Aggregates as Tools

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When the Buddha analyzes suffering, he starts out with things we’re familiar with—the suffering of birth, aging, death, not getting what you want, being separated from things you love, having to live with things you don’t love. These are all things we know. We’ve experienced them many times. But then when he analyzes suffering for the purpose of putting an end to it, he starts with—the analysis is not that familiar—five clinging aggregates. When you look back on your life, when was the last time you saw aggregates? When they came out and just said, “We’re aggregates.” Something you have to ferret out, something you have to try to find. That’s why the Buddha said we have to comprehend suffering. We know it. We’ve experienced it, but we don’t comprehend it. Or in that verse we have about those who don’t discern suffering as opposed to those who do. We know it, but we don’t really discern it. That’s the problem. The discerning means seeing it in terms of those five clinging aggregates. The word for clinging also means to feed. We’re feeding on these things. Aggregates are activities. They’re not really things. There’s form, the physical form of the body, and the physical forms of things outside. And they’re activities in the sense that they’re always changing. There’s feeling, the feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Then there are perceptions, the labels you put on things when you identify something. The Pali word sannya in Thai also means an agreement or a contract. It’s basically an agreement that the mind makes with itself that something has a certain meaning. For instance, you see a green light, and the first thing you recognize is a green light. You label that as a green light, but then you also realize it has a meaning. It means you can go. You see a red light. The first level of perception is to recognize it as a red light. The second level is to recognize it means you have to stop. But then suppose the red light just doesn’t change. Then you have to think about it. What does this mean? You have to put a thought together. You have to reason. You have to come to the conclusion that the light is broken. That’s fabrication. That’s the fourth of the aggregates. It’s when you put things together, particularly when you put thoughts together, usually out of perceptions. And then finally there’s consciousness, which is the basic awareness of all these things. Consciousness is more passive. When the Buddha illustrates it, he illustrates it with your sense of taste. Things have to reach the tongue before you can taste them. Whereas perception is something he illustrates with your sense of sight. You don’t stop simply at the level of seeing that there are blue patches or red patches or whatever. You try to figure out, well, what are those patches? And how do they fit into the world? You have to create a three-dimensional world out of the impulses that arrive at the eye. And the eye has to look out to see things. It has to focus to see things. The tongue doesn’t have to focus. It’s much more passive. Consciousness actually functions at all the senses, but it’s the more receptive activity. Perception is more active. And as I said, we cling to these activities. One of the reasons we cling is because we need them in order to feed. Think about feeding on something physical. You’ve got the body, which is form, and then you’ve got the forms of things outside, the food that you might be eating to take into your body. Then there’s feeling, the feeling of pain that comes with hunger, and the pleasure that comes with having a sense of fullness. Then there’s your perception, when you label the type of hunger you have. Whether you’re hungry for something salty or hungry for something sweet, hungry. Here we get into mental feeding, where you can get hungry for a relationship or hungry for some kindness, some recognition, attention. These are all different kinds of hunger. And you have to identify what’s lacking. That’s the perception. And then you look outside to see what might fill the lack. What’s edible? What’s not edible? Where are the salty things? Where are the sweet things? The fabrication is figuring out how you’re going to find the food, and then once you’ve found it, how you’re going to fix it so you can eat it. You can find a raw potato, but you can’t eat it as a raw potato. You’ve got to cook it. And finally, consciousness is the awareness of all these activities. These are very intimate activities in the mind. So even though the term “clinging aggregate” is something that’s somewhat foreign, the activities themselves are very intimate. As the Buddha said, when you’re a being, you have to feed. That’s one thing that unites all beings, or all beings have in common. It’s our basic activity. Once you take on an identity, you’ve got to maintain it. You’ve got to sustain it. You’ve got to nourish it. And these are the activities by which we nourish it. So what the Buddha is saying is that the activities by which we survive as beings are also, when we cling to them, they’re going to be suffering. It’s a pretty radical analysis. Oftentimes, when we first understand, the fear comes in that we’re going to have to annihilate ourselves, which is not the case. But as the Buddha realized, you can’t simply just stop feeding on these things. It’s interesting that there’s a double layer of feeding. There’s the activities that go into feeding, that the aggregates are, basically. And then there’s the clinging to the activities, feeding on them. We feed off of certain perceptions. We feed off of certain ways of thinking about things. As the Buddha realized, you can’t simply stop feeding. Instead, he says, feed