

An Introduction to the Five Aggregates

by Sayalay Susilā

Before we start, let us pay respect to the Buddha three times because what I teach is the teaching of the Buddha.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-Sambuddhassa
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Talk 1: What are the Five Aggregates?

During this five-day retreat, our main focus will be the five aggregates. Let me start by asking you:

What are the five aggregates?

In short, the five aggregates are the:

materiality aggregate, feeling aggregate, perception aggregate,
volitional formations aggregate, and consciousness aggregate.

In this world, there are two types of truth or reality. They are: (1) conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and (2) ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*). Conventional truth refers to ordinary concepts, such as “tree,” “house,” “table,” “man,” “woman,” “you,” “me,” “person,” “body,” “being,” etc. Such concepts are closely linked to our language, culture, and conditioning. Ultimate truth means something which exists by reason of its own intrinsic nature (*sabhāva*). The five aggregates are ultimate truth. When practicing *vipassanā*, the object of our meditation is ultimate truth.

The difference between the conventional truth and the ultimate truth can be made clear by quoting a conversation between King Milinda & Arahant Nagasena. King Milinda was very good and famous as a debater. One day an elderly *mahathera*, who was an *arahant*, requested Arahant Nagasena to have a debate with King Milinda. King Milinda had the impression that the Buddha’s teachings were inferior because no Buddhist monks had been able to defeat him in debate.

One day King Milinda came to Arahant Nagasena’s monastery and--after paying respect to him--asked, “Venerable sir, how do your fellow monks address you?”

Venerable Nagasena replied, “My fellow monks address me as ‘Nagasena.’ But ‘Nagasena’ is not something real. It does not exist at the level of the ultimate truth.”

King Milinda continued, “You said ‘Nagasena does not exist.’ If that is the case, then who are you? Who is the one that sits in front of me, receives my bow, receives my homage, and receives my offerings of the four requisites?”

Arahant Nagasena replied with a question, “King, how did you come to this temple?”
King Milinda replied that he had come in a chariot.

Arahant Nagasena continued, “Well then please show me your chariot? Is the horse that pulls the chariot, the chariot? Or the wheel of the chariot, the chariot? Or the carriage of the chariot, the chariot? Or the axle of the chariot, the chariot?”

King Milinda replied, “No, the horse is not the chariot, neither is the wheel, carriage or axle the chariot.”

Arahant Nagasena continued, “King, only just now, you said you came here in a chariot. And yet, you couldn’t give me a clear answer as to what is a chariot!”

King Milinda replied, “A chariot is made up of all the parts that you have mentioned. The combination of these parts forms a chariot.”

Then Venerable Nagasena said, “Very good, your highness. The way you understand the chariot is the way you should understand me. In the same way as a chariot does not exist in ultimate reality, so too ‘Nagasena’ does not exist as a person. What actually exists is only the five aggregates. ‘Nagasena’ is just the combination of the materiality aggregate, feeling aggregate, perception aggregate, formations aggregate, and consciousness aggregate.”

The essence of this conversation between King Milinda and Venerable Nagasena is simply to answer the question:

What makes up the “self”?

Who am I and what is my real “self”? Now you should be able to answer the question what makes up the “self”?

The “self” is only a conventional truth. Penetrating the conventional truth with wisdom, one understands that the “self” is composed of the five aggregates. We are living in conventional truth. Without relying on conventional truth, everything will be out of order. Conventional truth makes communication possible, and without it society cannot function. However, it does not go to the level of ultimate truth which can liberate us from ignorance in order to attain

true and lasting happiness.

In order to attain real happiness, you have to reach the level of ultimate truth, and to do this, you must go beyond conventional truth. Only then will you be able to make the breakthrough to real happiness.

Now let me ask you a second question:

Why do we need to understand the five aggregates?

This is because the five aggregates are the Noble Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha Ariya Sacca*). The entire teaching of the Buddha is based on the Four Noble Truths, and the First Noble Truth, the Noble Truth of Suffering, is the five aggregates of clinging.

Without understanding the five aggregates of clinging, we cannot understand the Noble Truth of Suffering, and if we do not understand suffering, how can we expect to get rid of it? Suffering is called *dukkha* in Pāli. “*Dukkha*” is a compound word consisting of two syllables: “*du*,” which means “bad” and “*kham*,” which means “void of happiness.” So “*dukkha*” is bad. Why is this so? This is because it is void of happiness.

Dukkha can be explained in three ways:

(1) *dukkha-dukkha*, (2) *viparināma-dukkha*, and (3) *sankhāra-dukkha*.

1. ***Dukkha-dukkha*** refers to what most of us understand as suffering. It is the most obvious kind of suffering, that which is related to gross mental and physical pain. This body brings a lot of suffering if you are mindful enough to observe your body. For example, if you are practicing sitting meditation for half an hour, pain will probably arise somewhere. If you find the pain is too much to endure, you will need to change your posture. In a short time, another pain will arise in another part of your body. In order to continue your sitting meditation, you will need to keep changing your posture to cope with the pain. This is the physical aspect of *dukkha-dukkha*.

After one hour of sitting, you may decide to get up and practice walking meditation. However after walking for some time, you may also feel discomfort. If you engage in either practice continuously for one to two hours, the body will reveal to you various aches and pains, all of which are manifestations of *dukkha*. Then you may decide to lie down. After lying down for a long time you will also feel that lying down is actually not comfortable. Then you may decide to practice standing meditation. However, after doing this for some time, you may also feel pressure in the feet and stiffness in the body--another form of suffering. Then you may decide to sit down again. No matter what the

posture, if you maintain it long enough, the suffering nature of the physical body will invariably be revealed.

Why is it that in your ordinary life, you do not clearly see the *dukkha* inherent in your body as you do during a meditation retreat? It is because we keep on changing postures. When there is even a little discomfort, we unconsciously change our posture, which makes the suffering disappear. During meditation, however, we are told to keep the same posture without moving, and then the suffering nature of the physical body is revealed. This type of suffering is one aspect of what we call *dukkha-dukkha*.

2. ***Viparināma-dukkha*** is suffering due to change. It mainly refers to the change of pleasant feeling. The only unchanging thing in this world is change itself. Both mind and body are constantly changing, the main difference being that the mental aggregates change even faster than the material aggregates. For example, you may experience pleasant feeling at this moment because you had a good experience during your morning meditation and a brilliant light appeared. You feel good and your faith increases; as a result, you believe that achieving *jhana* is at hand. You begin the next sitting with great expectations. However, this time not only is there no light, but your mind is also harassed with restlessness. Very quickly, your pleasant feeling changes to unpleasant feeling and frustration. You are now experiencing a kind of suffering that arises due to your attachment to the previous pleasant experience.

When we cling to a happy state and that state changes, we feel suffering in its place because of our attachment to that happiness. This is what we call suffering due to change, or *viparināma-dukkha*.

3. ***Sankhāra-dukkha*** is suffering due to the changing nature of all conditioned existence. Sometimes you feel that your mind and body are beyond your control. Your emotions are beyond your control. Your physical pains are beyond your control because they are produced by causes. And the causes are also beyond your control. When the weather is too hot, you feel suffering, so you may go into an air-conditioned room. After some time, you feel the temperature has become too cold for you, and this in turn is another type of suffering. In fact, there is not a single thing in the universe over which you have absolute control, since all conditioned things are in a state of constant change. What is beyond your control is suffering and arouses fear.

At times, you may meet with a lot of suffering in your life, and that causes you to feel disenchanted with your life. You may wish that you could just stop living, but somehow life keeps pushing you on. Since the causes that led to rebirth as a human being are not yet exhausted, you must bear the burden patiently. This is what we call suffering due to conditions or formations, *sankhāra-dukkha*.

