**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. 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))

This concept is revisited in the *Satipatthana Sutta,* as a stanza in the fourth foundation of mindfulness:

"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 the mental qualities in & of themselves or focused externally... unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the five clinging-aggregates.” (translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

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 elements aggregates “bonds” them into what seems to be an enduring/autonomous self. *Upadana* (oo-pah-dah-nah) is translated as *clinging* or *attachment*, and this is 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 a dynamic process that is constantly reforming, according to variable conditions, internal and external.

Here, in brief, are the aggregates: *Form, Perception, Feeling, Conditioning Factors*, and *Consciousness*. These terms don’t describe “things”; rather, they are processes. *Form* is a process of data input, 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 data input meaningfully, and *consciousness* is the function of awareness that reflects perception, feeling and conditioning factors.

Below is a graphic that shows the relationship among the five:

**THE FIVE AGGREGATES**

**(Without clinging)**

**5: CONSCIOUSNESS**

**Our experience is what the mind makes regarding form**

**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 is the combined functions of perception, which demarcates the incoming data into recognizable “bits”, and 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*).

One of the levels of the Awakening process is direct awareness of *nama/rupa*, which is translated as *name/form*. We train the mind to be sensitive enough and dispassionate enough to “deconstruct” the self, which manifests as craving/clinging effects nama. Direct knowledge of nama/rupa is the recognition that what the mind makes out of sensory stimulation is only an approximation, a fabricated representation of reality that may or may not be beneficial.

The conditioning factors relate the perception and associated affect to prior experience (memory, that is, karma); then a intention is formed and acted on. Most sensations are not considered relevant in the moment of experiencing them, so are functionally disregarded. 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” them to reveal impermanence and hence the absence of a self. Here is the contemplation that reveals the way vipassana points to anicca, 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 associations (Some of the associations are poorly matched to the data input, which contributes to the distress and confusion that is dukkha). The new initial perceptions are overlaid by the 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. 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 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.

**RUPAKKHANDA**

This grouping is almost synonymous with the first foundation of mindfulness, *kayanupassana.* There’s an important differentiation regarding the terms *rupa (roo-pah)* and *kaya (kah-yah).* The word *kaya* is typically translated as *body*, while *rupa* is translated as *form* or *materiality*. Rupa is a concept specific in use as related to the five aggregates, and 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 the experience of being stimulated by light, sound, etc.; therefore, the rupakkhanda is the aggregation of various stimulating elements. The four primary elements represent the subjective experience: hardness/softness, heat/coolness, movement, and fluidity/cohesion. The elements are conceived as co-occurring, for example, ice feels hard, cold, and tends to be slippery when held in the hand, which combines fluidity (water) and movement (slippery). The ice is rupa, while the subjective experience is kaya.

**VEDANAKKHANDA**

This grouping is also almost synonymous with the second foundation of mindfulness, *vedanupassana.* Vedana (vway-dah-nah) is typically translated as feeling, the affective quality of experience, as mentioned above. 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, 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 functions to identify and recognize a particular part of the flow of data input in the mind. In the classical commentaries, sanna is compared to the measuring a carpenter does while building something: measuring out the length of space that is to be occupied by a piece of wood with a tape measure, then using the tape to measure the uncut piece of wood and marking it 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 data input prevails, perceiving that which is transitory as permanent, and separating out a fabricated, provisional “self”, set apart from the rest of reality. This misperception is the primary cause of suffering.

As the practice of mindful investigation is perfected, the perception of the data input “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 benevolent intention, leading to further freedom from suffering.

**SANKHARAKKHANDA**

*Sankhara* (sahn-kah-ruh) is a complex term in Buddhist psychology. *The function of sankhara is to provide meaning 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. When rupa, vedana and sanna are activated, sankhara functions as a verb, that is, the static memory actively shapes the meaningful “selfing story” which emerges into conscious awareness. The activated sankhara formation produces behavior, and this production is called kamma (karma in Sanskrit). The mental aftereffect of the kamma-conditioned behavior goes back into the cetasika, stored as memory until new stimulation reactivates the sankhara.

**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,* and *manas.* 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 *conscious awareness*, *citta* is *the momentary arising of a thought through the action of the conditioning factors known as cetasikas,* 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. This isn’t all that mysterious from the Buddhist perspective, as the Buddha never discussed 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”, 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.

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