UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE AGGREGATES

In the Satipatthana Sutta (the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse), the Fourth Foundation is called *Dhammanupassana,* which translates as *Mindfulness of Mind Objects*. The first dhamma category examined is the Five Hindrances, with the intention to understand what stimulates their activity, what can be done to direct attention away from them and what can be done to prevent their future emergence into awareness. The remaining dhamma categories focus on how to recognize and enhance the mind conditions that create insight into the impermanent and non-self characteristics of existence.

The focus of this discussion is the Five Aggregates of Clinging, described by Analayo in “Satipatthana-The Direct Path To Realization” on pgs 216-217:

“These five aggregates are often referred to in the discourses as the “five aggregates of clinging” (*pañcupãdãnakkhandha*) [pahn-choo-pah-dah-nah-kahn-dah]. In this context “aggregate” (*khandha*) is an umbrella term for all possible instances of each category, whether past, present, or future, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, near or far. The qualification “clinging” (*upãdãna*) [ooh-pah-dah-nah] refers to desire and attachment in regard to these aggregates. Such desire and attachment in relation to the aggregates is the root cause for the arising of *dukkha*.”

The actual wording in the Sutta is this:

"Furthermore, the monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the *five clinging-aggregates.* And how does he remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the five clinging-aggregates? There is the case where a monk [discerns]: 'Such is form, such its origination, such its disappearance. Such is feeling... Such is perception... Such are fabrications... Such is consciousness, such its origination, such its disappearance.'

"In this way he remains focused internally on mental qualities in & of themselves, or externally on mental qualities in & of themselves, or both internally & externally on mental qualities in & of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to mental qualities, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to mental qualities, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to mental qualities. Or his mindfulness that 'There are mental qualities' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the five clinging-aggregates.’ “ (translation by Thanissaro)

*Form*, *Rupakhandha* (roo-pah-kahn-dah), describes physical experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and the various bodily experiences such as pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue and how the body is arranged in space (proprioception). This repeats the characteristics examined in the First Foundation, Mindfulness of the Body, Kayanupassana(kah-yah-new-pah-suh-nah).

*Feeling, Vedanakhandha* (vey-dah-nah-kahn-dah),describes those characteristics of experience investigated in the Second Foundation, Mindfulness of Feelings, Vedanupassana (vey-dah-new-pah-suh-nah). Feelings are the immediate response to stimulation, either pleasurable, painful or neutral in experience; they can be either physical or mental. Feelings are often represented as the bridge between sensory stimulation and mental processing of the stimulation.

*Perception*, S*annakhandha* (sahn-yah-kahn-dah), is the immediate but undeveloped categorization of experience. Examples would include hot or cold, apple or red ball, up or down, etc. This categorization process is ongoing, constantly “re-compared” to prior experience and updated dynamically. It is primarily associated with feeling, so that feeling and perception are fundamental ways that the selfing process is formed and modified dynamically through volitions.

*Fabrications, Sankharakhandha,* (sahn-kah-rah-kahn-dah),are often termed *mind conditioners*; another term that is synonymous with sankhara is *cetasika*, (cheh-tah-see-kah), translated as that which pertains to citta and the dynamic operation of these mental processes determines how the selfing process is shaped in awareness.

*Consciousness* in Pali is V*innanakhandha* (vihn-yah-nah-kahn-dah), which is almost synonymous with *citta* (chee-tah), the subjective integration of sankhara activation, that is, the “contents” within the stream of consciousness; and the component categories are called *cetasikas* (cheh-tah-see-kahs). There are 52 cetasikas and they are subdivided into 5 categories: The first two are Feelings and Perceptions—their bridging function makes them universal, but they don’t actively contribute to conditioning the mind. The fabricating factors (sankharas) include: Universal (Five in number, conditioning each moment of consciousness), Occasional (Six in number, which may or may not condition consciousness), Unwholesome (Fourteen in number) and Wholesome (Twenty-five in number).

In the previous talk about the Six Sense Bases, posted on May 20, 2020, the mind was considered as a sense base, that is, the primary interpretive process that makes meaning of the other five sense bases. This meaning making process is called *namarupa* (nah-mah-roo-pah)—nama is feeling, perception, fabrications and consciousness, while rupa represents the sensations that stimulate fabrications. Form (rupakhandha) represents those five sense bases, while feeling and perception are “bridging” functions into consciousness, where fabrications shape each moment of selfing. In his book “The Mind Illuminated”, Culadasa adds another component to this process, *binding moments of consciousness*. Here is his definition, found in the Glossary on page 420:

**Binding moment of consciousness:** The content of this kind of mind moment is generated by integrating the content of the other six kinds of moments of consciousness. For example, when visual and auditory inputs are brought together by binding consciousness, the product of this combination is projected into consciousness, and the resulting subjective experience is of hearing words come out of someone’s mouth.

Culadasa, during his career as John Yates, a research psychologist studying neuropsychology, was aware of *neural binding*, which suggests that various complex neural activities, for example, the visual and auditory functions in different parts of the brain, are “bound” through synchronous patterns of neural connections displaced throughout the brain that can be integrated into the subjective experience he describes above. In his Culadasa persona he is aware of Yogachara Buddhism, which posits additional elements of the mind that coordinate and bind consciousness into a subjective sense of self.

***The goal of the practice of being mindful of the Five Aggregates of Clinging is to discover in the immediacy of experience the impermanent nature of these elements of personality and discover how craving and clinging create a false perception of an enduring and autonomous self***. This immediate and detached awareness “deconstructs” the process of selfing. The mind can be trained to be diligent, mindful and clearly aware (atapi, satisampajjana), a phrase repeated throughout the Satipatthana Sutta with sufficient proficiency that the seemingly blended moments can be deconstructed, able to develop awareness of impermanence enough to see a “flickering” of separate self-state organizations without the blending moments of consciousness.

With the experience of nirvana, the unconditioned, the Five Aggregates are relieved of clinging and are therefore regarded as simply the *pancakhandha*. An Awakened being such as the Buddha or an Arahant still experiences a personality organized around the five aggregates but no longer bound by craving and clinging. I hope these notes and your diligent, mindfully aware practice allows you to realize this.