All this *dukkha*, regardless of whether it is *dukkha-dukkha*, *viparināma-dukkha*, or *sankhāra-dukkha*, comes from the five aggregates of clinging. The *dukkha-dukkha* arises based on clinging to the materiality aggregate; the *viparināma-dukkha* arises based on clinging to the mental aggregate; and the *sankhāra-dukkha* arises based on clinging to both aggregates. That is why the five aggregates of clinging are called the Noble Truth of Suffering, *Dukkha Ariya Sacca*.

Let me go back to the second question: Why should we understand the five aggregates?

This is because these five aggregates are the objects of identity view and clinging. It is important to understand this statement. Because of having a body, we identify our body as “I,” “me,” and “mine.” Without having a body, how could we possibly identify it as “I,” “me,” and “mine”? Thus the materiality aggregate becomes the object of identity view. We cling to the body as “I,” “me,” and “mine.” And when we cling to the body, we also cling to the view that we have a body. In fact, we cling to this view as if our very life depended on it, which it does. Thus a vicious cycle is set in motion--body begets view, and view begets body.

The same is true of the other four aggregates (feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness). Whenever we experience a pleasant feeling, we identify it as “my” pleasant feeling. You take this pleasant feeling as “yourself.” And when you identify with it, clinging arises. When your eyes see something, you say, “Oh, I see!” When the ear hears something, you say, “I hear! I hear!” What actually happens during the hearing process is that a sound impinges on the ear sensitivity of the ear, and because of this contact, hearing consciousness arises. This is the actual process. But without seeing this process clearly, you identify it as your-“self” hearing a sound. In the same way, when you eat something, the food touches the tongue sensitivity, and due to this contact, tongue consciousness arises. This is the actual process. But without understanding this process, you immediately identify it as your-“self” tasting. Thus, without seeing clearly, identity view comes about.

Here I would like to quote from the discourse named ANANDA (SN 22.83). After listening to this discourse, Venerable Ananda broke through his insight knowledge and became a stream-enterer. In this discourse, the Venerable Punnamantāniputta said to the Venerable Ananda:

“It is by clinging that the notion ‘I am’ occurs. Not without clinging. And by clinging to what does the notion of ‘I am’ occur?”

What do you think?

“It is by clinging to the five aggregates that the view ‘I am’ occurs.”

Or if we say it is by clinging to body and mind, then this is a simple way of referring to the ultimate reality of the five aggregates by using a conventional truth. It is by clinging to our body and mind that the view “I am” occurs. Venerable Punnamantāniputta then proceeds to give the simile of a young woman, fond of wearing ornaments, who is standing in front of a mirror. Before the mirror, she will look at her facial image with clinging, not without clinging. So there the notion of “I am” occurs because of clinging. Clinging to what? It is clinging to the five aggregates.

Venerable Punnamantāniputta continues, “Is the materiality aggregate impermanent or permanent?” and Venerable Ananda replies, “Impermanent, venerable sir.” Theoretically we know the body is impermanent. But when suffering arises, it is an indication that we have already forgotten about impermanence! When there is happiness, we also forget that happiness is impermanent. So when happiness goes away, we suffer greatly owing to grasping. Why are we so forgetful? This is because the perception of impermanence is not deeply imprinted in our mind. Perception is the proximate cause for mindfulness. When the perception of impermanence is strong, the mindfulness of impermanence will also be strong. When the perception of impermanence is embedded in the mind, the mind will remain unmoved under all circumstances. That is why the Venerable Punnamantāniputta asked the Venerable Ananda: “Is the materiality aggregate impermanent or permanent?”

Venerable Ananda replied, “Impermanent.”

You should investigate your own body to see if it is actually impermanent. Do not believe this just because it is what the Buddha said. Keep your attention on your body with complete mindfulness. From the first moment you wake up, begin to observe your body. Your body may be in a state of lassitude. Then after eating, continue to pay attention to your body. You will see that the state of your body has changed. With or without food, the body is constantly changing. When you are happy, the body feels light and robust. When you are sad, the body tends to be heavy and rigid. If you continue to observe your body, you will see how your body is changing all the time. In order to see the impermanent nature of the body, you must be constantly mindful of it in this way. When the mind is well concentrated on the meditation subject, the body is erect and quiet. The concentrated mind holds the posture. However, when the mind is restless, the body tends to move. This implies that our bodily changes are dependent on both internal and external factors, i.e., food, air water, etc. Since the body is impermanent, how then can we posit a permanent self that is identical with the body? This materiality aggregate is indeed impermanent and without a self.

Similarly, Venerable Ananda was asked about the feeling aggregate, “Is the feeling aggregate, impermanent or permanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir,” replied Venerable Ananda.

The feeling aggregate changes almost every moment. For example, when your eyes see something pleasant, pleasant feeling arises. If it is followed by seeing an enemy, unpleasant feeling will follow. When the ears hear abusive words, unpleasant feeling arises. If it is followed by praise, the feeling changes to pleasant. When your tongue tastes food that you like, pleasant feeling arises, and similarly, when your tongue tastes food that you do not like, unpleasant feeling arises. So feeling is not only impermanent, but also conditioned by internal and external factors.

Similarly, Venerable Ananda was asked about the perception aggregate, “Is the perception aggregate, impermanent or permanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir,” said Venerable Ananda.

Our perception keeps changing, moment by moment. What you perceive now may be completely different from what you had perceived previously. For example, previously you may have perceived that money brings happiness. Due to that perception, you place a high value on money and try hard to accumulate more and more. At this point in your life, however, you realize that money cannot bring lasting happiness. That is why you have come here to practice the *Dhamma*--in order to gain another type of happiness, which is permanent and unconditioned. So you can see that your perception of wealth has already changed. Previously, what you had thought of as permanent, you now realize is not really permanent. Beginning with your parents, you have seen how people and things age and eventually pass away. Having gone through so many ups and downs in life, you no longer perceive things naively as permanent.

Then Venerable Ananda was asked about the formations aggregate, “Is the formations aggregate, impermanent or permanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir,” said Venerable Ananda.

The formations aggregate includes anger, jealousy, generosity, happiness, restlessness, concentration, wisdom, etc. Your desire and effort to meditate also change. At one time, you may practice with a great sense of urgency, at another time you may not want to sit at all. In the course of practice, you are sometimes mindful and sometimes not. When your concentration is good, you can sit for a long time without moving. At other times, your mind may be obsessed by hindrances, and you feel like jumping up from the seat! There seems to be no consistency in the mind. This is the way things are--the

formations aggregate is also impermanent.

Lastly, Venerable Ananda was asked about the consciousness aggregate, “Is the consciousness aggregate, impermanent or permanent?”

Venerable Ananda replied, “Impermanent, venerable sir.”

There are 6 types of consciousness: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind consciousness. Each consciousness takes its respective object: form for the eye, sound for the ear, odor for the nose, taste for the tongue, touch for the body, and mental objects for the mind. When you walk into a restaurant, eye consciousness sees the form of various dishes displayed, ear consciousness hears the waiter greeting you, nose consciousness smells the aroma of the dishes, taste consciousness tastes the food when you put the food into your mouth, body consciousness senses the softness and warmth of the food, and mind consciousness lingers on the pleasant and unpleasant feelings that arise in conjunction with the other consciousnesses. When you have finished eating, if the overall impression coming from the various sense doors is positive, you may decide to come to the restaurant again, and your consciousness is privy to that decision. Considering that consciousness can only take one object at a time, the flow of consciousness from one object to the other is so rapid that these different sense impressions seem to merge together into a single uniform presentation, similar to the rapid display of individual frames on a movie screen. Only when the mind is concentrated are we able to see the individual frames of our sense door consciousnesses arising and passing away, one after the other, with such incredible speed. So the consciousness aggregate is also impermanent.

