Clinging-Aggregates

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When the Buddha explains the truth of suffering, the first parts are easy to understand. Birth is suffering, aging, death, not getting what you want, having to be what you dislike, having to be separated from what you like, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair. It’s easy to see that these things are suffering. We’ve had this experience ourselves. We may not remember our birth, but we can see when someone gives birth, it’s painful both for the mother and for the child. Aging, illness, death. We’ve all passed the suffering of these things. But then when the Buddha summarizes what all of these forms of suffering have in common, then it gets not quite so easy to comprehend. He says that the five clinging aggregates form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. This is because we cling to these things that we suffer. So it’s good to know how we cling, why we cling, and how we can stop clinging. First we have to identify what they are. Form is the form of your body. Feelings are feeling tones, pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels the mind puts on things, identifying what they are, what they mean. Say you see a stoplight, you’re able to identify the red light and the green light, and you also identify what they mean. The red light means stop, the green light means go. Thought constructs are anything that the mind puts together. Your comments on things, you like this, you don’t like that, this should be this way, that should be that way. You might think of perceptions as single words and thought constructs as full sentences. Then finally there’s consciousness, which is aware of all these things. Now aside from the form, the rest are activities of the mind. We hear the word aggregate and it sounds like little bits and pieces of things. But actually they’re activities, as he says, feelings, feel, perceptions, perceive. Thought fabrications fabricate things. Consciousness cognizes. There are things that we do and there are things that we put together, the way the Buddha explains them. There are potentials for feelings and perceptions, all five aggregates, coming in from the past. And our actual experience of those is something we put together. We have a purpose. We want to use these things for the sake of happiness. And they’re very basic to our sense of identity, who we are, what we can do. Even something as basic as feeding, it involves the body. We’re talking about here physical food, but there’s also mental food. But with physical food you’ve got the body, which needs support. And then you’ve got the physical food out there, all kinds of things that could potentially be food. And you’ve got the pain, the feeling of hunger, in which you want to replace with a feeling of fullness. And so we go around looking for the food. Think of a small child walking, crawling through a house. When the child sees something, what’s the first thing the child does? Picks it up, puts it in his mouth to test to see if this is something to eat or not. That’s basically our first perception. Things that are edible, things that are not edible. Then when you find something that’s potentially food, the question is how do you fix it? Because some forms of food need to be fixed, like rice has to be cooked. You can’t eat just the raw rice grains. Potatoes, if you eat them raw, are poisonous, so you have to come to get the poison out. That’s fabrication. Figure out how to get what you want, how to fix it, how to eat it. And then consciousness is simply aware of all these things. It’s because of consciousness that we can then perceive what really is good food, what’s not good food, what we can eat again, what we shouldn’t eat again. As we go through life, we use all five of these activities. We use them in emotional feeding as well. We decide there’s somebody we need to support us, someone we need to go together with us in life. So you fix up your body so it’s appealing. You try to focus on the comfortable feelings that come when you are supported by somebody else. And you try to ignore the uncomfortable feelings so that you can be more active. Then you have the perception of what kind of person you want. And if the relationship is going well, how to maintain it. If it’s not going well, what can you do to fix it? And you have to be aware of all these things so that you can make proper judgments. So whether we’re feeding physically, or emotionally, we have to use these five aggregates, these five activities. Which is why we’re so attached to them. But we even identify them. These are me, these are mine. Some people think they are their consciousness, or they are their thinking process. And they’re very much attached to the feelings that they want, and their perceptions that they hold of the world. The way they understand the world. So we’re attached to these things. And the Buddha said it’s because we’re attached to these things that we suffer. This is where his teaching goes so much against the grain. He says we cling to these things because we crave them, and of course we crave them because we want them. We think they’re going to be good. And he says we crave and cling because we don’t really understand them. Now if you had just stopped with two Noble Truths, that we suffer in clinging, and the reason we cling is because we crave, then we might as well say, well it’s the best we can get. This is how we find happiness in life. So even though there’s going to be some suffering involved, it’s worth it. So we’ll continue to cling, continue to crave. But there are four Noble Truths. He points out that if you can abandon the craving, you find that there’s a greater happiness that can come. Happiness that’s not subject to suffering. It’s not going to let you down. It’s not going to disappoint you. And the way you do that is the fourth Noble Truth, the path that we’re practicing. Starting with right view, going through right concentration. So if you’re intrigued by that possibility, the irony of our situation, that with the things we cling to, the things we crave, are actually suffering and the cause of suffering, and it is possible to find a true happiness by not engaging in them, then we’re willing to give this path a try. The question is what you’re going to use to follow that path. Well we use aggregates. And we cling to them. But we try to do it in a skillful way. Like right now you’re practicing concentration. You’ve got the body sitting here. You’re focused on the breath, the breath energy coming in, the breath energy going out, the breath energy spreading throughout the body. That’s form. We’re trying to create a feeling of pleasure, ease as the breath comes in, ease as the breath goes out. That’s feeling. We hold in mind the perception of the breath. That’s not just the air coming in and out through the nose, but the flow of energy throughout the body. And you have sensations