

Clinging-Aggregates in Context

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When the Buddha talks about the five clinging-aggregates, it's always in the context of the four noble truths. In fact, it's his definition of the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, or stress: Clinging to the five aggregates is stress.

It's important to keep that context in mind because sometimes you hear the five clinging-aggregates defined as the Buddha's answer to the question, "What are we?" His supposed answer to that question is that, as beings, we're nothing but clusters of aggregates. But the question, "What are we?" is one the Buddha would not answer. He wasn't concerned with defining us, what we are. He was more concerned with how we define ourselves, and the fact that the way we define ourselves is suffering.

We cling to the aggregate of form, which is the body; and to the aggregate of feeling, which covers feeling tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. We cling to perceptions: the labels we put on things. We cling to fabrications, the way the mind puts thoughts together intentionally, and we cling to consciousness. And in clinging to these things, we make ourselves into a being.

Why do we do that? Because of craving. That's the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. We crave sensuality. We fantasize about pleasures that we'd like to get, and to get those pleasures we need to take on an identity. This is why the Buddha talks about this kind of craving as craving that leads to becoming.

Once there's something you want, you find that that thing exists in a world, and to get it you have to take on an identity in that world, as the person or being who's going to get that thing, and then enjoy it once you've gotten it. As for the world in which that thing exists, parts of that world may be totally irrelevant to your desire, so you don't pay much attention to them. You pay attention to the parts that are relevant: the ones that either help you attain that goal, that object, that pleasure, or get in the way.

Often you find yourself identifying with the various skills you might have developed in order to get what you want, to get past the obstacles. That becomes one of your identities, too.

We have lots of these identities in the mind. For most of us, that's how we find pleasure, how we find happiness in life. Yet the Buddha's pointing out that that way of finding happiness entails suffering. But if we follow the path of practice, we can put an end to all this. That means putting an end to the five clinging-aggregates.

For a lot of us, that's kind of scary, because we identify so much with them. That's one of the four kinds of clinging. You can cling through sensuality, the way you fantasize about sensual pleasures. You can cling through your views about the world. You can cling through your ideas about what habits and practices are needed in order to negotiate that world to find the pleasure you want. And you can cling by identifying with these aggregates.

The Buddha says you can identify in one of four ways: Either you think that you are one of the aggregates or a combination of them, or that they belong to you: You have a self that's something different from them, but owns them. Or you think that your self is inside them, or that they're inside your self.

For instance, you may identify with a spacious consciousness, and think that all the other aggregates are somehow there in that consciousness. Or you may have the idea of a little tiny person inside the body who looks out the eyes, listens through the ears, and so forth. There are lots of ways that you can relate to these aggregates with an idea of self. But all of them, the Buddha says, are suffering, stress.

So he has us take this sense of who we are—or what we own and what we control—and analyze it into these five aggregates to see that there's not much there. That way, we can develop some dispassion for them. That's the duty with regard to that first noble truth: to comprehend the clinging-aggregates. And comprehension is defined as developing lack of passion, lack of aversion, lack of delusion for them.

In other words, you're not passionate about identifying with them, but at the same time you don't hate them. The Buddha's not telling you to hate yourself.

And he certainly doesn't want you to be deluded about them. He simply wants you to see clearly how you create a sense of self out of these things.

This, again, relates to the idea of our being a being, because one of the things that identifies a being is that beings need to feed. This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha divides the your experiences that you identify with, that you cling to, into these five aggregates, because they're all related to how we feed.

For instance, take feeding on physical food: There's the form of the body that needs to be fed, and there's the form of the food that we're looking for to feed it.

There's the feeling of hunger that drives us to look for food, and the feeling of satisfaction that comes after we've eaten.

Perceptions: You have to have perceptions about which kind of things are edible, and which kinds of things are not. This is how we learned about the world to begin with. We crawled around; we found something. What was the first thing we'd do with it? We'd stick it in our mouths to see if it was food. That's our basic category—things are either edible or not edible.

Then there's fabrication: This covers a lot of different mental activities, starting with intention and attention. The intention is the important part, because the mind is active. It's not just there passively watching the passing show without participating in it. It's out there looking for something to feed on. When it finds something that might potentially be good food, but is not yet ready to eat, it tries to figure out how to turn it into good food. Even before that, it tries to figure out how to find things to eat. All that is part of fabrication.

And then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

The Buddha says we cling to these activities—after all, the aggregates *are* activities. There's one spot where the Buddha defines them as verbs. Even form, he says, deforms. It's constantly changing. Feeling feels, perception perceives, fabrication fabricates, consciousness cognizes.

These are the activities we use in feeding, and we cling to them. We feed off of them, because the word for clinging also means to take sustenance. We feed off of these activities that we use in the act of feeding. There's a double layer of feeding going on.

So we have to develop comprehension for these things. That means knowing them so thoroughly that we end our passion, aversion, and delusion for them. How do we get to know them? We turn them into a path. All the different factors of the path require different aggregates.

