

The Five Aggregates of Personality View

By
Ian Allan Andrews

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Bhikkhus, just as the dawn is the forerunner and first indication of the rising sun, so is right view the forerunner and first indication of wholesome states.

– *Anguttara Nikaya*, 10:121

Now this has been said by the Blessed One: “One who sees dependent co-arising sees the *Dhamma*; one who sees the *Dhamma* sees dependent co-arising.” And these five aggregates affected by clinging are dependently arisen. The desire, indulgence, inclination, and holding based on these five aggregates affected by clinging is the origin of suffering. The removal of desire and lust, the abandonment of desire and lust for these five aggregates affected by clinging is the cessation of suffering.

– *Majjhima Nikaya*, 28:28.

Thus, from these two short quotations, the Buddha expounds the key insight into ridding oneself of the delusion of personality view, such view itself being responsible for the suffering of conditioned beings. Built on the bedrock of the notion of impermanence (*anicca*), the five aggregates, when viewed properly, are seen for the elements that they are and not for the abstracted personality view that most people take them for. Because of their arisen quality as aggregates, they give the appearance of there being a united whole personality behind their manifestation. But on closer observation, in the form of individual elements, one can begin to see not only their quality of impermanence but also the way in which they come together to form what seems to be a substantial whole entity. Therefore one can confirm from direct personal experience the illusion that they present.

Having an intellectual grasp of the principles enunciated in the Buddha’s teaching on the Five Aggregates is not enough to remove their influence from our life. Because the individual mind has been conditioned from birth into thinking and viewing the manifestation of the body, its feelings, thought formations, and consciousness as that of a unique personality which is a being – an individual or an “I” – such conditioning can only begin to be broken down by direct penetration of the truth in the teaching through one’s own immediate experience. This initial penetration is followed up with the effort to continually bring the mind back into alignment with this reality whenever it is confronted by the illusion of other beings in life. This is done through both contemplation and the establishment of right view regarding the five aggregates of personality view.

Before we endeavor to explore the methods and means for bringing about a clearer practical realization of this truth encompassing the five aggregates, it will be necessary that we identify the nature and qualification of each of these aggregates one by one. The five aggregates affected by clinging are a classificatory scheme devised by the Buddha for demonstrating the

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composite nature of personality. The scheme describes every possible type of conditioned state which a human being can enter into through the means of five interconnected categories which make up the illusion of a self. These categories are: (1) material form or matter, (2) feeling or the affective response to phenomena, (3) perception, (4) mental formations or volition, and (5) consciousness. An examination of each of these individual aspects will help us to understand how these elements act upon the mind in the matter of bringing about the view of a unique personality.

The aggregate of material form (*rupa*) includes the physical body with its sense faculties as well as external material objects. Living material forms themselves are composed of the Four Great Elements, namely earth or solidity, water or fluidity, fire or heat, and wind or motion, and also of the corresponding Derivatives of the Four Great Elements. If we examine our physical body, we find that it is composed of these four elements of solidity (the flesh and bones), fluidity (blood and other bodily fluids), heat (it must maintain a constant temperature of 98.6 degrees in order to properly carry out its metabolic functions), and wind (the air in the lungs and other bodily gasses). Included in the Derivatives of the Four Great Elements are our six material sense-organs, that is, the faculties of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind as well as their corresponding objects in the external world, namely visible form, sound, odor, taste, tangible things, and mind objects – thoughts, ideas, or conceptions. Thus the whole realm of matter, as it is sensed both internally and externally, is included in the aggregate of matter.

It might be mentioned here in the interest of clarification that in Buddhist thought, mind (*manas*) is considered the sixth sense. Mind is but another sense faculty (*indriya*) like the eye or the ear. Without the mind, the sense objects grasped by the eye, the body, the nose etcetera could not be known. For instance, a red rubber ball looks very similar to a red apple of similar size, yet without the mind and the ability of recognition to help distinguish between the two we might take them to be the same object. Because the world is made up of more than just objects which the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body can grasp, there is need of a sense faculty which can also grasp thought or ideas and conceptions. Ideas and thoughts are also a part of the world and are produced and conditioned by physical experiences; hence mind is needed in order to know and analyze these additional experiences. Thus mind is considered a sense faculty, like the eye or the ear, and is made up of five elements: sense-contact, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. In this pentad, consciousness grasps the object, be it mental or material, while perception distinguishes the differences between this and that object.