of energy flowing the body. You learn how to perceive those as breath, and that they are connected with your in and out breath. You hold that perception in mind. Then we talk to ourselves about how we’re doing it. Is the breath comfortable? Is the breath not comfortable? Could it be made more comfortable? When it is comfortable, how do you maintain it? When you maintain it, what can you do with it? Those are all thought fabrications. Then of course your consciousness is aware of these things. And as for the clinging, the Buddha says there are four ways that we cling to the aggregates. One is sensuality. In other words, our sensual fantasies. We paint pictures in the mind. And we identify this thing is attractive, that thing is attractive. That’s all perception, thought constructs that we hold on to. In some ways we enjoy the process of planning and fantasizing about our pleasures even more than the pleasures themselves. Then we have views about how the world works, and then ideas about how we should behave within that world in order to get what we want. And then finally there’s our sense of who we are. We use aggregates for all of these things. And we cling to these things. We don’t really realize how much suffering is involved. But when we’re going to get beyond them, we have to learn how to cling in a new way. There’s no role for sensual fantasies in the path. But the other three kinds of clinging do have a role. You have to have a sense of the world, your views about the world, how karma works. You have your views about what should be done. That’s the path that you follow. And your views about yourself. You have to have a sense that you are competent to do this, and that you will benefit from it. And that you can learn how to watch yourself to see where you’re doing things right. And if you’re not doing things right, what you can do to make them more right. So you have the self as the person who’s responsible for doing the path, your sense of self as the person who’s going to experience the pleasure, and the sense of self as the commentator, watching what you’re doing, making comments. And we want to train all these things in a skillful way, to actually help us on the path. The Buddha’s image is of taking a raft across a river. And where are you going to get the materials for the raft? You’re on this side of the river, which is not safe. The other side is going to be the safe side. But you can’t go over to the safe side and get what they have over there. You have to use the things that are on this side. Well, you’ve got the aggregates. But his image of the twigs and branches and vines that grow on this side of the river, that you’re going to bind together to make the raft to take you across. As you’re going across, you hold on to the raft. Learn how not to hold on to other things that may come. You’re floating down the river, and finally when you get to the other side, then you can let go. You don’t need to carry the raft around. It’s done its job. You don’t need to hold on to it. You’re in a safe place. But while you’re on the river, you do have to hold on. This is what the Buddha says. You have to make yourself its own mainstay. In other words, you have to learn how to depend on yourself. And you do that by practicing right mindfulness, getting into right concentration, and then using that concentration to take apart all the ways in which you’re causing yourself stress in an unscrupulous way. And when you’ve taken everything else apart, then you take the raft apart. You don’t want to stay in the river on the raft. You have to get off. But you use these aggregates to get across. You use the different forms of clinging. And John Chah has an image. You’re coming back from the market. You’ve got a banana in your hand. Someone comes and asks you, “Why are you holding the banana? What are you going to do with it?” You say, “I’m going to eat it.” “How about the peel? Are you going to eat the peel too?” “Oh no.” “Then why are you carrying the peel? And how are you going to answer?” And John Chah says two ways. One, you answer. The question is, with what are you going to answer the person? First you answer with desire. You have to want to come up with a good answer. In the same way to practice the path, you have to want to practice the path. And the answer, of course, is, “Well, the time hasn’t come to throw the peel away yet. If I take away the peel right now, hold on to the banana, it’s going to get my hand all sticky and the banana will turn to mush.” So you hold on to the banana and the peel. Until the time comes to eat, then you can throw the peel away. Otherwise you don’t start the path just by letting go, letting go, letting go. You have to hold on to certain things. You’re holding on to the same aggregates that have been making you suffer, but you’re learning to hold on to the skillful versions of them, and you’re learning to hold on in a skillful way. This is how we get across. It shows the Buddha’s wisdom as a strategist. He doesn’t tell you, “Well, just stop craving, stop clinging,” because he knows that’s not going to work. Instead, he has you focus your desires in the direction of the path, and to hold on to the path, and keep doing it again and again and again, learning from it again and again. Use that self as the commentator, the observer, to figure out when things are going right, when they’re not going right. Use the desire to motivate the self as the agent. When you get to the other side, as John Sowat said, you get to the point where the happiness is so great that you don’t really care if there’s a self there or not. The happiness is that sufficient. That’s when you can let go of everything. When you let go, you realize you’re not deprived. This is our big fear. We hold on because we think that if we don’t hold on to things, we’re going to be deprived. But the Buddha teaches you, “Well, hold on in this way. Hold on to the path. Keep on doing the path, getting better and better at it.” And then you will get to the point where you let go, and the result is happiness. Total unadulterated. And then the Buddha calls the truths about these things, the truth about suffering and the cause, the cessation and the path, he calls them noble truths. Because it requires that you take a noble attitude towards your clingings and cravings. Ordinarily we’re so invested in them that we can’t question them. And we don’t like it when other people question them. But when we’re finally willing to step back and say, “Yeah, the Buddha may be right. Let’s give his teachings a try.” The fact that you can step back from your clingings, step back from your cravings, that’s a noble act in the mind. Then as you follow through the path, it requires that you also develop more noble characteristics, more noble qualities. Until you finally reach a goal that is noble all around, i.e. excellent, harmless, the best thing there is.

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