Investigating these five aggregates, we find them constantly changing, one state giving way to the next. Their very nature is to change. Venerable Punnamantāniputta asked Venerable Ananda to investigate these five aggregates to see their inherent nature of arising and passing away.

Arahant Punnamantāniputta further asked: “Is what is impermanent, happiness or suffering?”

To this, Venerable Ananda answered “Suffering.”

We all agree that what is impermanent cannot bring happiness. Therefore, what is impermanent is also *dukkha*.

The Venerable Arahant asked further: “Is what is impermanent, suffering, subject to change and destruction fit to be regarded as ‘I,’ ‘me,’ and ‘mine’?”

“No, venerable sir,” answered Venerable Ananda.

What is impermanent and subject to suffering cannot be regarded as a self. Thus the five aggregates are not a self. If they are not a self, what are they? They are merely an on-going process of cause and effect, nothing but a series of causal relationships.

In this discourse, Arahant Punnamantāniputta poses an important question to Venerable Ananda:

“How does the notion of ‘I am’ occur?”

As Venerable Punnamantāniputta was finishing his discourse, Venerable Ananda became a *sotāpanna* (stream-enterer).

Let me summarize the reasons for studying the five aggregates:

1. Because the five aggregates are the Noble Truth of Suffering.
2. Because the five aggregates are the objects from which identity view and clinging spring.
3. Because the five aggregates are the objects of investigation for gaining insight knowledge.

If the meditators keep on investigating the nature of the five aggregates with insight knowledge, they will finally see that these five aggregates are arising and passing away all the time. As a result, they will become disenchanted with the aggregates. Once they become disenchanted, they will want to let them go. Now we are still attached to our body and mind. Why is this so? Are you attached to your body and mind? Yes. Who does not feel attached to the body and mind? We are all attached to the body and mind. But why?

It is because we have not yet seen the fault of the body and mind. We are just like a child who sees fireworks for the first time; he becomes fascinated by the display and develops an attachment to it. One day, however, he touches one of the fireworks and gets burnt. Now he realizes that fireworks are not only beautiful but also dangerous. They are danger in disguise. He knows if he holds on to one of the fireworks, he may get seriously burnt. For the sake of his safety and happiness, he starts to keep a distance from the fireworks display. He has learned to let go of his attachment to the fireworks. Now he looks at the fireworks dispassionately.

Similarly, we are attached to our mind and body because we have not yet seen their fault. Although we have been told many times that this body and mind are suffering (*dukkha*), yet we still cling to this *dukkha*. Why is this so? Just like the child, we have not yet seen the fault and danger of the mind and body. We have not been burnt enough by this mind and body to learn to let go of them.

So how can we see the fault and danger of the mind and body?

It is only through experiencing directly the constant arising and ceasing of the mind and body that the fault and danger of the mind and body are revealed. To see the fault and danger of the mind and body is the goal of *vipassanā* practice.

This is very important. When you come to practice meditation at a retreat like this one, you should clearly know the goal. But this doesn't mean that you should become attached to the goal. Knowing the goal of the practice and attaching to the goal are two different things. You should know the goal clearly and when you begin to practice, you don't need to think about the goal. Let the goal take care of itself. It is not just about wanting to sit down and wanting to see arising and passing away in order to realize the fault and danger of the body and mind. If this is so, your meditation will end up in suffering. In this practice, the *Dhamma* will only reveal itself when the time is ripe. If your wisdom has not matured enough to see the rapid arising and passing away, you just have to continue practicing.

The process of practicing *vipassanā* can be compared to a hen hatching eggs. The hen has to sit on top of the eggs and make sure the eggs are well covered and nurtured. Only then the chicks will break through the shell and hatch properly. Similarly, you must make sure your practice is done properly. The result will take its own natural course. Let your aim, the goal, the objective of the practice be very clear in your mind. With this clearly in mind, you will be able to constantly check your practice to see whether you are getting side-tracked from your goal. You should again remember to free yourself from all expectations of results. You just do your duty. Let nature takes its course. I just want to remind you that the progress of the practice (the removal of the defilements) takes a long time. It may take five years, ten years, or twenty years before you can see that the defilements have worn away. Do not expect to see immediate results. Unless your *parami* is very strong, it is very difficult to see the results within a short period of time. Despite this you must have the confidence that as long as you are practicing then you will progress. Just like a carpenter, looking at the handle of the ax, only sees the impression of his thumbs; he does not know so much of the handle of the ax has worn away today, so much yesterday, so much earlier. But when it has worn away, the knowledge occurs that it has worn away. So it is with the practice.

Talk 2: The Five Aggregates in Detail

The materiality aggregate

Materiality aggregate in Pāli is called *rūpakkhanda*. *Rūpa* is derived from the word *ruppati* which means to be deformed, disturbed, oppressed and broken. All

kinds of states that have the characteristic of being molested or deformed come under the materiality aggregate. The meaning of *rūpa* is the continuous change of materiality, oppressed and disturbed by adverse physical conditions. *Rūpa* consists of the four great elements: earth element, fire element, water element and wind element. Dependent upon these four elements, there are 24 types of derived materiality. For example; eye-, ear-, nose-, tongue-, and body-sensitivity, color, smell, taste, nutriment, etc. All these types of materiality are called derived materiality because they are derived from the four great elements.

What are the causes for the arising of the four great elements? There are four causes: Karma, consciousness, nutriment, and temperature. Karma means both our past and present action. Take our digestive fire in the stomach as an example. This digestive fire is part of the fire element, which is one of the four elements. The four elements are a product of past karma. Owing to some unwholesome past karma, the four elements--which are the products of that karma--may have a deficient fire element in a particular case. The deficiency of the fire element causes weak digestive fire in the stomach, and this can affect a person's health. This is how karma can impact the four great elements.

The four great elements are also produced by consciousness (*cittajarūpa*). For example, when you have the intention to walk, your intention produces the four elements--especially the wind element--that pushes your body to go forward. Wholesome and unwholesome mental states also affect the elements in the body. If your mind is in a wholesome state, such as radiating love and compassion for sentient beings, then the wholesome mental state produces wholesome four elements which energize your body. But if your mind is in an unwholesome state, for example if it is associated with hatred, then that hatred mind state produces four elements--especially the fire element--in excess in your body. The excessive fire element burns your body. Due to the excessive fire element, the wind element becomes excessive too. The wind element pushes your body and your whole body shivers because of anger. You can experience this yourself. This is how the mind state affects the four elements in the body. With this understanding, for the sake of our health, we should always cultivate wholesome mental states to ensure good health.

The food you eat also affects the four elements in the body. If you consume wholesome food, it produces healthy four elements that make your body healthy and strong. On the other hand, if you eat junk food, this unhealthy food produces unhealthy four elements that affect your health.

The last cause for the arising of the four elements in the body is temperature. The external and internal temperatures affect the four elements in the body. For example, if the weather is very hot, the whole body becomes fiery and sweats. If the weather is too cold, the body becomes inactive and the skin cracks. As

for the internal temperature, excessive intake of chili peppers makes the body very hot. On the other hand, the intake of ice-cream cools down the temperature in the body. From here, you can clearly see that the body--which is merely the effect--reacts according to the adverse causes of past karma, consciousness, nutriment, and temperature. The body is just a group of effects produced by causes. Therefore, the body is conditioned. Even though this is a theoretical understanding, it temporarily helps you to remove the wrong view of body as permanent self or self as being in the body.

The feeling aggregate

Feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness are mental aggregates.

There are three ways to study them according to their characteristics, functions and manifestations.

