

Understanding the Five Aggregates

Samyutta Nikāya 56.13. The Four Noble Truths

“Monks, there are these Four Noble Truths. What four? The noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

“And what is the noble truth of suffering? It should be said: the five aggregates subject to clinging; that is, the form aggregate subject to clinging ... the consciousness aggregate subject to clinging. This is called the noble truth of suffering.

“And what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is this craving which leads to renewed existence....

“And what is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving....

“And what is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering? It is this Noble Eightfold Path....

“These are the Four Noble Truths.”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.22. The Burden

“Monks, I will teach you the burden, the carrier of the burden, the taking up of the burden, and the laying down of the burden.

“And what is the burden? It should be said: the five aggregates subject to clinging. What five? The form aggregate subject to clinging, the feeling aggregate subject to clinging, the perception aggregate subject to clinging, the volitional formations aggregate subject to clinging, the consciousness aggregate subject to clinging. This is called the burden.³⁶

“And what is the carrier of the burden? It should be said: the person of such a name and clan. This is called the carrier of the burden.

“And what is the taking up of the burden? It is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination. This is called the taking up of the burden.

“And what is the laying down of the burden? It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving. This is called the laying down of the burden.”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.23. Full Understanding

“Monks, I will teach you things that should be fully understood and also full understanding. And what, monks, are the things that should be fully understood? Form is something that should be fully understood; feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness is something that should be fully understood. These are called the things that should be fully understood. And what is full understanding? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called full understanding.”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.24. Direct Knowledge

“Monks, without directly knowing and fully understanding form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, without becoming dispassionate towards it and abandoning it, one is incapable of destroying suffering. But by directly knowing and fully understanding form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, by becoming dispassionate towards it and abandoning it, one is capable of destroying suffering.”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.25. Abandon Desire and Lust

“Monks, abandon desire and lust for form. Thus that form will be abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, obliterated so that it is no more subject to future arising.

“Abandon desire and lust for feeling ... for perception ... for volitional formations ... for consciousness. Thus that consciousness will be abandoned ... no more subject to future arising.”

From Samyutta Nikāya 22.82: Aspects of the Aggregates

A monk asked the Buddha the following question: “In what way, Bhante, does the designation ‘aggregates’ apply to the aggregates?”

“Whatever kind of form there is whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: this is called the form aggregate. Whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: this is called the feeling aggregate. Whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: this is called the perception aggregate. Whatever kind of volitional formations there are, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: this is called the volitional formations aggregate. Whatever kind of consciousness there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or

near: this is called the consciousness aggregate. It is in this way that the designation 'aggregates' applies to the aggregates."

Saying, "Good, Bhante," that monk ... asked the Blessed One a further question:

"What is the cause and condition, Bhante, for the manifestation of the form aggregate? What is the cause and condition for the manifestation of the feeling aggregate?... for the manifestation of the perception aggregate?... for the manifestation of the volitional formations aggregate?... for the manifestation of the consciousness aggregate?"

"The four great elements, monk, are the cause and condition for the manifestation of the form aggregate. Contact is the cause and condition for the manifestation of the feeling aggregate. Contact is the cause and condition for the manifestation of the perception aggregate. [102] Contact is the cause and condition for the manifestation of the volitional formations aggregate. Name-and-form is the cause and condition for the manifestation of the consciousness aggregate."

"Venerable sir, how does identity view come to be?"

"The uninstructed worldling regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He regards feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how identity view comes to be."

"But, Bhante, how does identity view not come to be?"

"The instructed noble disciple does not regard form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He does not regard feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That is how identity view does not come to be."

"What, Bhante, is the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of form? What is the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of feeling?... in the case of perception?... in the case of volitional formations?... in the case of consciousness?"

"The pleasure and joy, monk, that arise in dependence on form: this is the gratification in form. That form is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in form. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for form: this is the escape from form. The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on feeling ... in dependence on perception ... in dependence on volitional formations ... in dependence on consciousness: this is the gratification in consciousness. That consciousness is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change: this is the danger in

consciousness. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for consciousness: this is the escape from consciousness.”

Saying, “Good, Bhante,” that monk delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One’s statement. Then he asked the Blessed One a further question:

“Venerable sir, how should one know, how should one see so that, in regard to this body with consciousness and in regard to all external signs, I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit no longer occur within?”

“Any kind of form whatsoever, monk, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one sees all form as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Any kind of feeling whatsoever ... Any kind of perception whatsoever ... Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever ... Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one sees all consciousness as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“When one knows and sees thus, monk, then in regard to this body with consciousness and in regard to all external signs, I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit no longer occur within.”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.56: Four Phases

“Monks, there are these five aggregates subject to clinging. What five? The form aggregate subject to clinging, the feeling aggregate subject to clinging, the perception aggregate subject to clinging, the volitional formations aggregate subject to clinging, the consciousness aggregate subject to clinging.

“So long as I did not directly know as they really are the five aggregates subject to clinging in four phases, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its devas, Māra, and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. But when I directly knew all this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with ... its devas and humans.

“And how, monks, are there four phases? I directly knew form, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation. I directly knew feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.

“And what, monks, is form? The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. With the arising of nutriment there is the arising of form. With the cessation of nutriment there is the cessation of form. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of form; that is, right view ... right concentration....

“And what is feeling? There are these six classes of feeling: feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact, feeling born of nose-contact, feeling born of tongue-contact, feeling born of body-contact, feeling born of mind-contact. This is called feeling. With the arising of contact there is the arising of feeling. With the cessation of contact there is the cessation of feeling. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of feeling; that is, right view ... right concentration....