Right view involves perceptions and fabrications and consciousness. Right resolve: again, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. Right speech and right action involve your body, along with your intentions—which, again, are fabrications—and perceptions.

You could go down, making a list for all the different factors of the path, and you'd see that they all make use of aggregates. But now the relation is different. You don't cling to them in the same way. Instead of carrying them around on your back as a big load of rocks, you put the rocks down and turn them into cobblestones so that you can walk on them.

Particularly with right concentration, as we're doing right now: You're focused on the breath. That's part of form. You're trying to create a feeling of pleasure. To stay focused requires a perception, a mental image of the breath that you keep in mind. And then you talk to yourself about how well it's working, trying to get the mind to fit snugly with the breath: That's fabrication. Then you're aware of all these things.

In fact, of the different factors of the path, right concentration is the one where you're going to be looking at the five aggregates very carefully, because you're feeding on them.

The Buddha compares concentration to the food for the path. So as you fix this food and enjoy it, you really got to get hands-on experience with these activities of aggregates.

It'll involve some clinging. Not sensual clinging—that doesn't play a role on the path—but with views, you have certain views about how karma acts in the world that motivate you. There are habits and practices: You have the habits of the five precepts, or the 227 precepts; the practices of concentration.

Then there's the self: the you who's doing this and is going to benefit from this and is also watching over things. That's a third function of this sense of self: It reflects on the other two. Is the self as the producer really producing happiness? Is

the self as the consumer satisfied? Does it have standards that are good enough? Could its standards be higher?

In fact, this observing or reflective self gets stronger and stronger as you practice, as you get more demanding about what kind of happiness you're going to take as satisfactory. Eventually it, too, will have to go, but it does play an important role in the mean time.

You use clinging-aggregates as part of the path so as to get to know them, because the state of becoming you crave with concentration is a transparent kind of becoming that allows you to see these processes in action—unlike other forms of becoming. For example, when you're involved in sensuality, the focus is out there on the object. You tend to disguise from yourself the various ways in which you're lying to yourself about what's attractive about that object, and why it's worth going for. Then you're lying to yourself about the bad effects that that particular desire might have. Whereas, here, with right concentration, there's no need to lie.

Think about the Buddha at the end of his austerities, trying to figure out what was he going to do now. The austerities hadn't worked. What other path could there be? He thought about the time he spontaneously entered right concentration, the first jhāna, when he was a child. The question came to him, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? There's nothing blameworthy about it at all."

This is one of the reasons why it's so transparent, as opposed to other kinds of pleasure. The ones that make the mind murky involve some form of harm. So you have to lie to yourself about them. That makes it difficult to watch yourself in action because it's not a pretty sight—seeing yourself looking for pleasure in ways that are actually harmful. So you tend to dress it up, to deal in abstractions, which obscure reality with their hazy shapes.

Whereas, here you can watch yourself pursue this pleasure and realize that no harm is being done, so you can watch yourself as much as you like. There's no need to hide anything. So this is the best way to get to know those aggregates: Make something good out of them, something harmless, something pleasurable, and watch what you're doing as you do it.

Try to develop concentration to make it as solid and as subtle as possible, until you realize you've taken it as far as fabrication can go. Then the mind begins to be more and more inclined to want to find something that's unfabricated, something that doesn't require constant upkeep like this. That's how concentration alerts you to the fact that you need to use more discernment to figure out how you can find something that's not fabricated. It delivers you to the threshold.

Discernment does its work, and then, it too—because it's made out of aggregates—has to be let go as well. It's in this way, by developing the path and reflecting on it, that you learn to comprehend your clinging and abandon craving. You've used the Buddha's analysis of the five clinging-aggregates for its intended purpose.

So make sure that you take this teaching in context, because if you take it out of context, it creates lots of problems—as when you define what you are as the five aggregates. Actually, the five aggregates end with nibbāna. Does that mean that there's nobody there to be unbound? Is it a total wipe out?

When the Buddha was asked that kind of question, he kept saying that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering—the point being that there are questions he didn't answer, that were not worth answering. But the question about what do you do with these five clinging-aggregates: He'd answer that. You try to comprehend them. Try to understand them to the point where you see them so thoroughly that any passion you might have for them simply has no place to land anymore.

And why would you do this? Because this is what leads you to the end of suffering. Always keep that third noble truth in mind, because it keeps reminding you that by learning how to let go of these things, you find happiness that's a lot greater than the happiness that comes by holding on to them.

It's a value judgment—but it's true. We tend to think of value judgments as being subjective, but this is objectively true—a happiness that's unfabricated, one that has none of the dangers of a happiness that depends on fabrication, because the happiness that depends on fabrication is always up for change, is always threatened.

The unfabricated happiness is not threatened by anything at all. Nothing can touch it because it's outside of space and time. But it is something we can find, something we can realize as we take these aggregates and develop them into a path—and then learn how to have dispassion even for the path itself.