Understanding The Five Aggregates

The Five Aggregates of Clinging, in Pali known as *Pancupadanakhandha* (pahn-choo-pah-dah-nah-kahn-dah), is a core concept of the Buddhist analysis of personality. The word *panca* (pahn-chah) is translated as *five*, *upadana* (ooh-pah-dah-nah) as *clinging*, and *khandha* (kahn-dah) as *aggregation*. The aggregates are: Form (The experience of sensory stimulation), Feeling (The affective “push-pull” experience—not necessarily emotionally expressed), Perception/Cognition (The way the brain separates out particular aspects of the flood of sensory stimulation for more focused attention), and Consciousness (How experience is reflected in awareness).

An aggregation is 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 into what seems to be an enduring/autonomous self. When investigated with Wisdom, the effects of craving and clinging are dissolved through realizing the transitory nature of the interactions between the five aggregates. Here is how this is described in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, from Analayo’s book: “Satipatthana—The Direct Path To Realization”, on page 201:

He knows “such is material form, such its arising, such its passing away; such is feeling, such its arising, such its passing away; such is cognition, such its arising, such its passing away; such are volitions, such their arising, such their passing away; such is consciousness, such its arising, such its passing away.”

An investigation of the Five Aggregates is intended to deconstruct the misperception that there is an enduring and autonomous self that inhabits the body, and the impermanent nature of the different functions of the body are also realized. Each aggregate can be investigated through the structured analysis provided by the Satipatthana Sutta—the form aggregate in the First Foundation of Mindfulness, the Feeling aggregate in the Second Foundation of Mindfulness, the Consciousness aggregate in the Third Foundation of Mindfulness and the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. Ignorance of the Three Characteristics—Impermanence, Suffering and Non-Self—causes the Five Aggregates to be misperceived as enduring and in control, as described in the above quoted book, on page 207:

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”. By laying bare these five facets of the notion “I am”, this analysis of subjective personality into aggregates singles out the component parts of the misleading assumption that an independent and unchanging agent inheres in human existence, thereby making possible the arising of insight into the ultimately selfless (*anattã*) nature of all aspects of experience.

One can mistakenly infer that insight into selflessness means life is meaningless, a nihilistic view that the Buddha refuted several times through the discourses, without acknowledging that there is some version of an ultimate self. The Buddhist view creates responsibility for meaning, organized around the principles and practices found in the Noble Eightfold Path, which is described at the end of the Satipatthana Sutta. In the context of contemporary cultural life, this teaching can create a much more responsible and adaptive approach to living a good life, provided goodness is not subjugated to the distorted values of contemporary consumerist norms. Here is another quote from the same source, found on page 211:

The teaching of *anattã*, however, is not directed against what are merely the functional aspects of personal existence, but aims only at the sense of “I am” that commonly arises in relation to it. Otherwise an *arahant* would simply be unable to function in any way. This, of course, is not the case, as the Buddha and his *arahant* disciples were still able to function coherently. In fact, they were able to do so with more competence than before their awakening, since they had completely overcome and eradicated all mental defilements and thereby all obstructions to proper mental functioning.

A well-known simile of relevance in this context is that of a chariot which does not exist as a substantial thing apart from, or in addition to, its various parts. Just as the term “chariot” is simply a convention, so the superimposition of “I”-dentifications on experience are nothing but conventions. On the other hand, to reject the existence of an independent, substantial chariot does not mean that it is impossible to ride in the conditioned and impermanent functional assemblage of parts to which the concept “chariot” refers. Similarly, to deny the existence of a self does not imply a denial of the conditioned and impermanent interaction of the five aggregates.

The key to realizing the benefits of the five aggregates concept incorporates two awarenesses, one being the deconstruction of the aggregates in ways similar to taking apart the component elements of the chariot, and the second being the transitory nature of each of the aggregates. Here is another quote from the same source, found on pages 213-214:

In the discourses, contemplation of the impermanent nature of the aggregates, and thereby of oneself, stands out as a particularly prominent cause for gaining realization. Probably because of its powerful potential for awakening, the Buddha spoke of this particular contemplation as his “lion’s roar”. The reason underlying the eminent position of contemplating the impermanent nature of the aggregates is that it directly counters all conceit and “I”- or “mine”-making. The direct experience of the fact that every aspect of oneself is subject to change undermines the basis on which conceit and “I”- or “mine”-making take their stand. Conversely, to the extent to which one is no longer under the influence of “I” or “mine” notions in regard to the five aggregates, any change or alteration of the aggregates will not lead to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. As the Buddha emphatically advised: “give up the aggregates, since none of them is truly your own!”