“And what is perception? There are these six classes of perception: perception of forms, perception of sounds, perception of odours, perception of tastes, perception of tactile objects, perception of mental phenomena. This is called perception. With the arising of contact there is the arising of perception. With the cessation of contact there is the cessation of perception. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of perception; that is, right view ... right concentration.

“And what are volitional formations? There are these six classes of volition: volition regarding forms, volition regarding sounds, volition regarding odours, volition regarding tastes, volition regarding tactile objects, volition regarding mental phenomena. These are called volitional formations. With the arising of contact there is the arising of volitional formations. With the cessation of contact there is the cessation of volitional formations. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of volitional formations; that is, right view ... right concentration.

“And what is consciousness? There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, mind-consciousness. This is called consciousness. With the arising of name-and-form there is the arising of consciousness. With the cessation of name-and-form there is the cessation of consciousness. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of consciousness; that is, right view ... right concentration....”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.79: Designations for the Five Aggregates

“And why, monks, do you call it form? ‘It is deformed,’ therefore it is called form. Deformed by what? Deformed by cold, deformed by heat, deformed by hunger, deformed by thirst,

deformed by contact with flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and serpents. 'It is deformed,' therefore it is called form.

"And why do you call it feeling? 'It feels,' therefore it is called feeling. And what does it feel? It feels pleasure, it feels pain, it feels neither-pain-nor-pleasure. 'It feels,' therefore it is called feeling.

"And why do you call it perception? 'It perceives,' therefore it is called perception. And what does it perceive? It perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white. 'It perceives,' therefore it is called perception.

"And why do you call them volitional formations ['constructions']? 'They construct the constructed,' therefore they are called volitional formations ['constructions']. And what is the constructed that they construct? They construct conditioned form as form; they construct constructed feeling as feeling; they construct constructed perception as perception; they construct constructed volitional formations as volitional formations; they construct constructed consciousness as consciousness. 'They construct the constructed,' therefore they are called volitional formations ['constructions'].

"And why do you call it consciousness? 'It cognizes,' therefore it is called consciousness. And what does it cognize? It cognizes sour, it cognizes bitter, it cognizes pungent, it cognizes sweet, it cognizes sharp, it cognizes mild, it cognizes salty, it cognizes bland. 'It cognizes,' therefore it is called consciousness."

Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59: The Discourse on Non-Self

"Monks, form is nonself. For if form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.' But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.'⁹¹

"Feeling is nonself.... Perception is nonself.... Volitional formations are nonself.... Consciousness is nonself. For if consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is nonself, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.'

"What do you think, monks, is form permanent or impermanent?" – "Impermanent, Bhante."
– "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" – "Suffering, Bhante." – "Is what is

impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’ – “No, Bhante.”

“Is feeling permanent or impermanent?... Is perception permanent or impermanent?... Are volitional formations permanent or impermanent?... Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?” – “Impermanent, Bhante.” – “Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?” – [68] “Suffering, Bhante.” – “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’” – “No, Bhante.”

“Therefore, monks, any kind of form whatsoever ... Any kind of feeling whatsoever ... Any kind of perception whatsoever ... Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever ... Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all this should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes repelled by form, repelled by feeling, repelled by perception, repelled by volitional formations, repelled by consciousness. Thereby he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.95: The Aggregates Are Empty

“Monks, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, monks, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a monk inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?

“Suppose that in the autumn, when it is raining and big rain drops are falling, a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, monks, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a monk inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?¹⁹⁰

“Suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, monks, whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a monk inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?

“Suppose that a man needing heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There he would see the trunk of a large plantain tree, straight, fresh, without a fruit-bud core. He would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As he unrolls the coil, he would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a plantain tree? So too, monks, whatever kind of volitional formations there are, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a monk inspects them, ponders them, and carefully investigates them. As he investigates them, they appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in volitional formations?

“Suppose that a magician or a magician’s apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion? So too, monks, whatever kind of consciousness there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a monk inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness?¹⁹⁴

“Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes repelled by form, repelled by feeling, repelled by perception, repelled by volitional formations, repelled by consciousness. Thereby he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’”

This is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Fortunate One, the Teacher, further said this:

“Form is like a lump of foam,
Feeling like a water bubble;
Perception is like a mirage,
Volitions like a plantain trunk,
And consciousness like an illusion,
So explained the Buddha, Kinsman of the Sun.

“However one may ponder it
And carefully investigate it,
It appears but hollow and void
When one views it carefully.”

Samyutta Nikāya 22.99: The Leash

“Suppose a dog tied up on a leash was bound to a strong post or pillar: it would just keep on running and revolving around that same post or pillar. So too, the uninstructed worldling ... regards form as self ... feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self.... He just keeps running and revolving around form, around feeling, around perception, around volitional formations, around consciousness.²⁰⁵ As he keeps on running and revolving around them, he is not freed from form, not freed from feeling, not freed from perception, not freed from volitional formations, not freed from consciousness. He is not freed from birth, aging, and death; not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; not freed from suffering, I say.

“But the instructed noble disciple ... does not regard form as self ... nor feeling as self ... nor perception as self ... nor volitional formations as self ... nor consciousness as self.... He no longer keeps running and revolving around form, around feeling, around perception, around volitional formations, around consciousness. As he no longer keeps running and revolving around them, he is freed from form, freed from feeling, freed from perception, freed from volitional formations, freed from consciousness. He is freed from birth, aging, and death; freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; freed from suffering, I say.”