Additionally, mind can be controlled and developed like any other faculty, and the Buddha speaks quite often about the value of controlling and disciplining the six senses or faculties. A good deal of the *Dhamma* (Dharma in Sanskrit) is consumed by discussion about maintaining control of the six senses, which is gained through insight into their essential nature as insubstantial or without self, impermanent or in flux, and ultimately dissatisfying. In this endeavor of self-discipline, it is mind which is utilized to its utmost abilities. Therefore, it is mind that needs to be properly trained to deal with the physical world and its phenomena. Thus a properly trained mind is a disciplined mind, and vice versa.

These derivatives of the four elements are also included in the other four elements that make up the five aggregates, hence each of these other four are affected by the six internal organs and the six external objects. For example, feelings arise when there is contact between any of the six internal organs and their corresponding six external objects. On account of contact with the eye there is sight; of contact with the ear there is sound; of the nose there is odor; of the

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tongue there is taste; of the body there is tactile sensation or touch; and on account of contact with the mind there is a mental object. This same nature of these six arisen internal and external phenomena can be said to be responsible for the arising of feeling, of perception, of mental formations, and of consciousness. Thus without the eye, no sight phenomenon arises, without the ear, no sound, and so on. And without sight phenomenon, no feeling arises which has sight as its cause, no perception arises, no mental formation arises, and no consciousness arises which has sight as its cause. Of course, this same implication is true for the other five sense faculties, such that feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness all arise with the ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind as well as the eye as its basis.

The aggregate of feeling (*vedana*), the second aggregate, is the affective element in experience as it is sensed as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral through the contact of the physical and mental organs with the external world. We should be careful here not to confuse feeling with emotions. Emotions arise separately as a result of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. Emotions are, in this way, connected to the arisen feeling but they are not the feeling itself. They arise in response to the feeling as a result of the mind's interaction with the feeling in the form of either liking, disliking, or a neutral emotion like boredom. Thus we can see at this point the beginnings of the arising of attachment through the response of our experience of feeling and emotion (closely related to *sankhara*) to internal and external phenomenon.

The third aggregate, perception (*sanna*), is the factor responsible for noting the qualities of things and also accounts for recognition and memory. In other words, it is perception that recognizes special qualities such as colors, like red or yellow, in objects. Perception recognizes the objects themselves, such as between a softball or a grapefruit, it distinguishes between the distinctive qualities of objects – the stitched hide of the soft ball or the rind of the grapefruit. In addition to physical qualities, perception also recognizes the qualities of a mental object. For example, when told to think of a basketball, it is perception which retrieves the mental object – the mental picture of a basketball – from memory along with all its varied detail. Perception therefore covers recognition of the full range of qualities which any object can have, both physical and mental.

Mental formations (*sankhara*), the fourth aggregate, is a term which includes all volitional, emotive, and intellective aspects of mental life. What is generally known as *kamma* (or karma in Sanskrit) is listed under this group. Here reflection on the Buddha's own definition of *kamma* can be brought to mind: “Bhikkhus, it is volition (*cetana*) that I call *kamma*, for having willed, one performs an action through body, speech, or mind.” Volition is mental construction, mental activity. Its function is to direct the mind in the sphere of good, bad, or neutral activities, volition being the factor responsible for the action. Just like feelings and perceptions, volition is of six kinds, connected with the six internal faculties (the eye, ear, nose etc.) and the corresponding six objects (sight, hearing, smelling etc.) in the external world, both physical and mental. Hence, it is only through the performance of volitional actions – such as attention (*manasikara*), will (*chanda*), decision or determination (*adhimokkha*), faith or confidence (*saddha*), concentration of mind (*samadhi*), desire (*raga*) etc. – that karmic effects are produced. There are fifty-two such mental activities which constitute the aggregate of mental formations.

