**THE FIVE AGGREGATES OF CLINGING**

The Buddha placed great emphasis on the concept of *pancakhandhupadana* (pahn-chah-kahn-doo-pah-dah-nah) the “*Five Aggregates of Clinging*”, as vitally important for understanding the First Noble Truth, dukkha (doo-kah). Here’s a quote, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, from the *Dhammacakkhapavattana Sutta* (dah-mah-chah-kah-pah-vah-tah-nah soo-tah), The *Discourse on the First Turning of the Wheel For Liberation*:

The Noble Truth of Suffering [dukkha], monks, is this: [Birth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati_%28Buddhism%29) is suffering, [aging](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaramarana) is suffering, sickness is suffering, [death](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaramarana) is suffering, association with the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to receive what one desires is suffering—**in brief the five aggregates subject to grasping are suffering.**

Here is an alternative description, edited for brevity, from the Samyutta Nikaya:

Top of Form

 I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vesali, in the Great Wood, at the Hall of the Gabled Pavilion. At that time Ven. Anuradha was staying not far from the Blessed One in a wilderness hut.

Then a large number of wandering sectarians went to Ven. Anuradha and on arrival exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to Ven. Anuradha, "Friend Anuradha, the Tathagata — the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment — being described, is described with [one of] these four positions: The Tathagata exists after death, does not exist after death, both does & does not exist after death, neither exists nor does not exist after death."

When this was said, Ven. Anuradha said to the wandering sectarians, "Friends, the Tathagata — the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment — being described, is described otherwise than with these four positions: The Tathagata exists after death, does not exist after death, both does & does not exist after death, neither exists nor does not exist after death."……..

…….Then Ven. Anuradha went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: "Just now I was staying not far from the Blessed One in a wilderness hut. Then a large number of wandering sectarians came and... said to me, 'Friend Anuradha, the Tathagata — the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment — being described, is described with [one of] these four positions: The Tathagata exists after death, does not exist after death, both does & does not exist after death, neither exists nor does not exist after death.”……..

……."What do you think, Anuradha: Is form constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord." "And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?" "Stressful, lord." "And is it proper to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, lord." "Is feeling constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."... "Is perception constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."... "Are fabrications constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord."... "Is consciousness constant or inconstant? "Inconstant, lord." "And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?" "Stressful, lord." "And is it proper to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, lord." "What do you think, Anuradha: Do you regard form as the Tathagata?" "No, lord." "Do you regard feeling as the Tathagata?" "No, lord." "Do you regard perception as the Tathagata?" "No, lord." "Do you regard fabrications as the Tathagata?" "No, lord." "Do you regard consciousness as the Tathagata?" "No, lord." "What do you think, Anuradha: Do you regard the Tathagata as being in form?... Elsewhere than form?... In feeling?... Elsewhere than feeling?... In perception?... Elsewhere than perception?... In fabrications?... Elsewhere than fabrications?... In consciousness?... Elsewhere than consciousness?" "No, lord." "What do you think: Do you regard the Tathagata as form-feeling-perception-fabrications-consciousness?" "No, lord." "Do you regard the Tathagata as that which is without form, without feeling, without perception, without fabrications, without consciousness?" "No, lord."

"And so, Anuradha — when you can't pin down the Tathagata as a truth or reality even in the present life — is it proper for you to declare, 'Friends, the Tathagata — the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment — being described, is described otherwise than with these four positions: The Tathagata exists after death, does not exist after death, both does & does not exist after death, neither exists nor does not exist after death'?" "No, lord." "Very good, Anuradha. Very good. Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress." (translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu [© 2004](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.086.than.html#F_termsOfUse))

The Buddhist term *panca* (pahn-chah) means *five*, *khandha* (kahn-dah) represents *an* *aggregation, a cohesive cluster of different elements*—the combination of gravel, sand, cement and water aggregates into concrete, and the resulting substance seems to be its own element but is not. A chemical bond is involved in the production of concrete, while craving and clinging among the five characteristics, when functioning as an aggregate, “bonds” them into what seems to be an enduring/autonomous self. *Upadana* (oo-pah-dah-nah) is translated as *clinging* or *attachment* and describes how the bonding happens. When investigated with Wisdom, the effects of craving and clinging are dissolved through realizing the transitory nature of the interactions between the five aggregates. The bonded aggregation manifests as a dynamic process that is constantly reforming, according to variable conditions, internal and external.