in a new way. That’s what the path is all about. Because the path is a fabrication, and it involves form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. Like you’re sitting right here. You’ve got the form of the body, you’ve got the breath that you’re watching and trying to stay with. That trying to stay with it, that intention, that’s a fabrication. And you hold in mind a perception of the breath. When the breath comes in, where is it coming in? How does it come in? You’re trying to create a feeling, a feeling of well-being. And then you’re aware of all these things. That’s consciousness. You’ve got all five aggregates right here, which means that we take certain aggregates and use them as means for prying away our attachment to the blatantly unskillful aggregates. As we all know, when the Buddha gave his second sermon, he talked about how these aggregates are not-self. In other words, they’re inconstant, stressful, and therefore they’re not worth calling yourself. One of his arguments was that we can’t really control them. When you get to the level where you’re going to let go totally, yes, you tell yourself that these are things that have to be let go. But in the meantime, you hold on to them. This is why we practice the path. We do have some measure of control. We can change our perceptions, like your perception of the breath right now. If you think of it simply as the air coming in and the lungs through the nose, it restricts the way you’re going to experience the breath. It restricts the number of possibilities you might find of making the breath comfortable. If you think of the breath as the energy flowing through the whole body, it can come in and go out from anywhere in the body. It gives you a wider range of possibilities. So you learn how to use certain perceptions, certain fabrications, certain feelings. You turn them into the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering. So use them as you can. Try to exert some control over them. As John Lee pointed out, when we’re practicing concentration, we’re fighting against the three characteristics. We’re trying to make a state of mind, a state of well-being, that’s constant. We want it to be well-being and not suffering. We want to have some control. So we make use of these perceptions. We make use of them to create this sense of well-being. And then we use that well-being to pry away our attachments to other things that are unskillful. So we use the aggregates as tools. But there will come a point when you realize that no matter how good the state of concentration is, it’s something else. It has to be constantly maintained. And this is what the Buddha meant when he said that we can’t ultimately control these aggregates. Because there’s no perception, say, that you can say, “Once that perception has been attained, you simply enjoy the perception.” Because the perception is an activity. You have to keep doing it. You can find the most beautiful, wonderful perception in the world. But then you have to do it again and do it again. It’s the same with fabrication. You have to have a wonderful thought. But it won’t stay. It’s an action. So you have to do it again and again. As long as the pleasure you get from this is better than anything else you can get, you’re going to hang on to it, which is fine. This is how we pull ourselves away from unskillful mental states. As the Buddha said, you can see all the drawbacks of sensuality. Or your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. You see how it can get you involved in activities that are going to be unskillful. But if you don’t have a better pleasure, you’re not going to be able to let go. You’re just going to keep coming back. So the concentration provides you with that better pleasure, a better feeling, and the perception that holds you there. And the fabrications that hold you there become activities that are worth doing. Because they’re better than whatever else you might do. It’s only when the mind is fully let go of other things and is really attached to the concentration, that’s when you start analyzing this. These are aggregates, too. They’re activities you have to keep doing and doing and doing. Wouldn’t it be better to find a happiness that didn’t require any doing? That’s when the mind is open up. To the idea that there might be something better that doesn’t involve feeding at all. And as the Ajahn says, when you attain that higher happiness that is not fabricated, that’s not an aggregate, and there’s awareness of that, that’s not an aggregate, then you can put all the aggregates aside. The analogy they give is of making a piece of furniture. As long as your piece of furniture is not done, you have to take good care of your tools. When it’s done, you can put the tools down. So we use these aggregates, these activities, as a path. You might think of them as bricks. If you’re just carrying them around, they’re going to weigh you down. But if you put them down, they can become a path, taking you to where you want to go. So notice that the Buddha is having us think strategically. He’s not saying, “The aggregates are bad, just throw them away.” As Ajahn Lee said, that would be like having a wound in your body and not caring for it. Saying, “This wound is disgusting. I don’t want to touch it.” If you don’t touch it, you don’t care for it, it’s going to get even worse. You care for these things. You create a good form for the body by the way you breathe. You create good feelings, good perceptions, good fabrications, good acts of consciousness. You care for the wounds, and then they’ll heal. Then you don’t have to concern yourself with the issue any longer, because your job is done.

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