

Satipaṭṭhāna (48) Five Heaps: Appearance

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good morning. Welcome to this series on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on the establishment of awareness.

There are many ways in which awareness is lost, subsumed, or collapses into our preoccupation with our lives. One way this occurs is with our preoccupation with the different aspects of our beingness – who we are – what we identify with and cling to as me, myself, and mine.

This next exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* has to do with five different areas in which we cling – especially clinging to me, myself, and mine. The idea is, if we cling, we are clinging to one of these five areas. The literal meaning of the Pali word for this is “heaps” – big heaps of stuff. While it is not a very technical-sounding idea, it has become enshrined in Buddhist philosophy and psychology, and it has taken on a more technical feeling. The usual translation in English is “aggregates.” The Pali word is *khandha*. This translates as five heaps of stuff.

Sometimes modern dharma teachers will say something like, “The Buddha taught there is no self, but there are these five aggregates, these five heaps.” The problem with this is the Buddha never said that. In fact, the Buddha saw the five aggregates or five heaps as problematic. They were seen as burdensome. The idea is to overcome this burden of the five heaps.

So this exercise has to do with these five heaps. It is described as the five heaps of clinging. The words “of clinging” are added to it. These are five areas in which we cling – five areas from which we cling. They are the five areas in the world of clinging. With this exercise, we will look deeply into these five areas of clinging.

I want to give an analogy. Imagine that it is a beautiful, peaceful day. You are out on the beach. If you do not live near the ocean, imagine someplace big – a big, beautiful meadow or field that goes on for a long while. Imagine a wide, long, beautiful sandy beach with very clean, soft, fine textured sand. To walk barefoot feels so nice and comfortable. Feel the warmth and softness of the sand.

The beach has a very gradual grade so it is easy to walk on. It may be hundreds of yards from the water up to where the vegetation begins. You can see up the coast for a long way. It is an inspiring day with lots of sky and beach. You feel the suchness of the beach. It is just a beach. It is inspiring. It is nice. You can wander freely, aimlessly up and down – close to the water, and away from the water. It feels so comfortable and nice. You have such a wonderful day with a picnic at some point – just being at the beach.

You come back a week later thinking you can do the same thing because it was so nice. But now, the local beach authorities have decided to give easier access to the beach to everyone. Everyone has an equal ability to walk the beach. You do not have to worry about people getting in front of you or blocking your way.

The authorities have decided to put fences along the whole length of the beach. They are making lanes. You have to get a ticket and reserve a spot beforehand. Then you are assigned a lane. There are 10-foot fences on either side of the lane so people stay in their lanes. People have their privacy in their lane because privacy is important.

You are given your lane. Maybe you are in lane 38. You are free to walk in that lane for as long as there is a beach. Everyone is free to walk their lane. This way it is equal. Everyone has equal access, though you can pay a little bit more to be close to the ocean. What you have lost then is the suchness – the vast freedom of just the beach by itself. Now it has been defined and laid out.

This is a kind of ridiculous analogy, but this is what we do to ourselves. We are like a vast open beach, without any definition in the sand, but we make lines in the sand. We define one thing over another. These five heaps are the five lines that we make.

Often the first heap is called form. Sometimes people say body instead of form. I prefer the word appearance, physical appearance. Form or physicality – not our physical physicality, but rather the way it appears to us. The second heap is the feelings of pleasant and unpleasant. The third heap is the basic perceptions of sensations that occur. The fourth is the world of mental activities such as concepts, ideas, wishes, aspirations, and memories. The fifth heap is consciousness.

It makes some sense to divide our experiences into these heaps, but the Buddha suggests we do not need to divide them in this way. Once we divide them up this way, we cling to them and hold on to them in particular ways. When we cling to them, it is like making a fence, a line, or a lane in our experience. We are selecting part of who we are to cling to at the expense of disconnection from the rest.

Some people cling a lot to their bodies and some people to their comfort and the sensuality of pleasant and unpleasant. Some people cling to their perceptions, sensations, and ideas of things. Other people cling to their whole inner landscape and psychology. They think it is a particular specialty of the psychological, modern world where we are hypersensitive to the little nuances of what we think and feel, and how we judge and operate psychologically. There is a lot of clinging here. There is also this idea of clinging to consciousness – to awareness itself as being the ultimate – as being special. These are five areas of clinging.

Rather than saying that the Buddha taught there is no self, but there are these five aggregates, the Buddha actually said there is no need to cling, but these are the five areas in which people cling. These are five areas in which we divide ourselves up, and then get attached to those divisions.

The idea is to be able to let go of the clinging, to allow things to return to the suchness of our experience – the simplicity of the beingness of things as they arise and pass, and come and go. That is the exercise – to see the arising and passing of each of these five heaps. As we see the arising and passing, at some point, the sense of the division, the fences, all fall away. We start being able to see the arising and passing of all phenomena and the suchness of things that occur.

When we are in the pristine simplicity of who we are, we do not make any lines. We do not make any fences and divisions. Everything is allowed to exist in its own naturalness – as it appears. There are sensations in the body. There is pleasant and unpleasant. All these things exist on this wide, broad, peaceful beach. There are no lines. It is just all allowed to exist, without clinging to any of it.

The first of the heaps is appearance. This is the physical appearance of how we are. It is not literally what our physical body is – the physicality of it. It is the concepts, ideas, projections, and ways of selecting the physical experience that we get attached to.

For example, the physical appearance of our nose, skin, height, and size are all physical ways in which we appear to ourselves and others. It is not just the way things are. It has something to do with how we select what is important to judge people by, to comment on or notice about people, notice about ourselves. There is a tremendous amount of suffering that occurs in clinging to appearance and to how things appear to us in our bodies.

Instead of being caught or preoccupied with the appearance of people or things, the Buddha suggests we step back with mindfulness. See that the world of appearance, physical appearance, belongs to the world of things that are inconstant, changing, and moving. One form of clinging to appearance is to think that our appearances are constant or permanent. This is who I am.

The world of appearance is an interactive world between our physicality and the mind's values, perceptions, concepts, and judgments – the selective projections that the mind makes. If we pay careful attention, we see that there is a kind of reconstruction of appearance, a reconstruction of what is important. We select what is important and cling to it. We judge it and build up ideas around it. That is what begins to relax and soften.

As we rest back into the appearance of things, we begin seeing that appearance is a flow of inconstancy, of arising and passing that goes on. Then the clinging can begin to relax. The prioritization of certain kinds of projections, judgments, or commentaries can begin to ease. We can begin experiencing the suchness – the simplicity of being, the beingness. We can be at peace and at ease with how things are with ourselves here.

So the five aggregates or the five heaps will be the topic for this week. Each day I will take one of the heaps and discuss it. Today was appearances. It was a short discussion because it was included with the introduction to all five.

So thank you, and I wish you well and look forward to being back tomorrow.