The characteristic of feeling is being felt. The function of feeling is to experience the desirable or undesirable aspect of the object. For example, during the eating process, when the favorable food touches your tongue sensitivity and you feel pleasure, it is not you that feels pleasure. In our mental stream, there is one mental factor called feeling and this feeling at that moment performs its function of experiencing and enjoying the desirable aspect of the taste. Therefore, whenever you enjoy something agreeable, the feeling makes you feel pleasure. You must bear in mind that feeling enjoys the taste and gives you a pleasant experience; feeling is not “I,” not “he,” not “she,” and not “a person.” The function of feeling is just to experience the object.

Each object has its desirable or undesirable aspect. Who experiences it? “Feeling” experiences it. When you look at your lover, at that moment feeling performs its function of experiencing the lovable aspect of your beloved one, and the manifestation of feeling is to make the associated mental states of perception, formations and consciousness happy. The body also feels happy. Therefore, you feel good when looking at your lover. On the other hand, if your eyes see an enemy, unpleasant feeling arises and makes the associated mental state and body unhappy. That’s all. If you can understand how feeling plays its role, then you will not misperceive feeling as a self.

There are three types of feeling: namely pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling or neutral feeling. Where do the feelings come from? Feelings come from contact or impingement. There are six types of contact.

When the eyes see something, that is called eye contact. According to dependent origination, when there is eye contact, dependent on contact, feeling arises. Since there is eye contact, there must be one type of feeling born from eye contact. When sound impinges on ear-sensitivity, this impingement is called ear contact. When there’s ear contact, there must be one type of feeling born from ear contact. The same goes for the other sense contacts. When fragrant

odor touches the nose-sensitivity, dependent on the nose contact, pleasant feeling born from nose contact arises. Similarly, when a very bitter food touches your tongue-sensitivity, owing to this tongue contact, there arises unpleasant feeling experiencing the undesirable aspect of the taste. Likewise, when the body touches a very soft cushion, due to this bodily contact, there arises pleasant feeling. After sitting for a long time, the cushion seems to become hard like a rock, and your pleasant feeling changes to an unpleasant one. When you think of something pleasurable, then pleasant feeling arises; when you think of something not pleasurable, unpleasant feeling arises. The neutral feeling arises when the contacts with the six sense objects are neutral.

Therefore, we have pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings with regard to each contact. Since there are six contacts, there are 18 types of feelings. When one practices contemplation of the feelings, these 18 types of feelings are the object of one's contemplation.

If we miss contemplating the feeling--for example, the pleasant feeling that arises from eating--attachment or craving follows the pleasant feeling. According to the formula of dependent origination and through our own practical experience, depending on pleasant feeling, craving arises. Suppose, we experience very pleasant feelings when tasting a piece of chocolate cake; depending on this pleasant feeling, we reach out with our hand to grasp another piece--a sign of craving, isn't it? Without contemplating the pleasant feeling, the mind gives in to craving. Not only that, we will also identify feelings as "I" or "myself" or "I am feeling." At this moment, we strengthen the personality view. In the practice to attain *sotāpanna*, we have to get rid of personality view by contemplating "feeling as feeling." Therefore, if we miss contemplating pleasant feeling, two defilements--craving and personality view--would follow.

We study the feelings because they are the objects of identity view and craving. This understanding is important because it reminds us to be contemplative. The six contacts of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are always open except when we fall asleep. Since these six contacts are always there, it means these six types of feelings are always present. Therefore, feeling is always there to be observed. If there is no pleasant and unpleasant feeling, there will be a neutral feeling. Just observe the neutral feeling and see how it changes.

The condition for the arising of feeling is contact.

The perception aggregate

The characteristic of perception is that it perceives the quality of an object. Each object has its own quality. The function of perception is that it makes a sign regarding those qualities to enable recognition of the object. For example, how do you recognize a bird flying in the sky? You recognize it from its two wings which are the sign or the quality of a bird that you have made in your mind.

The manifestation of perception is the action of interpreting by means of signs as apprehended. We always perceive in a distorted way, just like the blind man who touches the elephant. The blind man cannot see the elephant as a whole. If he touches one part of the elephant, the leg, he may conclude that the elephant is like a pillar. This is the sign which the blind man mis-apprehends and mis-imprints in his memory. This sign is a distorted sign, not in accordance with the truth. The elephant's leg is only one part of the elephant, not the totality or the complete picture of the elephant. Similarly, happiness is only one part of life, not the totality of life.

Another example--you see a coil of rope at night time and misperceive it to be a snake. Previously, you have seen a snake and know that a snake is like a coil. At night, due to the darkness, you misperceive the rope as a snake and get frightened. This is called perverted perception. Perception perceives what is wrong as right or vice-versa. When can we see a rope as a rope? Only when there is light.

Under the influence of ignorance--the darkness of the mind--we perceive the five aggregates as permanent, happiness, and self; this is similar to the situation when we see a coil of rope and mistake it for a snake. When wisdom arises, we clearly see the true nature of the five aggregates. Perception is grouped under the five aggregates because of its importance. Thought and view follow what one perceives.

The condition for the arising of perception is also contact.

The Buddha repeatedly said that all formations are impermanent, but we still perceive them as permanent. The distorted perception is deeply rooted. Once the phenomenon is wrongly perceived, it takes great effort and a long time to correct it. That's why, no matter how many times we have been taught that all things are impermanent, impermanent, and impermanent, we still forget. This is because for a long time, through the beginningless round of rebirths, we have perceived everything as being permanent. This has been strongly imprinted in our mind.

Look at your own experiences. Take feeling as an example: since your birth until now, your feelings have changed constantly from pleasant to unpleasant, or from unpleasant to neutral and vice-versa. Before you were married, you felt excited about your beloved one. After marriage, the feelings may not be as pleasant as before. Sometimes you may even have bad feelings towards your spouse. You experience the instability of feelings. But why is your perception of impermanence still shaky? This is caused by latent ignorance and the failure to contemplate impermanence when actually experiencing change. Every time your feeling changes, if you could contemplate it accordingly, then the perception of impermanence will be imprinted in your mind repeatedly. Thus

the perception of impermanence is reinforced and becomes powerful. As contemplating impermanence becomes a mental habit, we will not be attached to happiness and sorrow because we already know they will soon change.

In Myanmar, Mogok Sayadaw taught the same way. Whatever arises, just contemplate arising and passing away repeatedly until your mindset matches this reality of impermanence. Then, nothing will move you; you will not be disturbed by any circumstances. Whatever happens to you, whether it is praise or blame, fame or defame, gain or loss, happiness or suffering, you remain unmoved because you know that all will change, so why attach! Happiness arises and passes away, sorrow arises and passes away, our prosperity may not last long, and that newly bought Mercedes may get banged. So why attach? It is better to take “impermanence” as your refuge. If the perception of impermanence is strong in the mindset, then one can maintain equanimity all the time. One single contemplation of impermanence frees oneself from grasping at that moment. Moment to moment, day after day, year after year, until there comes a day when the mind is completely free from clinging to anything whatsoever, and you achieve the freedom of the heart.

The formations aggregate

The characteristic of formation is forming, fabricating or constructing. In Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Buddha said: “They form the form, bhikkhus, this is why they are called formation.” According to the *Abhidhamma*, excluding feeling and perception, the rest of the 50 mental factors are termed as formations. These mental factors include craving, jealousy, mindfulness, effort, concentration, avarice, sloth and torpor, restlessness, faith, tranquility, desire, determination, doubt, wisdom, hatred, delusion, etc. The function of formation is to accumulate karma whether it is bodily, verbally or mentally action. Whatever actions one performs, whether they are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, are termed as karma. Once karma is performed, it leaves behind potency or an energy that can produce effect. Karma can be likened to a seed; when you throw a seed onto the ground, it has the potency to sprout. Similarly, whatever action we do has the potency to produce an effect. It is called karmic potency which cannot be seen by the eye.

