**The Significance of the Five Aggregates**

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Buddhism speaks of two truths, the apparent or conventional truth (sammuti sacca) and the ultimate or highest truth (paramattha sacca).

In ordinary language we speak of a ‘being’, but in the ultimate sense there is no such ‘being’; there is only a manifestation of ever-changing psycho-physical forces or energies. These forces or energies form the five aggregates, and what we call a ‘being’ is nothing but a combination of these everchanging five aggregates.

**What are the five Aggregates?**

1. The first is the **Aggregate of Matter** (rupakkhandha). Matter contains and comprises the Four Great Primaries (cattari mahabhutani) which are traditionally known as, solidity, fluidity, heat or temperature, and motion or vibration (pathavi, apo, tejo, vayo).

In this context, they are not simply earth, water, fire and wind, though conventionally they may be so called. In Buddhist thought, especially in the Abhidhamma, the Higher Doctrine, they are more than that.

Pathavi or solidity is the element of expansion. It is due to this element of expansion that objects occupy space. When we see an object we only see something extended in space and we give a name to it. The element of expansion is present not only in solids, but in liquids, too; for when we see the sea stretched before us even then we see pathavi. The hardness of rock and the softness of paste, the quality of heaviness and lightness in things are also qualities of pathavi, or are particular states of it.

Apo or fluidity is the element of cohesion. It is this element that heaps particles of matter together without allowing them to scatter. The cohesive force in liquids is very strong, for unlike solids, they coalesce even after their separation. Once a solid is broken up or separated the particles do not re-coalesce. In order to join them it becomes necessary to convert the solid into a liquid by raising the temperature, as in the welding of metals. When we see an object we only see an expansion with limits, this expansion or ‘shape’ is possible because of the cohesive force.

Tejo is the element of heat or temperature. It is this element which matures, intensifies or imparts heat to the other three primaries. The vitality of all beings and plants is preserved by this element. From every expansion and shape we get a sensation of heat. This is relative; for when we say that an object is cold, we only mean that the heat of that particular object is less than our body heat, in other words, the temperature of the object is lower than the temperature of our body. Thus it is clear that the so-called ‘coldness’, too, is an element of heat or temperature, of course in a lower degree.

Vayo is the element of motion. It is displacement. This, too, is relative. To know whether a thing is moving or not we need a point which we regard as being fixed, by which to measure that motion, but there is no absolutely motionless object in the universe. Thus the so-called stability, too, is an element of motion. Motion depends on heat. In the complete absence of heat atoms cease to vibrate. Complete absence of heat is only theoretical, we cannot feel it, because then we would not exist, as we, too, are made of atoms.

Every material object is made up of the Four Great Primaries though one or other seems to predominate; if, for instance, the element of solidity (pathavi) preponderates, the material object is called solid, and so on.

From these Great Primaries which always co-exist are derived twenty-four other material phenomena and qualities; among these derivatives (upadayarupa) are included the five sense faculties, namely, the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, and their corresponding sense objects, namely, visible form, sound, smell, taste and tangible things. The aggregate of matter includes the whole realm of physical substance, both in one’s body and in the external world.

2. The second is the **Aggregate of Feeling** or Sensation (vedanakkhandha). All our

feelings are included in this group. Feelings are threefold: pleasant, unpleasant and

neutral. They arise dependant on contact. Seeing a form, hearing a sound, smelling an odour, tasting a flavour, touching some tangible thing, cognizing a mental object, (an idea or thought) man experiences feeling.

When, for instance, eye, form and eye consciousness (cakkhu-vinnana) come together, it is their coincidence that is called contact. Contact means the co-arising of the organ of sense, the object of sense, and sense consciousness. When these are all present together there is no power or force that can prevent the arising of feeling.

