

THE FIVE AGGREGATES
Five Aggregates of which a Human Being Is Composed

The Five Aggregates lead to the Buddhist analysis of *personal experience* or the Buddhist analysis of the personality. The analysis of personal experience follows along two lines: (1) with regard to the *body*, and (2) with regard to the *mind*. The concept of 'self' is a convenient term for a collection of physical and mental factors, in the same way that the word 'forest' is a convenient term for a collection of trees.

<i>Aggregate</i>	<i>Description</i>
Body Form (Pali: <i>rupa</i>)	Matter or form refers to material or physical factors. It includes the body, and the material objects that surround us – the earth, trees, buildings, oceans, etc. In relation to the physical body (composed of sub-atomic particles; Pali: <i>kalapa</i>): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 sense faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, intellect) • 6 sense objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, non-physical objects of perception)
Consciousness (Pali: <i>vinna</i>)	Cognizing – observing objectively: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 consciousnesses (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, intellect)
Sensation (Pali: <i>vedana</i>) Feelings	<i>Emotional dimension</i> When an object is experienced, that experience takes on one of these emotional tones or elements: pleasant (pleasure) / unpleasant (displeasure) / neutral (indifference)
Perception (Pali: <i>sanna</i>) Recognizing Discrimination	<i>Conceptual dimension</i> This is the forming of a concept of an <i>idea</i> about a particular object. One has a conceptual element in the sense of introducing a definite, determinate idea about the object of experience, for example: good / bad; nice / not nice; right / wrong.
Reaction (Pali: <i>sankhara</i>) Mental formation <i>and</i> Volition	<i>Moral dimension</i> This aggregate may be described as a <i>conditioned response</i> to the object of experience (reacting based on mental conditioning), for example: liking / disliking; attachment / aversion; greed / hatred. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental formation is the impression created by previous actions, the habit energy stored up from countless former lives. • Mental formation <i>and</i> volition each represent one half of the meaning of <i>sankhara</i> – mental formation represents the half that comes from the past, and volition represents the half that functions here and now. So mental formation <i>and</i> volition function to determine our responses to the objects of experience. • These responses have <i>moral consequences</i> in the sense of: wholesome / unwholesome / neutral.

Notes

- Personal experience is produced through the functioning of the three major *mental factors of experience*: (1) aggregate of feeling, (2) aggregate of perception, and (3) aggregate of mental formation *and* volition. These three aggregates function to turn *mere awareness of an object* into personal experience. We can analyze all our personal experience in terms of the five aggregates.
- The five aggregates are all in *constant change*: (1) The elements that constitute the aggregate of form are impermanent and are in a state of constant change (e.g. the body grows old, weak, sick, etc.). The things around are also impermanent and change constantly. (2) Consciousness, too, is impermanent and constantly changing – it arises dependent upon an object and a sense organ. It cannot exist independently. (3) Feelings are constantly changing as well. (4) Today we may perceive an object in a particular way; at a later time, under different circumstances, our perception will change. (5) So too, mental formations are impermanent and ever-changing. We alter our habits. We can learn to be kind and compassionate. We can acquire the attitudes of renunciation and equanimity, and so forth.
- All these aggregates are constantly changing and impermanent. They are *processes*, not *things*. They are dynamic, not static.
- The purpose of this analysis is to create the *wisdom of not-self* – to arrive at a way of experiencing the world which is not constructed upon and around the idea of a self. Personal experience can be seen in terms of processes, in terms of *impersonal functions* – rather than in terms of a self and what affects a self. This view will create an attitude of equanimity, which will help one overcome the emotional disturbances of hope and fear.
- We hope for happiness, we fear pain. We hope for praise, we fear blame. We hope for gain, we fear loss. We hope for fame, we fear infamy. We live in a state of alternating between hope and fear. We experience these hopes and fears because we understand happiness and pain, and so forth, in terms of the self. We understand them as personal happiness and pain, as personal praise and blame, and so forth.
- However, once we understand them in terms of *impersonal processes*, and once through this understanding we leave the idea of the self, we can overcome hope and fear. We can regard happiness and pain, praise and blame, and all the rest, with equanimity, with even-mindedness, and we will then no longer be subject to the imbalance of alternating between hope and fear.

Source: Based on and adapted from: Buddha Dharma Education Association (1996-2012), "Fundamentals of Buddhism" (a BuddhaNet production). Accessed at <http://www.buddhanet.net/funbud14.htm> (December 20, 2013)

© Alexander Michael Peck, 2013