The manifestation of formation occurs as a result of one’s intervening or controlling by becoming interested in an object. For example, when you are mindful of your breath, it is a formation because your mind is interested in this breath. You accumulate karma which in this case is good karma. Practicing *samatha* is always good karma since the mind is absorbed in a pure object. However, this type of karma prolongs your life in the round of rebirths.

Vipassanā is different. In *vipassanā* practice, whatever object arises you contemplate impermanence, suffering and non-self. The mind does not become interested and engaged; instead, the mind turns away from engaging in that object. This

turning away from the object or non-clinging cuts short the round of rebirths.

We have mundane activity and supra-mundane activity. In mundane activity, volition is the leader because it accumulates *kamma*. In supra-mundane activity, wisdom is the leader because wisdom is like a sword that cuts off the defilements that produce rebirths.

The condition for the arising of formations is also contact.

The consciousness aggregate

Consciousness has the characteristic of knowing an object. The function of consciousness is to be the forerunner of mental factors. According to the *Abhidhamma*, there are four ultimate truths: matter or materiality, consciousness, mental factors, and *nibbana*. Consciousness and mental factors must arise together. However, between consciousness and mental factors, consciousness is the forerunner or the leader. The manifestation of consciousness occurs as a continuity of process rather than an independent being experiencing the phenomena.

For example, while watching a TV program, you may eat an ice cream and rock your legs. There are several actions here: eye-consciousness arises on seeing the form on the screen; ear-consciousness arises on hearing the sound; tongue-consciousness arises on tasting the ice-cream; nose-consciousness arises on smelling the fragrance of the ice-cream; body-consciousness arises on feeling the shake of the legs; and mind-consciousness interprets what the drama tells. These six consciousnesses arise one after another, not all at once. But we think they arise all at once because we fail to see the rapid arising and passing away of each discrete consciousness. In a snap of the fingers, millions of consciousnesses arise and pass away.

Therefore, as we watch TV, different consciousnesses arise one after another in rapid succession. Unable to understand the actual process, we conclude seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing, and thinking as “myself.” We wrongly think, “I am eye-consciousness,” “I am ear-consciousness,” . . . “I am mind-consciousness”; we think, “these six consciousnesses are mine.” The six consciousnesses arise one after another as a continuity of process but we think it is a single continuous consciousness we identify as “I” that is experiencing the watching of the TV program. That’s why the Buddha said consciousness is like a magician, deceiving us. A magician can create something unreal and we are cheated.

Consciousness is dependently arisen. Consciousness is named by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-

consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the nose and odors, it is reckoned as nose-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the tongue and flavors, it is reckoned as tongue-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the body and tangibles, it is reckoned as body-consciousness; when consciousness arises dependent on the mind and mind objects, it is reckoned as mind-consciousness.

In summary, we have six types of consciousnesses: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness.

For each consciousness to arise, their conditional factors must be fulfilled. For example, for eye-consciousness to arise, four factors are needed--eye sensitivity, light, attention, and form. When the cause of seeing is fulfilled, the effect of seeing arises. It is the same for other types of consciousnesses. None of the consciousnesses is “I,” “he,” “she” or a “person.” This is the correct view.

Talk 3: The Gratification of the Five Aggregates

The gratification of the materiality aggregate

The form that is derived from the primary element gives rise to excitement, enjoyment, satisfaction, and gratification to the eyes. For example, when one has nothing to do at home, there is a tendency to switch on the TV. That is because the various forms projected by the TV satisfy the eyes. This is enjoyment of the eyes.

How about sound? Some people are fond of music: classical, rock and roll, etc. Others like to hear sweet and pleasing talk such as praise from other people, although sometimes it may not be true. Music and pleasant words give satisfaction, enjoyment, and excitement to the ears.

The nose likes a fragrant odor, and this makes the Paris Fragrance sell well in the world. A fragrant odor gratifies the nose and gladdens the mind.

The same is true of taste. Taste is also a derived materiality. Various tastes excite the taste buds. If we eat the same type of food every day, very soon we will get bored. That's because just one type of taste is not able to satisfy the tongue. The variety of foods gives rise to excitement, enjoyment, and satisfaction for the tongue. We can see various restaurants being established; other businesses may go bankrupt but seldom restaurants. All beings love and depend on food, “*sabbe satta ahāra thitika*”: “All beings are maintained by the nutriment.”

The soft touch--the touch of fine cloth or the touch of the opposite sex--gratifies the

body.

In short, the pleasure and joy that arise dependent on the five internal bases and their respective five external objects are the gratification of the materiality aggregate.

The gratification of the feeling aggregate

The feeling aggregate, especially pleasant feeling, gives more enjoyment than the materiality aggregate. Some people get addicted to alcohol, drugs, morphine and so on not because of their taste but because they stimulate a strong pleasant feeling. These people are addicted to the pleasant feeling that the drugs provide. This pleasant feeling thrills both the mind and body.

So, this is the enjoyment, gratification and excitement of the feeling aggregate.

The gratification of the perception aggregate

We always perceive all formations as permanent, happiness, and self. This perverted perception makes the mind happy. Most people perceive worldly life as full of happiness. Being surrounded by one's beloved spouse and children is joyful; enjoying the wealth one gains is happiness. Such a way of perceiving things satisfies us and we cannot bear to become monks or nuns.

The perception of non-self is unwelcomed by the majority. It threatens our ego-cherishing attitude. Few can bear to perceive the mind and body as not a self. We do not like to hear that our property and beloved children do not belong to us.

The gratification of the formations aggregate

Craving, one of the mental factors among the formations aggregate, finds great enjoyment in sensual pleasure. Craving has the characteristic of grasping the sensual object; its function is not to let go. The more one indulges in sensual pleasure, the more one's craving increases.

The gratification of the consciousness aggregate

We are free to think whatever we want. Let us take, for example, the situation of a poor person. A poor person may not have a big house or a Mercedes, but he can dream of them. Nobody can stop him dreaming. He might even think he is now the President of the United States. He indulges in his own thought which satisfies him. His thoughts make him happy.

Consciousness sustains life by being aware of some objects. The very thought of--I am aware, thus still "alive"--gratifies the majority. This is called the gratification of the consciousness aggregate.

As the five aggregates provide gratification and enjoyment, we cling or attach to the

five aggregates very strongly. If the five aggregates do not provide enjoyment, satisfaction or happiness, how can we cling to them? Owing to their gratification, we just keep running and revolving around form, around feeling, around perception, around volitional formations, and around consciousness. As we keep on running and revolving around them, we are not freed from form, not freed from feeling, not freed from perception, not freed from volitional formations, and not freed from consciousness. We are not freed from suffering. (SN 22.99)

The gratification, enjoyment, and excitement of the five aggregates cause us to be blind to their dangers and faults. For a long time, this mind has been defiled by lust, hatred, and delusion. The Buddha said: “Through the defilements of the mind, beings are defiled.”

