



Sacramento Insight Meditation

A Lump of Foam:

The Five Aggregates of Clinging

October 17, 2019

The five Aggregates of Clinging are an excellent means for seeing the three universal characteristics: impermanence, conditionality/insubstantiality and suffering/stress. This phrase is repeated like a mantra in the many suttas about the aggregates: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

In the Satipatthana Sutta and many other suttas, the traditional order of the Aggregates of Clinging is: material form (*rūpa*); feeling tone (*vedanā*); perception/cognition (*saññā*); mental formations/volitions/fabrications (*sankhāra*); consciousness (*viññāna*).

We may also better understand their relationship to suffering/stress by considering the aggregates in order as they appear in the cycle of reactivity (dependent origination; *paticca samuppada*):

[ignorance] => mental formations (*sankhāra*) => consciousness (*viññāna*) => [name &] form (*rūpa*) => [six sense doors] => perception [contact] (*saññā*) => feeling tone (*vedanā*) => [craving] => [clinging] => [attachment] => [identification] => [unskillful intentions, thoughts, speech, and action]

“The Buddha saw that all experience involves a process in which the raw data streaming into the mind through the ... sense doors is compiled and synthesized into a virtual world of meaning. ... There are five primary categories or systems, whereby the information flowing through these sense doors is processed.” Siegel, Germer, and Olendzki, (2008).

Further reading

Dhammas: the Aggregates, Chapter 10 from Satipatthana: the direct Path to Realization, Analayo p. 201-215.

Similes from SN 22:95, “A Burden Off the Mind: a study guide on the five aggregates,” Thanissaro Bhikkhu, p. 44:

Mindfulness, Siegel, Germer, and Olendzki, from Didonna, F (Ed.) (2008). Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness. NY. Springer.

Further Practice

Practice involves understanding that the aggregates (all conditioned things) are impermanent, clinging to these things give rise to a false sense that the self is an unchanging inherently real thing, and that ignorance of these characteristics of experience leads to suffering. How can we bring these deep insights into our everyday life?

Imagine that you are deeply involved in a satisfying project. The work flows; there is a sense of ease; the attention shifts as needed to keep the flow moving forward. Now imagine that you are interrupted by a telephone call. From the sound (consciousness) of the voice (form) you can tell it is a telemarketer (perception). You know from previous calls (mental formations) that these calls are really irritating (feeling tone: unpleasant). You resent this interruption and want to return to your project (craving). As you think about how you need to get this project done today (clinging), a sense of self-righteousness arises (identification) and you think of the perfect thing to say before you hang up (unskillful intention). What do you do now?

This Cycle of Reactivity fires on various levels throughout our daily life. When the separate sense of self arises, we are about to go unconscious and revert to habitual, unskillful patterns of behavior that harm ourselves and others.

In the days ahead, see if you can sense the Cycle of Reactivity at work before it reaches the stage of harmful speech and action. Note when a feeling tone of pleasant or unpleasant arises. Note when unpleasant turns to aversion or pleasant escalates to desire. Note when the mind shifts from “I would prefer this...” to “I need this...” In short, note when the mind clings to the Five Aggregates.

You may find it useful to label an object of desire or aversion “form.” See if this helps diffuse some of the power behind an old habit of mind. Be gentle with yourself, but resolve to see these patterns clearly. Reflect on what you have learned.

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