The fifth aggregate, consciousness (*vinnana*), is the basic awareness of an object necessary for all cognition. As with the three preceding aggregates, consciousness is a response

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which has one of the six internal faculties (eye, ear, nose etc.) as its basis and one of the six corresponding external phenomena (visible form, sound, odor etc.) as its object. Once again, it should be understood here that consciousness does not recognize an object. Recognition of an object is the function of perception. The function of consciousness is only to be aware of *the presence of* an object. An example of this might be the awareness of the presence of a circular object. Consciousness is aware of the circular object, yet perception tells us that this object is a ball rather than an apple. Consciousness, therefore, sees objects, hears objects, smells objects, tastes objects, has tactile contact with an object and/or mental contact with an object, be it a physical object, like a ball, or a mental object, like a thought or idea. Consciousness thus brings an object into awareness so that perception can determine what the object is.

It is necessary here, in order to fully comprehend the Buddha's psychological position on this point, to differentiate consciousness from the commonly held convention that a "self" or "soul" or "ego" is involved with this conscious awareness. There is only the function of awareness itself which is taking place, in its bare essence as arising by result of one of the six sense faculties. According to the *Dhamma* teaching on *anatta*, no self, soul, or ego exists which sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, or cognizes an object. The very idea that an independent "self" exists is in itself a mind phenomenon based on the functioning of the third and fourth aggregates: perception and volition or mental formations. Thus it is the mind itself which mistakes the continuity of consciousness and the five aggregates of a being for a "self" or "soul" which continues as a permanent substance throughout life.

To underscore this point let us examine what the Buddha himself has said about it. In the Mahatanhasamkhaya Sutta – or The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving – in the *Majjhima Nikaya* he states: "Haven't I in many ways explained consciousness as arising out of conditions: that there is no arising of consciousness without conditions." He then went on to explain consciousness in detail.

Consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent upon the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent upon the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness; when . . . dependent on the nose and odors, it is reckoned as nose-consciousness; when . . . dependent on the tongue and flavors . . . as tongue-consciousness; when . . . dependent on the body and tangibles . . . as body-consciousness; when . . . dependent on the mind and mind-objects (thoughts and ideas) . . . as mind-consciousness.

By way of further explanation he used an illustration: A fire is named according to the material on account of which it burns. A fire may burn on account of wood, and it is called a wood-fire. It may burn on account of straw, and is then called a straw-fire. So too, consciousness is named according to the condition dependent on which it arises.

This brings us to an additional classical explanation which the Buddha used in order to help clarify this situation. This explanation is laid out in the Culavedalla Sutta – or The Shorter Series of Questions and Answers – in the *Majjhima Nikaya*. Though the speaker in this discourse is one Dhammadinna, a bhikkhuni (or nun) in the women's monastic order, she was declared by the Buddha as the foremost bhikkhuni disciple in expounding the Dhamma and therefore had his blessing in her description of personality view as taught by the Buddha. When asked by a Dhamma seeker, "How does personality view come to be?" she gave the following answer:

"Here . . . an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled

and undisciplined in their *Dhamma*, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their *Dhamma*, regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. He regards feeling as self, or self as possessed of feeling, or feeling as in self, or self as in feeling. He regards perception as self, or self as possessed of perception, or perception as in self or self as in perception. He regards mental formations as self, or self as possessed of mental formations, or mental formations as in self, or self as in mental formations. He regards consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how personality view comes to be.”

Thus was explained the famous twenty types of personality view, based upon the five aggregates and the four ways in which each aggregate can be mistaken or taken for self. Here we see how thorough this idea of self can be ingrained in our thought patterns and systems of self identity. Is it any wonder, then, that this habit is so difficult to see and comprehend much less the difficulty involved in uprooting and doing away with it. Every action we take is rooted in this false view of personality, and therefore a tremendous effort in heedfulness, in the form of mindful awareness (*sati*), is needed in each moment that passes in order to ensure that this false view of self is not clung to.

The whole of life’s activities, what most beings take to be life’s significant activities, arise and pass away based upon the conditions which constantly arise, endure for a while, and ultimately pass away. Beings are made aware of these conditions based upon which sense organ is contacted and becomes conscious of the activity. When the condition ceases, passing away, it creates a change in the life continuum, and consciousness of that condition also ceases. Something new, though, may arise to take the previous condition’s place and thus create a new condition with new elements to confront and of which to be conscious. Thus what we call life and consciousness is based upon this ever changing panorama of altering conditions and their impact upon our sense faculties. What the Buddha realized and declared in no uncertain terms was that consciousness, the fifth aggregate, depends on matter, feeling, perception, and mental formations, and that its existence independent of these factors is not possible.