I will give you an example from the Magandiya Sutta (MN 75) which is a very profound *sutta*. A man, who was born blind, could not see colors, whether pink, green, black, or white. He could not see the moon, the sky, or the sun. However, one day, he heard a man with good eyesight say, “How wonderful, good sir, is a white shirt or white cloth, beautiful, spotless, and clean.” And this blind man went in search of something white because after hearing somebody praising the white, spotless, clean shirt or cloth, he developed a strong attachment to this white shirt although he could not see. One of his friends fooled him with a grimy and oil stained cloth or rag and told him: “Here my good friend, is a white shirt, beautiful, spotless, and clean.” This blind man was so happy. He quickly took it and put it on. Having put it on, he felt so gratified, satisfied, and happy. He went around showing off to the other people. All of his friends laughed at him. One of his good friends told the blind man that he was wearing a grimy and oil stained shirt, but the blind man still declared that he was wearing a white, clean, spotless shirt. His good friend thought that he should tell the blind man’s mother. His mother tried to convince her son that he was wearing a grimy and oil stained shirt. However, as her blind son was so attached to this shirt which he thought was white, clean, and spotless, he did not believe her. His mother had no choice but to call for an eye doctor to cure his blindness. When he finally gained his eyesight and looked at his body, he found that it was not a white, clean, and spotless shirt that he cherished. Instead it was a grimy and oil stained shirt. He exclaimed to himself, “Oh my gosh! How long have I been fooled, cheated, and deceived by that man and this grimy, oil stained rag!” He quickly took it off and thought that the man who had fooled him should be killed.

What is this oil stained, grimy, and dirty shirt? It is none other than the five aggregates that we all are showing off to other people. We think, “How fit and beautiful is my body!” Instead, we should say: “How beautiful is my oil stained rag!” Why did this blind man develop such strong attachment to this oil stained and grimy shirt? That’s because he could not see (ignorance). As he

was blind, he could not see clearly. Therefore, blindness is called ignorance. Don't laugh at this blind man; we are in the same boat. Due to ignorance, we cannot see the fault of the five aggregates. We think that the five aggregates provide us with enjoyment, gratification, and happiness. We are just like the blind man who perceived the grimy shirt as beautiful, clean, and spotless. That's why we cling strongly to the five aggregates. Only when wisdom arises, will ignorance give way. Then we start to see clearly the fault and the reality of the five aggregates. Then we will say, "My gosh, how long have I been fooled, cheated, and deceived by this mind!"

One starts to realize that in clinging, it is just form that one is clinging to; it was just feeling, just perception, just fabrication of volitional formations, and just consciousness that one is clinging to.

The Buddha said: "Suppose a dog tied up in a leash was bound to a strong post or pillar. When it walked, it walked close to that post or pillar. When it stood, it stood close to the post or pillar. When it sat down, it sat down close to the post or pillar. When it laid down, it laid down close to the post or pillar. So, too, bhikkhus, the uninstructed worldlings regard form, materiality thus as this is mine, this I am, this myself. He regards feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness thus--this is mine, this I am, this myself. If he walks, he walks close to the five aggregates of clinging. If he stands, he stands close to the five aggregates subject to clinging. If he sits down, he sits down close to the five aggregates of clinging. If he lies down, he lies down close to the five aggregates subject to clinging." (SN 22.100)

With clinging as a requisite or condition, karmic becoming arises. Dependent on the becoming, there is birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, distress, and despair. Thus arises the whole mass of suffering. This suffering comes from ignorance, not knowing clearly. Because of not knowing clearly, we develop attachment. If we know clearly, we will give up attachment. Therefore, ignorance and craving are the origin of all suffering. They are the root causes of all suffering. The practice of *vipassanā* and *samatha* are called The Noble Eightfold Path that will finally remove the ignorance which conceals the Four Noble Truths. When ignorance is removed, the Four Noble Truths manifest.

In summary, the purpose of practice is to remove the ignorance of the danger of the five aggregates. It means to develop wisdom in order to see the fault, the danger, and the misery of the five aggregates. Seeing clearly, we are willing to let go of that attachment to the five aggregates.

Here ends the gratification of the five aggregates.

The danger of the five aggregates

Each coin has two sides. The five aggregates give gratification but there is also

danger in them. The danger of the five aggregates is that they are impermanent, subject to destruction. We may cling to our five aggregates but once they change, the craving is no more satiated; then we feel misery. For example, we cling to our body delusively thinking that our body is healthy and strong. One day when we go for a check-up and the doctor says that we have cancer, we won't be able to laugh anymore because what we thought previously, that the body gives happiness, now turns out to be the opposite. The body is giving us suffering now. This is the danger of the material aggregate.

The mental aggregate changes faster than the material aggregate. Within a single day, thousands of thoughts arise and pass away. Our cherished happiness soon leaves us and is replaced by sorrow; the praise we receive today becomes tomorrow's blame.

The danger of the five aggregates is that they are impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is impermanent or suffering cannot be regarded as "I," "mine" or "myself."

The process of change is beyond our control. Therefore, the five aggregates are not-self. What is non-self and beyond our control cannot bring us lasting happiness. This is the danger of the five aggregates.

The five aggregates were compared to murderers or killers. In the Yamaka Sutta (SN 22.85), Venerable Sariputta gave a simile. He said: "Friend, suppose there was a rich man with much wealth and property, protected by body guards. Then, someone appeared who wanted to ruin him, to harm him, to endanger him, and to take his life. It occurred to the man that this rich man was protected by bodyguards, and it wouldn't be easy to take his life by force. He thought, 'Let me get close to him and then take his life.' Then he approached the rich man and said to him, 'I would like to serve you, sir.' The rich man appointed him as a servant. The man served the rich man very well, rising up before him, retiring after him, doing whatever he wanted. He was agreeable in his conduct and endearing in his speech. Eventually, the rich man considered him as a friend and placed trust in him. However, when the man became aware that the rich man had placed trust in him, finding him alone, he took his life with a sharp knife. When the man was serving the rich man, rising up before him, retiring after him, doing whatever he wanted, agreeable in his conduct, endearing in his speech, wasn't he a murderer then even though the others might not recognize him as a murderer?"

Our five aggregates are compared to a murderer living closely with us though we may not recognize him. Our five aggregates serve us and please us well. We become very intimate with our five aggregates and place trust in our five aggregates. When attachment to the five aggregates grows strong, we will then be killed.

The escape

We have spoken about the gratification and dangers of the five aggregates.

But how do we escape from the dangers of the five aggregates?

The escape lies in removing the lust, the attachment, the craving, and the clinging to the five aggregates.

To achieve this goal, we must see the five aggregates as they are: **impermanent, suffering, and non-self**. Without seeing their impermanent, suffering, and non-self nature, we are unable to remove our lust for them. We are just like a child who is fascinated by fireworks; only when the child touches the fireworks and gets burnt will he know that fireworks are dangerous; thus he will let go of his clinging to the fireworks.

The materiality aggregate: The Buddha compared the materiality aggregate to a lump of form. He said: “Monks, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of form; a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it and carefully investigate it, and this lump of form would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial for what substance could there be in the lump of form? So, too, monks, whatever kind of form that is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a bhikkhu or a monk inspects it, ponders it and carefully investigates it and it will appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial for what substance could there be in a lump of form?” (SN 22.97)

So if we inspect and investigate our body through the four elements meditation, we will see clearly that the body is insubstantial.

How do we practice the four elements meditation?

We can scan the body: from the top of the head slowly scan down to the feet. In whatever part we feel hardness, mentally we should note “earth element, earth element.” If we feel hot somewhere, then mentally note “fire element, fire element.” Move the awareness from the top of the head down to the soles repeatedly. If we feel softness in any part of the body, we should note “earth element, earth element.” When awareness reaches the heart and we feel the heart pumping, then we contemplate it as earth element “wind element, wind element.” Sometimes we might feel the tightness of the body--this is the water element. Contemplate “water element, water element.” As we move our awareness from the top of the head down to the feet, we will see various elements in our body. As concentration grows, we will come to a stage when we no longer feel the body, only the elements. The elements will manifest very fast, appearing and disappearing up to the final stage when we will no longer

see elements--we will only see particles, billions of particles arising and passing away in the body. Some will see the body breaking up and falling apart. At this time, we will understand why the Buddha compared the materiality aggregate to the form. The body is like a lump of form. For what substance could there be in this body? It is insubstantial.