These are the aggregates: *Form, Perception, Feeling, Conditioning Factors*, and *Consciousness*. The terms don’t describe “things”; rather, they are processes. *Form* is a process of stimulation, that is, light, sound, temperature, pressure and the chemical actions that create odor and flavor; the physical processes of the body that produce pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue, etc., are included. The aggregates of *perception, feeling* and *conditioning factors* are functions that organize the stimuli meaningfully, and *consciousness* is the function of awareness that reflects perception, feeling and conditioning factors. Form can only be understood in the context of what perception, feeling and conditioning factors produce. Below is a graphic that shows the relationship among the five:

**THE FIVE AGGREGATES**

**(Without clinging)**

**5: CONSCIOUSNESS**

**Our experience is what the mind creates regarding sensations**

**4: CONDITIONING FACTORS**

**There are 50 factors, wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral**

**THE 7 AWAKENING FACTORS**

**CRAVING/CLINGING**

**VIPASSANA**

**3: FEELING (VEDANA)**

**Pleasant, unpleasant or neutral**

**SAMADHI & PASSADHI**

**Concentration & Tranquility**

**2: PERCEPTION**

 **(SANNA)**

**THE FIVE HINDRANCES**

**(When set aside)**

**1: FORM (RUPA)**

**The Five Sense Doors:**

**Eyes, Ears, Nose, Tongue, and General Body Sensing**

**THE FIVE AGGREGATES WITH CLINGING**

To describe this verbally, the Five Sense Doors channel stimulation into the nervous system. The bridge for this transmission involves the aggregating functions these characteristics: *Perception*, which initiates a preliminary focus of attention that organizes the incoming data into recognizable “bits”; the process of *feeling* develops an affective response (An *affect* is a sensation with a felt sense of impulsive urgency. An *approach affect* means *the perceived sensation and feeling is desirable*, while an *avoidance affect* means the *perceived sensation and feeling is undesirable*). The full development of the self involves the *conditioning factors*, through the action of craving and clinging.

One of the levels of the Awakening process is direct awareness of *nama/rupa*, (nah-mah/roo-pah), which is translated as *name/form*. We train the mind to be sensitive enough and dispassionate enough to “deconstruct” the self, which manifests as the effect of craving and clinging—this process is called *nama*. Direct knowledge of nama/rupa involves direct recognition that what the mind makes out of *rupa*, sensory stimulation, is only an approximation, a fabricated representation of reality that may or may not provide a beneficial response to the circumstances of the moment.

The conditioning factors relate the perception and associated feeling to prior experience, which in this context can be understood as karma, through which an intention is formed and acted on. Most sensations are not considered relevant in the moment of experiencing them, so are functionally disregarded through perception, which initiates a process that determines which sensations are relevant, derived from one’s prior experience--karma. Craving and clinging bind nama and rupa, reflected in consciousness, so the illusion of a unitary self is apparent. The goal of the vipassana process is to “unbind” the craving and clinging process through direct awareness that reveals impermanence and therefore the absence of an enduring self, as described in the above quoted excerpt from a sutta. Here is the contemplation that reveals the way vipassana points to *anicca* (ah-nee-chah), the transient nature of subjective experience; the excerpt is from the fourth foundation of mindfulness, translated by Thanissaro:

"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.