Such is the intrinsic nature of contact and feeling. It cannot, however, be said that all

beings experience the same feeling from the same object. One person may derive a

pleasant feeling from a particular object while another has an unpleasant feeling and still another a neutral feeling from the same object. This depends on how the mind and its factors function. Further, a sense object which once evoked a pleasant feeling in a man, may produce an unpleasant or a neutral feeling in him under different circumstances, and so on. Again, what is pleasant to one sense faculty may be unpleasant to another faculty; for instance, a luscious fruit unpleasant to the sight may prove very pleasant to the tongue and so on. Thus, we learn how feeling is conditioned by contact in diverse ways.

3. The third is the **Aggregate of Perception** (sannakkhandha). The function of perception is recognition (samjanana) of objects both physical and mental. Perception, like feeling, also is sixfold: perception of forms, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily contacts and mental objects. Perception in Buddhism is a basic sense perception not like the definition in western philosophy and psychology.

There is a certain affinity between awareness (vinnana, which is the function of consciousness) and recognition (samjanana, the function of perception). While consciousness becomes aware of an object, simultaneously the mental factor of perception takes the distinctive mark of the object and thus distinguishes it from other objects. This distinctive mark is instrumental in cognizing the object a second and a third time, and in fact, every time we become aware of the object. Thus, it is perception that brings about memory.

It is important to note that perceptions often deceive us. Then they become known as illusion or perversity of perceptions. (sanna-vipallasa).

A simile will illustrate the point. A farmer after sowing a field, will set up a scare-crow to protect the seed and for a time the birds will mistake it for a man and will not settle. That is an illusion of perception. Similarly sense and mental objects deceive our mind by producing a false impression. The Buddha, therefore, compares perception to a mirage.

When a particular perception, perverted or not, occurs frequently, it grows stronger and grips our mind. Then it becomes difficult to get rid of that perception, and the result is well explained in this verse of the Suttanipata 26.

‘Who is free from sense perceptions

In him no more bonds exist;

Who by Insight freedom gains

All delusions cease in him;

But who clings to sense perceptions

And to view-points wrong and false

He lives wrangling in this world.’

4. The fourth is **Aggregate of Mental (Volitional) Formations** (samkharakkhandha). In this group are included all mental factors except feeling (vedana) and perception (sanna) mentioned above. The Abhidhamma speaks of fifty-two mental concomitants or factors (cetasika). Feeling and perception are two of them, but they are not volitional activities. The remaining fifty are collectively known as samkhara, Mental or Volitional Formations. Volition (cetana) plays a very important role in the mental realm. In Buddhism no action is considered as karma (kamma) if that action is void of volition/intention. And like feeling and perception, it is of six kinds: Volition directed to forms, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily contacts and mental objects.

5. The fifth is the **Aggregate of Consciousness** (vinnanakkhandha) which is the most important of the aggregates; for it is the receptacle, so to speak, for all the fifty-two mental concomitants or factors, since without consciousness no mental factors are available. Consciousness and the mental factors are interrelated, inter-dependent and coexistent.

Now what is the function of consciousness? Like feeling, perception and volitional

formations, consciousness also has six types and its function is varied. It has its basis and objects. As explained above all our feelings are experienced through the contact of sense faculties with the external world.

The faculty of mind (manindriya) which cognizes mental objects, we know, is not something tangible and perceptible like the other five faculties, which cognize the external world. The eye cognizes the world of colours (vanna) or visible objects (rupa), the ear audible sounds, and so forth. The mind, however, cognizes the world of ideas and thoughts. Indriya (faculty) literally means ‘chief’ or ‘lord’. Forms can only be seen by the faculty of the eye and not by the ear, hearing by the faculty of the ear, and so on. When it comes to the world of thoughts and ideas the faculty of the mind is lord over the mental realm. The eye cannot think thoughts, and collect ideas, but it is instrumental in seeing visible forms, the world of colours.

It is very important here to understand the function of consciousness. Although there is this functional relationship between the faculties and their objects, for instance, eye with forms, ear with sounds and so on, awareness comes through consciousness. In other words, sense objects cannot be experienced with the particular sensitivity without the appropriate kind of consciousness. Now when eye and form are both present, visual consciousness arises dependent on them. Similarly ear and sound, and so on, down to mind and mental objects. Again when the three things, eye, form and eye consciousness, come together, it is their coincidence that is called ‘contact’. From contact comes feeling and so on (as explained in Dependent Arising or Paticca Samuppada).

