

A Path of Aggregates

November 23, 2022

There's a strange phrase in the chant we had just now: "those who don't discern suffering." You would think that everybody can discern suffering. But from the Buddha's point of view, he was the first to really discern it. When he explains suffering, the noble truth of suffering, he starts out with common examples of suffering: aging, illness, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; not getting what you want, having to be with things you don't like, being separated from things you do like. We all know these things.

But then when he defines the suffering that all these things have in common, he goes to someplace that sounds unfamiliar. He says, "the five clinging-aggregates." That, he says, is the suffering. So, we have to know what clinging is, we have to know what aggregates are. And the question is, why did the Buddha list those five aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrication, consciousness?

For one thing, he says it's through our attachment to these things that we create our sense of being a being. And it's this attachment that keeps grabbing on to new aggregates as the old ones pass away, and goes from one life to the next. Attachments just keep happening again and again and again. It's a long process. It's how we create our sense of who we are, and our sense of who we are has to depend on food. That's one thing he says all beings have in common—we all have to depend on food.

Now, by this he means not only physical food but also mental food: emotional food, intellectual food, the food of our intentions. We feed on these things, and this, I think, is why the Buddha chose to divide things up into those five categories: They're involved in the way we eat.

Form, of course, is the form of the body, and it's what has to be fed. Then there's also the form of food, the physical food we take in.

Then there's feeling: the feeling of hunger that drives us to look for food, and the feeling of satisfaction and pleasure that comes when we've had enough to eat. Of course, that will change to hunger again, so you have to find more food. But it's these feelings that drive us: feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

Then there's perception. There's the perception of what's edible and what's not edible.

Think of a child crawling across the room: It encounters something on the floor, what's the first thing it does? Picks it up, puts it in its mouth to see if it's edible. That's how we begin sorting out the world. And it's not just little children. As we grow up, we get very particular about the foods we will eat, and the foods we won't eat, and there are perceptions that lie behind that distinction.

Then there's fabrication. Fabrication, here, covers all the activities that go into finding the food and fixing it when it needs to be fixed. Say you get a raw potato. You can't eat a raw potato, but you can fix it so that you can. Fabrication covers all the intentional actions that go around making the food edible.

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

In the simple act of feeding, we engage in these five aggregates. So, even though the name "aggregates" may be unfamiliar, the activities themselves are things that are very close. We're very familiar and intimate with these things. Our very identity as beings gets tied up in the act of feeding.

And yet, the Buddha says, this is suffering. It's very counterintuitive, which is why when he explained the four noble truths, he didn't start out with the four noble truths. He would often prepare people by having them think about generosity, virtue, the rewards of virtue and generosity that can be found in heaven.

But then the drawbacks: Even heavenly sensual pleasures have their drawbacks. Some of them can be quite severe. The Canon says that very few devas return to the human world after they pass away from the deva realm. Many of them fall deeper down.

So you realize: The pursuit of sensual pleasures, even if you do it through generosity and virtue, has its limitations. Then you think, "There must be something better." When you're ready for that, the Buddha would talk about renunciation.

Renunciation is not so much *denying* yourself pleasure, it's finding happiness in ways that don't involve sensuality. This, of course, is the happiness of getting the mind concentrated, the happiness of bringing the mind to stillness.

But here, too, you have the aggregates—they're part of the path. When the Buddha describes the four noble truths, the fourth noble truth ends in right concentration. And of the different factors of the path, this is the one the Buddha most often compares to food. And concentration is composed of the five aggregates.

When you're sitting here with the breath, the breath, of course, is form, and your sense of

the body as you're sitting here is form as well.

Then there are the feelings you feel in the body: You want to get them to be feelings of pleasure. This is one of the skills of meditation, learning how to relate to the body in such a way that you can generate a sense of pleasure that doesn't have to depend on sights, sounds, smells, taste, or tactile sensations outside. It's purely an internal matter through the way that you breathe and focus on the breath. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing: energizing if you need to be energized, relaxing if you need to be relaxed. Try to gain a sense of what kind of breathing is just right.

That, of course, will deal with perception: how you perceive the flow of the energy in the body. There are ways of perceiving it that allow it to flow more easily than others will. So, try to hold in mind a perception that the body is, say, like a sponge: As you breathe in, breath energy can enter anywhere, go out anywhere, and it can flow anywhere inside.

Or you can direct it in particular ways: As I was saying earlier, if you find that sitting long periods of time leaves you numb in your legs, you might want to check your spine. Think of the breath energy entering there at the back of the neck, going all the way down the spine. Then from the spine, of course, it goes down the legs—whatever perception you find helps the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being.

Fabrication here, in the beginning, is how you talk to yourself. Talk to yourself about the breath. If the mind is wandering away, you remind yourself, "Hey, come back!" That's directed thought. Keep the mind coming back, coming back, coming back. While you're here, evaluate how the breath feels. Is this a breath that's easy on the body? Is it easy on the mind? As you adjust things, you're engaged in the process of fabrication. You're fixing your concentration food.

Then there's consciousness which is aware of all these things.

