**THE FIVE AGGREGATES OF CLINGING**

The Buddha placed great emphasis on the “Five Aggregates of Clinging” as vitally important for understanding the First Noble Truth. Here’s a quote, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, from the *Dhammacakkhpavattana Sutta* (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, at length 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."

When this was said, the wandering sectarians said to Ven. Anuradha, "This monk is either a newcomer, not long gone forth, or else an elder who is foolish & inexperienced." So the wandering sectarians, addressing Ven. Anuradha as they would a newcomer or a fool, got up from their seats and left.

Then not long after the wandering sectarians had left, this thought occurred to Ven. Anuradha: "If I am questioned again by those wandering sectarians, how will I answer in such a way that will I speak in line with what the Blessed One has said, will not misrepresent the Blessed One with what is unfactual, will answer in line with the Dhamma, so that no one whose thinking is in line with the Dhamma will have grounds for criticizing me?"

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.'

"When this was said, I said to them, '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.'

"When this was said, the wandering sectarians said to me, 'This monk is either a newcomer, not long gone forth, or else an elder who is foolish & inexperienced.' So, addressing me as they would a newcomer or a fool, they got up from their seats and left.

"Then not long after the wandering sectarians had left, this thought occurred to me: 'If I am questioned again by those wandering sectarians, how will I answer in such a way that will I speak in line with what the Blessed One has said, will not misrepresent the Blessed One with what is unfactual, will answer in line with the Dhamma, and no one whose thinking is in line with the Dhamma will have grounds for criticizing me?'"

"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.

When I was in graduate school, I had already been practicing Buddhist meditation for 3 years. Part of what inspired me to become a psychotherapist was, and is, my perception of Buddhism as a very sophisticated spiritual psychology. When it came time for the course on Personality Theory, I was thrilled upon reading the contents of the textbook, entitled “Theories Of Personality”, by Hall and Lindzey, with an entire chapter written by Daniel Goleman, “Eastern Psychology”. The primary source for this chapter is an analysis of personality according to the “third basket” of the Pali Canon, the Abhidhamma (the other two baskets are the Suttas and the Vinaya).

The Five Aggregates Of Clinging are not specifically mentioned in the chapter, but Goleman does describe one of the aggregates in some detail, the 52 mental conditioning factors. These factors will be discussed further on in this writing. The Buddhist term khandha (skandha in Sanskrit) means the accumulation of various elements, an aggregate, such as a cluster of grapes, a pile of gravel, and so on. In this case, the aggregation represents 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, and the chemical actions that create odor and flavor. The physical activities of the body that produce pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue, etc., are included. The aggregates of perception, feeling and conditioning factors are functions that process the data input, 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**

**THE 7 AWAKENING FACTORS**

**4: CONDITIONING FACTORS**

**(SANKHARAS or CETASIKAS)**

**There are 50 factors, wholesome, unwholesome and neutral**

**5: CONSCIOUSNESS**

**(VINNANA)**

**VIPASSANA**

**3: FEELING (VEDANA)**

**Pleasant, unpleasant or neutral**

**SAMADHI & PASSADHI**

**Concentration & Tranquility**

**2: PERCEPTION**

**(SANNA)**

**THE FIVE HINDRANCES**

**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 urgency. An approach affect means the perceived bit is desirable, while an avoidance affect means the perceived bit is undesirable).

The conditioning factors relate the perceptual bit and associated affect with prior experience (memory or karma), then determining a response. Most bits are not considered relevant at a particular moment, so are functionally disregarded. The resulting momentary “product” is self-awareness.

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, but the process 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). The new initial perceptions are overlaid by the association from the past, and, depending on the degree of affect (particularly negative affect), 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 data input process. Modern research suggests that the default human processing 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 Buddhist psychology. 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* and *kaya.* 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, in regards to 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.* The term in the context of the five aggregates simply refers to the feeling associated with the contact of sensory input, for example, the stimulation of the eye and optic nerve as it’s initially processed in the limbic area, to assess whether to engage or avoid a flow of optic stimulation. Each of the “sense doors” initiates a feeling response: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The function of vedana is closely interactive with sanna, 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 included in the dynamic of *paticca sammupada*, 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 sammupada describes the dynamic process whereby a moment of aggregation of the five categories comes into being and dissolves.

Understanding vedana directly and experientially, with the ability to not be “enchanted” by craving and clinging is key to spiritual development. In this way, vedana is key to understanding and managing the paticca sammupada process.

"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.” Satipatthana Sutta, translated by Thanissaro

**SANNAKKHANDA**

Sanna is typically translated as perception. It 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 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, which is translated as the constituent elements that condition the mind. Cetasikas are considered to be 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 kammically conditioned behavior goes back into storage as memory until new stimulation reactivates the sankhara.

**VINNANAKKHANDA**

Vinnana is typically translated as consciousness. 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 distinguished as the capacity to think. Perhaps they 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 integration of thoughts into a stream, the “selfing story”.

In the Buddhist system, consciousness cannot exist without an object to be 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.

The five aggregates are intimately associated with the core Buddhist concept called *paticcasamuppada.* I translate this as *contingent provisional emergence.* The Buddha said:

"The form of what has thus come into being is gathered under the form clinging-aggregate. The feeling of what has thus come into being is gathered under the feeling clinging-aggregate. The perception of what has thus come into being is gathered under the perception clinging-aggregate. The fabrications of what has thus come into being are gathered under the fabrication clinging-aggregate. The consciousness of what has thus come into being is gathered under the consciousness clinging-aggregate. One discerns, 'This, it seems, is how there is the gathering, meeting, & convergence of these five clinging-aggregates. Now, the Blessed One has said, "Whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising." And these things — the five clinging-aggregates — are dependently co-arisen. Any desire, embracing, grasping, & holding-on to these five clinging-aggregates is the origination of stress. Any subduing of desire & passion, any abandoning of desire & passion for these five clinging-aggregates is the cessation of stress.' And even to this extent, friends, the monk has accomplished a great deal." Majjhima Nikaya # 28, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

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