Thus, consciousness originates through a stimulus arising in the five sense doors and the mind door, the sixth. As consciousness arises through the interaction of the sense faculties and the sense objects, it also is conditioned and not independent. It is not a spirit or soul opposed to matter. Thoughts and ideas which are food for the sixth faculty called mind are also dependent and conditioned. They depend on the external world which the other five sense faculties experience.

The five faculties contact objects, only in the present, that is when objects come in direct contact with the particular faculty. The mind faculty, however, can experience the sense object, whether it is form, sound, smell, taste or touch already cognized by the sense organs. For instance, a visible object, with which the eye came in contact in the past, can be visualized by the mind faculty just as if at this moment although the object is not before the eye. Similarly, with the other sense objects. This is subjective, and it is difficult to experience some of these sensations. This sort of activity of the mind is subtle and sometimes beyond ordinary comprehension.

Thus, the whole cosmos becomes a mere mass of sensation. When we see colour patches and something solid or expanded we make an entity out of them but in reality it is not so. The mind is merely giving a certain interpretation to phenomena which exist in the external world, but which are not necessarily the same as they appear through the channels of the senses. As this mind or consciousness lies outside the realm of the physical world it cannot be submitted to a chemical test; it has neither size, shape, dimension or bulk. It is invisible, intangible and as such cannot be discerned by the five senses. It is not under the control of other factors, but is master of them. And it must clearly be understood that mind is not an everlasting spirit in the form of a ‘Self’ or a Soul’ or an Ego-entity. It is neither a spirit opposed to matter nor a projection, an offspring of matter.

There were many during the time of the Buddha who thought, and there are many who continue to think that consciousness in the form of a permanent enduring self or soul exists in man, and that it continues through life and at death transmigrates from one life to another and binds lives together.

We see a glaring instance of this in the Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya (MN 38). One of the Buddha’s own disciples, Sati by name, held the following view:

‘In so far as I understand the Dhamma taught by the Buddha, it is the same consciousness that transmigrates and wanders about (in rebirth).’

When Sati intimated his point of view to the Master, the Buddha questioned him:

‘What is this consciousness, Sati?’

‘It is that which expresses, which feels (vado vedeyyo) and experiences the result of good and evil deeds now here now there.’

‘But to whom, foolish man, have you heard me teaching the Dhamma in this way? Have I not in many ways explained consciousness as arising out of conditions, that apart from conditions there is no arising of consciousness?’

The Buddha then explained the different types of consciousness and made clear, by means of examples, how consciousness arises depending on conditions.

These are the five aggregates explained briefly. None of these aggregates are permanent. They are ever subject to change. Leaving aside philosophy, and looking at the matter from a purely scientific standpoint, nothing conditioned and compounded is permanent. Whatever is impermanent is pain laden, is sorrow-fraught. It is not at all astonishing if the reader concludes that this Buddhist concept of suffering is very uninviting. As the Buddha has pointed out, all beings crave for the pleasant and the pleasurable. They loathe the unpleasant and the non-pleasurable. The grieving ones seek pleasures which those already happy seek more and more.

It is, however, wrong to imagine that the Buddhist outlook on life and the world is a gloomy one, and that the Buddhist is in low spirits. Far from it, he smiles as he walks through life. He who understands the true nature of life is the happiest individual, for he is not upset by the evanescent nature of things. He tries to see things as they are, and not as they seem to be. Conflicts arise in man when he is confronted with the facts of life such as ageing, illness, death and so forth, but frustration and disappointment do not vex him when he is ready to face them with a brave heart. This view of life is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but is a realistic view. The man who ignores the principle of unrest in things, the intrinsic nature of suffering, is upset when confronted with the vicissitudes of life, because he has not trained his mind to see things as they really are.