He stated: “Consciousness may exist having matter as its means, matter as its object, matter as its support, and seeking delight it may grow, increase and develop; or consciousness may exist having feeling as its means . . . or perception as its means . . . or mental formations as its means, mental formations as its object, mental formations as its support, and seeking delight it may grow, increase and develop.

“Were a man to say: I shall show the coming, the going, the passing away, the arising, the growth, the increase or the development of consciousness apart from matter, feeling, perception, and mental formations, he would be speaking of something that does not exist.”

The greater implication here is that all life, and thus all consciousness, arises in dependence upon and in relation to all other life and consciousness. And because all life is a reflection of arisen conditions, both physical and mental, all life and consciousness is conditioned in one manner or another. In order to reach the exterior limitations of the Unconditioned, *Nibbana* (*Nirvana* in Sanskrit) in the world, one must be able to let go of all conditions, of all preconceptions, to stop clinging to anything whatsoever and float in the ever changing here and now, simply observing whatever is happening, with neither liking nor disliking in one’s heart. This is the path to the cessation and relinquishing of suffering. When this is seen and fully comprehended, then the truth of the Four Noble Truths is seen and

comprehended, as well as that of the Three Characteristics of Existence. In other words, the whole essence of the *Dhamma* is comprehended in one grand act of realization.

This path is shown to us by the Buddha in his description and definition of the five aggregates and how they play their tune of illusion on our sense of possessing a personal identity. When we can see and experience first hand the insubstantiality, the impermanence, and the dissatisfying effect that these three characteristics of existence have upon the aggregates and upon the individual conscious mind which is experiencing them, and see the aggregates for what they are, as simply elements which the mind brings together in order to create the “idea” of a self – the illusion of a self – we see for the first time reality as it is, as the Buddha saw it, and recognize the truth of *anatta* or selflessness. We see, in other words, that the very things we identify with and hold to as the basis for happiness, when correctly seen, are the basis for the suffering we dread. Even when we feel comfortable and secure, the instability of the aggregates is itself a source of oppression which keeps us perpetually exposed to suffering in its more conspicuous forms. As long as ignorance and craving remain present in us we are doomed to wander on in the cycle of repeated existence, *samsara*, in which each turn brings us the suffering of new birth, ageing, illness, and eventual death.

Another way of looking at the aggregates has been shown us by the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagasena in his simile of the chariot. To paraphrase, he points out that what one calls a chariot is just made up of an aggregate of pieces: the axel, the wheels, the frame of the chariot, and the harness tongue. He asks, would any of these single pieces – the wheels or the axel or the frame – by themselves be called a chariot? No, of course not. But when assembled together they make what we conventionally refer to as a chariot. So too when we look at the five aggregates of what we conventionally call a being or a person. There is form or matter composed of solidity, fluidity, heat, and motion; there is feeling, perception, volition (or mental formations, emotion), and consciousness all based upon the six internal organs making contact with the six external objects. In other words, when the eye is being stimulated by a visual object we have what we call sight or visual consciousness. When the ear is stimulated by sound, we have auditory consciousness; and so on for the nose and olfactory consciousness, the tongue and gustatory consciousness, the body and tactile consciousness, and the mind and mental-object consciousness. When these factors are strung together, they give the impression of a continuous process and a coherent whole. Yet this whole is nothing more than the coming together of separate modes of consciousness around which we mentally formulate a personality: “I” and “mine” or “you” and “yours.”

This is a little easier to comprehend when we stop to examine these processes which make up our life as we experience it. If the only senses we had were those of sight and mind, whenever our sight was disengaged from the world, the condition of the world would disappear. There would be no-thingness, or more precisely imagelessness. With eyes shut, there would be no object for the mind to latch onto and of which to become conscious. All the other actions taking place around us would not impinge upon us by virtue of our consciousness not being stimulated. We would not be conscious of touch, nor of hearing, nor of taste, nor of smell. Only visual sensation when our eyes were engaged with the world. Our whole experience would consist of sight and what the mind could abstract from the consciousness of forms seen. Because of the lack of the sensation and consciousness of touch, the forms seen in themselves would not have any body or depth to them, only form. The world would seem like a two-dimensional dreamland. In such a dreamland, the concept of individual personality would be absent. Our

experience would be like turning on a television set, watching it for a few moments, then turning it off. Our reality would be only of a flow of images which presented themselves and then ceased.

