

Understanding Aggregates

March 21, 2022

In the Buddha's first sermon, he defines suffering—or stress, the word *dukkha*—as the five clinging-aggregates. He states that our duty with regard to those five clinging-aggregates is to comprehend them. Elsewhere, he says that comprehension means getting rid of all passion, aversion, and delusion around them.

In his second sermon, he shows how to do that. He talks about how the five clinging-aggregates should be seen as not-self. One argument is that they don't lie within your total control. If there's any disease in any of the aggregates, you can't say, "Go away!" Sometimes it goes away but it doesn't really obey you. The other argument is that the aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and, if anything is inconstant and stressful, it's not really worthy of taking as your self.

We look at the categories of the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness—and they can seem strange, but you have to remember that we, coming from the West, tend to look at issues of how we engage with the world by taking the sense of sight as our major paradigm. From there, we ask the questions that come with the sense of sight. Because there's so much that you have to do in order to take the raw data from splotches of color coming into the eye and building them into a three-dimensional world that you can actually move around in, and the question sometimes becomes, "Does that world actually exist? Are there any things out there that really lie behind, say, your visual image of them?" That sort of question. And how do you check? You use your other senses. You move around to see if you run into anything unexpected, or if you can walk through something you think you see.

But, in ancient India, that was not the paradigm. The paradigm was the act of feeding. This is basic to how we engage in the world. As the Buddha said, all beings have one thing in common, which is that they need food in order to survive.

He was building on an older tradition. Look at the Vedas: The main concern was how to provide a source of food for yourself not only in this lifetime but also after death. In the Upanishads, their theories about what the self is and how it fares after death are basically mystical knowledge about the nature of reality. Once you have that knowledge, then that becomes your food—a better food source than the food provided by Vedic sacrifice, they claimed.

So, the Buddha was building on an old tradition. What was radical about his contribution was to say that these aggregates are suffering when you cling to them.

Now, the word for clinging can also mean “to take sustenance.” In other words, when you cling, you feed off of these aggregates. So you suffer by the way you feed. And, as it turns out, there’s a double level of feeding, because the best way to understand the aggregates is to see how they relate to *the* most basic function of a being, which is to feed.

Think about feeding on physical food: You’ve got the body—that’s form—and you’ve got the form of the food out there. The question as to whether it exists or not is not really an issue; you just stick it in your mouth and if you get nourishment, that’s good enough.

But you’re driven by a feeling: the feeling of hunger—the pain of hunger—and the desire for the pleasure of feeling full. But that doesn’t last. You get hungry again, and so have to feed again.

Then there’s perception: how you label things in the world. Your first act of perception is to figure out what’s edible and what’s not. Think of a little child crawling across the room. When it encounters something, what does it do? The first thing it does is to put it in its mouth. So, our first perceptions revolve around edible/not edible; tastes good/doesn’t taste good.

Fabrication is the big aggregate, because that covers a lot of activities. First, you have to formulate a desire to want to eat—that’s a fabrication, a desire to get rid of the pain of hunger, a desire to recognize what’s edible, what’s not, to recognize what kind of hunger you’ve got. Then you look for the food. When you find it, oftentimes you have to fix it, because there are a lot of foods out there that you simply can’t eat raw, as they are. But, you’ve learned skills in how to cook them, how to put them together, how to treat them so that you *can* eat them.

Then there’s consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

So, if you want to understand the aggregates, think about how they relate to feeding, and the Buddha’s way of dividing things up becomes very clear. It seems, actually, very natural.

This applies, of course, not only to feeding outside but also to mental feeding, emotional feeding inside. Think about the path—you feed off the path. Of the various factors of the noble eightfold path, right concentration is the one that’s most often compared to food. Here again, you’ve got form (the breath); feeling (the feeling of dis-ease you might encounter when you first try to settle down, and then the feeling of pleasure you’re trying to develop); the perceptions that you keep in mind about how the breath goes, where you can focus on the breath, your relationship to the breath. Fabrication starts out especially with directed thought and evaluation. You talk to yourself about how it’s going and then you make adjustments—that too is fabrication—until things get just right. You get the

feeling you want and then you continue your work with it, you spread it around so that, eventually, you're aware of the whole body. The sense of ease courses throughout the body. Your awareness covers the whole body: That's the aggregate of consciousness.

Here, too, you've got the act of feeding. Only, in this case, this kind of feeding doesn't come under the first noble truth; it comes under the fourth. This is what you *do* with the aggregates in order to get beyond them.

So, when you think about the aggregates in this way, you get closer to understanding why the Buddha divided them up the way he did. But, even though you'll find that different ajaans will sometimes differ on their explanations of how the aggregates relate to one another, the important thing is not so much precisely where the lines are drawn, but that you see that these activities cover anything that you might want to identify with. When you take them apart in this way, you begin to see that the Buddha was right: They really are inconstant, stressful, and they're not worthy of taking as your self.

You can apply those three perceptions to all kinds of things, but the Buddha specifically recommends, in the beginning, applying them to things that you really like that would pull you off the path. Because after all, there's a lot of liking that goes with clinging.

This is where the teaching on the four noble truths and the three characteristics really goes against the grain. Precisely the places where you find joy, precisely the places where you feel that you've got to hold on: *Those* are the places, the Buddha says, you've got to watch out for. You've got to learn how to peel away the appeal of those things and, eventually, get so that you can stop feeding on them.

You're trying to induce a state of what the Buddha calls *nibbida*, which we translate as "disenchantment," but can also be translated simply as "distaste": You get to the point where you're tired of feeding on these things.

You try to induce that sense of distaste first with things that would pull you off the path, and then, when you've done that work, you look at the path itself. You realize that—even though you've learned how to make the mind as constant as possible and as easeful as possible and as much under control as possible—still, there are the ups and downs. The fact is, this too is fabricated.

You put up with those ups and downs as long as it's the better alternative to wherever else you might go. But when you've taken care of the other alternatives, you get inclined to turn and look at this: Wouldn't it be good if there were something that was not fabricated? That's the point when you're ready to incline the mind to something that's not fabricated, and to stop feeding entirely.

As the Buddha said, “Those who’ve gained awakening have no hunger.” Food is appealing as long as there’s hunger. But when you find something that frees you from any sense of hunger at all, that’s when you know that you’ve used the teaching on the aggregates for its purpose and you can let the whole thing go.

The commentaries tend to talk about the aggregates as ultimate truths, as opposed to conventional truths. But the Forest Tradition seems to be more in line with how the Canon approaches the whole topic, which is that there are all kinds of conventions, including the Buddha’s language, including the Buddha’s way of analyzing things: That, too, is a convention. And, as with every convention—every agreement that we have about what means what—you get the most out of it if you use it for its intended purpose.

The purpose of analyzing these things in this way is so that you can develop that sense of distaste, because from distaste there’s dispassion for the passion that fueled the fabrication of these things to begin with. When there’s no passion, then the fabrications cease. From the cessation of fabrications, there’s release. When you put down everything—worldly conventions, Buddha conventions—and you’ve reached that goal, that’s when you know that you’ve understood the meaning of these things.

The word *attha* in Pāli means both “goal” and “meaning.” The deathless is the *attha* of these dhammas. It’s their goal, and it’s what makes them meaningful. So, make sure that you use this way of looking at things for its intended purpose, and that way you really understand it, at the same time getting the most out of it.