In practical terms, contemplating the arising and passing away of each aggregate can be undertaken by observing change taking place in every aspect of one’s personal experience, be these, for example, the cycle of breaths or circulation of the blood, the change of feelings from pleasant to unpleasant, the variety of cognitions and volitional reactions arising in the mind, or the changing nature of conscious-ness, arising at this or that sense door. Such practice can then build up to contemplating the arising and passing away of all five aggregates together, when one comprehensively surveys the five aggregate components of any experience and at the same time witnesses the impermanent nature of this experience. Contemplating the arising and passing away of the five aggregates also highlights their conditioned nature.

As mentioned above, one of two approaches to realizing the liberation potential of contemplating the five aggregates involves investigating each of the five aggregates in the context of their separate functioning. This is a daunting but beneficial approach and several subsequent Dharma talks will focus on this process. Among those reviewed the next contemplation of the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, the Six Sense Bases, found in the above quoted book on pages 216-217:

He knows the eye, he knows forms, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented. He knows the ear, he knows sounds, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.… He knows the nose, he knows odours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.…

He knows the tongue, he knows flavours, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.… He knows the body, he knows tangibles, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and.…He knows the mind, he knows mind-objects, and he knows the fetter that arises dependent on both, and he also knows how an unarisen fetter can arise, how an arisen fetter can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed fetter can be prevented.

This quote is a rendition of the First Foundation of Mindfulness, with more specific reference to each of the “sense bases”. This represents the raw, unprocessed stimulation that is as yet unconditioned by the mind. The term “fetter” is described as the bond between the sequential arising/passing away of self-state organizations that must be understood and relinquished in order to experience Nirvana. There are a variety of renderings of the hindrances, with different numbers and characteristics. The system that Analayo describes in the above quoted book, on pages 219-220:

Although a fetter arises in dependence on sense and object, the binding force of such a fetter should not be attributed to the senses or objects per se. The discourses illustrate this with the example of two bulls, bound together by a yoke. Just as their bondage is not caused by either of the bulls, but by the yoke, so too the fetter should not be imputed to either its inner or its outer conditions (for example eye and forms), but to the binding force of desire. In the discourses there is considerable variation in the usage of the term “fetter”, which suggests that to speak of “fetters” does not always necessarily refer to a fixed set, but may sometimes include whatever falls under the same principle, in the sense of fettering and causing bondage. The most common presentation of “fetters” in the discourses lists altogether ten types: belief in a substantial and permanent self, doubt, dogmatic clinging to particular rules and observances, sensual desire, aversion, craving for fine-material existence, craving for immaterial existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance.12

There is a “bridge” between the unprocessed stimulation provided by the sense bases, including between one moment of cognition, the sixth sense base, and the next, and this bridge is manifested by the functions of Feeling and Perception, which can be understood in the context of their position in the Four Foundations conceptual structures. The function of Consciousness is also understood in this context as the “screen” upon which the function of Volitions, as described by Analayo. Volitions are a key function, but only one of 50 mind conditioning factors described as *cetasikas* (cheh-tah-see-kahs), translated as *those functions that condition the mind*. The review of the cetasikas is important for understanding how to deconstruct the Five Aggregates of Clinging, and will take several Dharma talks to accomplish.

In addition to the Six Sense Bases, a further consideration is necessary to understand the implications of how the Five Aggregates of Clinging concept fits into the process of Awakening. A very important concept of Buddhism in all the various traditions is Paticcasamuppada, traditionally translated as Dependent Origination. This core concept will be more effectively understood with a review of the Fourth Aggregate, which Analayo’s book terms the Volitions, found within the 52 Cetasikas (cheh-tah-see-kahs), those factors that condition the mind, and which will be reviewed over the next several talks. Then there will be a review of paticcasamuppada, followed by each of the five aggregates in more detail.