Yet another way of becoming aware of the insubstantiality and the impersonality of the physical world comes about when we become conscious of the events happening as singular, bare events in themselves. The sight of a bird flying through a morning sky, the smell of a wood burning fire, the sound of the fire crackling, and the sensation of the heat given off by the fire are all impersonal events. There is no self in the bird flying, just a bird doing what it was born to do. No self in the smell of the wood fire, only the aroma of the type of wood used. No self in the sound of the crackling fire, only the natural sounds produced by the fuel being consumed by the heat. No self in the heat of the fire as heat is a natural by-product of fire. All we experience are the bare elements of sight, aroma, sound, and tactile sensation, nothing more. None of these events is imbued with a personality; they are all impersonal. When we see, there is only sight and the object of sight; when we smell, there is only the aroma of the object being smelled; when we hear sound, only the sound of what is heard; and when we touch or are touched by something, only the sensation of touching or being touched. Our daily experience is made up of endless combinations of these simple events wherein only the specific event is happening and nothing else.

So the question naturally arises: How does the concept of personality or “a self” make its way into these innocent events? Such a phenomenon happens when the mind begins to mentally formulate events, bringing in the idea of personification in order to more easily understand a subject. We can see this most pointedly in the personification of a favorite pet, wherein our dog or cat is viewed as having a unique personality by virtue of its acquired habits of living. These acquired habits are nothing more than the mental conditioning which the animal has undergone during its lifetime. That is, it learns to act and react to certain physical stimulus as are carried out by the owner or its own inclinations. Through an intimate knowledge of these reaction patterns, the mind formulates a set personality which assists it in being able to predict certain behavior. This behavior pattern then becomes the mind’s way of distinguishing one set of patterns from another through the use of a personifying image or template. Once this personality template is in place, the mind naturally falls back on it time and again in order to further add to its data about this particular subject. The subject has thus assumed a life of its own in the mind of the observer based upon how the mind has fabricated the so-called personality. Thus through sheer repetition of mental reference, by viewing a subject over and over as this personality or that, the mind, in formulating a personality, becomes conditioned to viewing different subjects as unique personalities.

While having realized this truth about the aggregates in itself is not the end of the road, it can be recognized as the beginning of a new life dedicated to insight and wisdom. Each day becomes a new adventure in applying this truth to our life. Because we are not used to viewing our life in this way, there may be many times when we are obliged to either halt or slow ourselves down such that we can properly digest the events happening in and around us. Without this “slowing down” in order to properly process incoming information, we may be liable to reenter the delusion of having a self, and thereby cause this self further suffering. It is at this point that the Buddha’s teaching on the cultivation of *bhavana*, or mental culture, and mindfulness comes into play.

The heart of the *Dhamma* revolves around *bhavana*, also translated as meditation. It is

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this cultivated awareness of our daily thoughts and reactions to the events of life that makes the difference in the quality of our everyday life. When we can see things as they are rather than as we imagine they are, we are able to cut through the delusion and ignorance in order to arrive at the essential truth in each situation. Being able to do this begins with cultivating a quiet mind, an undistracted mind. Through the development of a practice in meditation using the *vipassana* (or insight) techniques described by the Buddha we can train the mind in the subtleties of quietude, bringing it to the point of singleness of concentration and undistractedness.

Having learned in the practice of meditation how to constantly bring the mind back to the object of our meditation, we can also apply this skill in our daily life; so, realizing the truth of the five aggregates, we are constantly reminding ourselves that existence is essentially without self-nature. Reminding ourselves about this nature of selflessness in existence helps us to stay grounded in reality by not taking ourselves or others too seriously. Thus it is through the practice of this mental cultivation of the truth in the five aggregates as it is demonstrated at the interpersonal level that we are gradually able to bring the mind out of its conditioned state in falsehood in order to maintain its establishment in truth and reality. It is from this point that the cessation of the mind's suffering takes place and that its growth and development in wisdom and insight is assured.

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