they are.)⁵

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on four fields for establishing mindfulness, we find instructions on working with the aggregates:

"... one dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena in terms of the five aggregates subject to clinging. And how does one dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena in terms of the five aggregates subject to clinging? Here one understands: 'Such is form, such its origin, such its passing away; such is feeling, such its origin, such its passing away; such is perception, such its origin, such its passing away; such are volitional formations, such their origin, such their passing away; such is consciousness, such its origin, such its passing away.'"⁶

Why is it so important to work with the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging? The more orthodox explanation has been that the Five Aggregates are what we are made of. It's built on the close association between the understanding of *anattā*, not-self, and the Five Aggregates. It's an understanding that we're not a separate independent self, but rather are a collection of these aggregates working together from moment to moment in a way that depends on the conditions that preceded them and conditioning, but not determining, the collection of aggregates and how they function in the following moments.

I think there is certainly something to this idea. There is a lot to learn from exploring it in one's own experience. But I don't find it completely satisfying, in part because the aggregates don't exist. They are concepts, categories of processes, not distinct building blocks.

A British scholar, Sue Hamilton, published a work⁷ at the end of the last century that offers a different view. She emphasized that what is important is *how* the aggregates help create the sense of self, of I, me and mine, when they are clung to.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu, the contemporary American translator and teacher, has argued forcefully against the orthodox understanding of the aggregates. "However, these piles [i.e., aggregates] are best understood, not as objects, but as activities, for an important passage (SN 22.79) defines them in terms of their functions."⁸

Our practice is to know the *khandhas* with mindfulness and to see for ourselves what they are and how clinging to them leads to *dukkha*. As a result of these investigations of our own experience, gradually over some time, we can come to experience disenchantment

and dispassion towards the aggregates. This disenchantment and dispassion will create the possibility of becoming free of *dukkha*, free of greed, hatred and delusion. It will create the possibility of living in peace whatever ups and downs life presents to us.

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Notes

1. adapted from SN 56.11 Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 1844-1845, {PTS 421-422}.

NOTE: The word "suffering" has been replaced by "*dukkha*" to more fully capture its meaning of unsatisfactoriness as well as suffering.

2. SN 22.8, {PTS III 18-19}, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 866-867.

3. SN 22.12, {PTS III 21}, adapted from op. cit., p. 868.

Note: The word "disenchantment" has been used in place of "revulsion." The bracketed text [] is my clarification of "volitional formations."

4. Theragāthā 161-162., Norman, K.R., trans., *Poems of Early Buddhist Monks*, Oxford, UK: Pali Text Society, 1997, p. 23.

5. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. & ed., *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 229.

6. *ibid.*, p. 287.

Note: Changed "monk" to "one".

7. Hamilton, Sue. *Identity and Experience*, London: Luzac Oriental, 1996.

8. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Five Piles of Bricks: The Khandhas as Burden and Path," *The Karma of Questions*, Mettā Forest Monastery, 2002, p. 55.

Note: Text in brackets [] is mine.