It’s crucial to understand the dynamics of the input/perception/feeling/conditioning process. Modern research suggests that this process requires only about 1/3 of a second to complete, reiterates 3 times per second, and never pauses! As the process repeats, other parts of the brain are processing the perceptions in more elaborate ways, making all sorts of aggregated associations The new initial perceptions are overlaid by the karmic associations from the past, and, depending on the potency of affect and how many times the associations occurred in the past, new data input is disregarded or misaligned with what would be the best response. The result is that the conditioning process can never quite keep up with the stream of data input. Some of the resulting associations are poorly matched to the nature of the current circumstances, which contributes to the distress and confusion that is dukkha and produces a dysfunctional response to the current environmental conditions. Modern research suggests that the default human meaning-making process puts more attention on the conditioning than on fresh data input. Functionally, this suggests that we’re fabricating a self-defining story derived from memory when mindfulness isn’t well developed. This, I believe represents the problem of clinging according to contemporary psychological views. The affective drives represent craving, and the tendency to fabricate cognitive processes represents clinging, to the extent that mindfulness isn’t fully functioning.

The following are more detailed reviews of the elements of the Five Aggregates:

**RUPAKKHANDA**

This grouping is almost synonymous with the first foundation of mindfulness, *kayanupassana* (kah-yah-noo-pah-sah-nah), *mindfulness of the body.* There’s an important differentiation regarding the terms *rupa* and *kaya.* The word *kaya* is typically translated as *body*, while *rupa* is translated as *form* or *materiality*. Rupa as a concept specifically related to the five aggregates includes light, sound, temperature, liquidity, flavor, odor, pressure/hardness-softness, etc. Rupa is whatever stimulates the eyes, ears, etc. Kaya is a concept specific to the practice of vipassana, noting how the mind responds to the experience of being stimulated by light, sound, etc.; therefore, the rupakkhanda is the aggregated cascade of various stimulating elements and the accompanying mind conditioning factors.

**VEDANAKKHANDA**

This grouping is also almost synonymous with the second foundation of mindfulness, *vedanupassana, mindfulness of feelings. Vedana* (vway-dah-nah) is typically translated as feeling, the affective quality of experience, as mentioned above. *Nupassana* (noo-pah-sah-nah) involves the process of mindfully investigating one’s subjective experience, *vipassana* (vee-pah-sah-nah).The term in the context of the five aggregates simply refers to the feeling associated with the stimulation from sensory input, for example, the stimulation of the eye and optic nerve as it’s initially processed in the limbic area of the brain, to assess whether the mind should engage or avoid a situation. Each of the “sense doors” initiates a feeling response: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The function of vedana is closely interactive with *sanna* (sahn-yah), the Pali word for *perception*, which is the next aggregate.

Some commentators view vedana as having five functions: pleasant physical feeling, unpleasant physical feeling, pleasant mental feeling, unpleasant mental feeling, and neutral feeling. Vedana is also part of the dynamic of *paticca sammupada* (pah-tee-chah-sah-moo-pah-dah), typically translated as *dependent origination*. I prefer to render a translation as *contingent provisional emergence,* which I believe more usefully describes the dynamic, interactive process. Paticca samuppada describes the dynamic process whereby a moment of aggregation of the five categories comes into being and dissolves. When not viewed with Wisdom, vedana almost instantly becomes craving, “bonding” the aggregates into a view of an enduring self. Understanding vedana directly and experientially, with the ability to not be “enchanted” by craving and clinging is key to spiritual development. In this way, wise attention regarding vedana is key to understanding and managing the paticca samuppada process.

**SANNAKKHANDA**

*Sanna* (sahn-yah) functions to provide *an initial distinction regarding a particular part of the flow of data input in the mind*. In the classical commentaries, sanna is compared to what a carpenter does while building something: Determining the length of space that is to be occupied by a piece of wood with a tape measure, then using the tape and a pencil to mark the wood so that, when it’s cut, it will fit appropriately into the space.

The function of sanna is very closely interactive with vedana and plays a critical role during the process of awakening: When mindful investigation is absent, a misperception about the stimulation prevails, identifying that which is transitory as permanent, and separating out a fabricated, provisional “self”, set apart from the rest of reality. This misperception is called *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), translated as *ignorance* or *delusion*, and, when combined with desire and aversion, is the primary cause of suffering.