The feeling aggregate: The Buddha compared the feeling aggregate to a water bubble. Water bubbles arise and burst on the surface of the water constantly. We can observe this when it rains and the water falls into a pond. If we investigate it, we will come to the conclusion that feelings are insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? It forms and perishes immediately. Similarly, our feelings--whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral--come and go.

The perception aggregate: The Buddha compared this perception aggregate to a mirage. During the hot season, sometimes we see a mirage appears. We think it is real but in fact it is unreal. Our perception, like a mirage, deceives us. It makes us think what is false to be real. The correct perception is to perceive everything as impermanent, suffering, and non-self. If we perceive all phenomena, including the five aggregates, as happiness, permanent and self, this is called perverted perception.

The formations aggregate: The Buddha compared the formations aggregate to a banana tree. Take the case of a man who goes in search for heart wood and finds a banana tree. Wanting to get the heart wood, he cuts down the banana tree. As we know, the trunk of the banana tree is composed of several layers just as the formations aggregate is composed of many mental factors. This man peels away the layers of the tree but he won't find even soft wood, not to mention heart wood. This signifies that all mental formations are empty; there is no substance in them. Mindfulness is empty of a self, wisdom is empty of a self, concentration is empty of a self, effort is empty of a self, and greed is empty of a self. There is no heart wood in the formations aggregate.

The consciousness aggregate: The Buddha compared the consciousness aggregate to a magician. A magician can make something unreal appear as real and make us believe in it. Therefore, consciousness or our mind always cheats us. Just like the blind man who thought that the grimy cloth was a clean cloth, we think that the five aggregates are permanent and bring happiness and enjoyment; thus, we are cheated by our mind.

By understanding that the five aggregates are insubstantial, how should we contemplate in order to remove the lust for the five aggregates?

Venerable Sariputta gave a very good discourse on how to contemplate them. In this discourse, Mahakothitta had asked Venerable Sariputta to explain the appropriate way to contemplate the five aggregates in order to attain the state

of a stream enterer or how to contemplate the five aggregates in an appropriate way in order to remove the lust for the five aggregates. Venerable Sariputta explained that the appropriate way a practitioner should attend to the five aggregates of clinging is to regard the five aggregates as impermanent, unsatisfactory, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, empty, void, not a self. Should a monk or practitioner attend in this way, it is possible for the practitioner to realize the fruit of a stream enterer, once returner, non-returner and finally an *arahant*. This is the reason why I ask you to contemplate “impermanent, impermanent, impermanent; suffering, suffering; non-self, non-self.” It is very clearly stated in the *suttas* and very easy to follow. Whatever comes, contemplate “impermanent, impermanent, impermanent”; it is so easy to practice.

However, although the method is very easy, we always forget. We always forget to contemplate “impermanent, impermanent, impermanent,” especially when we experience happiness. When happiness comes, we don’t want impermanence; we hope our happiness becomes permanent because sensual pleasure activates craving. But if we experience sorrow, we hope the sorrow goes away quickly. Yet, we remain forgetful to contemplate sorrow as impermanent and get caught in it.

We will end here. *Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu.*

Talk 4: The Importance of Right View

Channa Bhikkhu’s dilemma

I would like to continue the last talk about the five aggregates of clinging. Today’s talk is an important one. It is connected to your practical experience. However, it is also very profound and it is dependent on your wisdom whether you can comprehend it or not. I would like to relate a story from the *sutta*. This story concerns Channa Bhikkhu.

One day, Channa Bhikkhu was meditating. After emerging from seclusion, he went to the eldest monk and asked the eldest monk to preach the *Dhamma* to him. The eldest monk preached to him thus: form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional formation is impermanent, and consciousness is impermanent. Moreover, the five aggregates are also non-self. It was a very short *Dhamma* talk.

Channa Bhikkhu bowed to the eldest monk and went back to his *kuti*. There he sat meditating. He thought to himself, “I understand form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional formation is impermanent, and consciousness is impermanent. I also understand they are non-self. However, my mind does not launch out upon the stilling of all

formations, the relinquishing of acquisition, and the destruction of craving. My mind does not launch out upon the cessation, the fading away, and *nibbana*. Instead, agitation and clinging arise in me and my mind turns back. Who am I? Who am I? Who is myself sitting here meditating?” And he thought that such a doubt would not have arisen in one who has seen the *Dhamma*. “Who can show me the path? Who can help me see the *Dhamma*?”

I would like to explain Channa’s doubt. Channa understood that the five aggregates are impermanent and he also understood that the five aggregates are non-self. But why did such a doubt arise in him? Why did agitation and clinging arise in him? You may face the same problem.

The commentary on this *sutta* states that doubt arose in Channa because his insight knowledge was very weak. Why was his insight knowledge weak? That was because before he proceeded to contemplate the impermanent and non-self nature of the five aggregates, he did not fully discern **cause and effect**. He did not fully discern the conditional five aggregates. Due to the fact that he did not fully discern the conditional five aggregates, although he knew that the five aggregates are non-self, he still had doubt: “Who am I? Who is myself? Who is this self sitting here meditating?”

This is the reason why on the first and second day, I taught you how to discern *nāma rūpa*, mind and matter, and cause and effect. Only then I asked you to contemplate impermanence. If you do not contemplate cause and effect but instead you go one step further to contemplate non-self, you will end up with Channa’s dilemma. You will have doubt and perplexity about this self and about yourself. Although Channa understood the impermanent and non-self nature of the five aggregates, his mind did not launch out upon the stilling of all formations and *nibbana*. Instead agitation arose in him. This agitation arose in Channa because of fear. Fear of what? Fear of losing this self.

For some meditators, when practicing the four elements meditation, they cannot see the self but only the elements. When they experience this, they feel sorrow and they weep. That’s because of fear. They are afraid of losing the self which they have clung to so firmly and so strongly.

Where does this fear come from? What causes this fear? **This fear is caused by the clinging to the self.**

Agitation and clinging--agitation out of fear and clinging to the self will block the meditator’s mind. The mind will refuse to incline towards cessation or to incline towards the stilling of all formations. Remembering this will be very helpful to your practice. You will come to this stage.

In order to overcome the difficulty or dilemma of Channa, **you have to contemplate**

mind and matter, cause and effect--again and again. When you are able to contemplate cause and effect, the non-self nature will become clearer and clearer to you. I have already mentioned the four causes of arising of materiality: Karma, consciousness, nutriment and temperature. You must not neglect the contemplation of cause and effect, called *paccaya pariggaha ñana* or the second insight knowledge of discerning cause and effect.

The eternalism and annihilation views

When this doubt and perplexity arose in Channa, he thought of Venerable Ananda who might be able to help him. Ananda was praised by the Buddha for his wise knowledge, and he listened to all the teachings of the Buddha. He approached Venerable Ananda and told him his difficulties. Ananda preached him a very profound *sutta*, the Kaccayanagotta Sutta. Venerable Ananda said: “This world for the most part, relies on duality or polarity, upon the notion of existence and non-existence. For one who sees the origination of the world as it actually is with correct wisdom, the notion of non-existence will not occur in him. For one who sees the cessation of the world, the notion of existence will not occur in him.”

The notion of existence is the same as the view of eternalism. The notion of non-existence is the same as the view of annihilation. In this world, most people get entangled in these dualities or views. Why does a person hold on or cling to the view of eternalism? That’s because this person does not see the cessation of formation. Therefore, during your *vipassanā* practice, if you cannot see the formation passing away, cease or perish, you will hold the view of eternalism.