Man’s recognition of pleasures as lasting, leads to much vexation, when things occur quite contrary to his expectations. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a detached outlook towards life and things pertaining to life. Detachment cannot bring about frustration, disappointment and mental torment, because there is no clinging to one thing and another, but letting go. This indeed is not easy, but it is the sure remedy for controlling, if not eradicating, unsatisfactoriness.

The Buddha sees suffering as suffering, and happiness as happiness, and explains that all cosmic pleasure, like all other conditioned things, is evanescent, is a passing show. He warns man against attaching too much importance to fleeting pleasures, for they sooner or later beget discontent. Equanimity is the best antidote for both pessimism and optimism. Equanimity is evenness of mind and not sullen indifference. It is the result of a calm, concentrated mind. It is hard, indeed, to be undisturbed when touched by the vicissitudes of life, but the man who cultivates equanimity is not upset.

A mother was asked why she did not lament over the death of her beloved son. Her answer was philosophical: ‘Uninvited he came, uninvited he passed away, as he came so he went, what use is there in lamenting, weeping and wailing?’ Thus people bear their misfortune with equanimity. Such is the advantage of a tranquil mind. It is unshaken by loss and gain, blame and praise, and undisturbed by adversity. This frame of mind is brought about by viewing the sentient world in its proper perspective. Thus, calm or evenness of mind leads man to enlightenment and deliverance from suffering. Absolute happiness cannot be derived from things conditioned and compounded. What we hug in great glee this moment, it turns into a source of dissatisfaction the next moment. Pleasures are short-lived, and never lasting. The mere gratification of the sense faculties we call pleasure and enjoyment, but in the absolute sense of the word such gratification is not happy. Joy too is dukkha, unsatisfactory (nandipidukkha); for it is transient. If we with our inner eye try to see things in their proper perspective, in their true light, we will be able to realize that the world is but an illusion (maya) that leads astray the beings who cling to it.

All the so-called mundane pleasures are fleeting, and only an introduction to pain. They give very temporary relief from life’s miserable ulcers. This is what is known as suffering (dukkha) produced by change. Thus, we see that dukkha never ceases work, it functions in some form or other and is always at work -- as dukkha dukkhata, viparinama dukkhata and samkhara dukkhata as explained above.

All kinds of suffering man can conceive of come into being, reach a peak, and cease in the Five Aggregates of Grasping. Apart from the Five Aggregates of Grasping, which are constantly changing, no suffering, gross or subtle, can exist. Wittingly or not, all beings exert themselves to avoid disharmony and unsatisfactoriness, and to gain pleasure, joy and happiness. The exertion goes on continuously, but no lasting happiness is ever experienced. Pleasure seems to be an interval between two pains. This is a clear indication that wherever there are the Five Aggregates of Grasping there is dukkha, suffering, unsatisfactoriness. It may be noted that like happiness, suffering is not lasting, because it too is conditioned and subject to change.

Sir Edwin Arnold paints this picture of pain in The Light of Asia:

‘Ache of birth, ache of helpless days,

Ache of hot youth and ache of manhood’s prime,

Ache of chill grey years and choking death

These fill your piteous time.’

As the Buddha says:

‘A burden, indeed, are the five aggregates,

Happy it is to lay down that burden.’

This is Nibbana, the absolute happiness (nibbanam paramam sukham).

The Buddha, the Lord over suffering, did not have a funereal expression on his face when he explained to his followers the import of dukkha, suffering; far from it his face was always happy, serene and composed for it showed his contented mind:

‘Happy, indeed, we live,

We who have no burdens.

On joy we ever feed

Like radiant deities.’

He encouraged his disciples not to be morbid, but to cultivate the all-important quality of joy (piti) which is a factor of enlightenment. The result of this admonition of the Buddha is seen in ‘Psalms of the Early Buddhists’ in which are recorded the inspired joyful songs (udana) of the disciples, male and female upon attainment of Nibbana. A dispassionate study of Buddhism will tell us that it is a message radiating joy and hope and not a defeatist philosophy of pessimism.