A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 02-09-2016.

This is the sixth of a series of talks on the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging, *pañc' upādāna-kkhandhā*, in Pāli. Tonight I want to talk about the fifth aggregate, consciousness. The Pāli term most frequently used to designate this aggregate, as an aggregate, is *viññāṇa*.[1]

So tonight the questions I hope to touch on are:

1. What is *viññāṇa*?
2. How is consciousness understood in Early Buddhism?
3. What is its importance to practice?
4. And how does one practice with it?

In the Pāli discourses, consciousness is generally understood as the simplest or the most basic knowing quality of the mind. In a teaching in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (the Connected Discourses) that I've referred to in other talks the Buddha defines each of the aggregates. When he speaks of the aggregate of consciousness we find:

> "And what, bhikkhus, is consciousness? There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness. This is called consciousness."[2]

Then, in the Honeyball Sutta (*Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*) one of the Buddha's disciples, Mahā Kaccāna, says:

> "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact."[3]

These two quotes capture, I think, some of the Early Buddhist ideas about consciousness.

First, consciousness is not viewed as an independent, separate and enduring quality of mind. It arises *dependent on* the presence of other things. And so when the Buddha speaks of "eye-consciousness" and the other forms of consciousness, it is a way of pointing to what the arising consciousness is *dependent upon*, what it is *associated with*. It's not so much that there are six kinds of consciousness, but that consciousness arises in association with six different kinds of objects.

In line with this, Sue Hamilton, the British scholar I've mentioned repeatedly in this series, suggests that the word *viññāṇa* is more accurately understood as *consciousness of*, rather than *consciousness*.[4] She also suggests that in understanding the meaning of something like "eye-consciousness" it might be more useful to think of it as consciousness or awareness of seeing, consciousness or awareness of hearing, and so forth.[5]

Matt Flickstein, one of my teachers, offered another perspective on consciousness. He compared consciousness-of-an-object as being similar to a motion detector connected to an electric light. When something would stimulate the motion detector (i.e., the sensory system), the object would be illuminated by the light (i.e., consciousness) so that it could be known.

A consequence of the idea that consciousness always arises in association with or dependent upon an object, is the idea that consciousness is impermanent. If our awareness of a sight or sound or thought passes away, our consciousness, or knowing of it, also passes away. There may be a memory of, a thought about, that moment of consciousness, but the actual moment of seeing or hearing is gone. And this actually seems to be what our experience is, if we look closely. So based on this idea we have moments of consciousness-*of* arising and passing away constantly.

As Early Buddhism developed, this observation and idea became the basis for the doctrine or theory of momentariness. It is expressed in this quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi's book on the Abhidhamma,

> "The life-span of a citta [i.e., consciousness] is termed, in the Abhidhamma, a mind-moment (*cittakkhaṇa*). This is a temporal unit of such brief duration that, according to the commentators, in the time that it takes for lightning to flash or the eyes to blink, billions of mind-moments can elapse. … Within the breadth of a mind-moment, a citta arises, performs its momentary function, and then dissolves, conditioning the next citta in immediate succession. Thus, through the sequence of mind-moments, the flow of consciousness continues uninterrupted like the waters in a stream."[6]

So on the one hand we have the idea and experience of consciousness-*of* being impermanent. On the other hand we have a felt sense of there being a continuity of

consciousness. So, when we don't look very closely at our experience, we tend to believe that there is an "I", an enduring self, that is the one who is being conscious of things.

What is being suggested here, though, is that being conscious-of does not require the belief in an independent enduring self. It can be seen to be simply a process of conditioning passing on from moment to moment. It can be seen as a process that is not only conditioned by other moments of consciousness, but also by all of the other aggregates, especially volitional formations or intentions.

How do we practice with consciousness? In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha offered us these instructions:

> "And how does one dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena in terms of the five aggregates subject to clinging? Here one understands: '… such is consciousness, such its origin, such its passing away.'"[7]

There are two difficulties in contemplating, being mindful of, or investigating consciousness. First, we cannot separate consciousness from its object, since they always arise together. This is something you can investigate for yourself. Look to see if you are ever conscious of or aware of without there being an object.

The second difficulty is that we have to be careful that we are not confusing consciousness with the mental factors that accompany it. An example of this would be noticing how, as we meditate over a period of time, we begin to see things more clearly. This happens not because consciousness is becoming more clear but for two other reasons. It happens because consciousness *of* the meditation object is happening more consistently. In other words there is less distraction from the meditation object. And it happens because consciousness *of* the meditation object is more consistently accompanied by the mental factor of mindfulness. This is also something you can investigate for yourself.

Matthew Flickstein offered instructions for investigating the passing away of consciousness. I found it a very useful approach, so I'd like to quote it here.

> "We begin by following our breath. When we become aware that our attention has moved to another object of awareness, we immediately reflect back to observe that not only is the breath no longer the object of our awareness, but the moment of consciousness that was noticing the

> breath has also disappeared. What is actually present at this time is a moment of consciousness that is taking the memory of the previous moment of consciousness as its object. In other words, to conduct this contemplation we keep using our current moments of consciousness to realize that the prior moments of consciousness, along with their objects, have totally vanished."[8]

In a similar way we can investigate the origin of consciousness by looking back and then seeing if we can trace what conditioned or led to the previous moment, when consciousness first shifted from, say, the breath to another object.

In these ways we can see for ourselves the impermanent and conditioned nature of consciousness. In doing this we will also begin to undermine the tendency to identify with consciousness or awareness as who I am.

I'd like to end this series of talks with a quote from Anālayo Bhikkhu. It points to the importance of investigating each of these aggregates for ourselves, which I hope you'll continue to do.

Anālayo Bhikkhu wrote:

> "Owing to the influence of ignorance, these five aggregates are experienced as embodiments of the notion 'I am'. From the unawakened point of view, the material body is 'Where I am', feelings are 'How I am', cognitions are 'What I am' (perceiving), volitions are 'Why I am' (acting), and consciousness is 'Whereby I am' (experiencing). In this way, each aggregate offers its own contribution to enacting the reassuring illusion that 'I am'."[9]

Notes

1. Sue Hamilton states that in the suttas two additional Pāli words, *citta* and *mana*, may be used for consciousness. see Hamilton, *Identity and Experience*, London: Luzac Oriental, 1996, p. 82.

Bhikkhu Bodhi also offers a brief discussion of the different uses of the three words in the Connected Discourses, p. 769, note 154.

2. SN 22.56 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, translator. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 896-897.

Note: Text in brackets [ ] is my own. BB in his general introduction to the volume (p. 48), notes that *nāma* actually refers to the mental factors of feeling, perception, volitional formations, contact and attention while consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is regarded as a separate quality. So although my use of "mind" conveys, I think, the general idea it is not technically accurate.

3. MN 18.16, Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 203 {PTS I 111}.

4. Hamilton, p. 88

5. Hamilton, ibid, p. 88.

6. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993, p. 156.

Note: Text in brackets [ ] is mine.

7. MN 10.38 {PTS I 60-61}, adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 287.

Note: Replaced "a monk" with "one" throughout.

8. Flickstein, Matthew. *Swallowing the River Ganges*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001, p. 102.

Note: This book has been reissued under the title *The Meditator's Atlas*.

9. Anālayo Bhikkhu. *Satipaṭṭhāna*, Cambridge, UK: Windhorse Publications, 200, p. 207.