How did the view of annihilation come about? Why do people think that after death, everything is annihilated? That’s because they do not see the arising or the origination of the world. The world here signifies the world of conditions (*sankhāra loka*). **The five aggregates are the world of conditions.** If a person does not see the origination or the arising, again and again, of the formation of the five aggregates, then he will hold the view of annihilation. The Buddha said, the notion of non-existence will not occur in one who sees the origination of the five aggregates as they actually are with correct wisdom.

Everything exists is one extreme. Nothing exists is another extreme.

The Buddha avoided these two extremes and preached the middle way. What is the middle way? He preached: dependent on ignorance, karmic formations come to be; dependent on karmic formations, consciousness comes to be; dependent on consciousness, mind and matter come to be; dependent on mind and matter, six sense bases come to be; dependent on six sense bases, contact comes to be; dependent on contact, feeling comes to be; dependent on feeling, craving comes to be; dependent on craving, clinging comes to be; dependent on clinging, becoming or karma activities comes to be; dependent on karmic

activities, birth comes to be; dependent on birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be; thus arises the whole mass of suffering. This is the middle way.

There is no “person,” no “being,” no “he” and no “she,” only cause and effect. When this exists, that comes to be; with the cessation of this that ceases. With the cessation of ignorance, karmic formations come to cessation. With the cessation of karmic formations, consciousness comes to cessation, etc. Thus, ceases the whole mass of suffering. This is the middle path. This is the right view that can help you to avoid the view of eternalism and the view of annihilation.

When a meditator sees the five aggregates, whether materiality, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness arising and passing away incessantly, he will not have a stand about “myself.” The view of “myself” will not occur in him. There’s no perplexity and doubt.

What one realizes is: **“What arises is suffering arising. What ceases is suffering ceasing.”**

This knowledge is independent of others. This practical knowledge does not depend on the Buddha, does not depend on the teacher and does not depend on the book. It is one's own practical insight knowledge. This is called **right view**. This is profound understanding.

I would like to connect what we have just discussed to the Yamaka Sutta (SN 22.85). Bhikkhu Yamaka held a pernicious view, a wrong view. He said that, as he understood the *Dhamma* taught by the Blessed One, a *bhikkhu*, whose taints are destroyed, is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death?

The fellow monks tried to correct his wrong view but in vain. Since nobody could convince Yamaka, they finally invited Venerable Sariputta to talk to Yamaka Bhikkhu. Out of compassion for Yamaka Bhikkhu, Venerable Sariputta approached Yamaka Bhikkhu and preached him the three common characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self of the five aggregates.

Venerable Sariputta asked: “What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard **form as the Tathagata?**”

“No, friend,” replied Bhikkhu Yamaka.

“Do you regard feeling, perception, volitional formation, consciousness as the Tathagata?”

“No, friend.”

“What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard the **Tathagata as in form?**”

“No, friend.”

“Do you regard the **Tathagata as apart from form?**”

“No, friend.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as in feeling? As apart from feeling? As in perception? As apart from perception? As in volitional formation? As apart from volitional formation? As in consciousness? As apart from consciousness?”

“No, friend.”

“What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard **form, feeling, perception, volitional formation, and consciousness as the Tathagata?**”

“No, friend.”

“What do you think, friend Yamaka, do you regard the **Tathagata as one who is without form, without feeling, without perception, without volitional formation, without consciousness?**”

“No, friend.”

“But, friend, when the Tathagata is not apprehended by you as real and actual here in this very life, is it fitting for you to declare: ‘As I understand the *Dhamma* taught by the Blessed One, a *bhikkhu* whose taints are destroyed is annihilated and perishes with the breakup of the body and does not exist after death?’”

“Formerly, friend Sariputta, when I was ignorant, I did hold that pernicious view; but now that I have heard this *Dhamma* teaching of the Venerable Sariputta I have abandoned that pernicious view and have made the breakthrough to the *Dhamma*.”

“If, friend Yamaka, they were to ask you: ‘Friend Yamaka, when a *bhikkhu* is an *arahant*, one whose taints are destroyed, what happens to him with the breakup of the body, after death?’--being asked thus, what would you answer?”

You should try to answer this question yourself before getting the answer from Bhikkhu Yamaka to see how much you have understood the *Dhamma* correctly.

“If they were to ask me this, friend, I would answer thus:

‘Friends, form, feeling, perception, volitional formation, and consciousness are impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering ceases and passes away.’”

When an *Arahant* dies, if one says he is annihilated or the self has been destroyed, one has already assumed there was the self beforehand. *Arahant* is a conventional name for the five aggregates; the five aggregates are impermanent, and what is impermanent is suffering. Thus, when an *Arahant* dies, we should conclude that what was suffering has ceased and passed away.

The Buddha said that whatever arises is the arising of suffering; whatever ceases is the cessation of suffering. That’s the essence of all the teachings of the Buddha. There is no person or being. We say a human being takes rebirth; this is only conventional truth. Who takes rebirth? Suffering takes rebirth. What is *Parinibbāna*--final cessation? It is the cessation of suffering. This is the correct view.

What to contemplate during meditation?

We experience insight knowledge step by step. First we discern mind and body, *nāma rūpa*. Although *Ānāpāna* is *samatha* practice, you can also discern *nāma rūpa* and cause and effect while practicing *Ānāpāna*. For example, the breath is composed of the four elements with the wind element as the predominant factor. This is materiality and the mind that is aware of the in and out breath is the mental aggregate. The perception perceives the breath; the feeling feels the breath, and the volitional formations act upon the breath.

Here the meditator further examines thus: Supported by what is respiration? He realizes supported by the basis. The basis is the coarse body. The coarse body is composed of the Four Great Elements and the materiality derived from these. The coarse body is where the mental aggregates of feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness occur.

The meditator examines the mind and the body and sees the causal relationship. He concludes that this mind and this body are bare conditions, and things produced from conditions, and that besides these there is neither a living being nor a person.

We discern the same way while practicing the four elements meditation. While discerning the four elements, you may also investigate the cause of arising of the four elements.

Nothing can arise without a cause. If you investigate the mind, you will see that the very **intention** of seeing the four elements produces the four elements. For example, the intention to straighten up the crooked body produces the four

elements with the wind element as the predominant factor that pushes your body to become erect.

Therefore, the mind is the cause and the four elements are the effect.

Without discerning cause and effect, while seeing just the four elements without an entity, you might get frightened and fall prey to doubt like Channa Bhikkhu. You might ask, if there is no self, who am I sitting here looking at the four elements? Your mind would get very agitated because of the fear of losing the self.

Once the cause and effect are clearly discerned, one can proceed to contemplate the impermanence of physical and mental phenomena.

Understanding suffering is not as easy as one assumes. One sees suffering when one sees phenomena are constantly oppressed by arising and ceasing. Before you can see the constant arising and passing away, it is very difficult to understand what suffering really means. You may understand suffering in terms of bodily or physical suffering only. This physical suffering is experienced by all human beings. This type of suffering is not insight knowledge. It is not what the Buddha meant by suffering. The real insight knowledge of suffering comes from seeing repeatedly the arising and passing away of phenomena. At that time, you feel helpless or oppressed because this constant arising and passing away is beyond your control. With this experience, we come to understand the nature of non-self of the mind and body. What is beyond our control is also non-self. It does not yield to our wishes; that is why it is non-self. In the *suttas*, the Buddha constantly said, what is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering cannot be regarded as a self. When one sees impermanence, one sees suffering and non-self. Contemplating impermanence is the entry point to the arising of various kinds of insight knowledge.

I hope that in this retreat I can help you to establish right view. This right view will help you along your spiritual path.

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu.

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