

Five Aggregates

Insight Meditation South Bay

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Five Aggregates (*khandha*)

Key Ideas

- The five *khandha* represent the five components of all conscious experience. They are not what we are made of, but how we operate: the psycho-physical process by which one is having one's experience. And it is this process one needs to understand.
- The teachings of not-self (*anatta*) and of the five *khandha* are not focused on what one is or is not. That one is is neither *the* question nor *in* question. Rather, the question which the teachings answer is *how* one works in a dependently originated world of experience.
- Through meditation, we see the rise and fall of these aggregates; we see them as impermanent, unsatisfying, and empty.
- The term *khandha* refers to the fire metaphor (SN III 71), so that the five processes that constitute our experience are being compared to burning bundles of firewood to feed either the fire of our suffering or the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. When these three fires are extinguished we still have the five *khandha*, that which we experience, so we still have a residue of fuel; however, it is no longer burning. When the five *khandha* cease to exist, i.e., when we die enlightened, we have no more potential for experience; we have run out of fuel.

Aggregate	Notes
Material Form (<i>Rūpa</i>)	<p>Includes the whole of physical nature, any kind of matter or material form whatsoever, either internal or external. Includes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Great Four Elements: Refers to both internal and external elements<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Earth Element (solidity): Internal elements include hair, teeth, bones, organs, etc.• Water (fluidity): Internal elements include bile, blood, urine, etc.• Fire (heat): Internal elements include bodily mechanisms that produce warmth (digestion)• Air (motion): Internal elements include breathing, winds in the bowel, etc.2. Derivatives of The Great Four Elements: sensitivity of the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body and their corresponding objects (color, sound, odor, taste and touchable objects), plus related material properties such as femininity, masculinity, space, nutriment, material basis of consciousness, malleability, growth, aging, impermanence etc. The <i>Abhidhamma</i> lists 28 kinds of materiality.

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Feeling Tone (<i>Vedanā</i>)	<p>Refers to the particular quality of every sense experience which has the quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness or neutrality. Sounds, tastes, emotions, sights, sensations, odors, thoughts—each has an associated feeling tone. Feeling is produced by contact which arises with the concurrence of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Eye (sensitivity) with visible forms (object) and eye-consciousness.2. Ear (sensitivity) with sounds (object) and ear-consciousness.3. Nose (sensitivity) with odor (object) and nose-consciousness.4. Tongue (sensitivity) with taste (object) and tongue-consciousness.5. Body (sensitivity) with physical objects (object) and body-consciousness.6. Mind (sensitivity) with thoughts and ideas (object) and mind-consciousness.
Perception (<i>Saññā</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The activity of recognition, identification, and classification. Conversion of an indefinite or vague experience into categories of things that are interpreted through features, signs, and qualities that we recognize and have experienced. Perception can be problematic because the process of classification encourages us to see things as ‘permanent’ when in fact they constantly change.• <i>Saññā</i> would better be translated as apperception, because it includes both perceiving and identifying what is perceived.
Mental Formations (<i>Sankhāra</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Sankhāra</i> as a <i>khandha</i>, might be translated as the “volitional constituent” of human experience in this life. It is defined as six groups of volitional activity (SN III 60-87) and functions according to the way one has been formed. It is what we may call the operative aspect of karma. This meaning of <i>sankhāra</i> is different from its meaning as the second link in the chain of dependent origination, the formative activities, what forms human experience for this life, which we may call the creative aspect of karma. Being cyclical, though, the operative karma of this life will (unless it is neutral) become the creative karma of a future life, so that one’s volitions are the instrumental factor in the coming-to-be of the human being.• The <i>Abhidhamma</i> lists 52 mental formations including conceit, ignorance, hate, concentration, desire, effort, attention, will, etc. which may produce either wholesome or unwholesome karmic effects.

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Consciousness (<i>Viññāṇa</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Viññāṇa</i> is the process of being conscious. Integral to the cognitive process, it provides subjective awareness at all stages of the changing experiences and insights that accompany spiritual progress. The stream of conscious processes, affected by conditioning, form a sense of continuity both within a single life and also from life to life.• Consciousness is the knowing of an object that has one of the six faculties (ear, eye, nose, tongue, body, mind) as its basis and cognizes one of the six corresponding objects. Consciousness does not recognize an object; perception recognizes the object. When the eye comes in contact with colors (white and brown, for example), consciousness brings an awareness only, but no specific recognition of what the object is. Perception associated with mental formations, (above) classifies the color into a pattern and identifies it as a “white dog with brown spots”.