As the practice of mindful investigation is perfected, perception “recognizes” the stimulus as transient and doesn’t function to falsely develop the “selfing story” which creates a delusional separation. The transient flow of data input is registered, and the subsequent aggregation is organized around processes that lead to develop freedom from suffering.

**SANKHARAKKHANDA**

*Sankhara* (sahn-kah-ruh) is a complex term in Buddhist psychology. *The function of sankhara is to provide meaning and set goals for behavior regarding feelings and perceptions in the ongoing flow of experience*. Sankhara is functionally synonymous with *cetasika* (cheh-tah-sih-kah), which is translated as *the collection of constituent sankharas that condition the mind*. Cetasikas are 50 in number, representing various functions of consciousness, such as mindfulness, aversion, volition, confidence, etc. In that way, a cetasika is a category within which content is stored. The content stored in human cetasikas is what makes our individual experience unique and personal.

When considering sankhara synonymously with cetasikas, sankhara is like a noun, that is, a static memory stored away in the unconscious that has the potential to be activated when conditions similar enough to prior experience—this stored potential memory is called *vipaka* (vee-pah-kah) in Buddhist psychology. When rupa, vedana and sanna are activated, sankhara functions as a verb, that is, the static memory actively shapes the emergence of a meaningful “selfing story” into conscious awareness. The activated sankhara formation produces behavior, and this production is called karma. The mental aftereffect of the kamma-conditioned behavior goes back into the cetasika, stored as memory—vipaka-- until new stimulation reactivates the sankhara. In this way the functioning of sankhara is synonymous with karma.

**VINNANAKKHANDA**

*Vinnana* (vih-nyah-nuh) is typically translated as *consciousness*; like sankhara, it is a complex term, depending on the context of its use. There are two terms that are almost synonymous with vinnana: c*itta* (chee-tah)*,* and *manas* mah-nass)*.* Wikipedia applies this distinction regarding vinnana and citta:

…there is a similarity between [viññāna](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vi%C3%B1%C3%B1%C4%81na) and citta; they are both associated with the qualitative condition of a human being. Viññāna provides awareness and continuity by which one knows one's moral condition, and citta is an abstraction representing that condition. Citta is therefore closely related to volitions; this connection is also etymological, as citta comes from the same verbal root in Pali as the active terms meaning "to will". (Quoting Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience.* LUZAC Oriental, 1996, page 112.)

Regarding the word *manas*, it could be understood as *the capacity to think*. Perhaps the terms can be understood in this way: *Vinnana* is *reflective conscious awareness*, *citta* is *the momentary emergence into consciousness of a thought through the action of the conditioning factors known as cetasikas/sankhara/karma,* and *manas* represents *the ongoing binding and integration of thoughts into a stream*, the “selfing story”.

In the Buddhist system, consciousness cannot exist without an object reflected upon it. The capacity to be aware is still a mystery to the scientific world—we can use technology to understand where in the brain different neurological functions occur, but the binding together of these functions as consciousness cannot be analyzed technologically. The Buddha never discussed such metaphysical topics (other than to make a metaphorical point while teaching). He was always saying he was here to describe the cause of suffering and the ways and means for alleviating suffering. Therefore, conscious awareness was a subjective “given” to be mindfully investigated, that is, given the direct experience of awareness of an object, through the lens of the conditioning factors, the consideration of what the object is, apart from the subjectivity of awareness, is irrelevant. Any speculation about metaphysical views is a sidetrack away from the path towards liberation from suffering.

When a person, through repeated direct experience of Nirvana, the unconditioned, becomes an Arhant (ahr-hahnt), totally Awakened, the Five Aggregates continue to operate, but without the effect of craving and clinging. The Five Aggregates concept can arguably be described as the earliest psychological description of a theory of personality. The history of Buddhism depended on the initial organization of the concepts and practices created by the Buddha, a fully Awakened individual, during the approximately 45 years he lived after his becoming the Buddha, so his personality was still highly functional after Awakening. The only thing missing was *dukkha* (doo-kah), the *distress* and *confusion* that results from craving and clinging to what the mind creates as a self.

I hope this is helpful, and I wish you well. Peter