So the Buddha's having you feed off of the sense of well-being that you can create inside this way—with the feelings of pleasure, and the satisfaction that comes from developing a skill—good food for the path. There's a slight element of clinging here. There's clinging just as there will be in other things, but this is *useful* clinging. This is clinging that leads to the end of clinging.

The Buddha describes four kinds of clinging: sensuality, habits and practices, views, views of self. With sensuality—in other words, the mind's fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—there's no role for that on the path. But the other three do play a role.

Habits and practices: You have the habits of virtue and the practice of concentration.

Views: You have a view about the world in which your actions matter, that your life will be shaped by your actions, which is why you're sitting here meditating. If you believe the media, they would say that everything is being decided for you by somebody else, and it's up to them to decide whether you're going to be happy or not. You become a slave to whatever is out there.

But the Buddha's saying No, you have to have a view of the world where *your* actions will shape *your* experience. So focus lots of attention on your intentions, your actions: what you think, what you do, what you say. That's all part of right view.

Then there's right view about the four noble truths. Again, the cause of suffering is not something outside; it's not built into the system. The system can be really bad, but the reason you're suffering has nothing to do with the system outside at all: It's all your own craving. It's because of the craving that you cling.

So you have views about how the world works, and then there's a sense of yourself as being competent to do this. You're responsible, you're competent: You can *train* yourself, you can learn. And you're going to benefit from this.

So there's a certain amount of clinging that goes into the path, which is one of the reasons why the path is not the goal. But it's important to keep in mind that this is something you do put together. You do engage in the five aggregates: This is one of the best ways of learning about the five aggregates, by getting the mind into concentration. When you notice that you've been talking about the breath in the wrong way, you can talk about it another way: That's fabrication.

The image you hold in mind of the breath as it flows in, flows out: That's perception. You're getting hands-on experience with these things.

So it's not the case that you can say, "Well, I'm just going to not have any fabrications at all, just be with direct experience." Direct experience is something that's already fabricated. Anything that has to do with the six senses is all fabricated. The question is: Is it skillful or not?

This is where we focus on the practice of the path: That's skillful fabrication. You want to engage in that as much as you can, develop that as much as you can. Abandon anything that gets in the way of the path. That's where you use the perception of not-self to begin with. Anything that would induce you to break your precepts or to wander away from your concentration, think of it as not-self.

Notice that it's inconstant. That seems to be the best translation of the word *anicca*. Sometimes it's translated as *impermanent*, but there are a lot of impermanent things that we feel are okay to hold on to. "They may be impermanent, but they're less impermanent than I am, so I might as well hold on." But if things are *inconstant*, it's like trying to sit in a chair where one of the legs is not long enough to balance the others. You constantly have to tense your leg muscles, tense your back, in order to keep the chair from falling over.

So, you see these things that would pull you away are inconstant, and because they're inconstant, they're stressful. And when they're inconstant and stressful, are they worth holding on to, worth identifying with? Well, No. When you see that it's not worth the effort, that's when you let go.

So you're engaged in fabrication, it's simply a matter of learning how to distinguish between what's skillful and what's not. A lot of people don't like this because it takes time. There's a gradual improvement in your detection of which actions are skillful, which thoughts are skillful, and which ones are not. That requires that you have to be observant. You have to be truthful with yourself.

After all, that's what the Buddha said he wanted in a student: someone who's observant, someone who is truthful. Those are the qualities needed for learning to be more and more observant of what you do, so that you develop more and more skill until finally everything you do is part of the path.

That's when you can start looking at the path itself and say, "Okay, this path, like the raft that takes you across the river, has been very useful, but if I'm going to go on my way, I can't hold onto the raft anymore, I've got to let it go."

That's when you start taking it apart. You say, "Oh yes, this state of concentration is made out of the aggregates. These aggregates, too, are inconstant, stressful, not-self." You develop dispassion for them.

Up to that point, you should have some passion for the path. The people who say, "The practice is simply a matter of accepting and letting go, accepting and letting go"—that's a mild depression. The idea that "Oh, there's nothing out there that's really worth anything, nothing worth the effort that goes into it; I might as well let go and forget about anything higher than the sense of ease that can come from not trying too hard." That, too, is mild depression. It's not the Dhamma.

You have to have a passion for the path. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "If you want to be

really good at the meditation, you have to be crazy about it.” Keep finding opportunities to do it whenever you are: You’re waiting in line, okay, you can meditate. In the doctor’s office, you can meditate. You’re at a stop light, you can meditate. You find little bits and snatches of time in the course of the day, well, you can meditate. Focus on your breath: free pleasure, free refreshment.

And it’s not like sensual pleasures. It doesn’t cloud the mind. It actually makes the mind clearer: You can see what the mind is doing a lot more clearly when you focus on this kind of pleasure.

So do your best to fabricate the path. Nurture a sense of well-being that can come from within, that you can tap into whenever you need it. And even though this is not the goal, following this path is what gets you there. Just make sure your path is complete, your raft is complete, and it’ll deliver you to the other side of the river.